



7-21-1971

Edward Nixon (July 21, 1971, second interview)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. EDWARD C. NIXON

July 21, 1971

En route to Ojai, California, in car

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: Ed, let's concentrate on your formal education or experience in Whittier, California, where you were born in 1913.

NIXON: No, I was born in 1930. You're thinking of my brother. And from 1930 to 1947 I lived in the Southern California area in a number of different homes. My parents moved when I was nine years old, I think, from the place I had lived the first nine years, and ever after that they were on the move about every other year or so. We lived first at the corner of Santa Gertrudes [Avenue] and East Whittier Boulevard, and from that place I started grade school at Lowell School, after a false start one week prior at East Whittier Elementary School, I decided to go to Lowell School, and began there in the fall of '36. I had the first eight years at one school continuing on at Lowell until finishing with an eighth grade diploma and then went on to Whittier High School for the first three years. And that brought us up to 1947, where the folks moved to Pennsylvania and I finished my last year back there.

But to go back to those first few years, 1936 on, I can remember that first day at East Whittier School when I decided I didn't want to go there, but only with a hazy recollection. I would have to think about that for a while and stimulate the memory a little bit to pull any details out of that. Lowell School was where my brother, Don [Francis Donald Nixon] had gone and my brother, Arthur [Burdg Nixon] as well. East Whittier was where Richard went. And by the way, I think Richard went to East Whittier School, the fourth grade through the eighth grade, the first three years being at Yorba Linda School. Those schools were approximately equal distance from

the corner of Santa Gertrudes [Avenue] and East Whittier Boulevard, and we were on the line between the two districts. So we had a choice; all of us had a choice as to which school we could attend. That situation may not always have been true. For example, when my parents first moved to Santa Gertrudes and Whittier Boulevard, 1922 or thereabouts, there was possibly no option when Richard started school, but by the time Don started, of course, Lowell School was there. So I don't know enough of those details to fill it all in. That's something you might want to check later.

ARENA: At this point, Ed, let me ask you, if you can recall a teacher who really stands out, whose method, whose personality opened up your eyes to different subjects; and have you, for example, been able to trace your present adult interests in geology and other subjects of interest directly to elementary years of education, who the teacher was and why was this the case?

NIXON: Well, I can remember all of my teachers in elementary school and each of them had an influence in one way or another. Maybe it was toward social development, which was significant to me because I was a rather shy person as a child. Or maybe it was in an academic sense toward various subject matters, or subject matters different from the ones I seemed most interested in. Stimulation in those directions were going on all the time and I can attribute incidents for many of my thoughts today.

Miss [Helen] Eastman was the first grade teacher. She was a very, very kind woman. I cannot say exactly how old she was when she had me in first grade, but I guess somewhere in her thirties. And she was very well liked by all the children--everybody liked her.

The second grade and the third grade were taught by Jessie Stone--not Jessie Stone, Ethel Stone, her sister--and Lowell School had three double classrooms and two single classrooms--second and third grade, fourth and fifth grade, sixth and seventh grade, and the eighth grade was alone. Second and third grade--Ethel Stone was responsible for getting me into reading, and broke a barrier there that I can almost remember with details, but not quite. She was one who gave us time to go to the shelf and choose a book and read it to ourselves--read it silently--and then tell about it at the end of that period. Not everybody could tell about it every day, but we took turns doing that. So I attribute that first exposure to the world of print to Ethel Stone.

Mrs. Naomi Riedel was the fourth and fifth grade teacher, and her gift to me was in mathematics, where we went through the barrier of the division very, very readily. And it was because of her that I became very enthusiastic about doing arithmetic, and I always did all the problems that she gave me and asked for more. And mathematics, I suppose, was never

really too much of a challenge to me after that until I got into calculus and didn't have time to do all the homework.

Sixth and seventh grade was taught by Jessie Stone, and Jessie Stone had a reputation for being the disciplinarian--the toughest, meanest teacher that anyone will ever want to run into. And hardly anyone really loved her when in her classroom, but always for her methods and appreciation for the accomplishments she had. She was one of the most penetrating people that you ever want to meet, perceptive. And she could second-guess you before you could answer her with a false question or anything of the sort, and kept you on target, on track, in everything she did.

Occasionally during the sixth and seventh grades Miss [Gladys] Starbuck, the principal, would come in and teach the class and she teamed up with one other teacher, Miss Carol Calkins, who later became Mrs. Hooker. And Gladys Starbuck was one who always found something new. I can remember becoming intrigued with the new subjects she kept bringing up all the time that I had never heard of at home--new subjects such as astronomy. We were supposed to have arithmetic skills and reasonable confidence, so we had a competition at the end of every day in which she would give us numbers, plus and minus, times and divide, in a long series, and whoever had the answer would pop up with the response; and if it was wrong, that meant points off for that team and the other side got a crack at it. Mrs. Starbuck, Gladys Starbuck, was also a part of my eighth grade experience, in that she taught me the Constitution course, and in California schools the Constitution test in the eighth grade is a requirement. Before you can graduate, you must pass it with a certain grade, I've forgotten what it is. But I know that she was capable of getting everybody through that, and succeeded in doing so in my class. I took a great deal of satisfaction from that particular exposure to the United States Constitution, because government wasn't really my favorite subject anywhere in school. But I did like that particular course, and as I recall, I did reasonably well. I think I came out second in the class on the Constitution test, something over ninety. And a Marjorie Windt was class champion and was really a brilliant student, so I didn't feel bad about taking second to her. That about finishes the eight years, the teachers, the courses.

I must say that when I went to Whittier High School and started out with Latin and algebra and all the other standard college preparatory courses I felt better prepared than most of my contemporaries. I had even had exposure to enough words of Latin so that I always felt I had a head start in every new phase of the language course we got into. And as a matter of fact, I made A's all the way through in Latin in high school. It was a lot of fun. Mathematics, the same way, never had lower than a B-plus or in that area. English was harder for me but even in that, English and history, I managed to stay

above the B line all the way through.

Not until I got to West York High School and ran into a teacher who was an avowed Communist--and if you'll think about it, this was about the same time as my brother was prosecuting Alger Hiss, undertaking the hearing in his case--and he really had it in for me; for some reason I was not able to do better than a C-plus. Got down to Duke University, I didn't have any trouble with the analytic geometry, so I wasn't too worried about that one C-plus in my high school record. That about winds up that phase of it.

ARENA: And now I would like to ask you to recall whether or not the different schools, such as Lowell and East Whittier, were more or less equal, we'll say, in plan, in teacher professional ability; and what I am wondering is, to what extent was your school of higher or lesser or about equal caliber in the education it afforded? That's one question. Another I would like to ask you is, to what extent were there field trips, visiting teachers? Did you have an art teacher come in once a week, a music teacher? Discuss that, to the best of your ability.

NIXON: Well, the two schools, East Whittier and Lowell, were very competitive, in the sense that we jealously guarded our reputations and felt that the schools--one was better than the other. But when you come right down to it, there was not much difference between the two. Perhaps the major difference was that East Whittier School had larger classes, there were many more students there, and Lowell had the small groups. But who knows, having more than one class in a room does something to stimulate those in the lower grades to rise to the upper grades. I don't know. In my own mind they were equivalent. The quality of teachers across the board was comparable, and I do know that in my own case, I heard later on from--I think it was Hazel Bernett who told the story--about Don going down to Lowell School soon after I got into the first grade and talking to the principal there, who was Mr. [Charles] Samuels at that time when they first started, and he asked that he not make any special point out of it, but to give me--be sure I got a lot of disciplinary instruction as well as academic instruction, because my parents were so busy in the grocery store during those 1930's that they were worried that I was not getting enough of an appreciation for discipline and respect for authority. So I know that he had a say in that regard.

ARENA: Now we go back to the second question I asked you regarding field trips and visiting teachers.

NIXON: All right. All the schools in that area used a library system that was a central library. In our case there was one located on East Whittier Boulevard

not far from our store. But periodically during the week, I think at least once a week, they would load the bus up and take a class to the library, and we would browse through and select a couple of books. And then we had book reports to write and so on.

The matter of having visiting teachers I don't think ever occurred in my memory. When we got into high school, of course, we had many assemblies, where we would have speakers from time to time in the big auditorium there at Whittier High School. There were about 2000 students at Whittier High School at that time, and the auditorium with its capacity of 2500 held all with no problem, and was a very fine place to get the commons, so to speak, in our background. The California Scholarship Society did sponsor some field trips, and I can recall going over to the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles [California] with that group each year in high school, but I don't think we ever had visiting teachers in our classes at the elementary or high school level. We had many opportunities to probe the world of books through those libraries, and the fact that we didn't have them immediately at our elbow was perhaps a better system, because when we got there we were rather awe-struck by the number of books and made good use of it, I think.