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Edward Nixon (June 29, 1973, third interview)

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. EDWARD C. NIXON

June 29, 1973
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is a continuation of the interviews with Mr. Edward C. (Calvert) Nixon, brother of President Nixon. Today's date is June 29, 1973, in Whittier, California. May I begin, Ed, by going back to the very earliest beginning, and discuss your own recollections of your parents. I would like to begin with just that question: What IS the very first recollection you have of your parents? Which one stands out more in your mind? Anything that comes to mind about just the idea of your very earliest recollections.

NIXON: They were both equally present, I should say; my mother, of course, more around the house, and my father more when I was outside the house. But we had a relationship within the family, wherein my father was the vociferous one and my mother the quiet one. But very often, when it came to matters of parental judgment, they conferred before reaching a decision. And it always happened in a peculiar way, in that my father would say, "Well, go check with your mother on that." And then my mother would say, "Go check with your father on that." And then we'd bring it to a head by saying, "We've already done that and we're wearing out shoe leather. What do we do now?" And then, when they were assured that they both knew what the question was, they would resolve it. But it's . . .

ARENA: Would this be in any way, do you think, something like passing the buck? And this might be determined by the questions that you were asking them--permission to stay overnight, stay out late. Were these the sort of things that they didn't want to give a ready answer to? Excuse me, I'm thinking especially about the early years, say elementary school years.

NIXON: That's right, the trivial questions; can I go barefoot today, that kind of thing. That didn't require any kind of bounce back and forth, although my mother was usually the judge of whether we went barefoot or not; unless we really wanted to go barefoot and she said no, then we would go to my father and see if he could go back and negotiate with her. But we worked out our small, trivial questions without any fanfare. When it came to bigger decisions which came along later in life, whether we were going to go to college or not, or whatever--I can't think of an exemplary question, but in answer to your original question--they stood together and yet we were between them, and it was a secure feeling.

ARENA: Just to be sure, you do have a feeling, you do have a recollection that they were both there physically. The father wasn't working and away from home all day long. You didn't have that situation. You recall that they were both physically present, in the early years, too.

NIXON: They both worked, all day.

ARENA: Within your immediate vicinity.

NIXON: That's right. The house we lived in was right next to the store that they worked in, and of course the yard between was my play area in early years. And then later on, as I was old enough to take on any responsibility at all in the store, they gave it to me, and I was working in there with them.

ARENA: While we're still on this question of physical presence, how about your brother's declining years--I'm thinking of Harold [Samuel Nixon], correct me if I'm wrong--did he not die in '33? You were born in '30. And were not your parents, your mother in particular, living with him away during these last few years, and how did that affect you, if you recall, during that period?

NIXON: Well, I was less than three years old at the time he died; I still was not yet three. And although I can remember, I have some recollection of my brother Harold, and even of Prescott, Arizona, it's more of a secondary recollection, because I looked at pictures and my mother reminded me of what happened, and I sort of developed a memory of those things, although there were certain specific recollections of that early, early period.

ARENA: Including the house itself, which I understand your father built? For a while your mother had rented one and took in other patients. Is that the one you remember?

NIXON: My father had not built the house in Prescott that I know of. Perhaps so. Don [Francis Donald Nixon] would

have to confirm that. He built many houses and many cabins, but I think the one that they stayed in in Arizona . . .

ARENA: Let me refresh your memory. I don't recall if you . . .

NIXON: My memory is not good for that. My brother Don and others would be much better sources than I. So whether or not he built the house was immaterial to me.

ARENA: But you don't recall it, necessarily, being a little, small, home-built type? You wouldn't recall that at all.

NIXON: No, only from seeing pictures of it and hearing stories about it. But I remember the round granite boulders. That is my own recollection, no pictures, nothing there, because they were impressive to me. I had never seen anything like that; smooth, round granite boulders.

ARENA: While we're on these early years, Ed, bearing in mind the seriousness of Harold's illness, and the toll it must have been taking on your mother, going away and so forth, what is your recollection, if any, that this was a crisis? Being three years old, of course, you couldn't appreciate the nature of the family crisis, but thinking back now, do you remember your mother being extra tense, short-tempered? Do you remember how she, your father, others were taking this crisis, as it touched upon YOUR relations and YOUR day-to-day living at that time, and the immediate aftermath, as well? Is there anything that comes to mind regarding the effect of that, not only living with serious illness, but then the death of the oldest son in the family?

NIXON: No. That kind of a recollection for that age is just-- it goes beyond what I can do. I really don't remember my parents in those days, although I can remember Harold on a couple of occasions. Once when he brought me a little racer, you know, about a foot-long model racing car, and rolled that thing across the floor to me and said, "Here's a new toy," or something to that effect.

ARENA: Do you think, by the way, that was handmade, or something that he had purchased?

NIXON: No, it was a very fancy racing car, and very, very impressive. Of course, I hadn't seen anything like that anywhere.

ARENA: Any notion as to whether or not it might still be in existence?

NIXON: I doubt it. It's probably torn up, with the many, many youngsters that played around that house, and if I had gone elsewhere, it might have been lost there, but it's gone, I'm sure.

ARENA: Over the years, since the death of Harold, can you recall your mother or father, members of the family bringing that up, and how, and under what circumstances, including the anniversary of his death, possibly, or his birthday? Of course, you can't ever know what's going on inside your mother or your father's mind, but I'm just wondering about the overt reactions.

NIXON: The earliest recollection I have of my mother mourning the loss of her oldest son was certain sensitivities about things around the house that had a sentimental value. And also on Memorial Day, which was the day, or just a couple of days before the anniversary of his death, she would go out to Rose Hills [Memorial Park] and put flowers on the graves, all of them. Arthur [Burdg Nixon], of course, was already buried there. He had died, I guess, seven years before, or eight years, maybe. And I would go with her. Most often I would ride along with her and make an errand to the flower shop where she'd stop, out there at the corner of Beverly Boulevard and Palm [Avenue]. Of course, it's changed a little now, but I think there's still a flower shop out there.

ARENA: Yes, there is at the intersection of Palm [Avenue] and Workman Mill [Road] and Norwalk [Boulevard]. There is a flower shop there.

NIXON: Yes. We'd stop there and then we'd go on into Rose Hills. Of course, Rose Hills has changed, too, but the grave sites are the same. I could go to them right now. I remember that, although we also buried my parents there, so it's a very familiar place. The things of sentimental character around the house were also apparent, and I often wondered about some of them. One I found out about much later on, after hearing my brother Dick, and also Don, talk about the day Harold died, and the mixer that Harold bought for her. That's been recorded, in the Pageant magazine story that I wrote, and also in prior interviews. But that was a very, very significant item to her, and she used it till it wore out, and then kept it, even then.

ARENA: Do you think THAT might still be in existence?

NIXON: I doubt it; no. The moves across country finally distributed many of those old sentimental things from California to Pennsylvania, and then from Pennsylvania to Florida, and then from Florida back to California. In each of those moves they cast off a few more of the old things that they hadn't used in years and were keeping just for sentimental value.

ARENA: The next to the youngest son, that is Arthur, whom you have just mentioned--what comes to your recollection about him?

NIXON: I often asked my mother about him. About the only thing she would tell me was about shortly before he died, how he sat on the stairway, which was an open stairway which led from the second floor above the garage down into the house, crossing over an arcade between the two buildings. He sat there and planned a new suit. So she told me about that.

ARENA: He planned a new . . .

NIXON: . . . suit of clothes; ordering a new suit, the kind of clothes he wanted. I don't know whether my mother was going to make it, or what. She never elaborated very much, and it was a very difficult thing for her even to discuss, for that matter. I don't remember much more that she said. Of course, I was always curious about Arthur and Harold, and asked her probably more often than I should have to remember things for me. But it was difficult for her.

ARENA: What would you want to say about your father on these same subjects we've touched on, the impact of the illness and death of Harold and Arthur. Was he demonstrative of his feelings overtly?

NIXON: Was he emotional?

ARENA: Yes; did he show it?

NIXON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Regarding these situations.

NIXON: He was not a man to disguise his emotions, regardless of the nature of the emotion; anger, fear, sorrow, all of those came forth immediately. He never made any bones about how he felt about something. He was, of course, a very stern disciplinarian, as I've said before. And I think the first-born always takes the brunt of that sternness in a father, more than any of the others, and I suspect Harold, from what my brothers have told me, really got whaled when he was out of line, and the rest of us didn't take quite as much of a dressing-down when we got out of line, but it didn't seem--apparently, from what I've been told--to affect his disposition. He was always a happy guy.

ARENA: This whaling and applying of physical punishment he took as his duty and his obligation, just as was going to work, would you say, in the sense that that was expected of him as a father, and he was doing what was expected of him.

NIXON: Well, that's true, although . . .

ARENA: What I'm getting at is this: Some dads might like to leave the discipline to the mother; for one reason or another, they wouldn't want to be bothered. Did you get the impression that he felt that it was up to him to do it, and he was going to do it? One example would be, was there a time when he had the chance to discipline you or your older brothers, and you can recall that he just would not, he just left it to your mother? Was there a time when that happened?

NIXON: Especially after Harold's death. Of course, that's what I would remember.

ARENA: Of course.

NIXON: The rest of it is hearsay from my brothers. But after Harold died, I think my mother was left with most of the disciplining of me. I was the only one of an age to be disciplined in that nature, and she was, as I say, a gentle person, but she was also stern in what was right and wrong, and she wanted me to understand that I had to develop my own sense of right and wrong, so we got to it right away.

ARENA: Looking back with hindsight, how could you analyze your mother's approach to that question of you learning right from wrong? What methods do you think she used to instill that judgment in you?

NIXON: Well, first of all, to draw attention to conduct that was NOT considered right, and thereby instilling a sense of what was NOT RIGHT, and then lecturing on a continual basis and on a periodic basis with respect to Sunday School and all the rest of it as to what is morally good and what is ethical and what is not. So the sense of what is good in life came from just living life and living it happily and enjoying it. What came as a sense of what is NOT good in life was pointed out by a very abrupt interruption of the activity.

ARENA: Can you think of some specific examples? For example, did you come home some day with apples you had taken from an open fruit stand?

NIXON: No.

ARENA: Of course, you had your own, but I'm just thinking of those kinds of situations that most youngsters get into. How would she handle that? Or some neighbor saying you had done this or that that was wrong, and your mother's handling of that situation, maybe with the neighbor, as well as lecturing you? Sneaking a smoke, maybe, for example, and being caught.

NIXON: No; let's see. I was not reprimanded that much. Not that I didn't get out of line, but it was more that we really knew what was right by the time we got to the point of doing something wrong, and we knew we were out of line; that was punishment in itself, being brought to our attention. We didn't want to be acknowledged as having broken the rules.

ARENA: Was there any attempt for your mother to discipline you away from your father so that you wouldn't be embarrassed, or was there an attempt to do this in an audience, and thereby make this have more of an impression on you?

NIXON: No, discipline was NEVER conducted in public; you were always taken aside, ALWAYS taken aside, the sense there being that you discipline yourself, no one else can help you, and an additional degree of embarrassment would only make it a little more painful to do so. And to discipline yourself should not be painful, it should be enjoyable, as much as you can make it so. I never really got into the philosophical aspect of it with my mother, as I would like to do now, but I'm sure that's what she had in mind.

ARENA: Besides teaching a child right from wrong, there are such things as reading and writing. What do you recall of that aspect of your mother's attempt at teaching you? For example, music; any attempt at education?

NIXON: They were very busy people, and my early years, my pre-school years, the only thing I got into in a formal way, my mother had her brother Griffith [Milhous] give me music lessons.

ARENA: You do recall your Uncle Griffith?

NIXON: Oh, yes. Uncle Griffith drove an old Buick, and drove it very moderately. He was a very conservative person. And my music lessons didn't quite work out like my mother would like to have had them, but . . .

ARENA: Was that because of Uncle Griffith or because of you?

NIXON: Oh, no. I was a very difficult person to teach piano.

ARENA: It was piano in this case.

NIXON: Yes. With respect to other kinds of augmentation of formal education, my parents were, as I say, very busy, but they showed by their example of the kind of work they had to do, the need to learn arithmetic and math and spelling and all that kind of thing, because it was a matter

of keeping books in the store; it was a matter of doing the cash register work in your head because you didn't have that kind of machine in those days that would add it up for you. You had to either write it down and add up a long column or do it in your head, and I got very good at doing it in my head, checking customers out of the store. And they never questioned me.

ARENA: Do you recall at what age you began doing that, working the cash register?

NIXON: Oh, I was probably a teen-ager before they would allow me to do it on my own, because the customer would be a little questioning, you know, unless it was a small order, and that's how they started, of course. They would give me two items and say, "Would you go check that customer out?" So I'd go do it. Two items wasn't hard. But then you'd go along and you'd look at four or five things, and it got to be quite an interesting exercise, to check somebody out, and rather enjoyable, although it got old after a long day.

ARENA: Did you get the feeling that this was conscious on the part of your parents, that not only were they getting labor assistance, but they were doing it to educate you?

NIXON: Well, they had no choice, really. They could not afford the labor in the depression, and secondly, they had not the time to give the children; therefore, they would keep the children with them in their work. I think we could probably profit from some of that today. In situations where they could, if families would work together, the children would learn a great deal from their parents. Instead of looking down on the kind of work they do, they might respect it more, having to do a little of it themselves.

However, getting back to what the parents did to teach us, especially with respect to my own education, my father, I remember, gave me a lesson on phonetics that I'll never forget. Not that it was an impressive teaching job, but the way he explained it. And the condition of mind I was in, having a very difficult time with spelling, in the second or third grade, I guess--I just didn't want to bother with it--but he impressed on me how easy it was and that I ought to be able to do it without any problem.

ARENA: Do you recall that method, by any chance?

NIXON: No. It was a matter of sounding out by the letters and what they signified. He was not a very good speller when it came to a large vocabulary, but there was nothing he couldn't write down so that you could understand what he was saying. And he said, "If nothing else, you can do

that. And if you don't spell it the way the book says to spell it, at least you can go back and find it in the book if you've got it down phonetically." And you know, that stuck.

ARENA: Looking back over the situation, and with the advantage of hindsight, as the President has admitted, his father, your father, did not have more than a sixth grade education. Would you want to comment on that?

NIXON: Well, I think that's altogether true, and he talked about it a good deal. It was substantiated by his sister, Carrie [Nixon] Wildermuth, his brother, Walter [Wadsworth] Nixon, and Ernest [Leland Nixon]--all of them are deceased now--all confirmed the fact of their family's education, Ernest being the only one who went on through school. The others stopped in grade school and had to either go out and earn a living or help with the family keep in some way. But my father never stopped educating himself, in a way, because he may not have done it formally, but he taught himself to type. He didn't type the standard way by touch method, but he could hunt-and-peck it pretty fast. He kept his own books in the store. He didn't much like to have to keep books for five to seven years for tax purposes, but he stored them in a big box, I remember, filed away all the books. And he taught himself He always had an attitude that he could do anything any other man could do, just given a chance to try.

ARENA: How can that be demonstrated, or can you recall any other instances other than in father-to-son talks? Are you saying that this idea that he had, this faith in himself as well as any man to teach himself and learn anything, are you basing that on his discussing that with you directly, or is this the overall impression that you have of him, thinking back?

NIXON: No. I can remember him responding to someone who would say, "You ought to get someone to do that who knows how. Get somebody to do that who CAN." And he always revolted against that and said, "I can do it myself. I can do anything any other man can do." And he may not have done it well the first time he took a crack at it, but whether it was putting together a fireplace or building a house foundation, or building the whole house, he turned out some pretty good products after a while.

ARENA: On the matter of house-building which he has engaged in--as you know, he built the house where your brother, the President, was born--do you recall to what extent he used plans, he used any of the formal methods of contractors?

NIXON: Oh, yes, the plan was essential. You had to have a plan to work it, and he knew basically what he wanted in a structure. And in order to get permits, which

you had to have in those days, too, he would go and get the kind of professional help there that was required to put on his plan. Somebody would go over his plan and put it in the shape that would get him a permit.

ARENA: Did he continue doing this right up to his death; that is, engaging in this sort of physical labor, carpentry? I'm thinking of adding a wing to a home or building a fireplace.

NIXON: He enjoyed doing things with his hands, and always did work with his hands. I think that as long as he was able, he did it. In fact, when he was no longer able to work with his hands, he really began to decline very rapidly.

ARENA: Was that due to arthritis, by the way, Ed?

NIXON: No. He did have arthritis, but he broke his arm on the farm in Pennsylvania, and they had to move to Florida, and then back to California at that time, and he was just never the same after that.

ARENA: In other words, you were with him at that time.

NIXON: Yes. He had arthritis out here in California after retiring from the grocery store and turning it over to Don, and it really began to cripple him up. And when we moved to the farm, the idea of moving to the farm seemed to restore him somewhat, and when we got there. . . . I know he had gone back East ahead of my mother and me to get the house in shape and move . . .

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

NIXON: Now, your question was?

ARENA: Bearing in mind the fact that your father had been in really two economic worlds, as well as social and cultural worlds; he had been raised on a farm, he worked farms, and he had also been a businessman; do you think that the fact that he had been a farmer--the stereotyped notion is that you develop an independent spirit, you're more on your own--that could have caused problems for him, especially since he was an adult crossing over to the business world, and may not have given him the business sense of getting along with people, of taking it, so to speak, letting the customers talk back to him so that he didn't lose them for future sales, that sort of thing?

NIXON: Well, he was not one to divide the world into pieces, and I think that it was all one big thing. But the fact of his growing up on a farm did not necessarily

take him away from personal relations. He had to work with the farm hands, he had to take orders from the farmer, and had to do a job very often alone, because the responsibilities were divided, and in that sense he had to work alone. But the idea of his being antagonistic toward a customer--first of all, he was antagonistic, or short-tempered, let's say, with those customers that were inclined to carry a chip on their shoulder. They required special treatment; whereas, you know, there are those kinds of people in every store, no matter where, and it takes a special kind of salesperson to handle them. Very often, the manager has to be called. Well, my father was the manager, no question about it, and if it came to the point of calling the manager, he was not going to have that customer coming back in the store if he was going to carry a chip on his shoulder any more. Now, I can't say it was exactly like that, but he was also short of hearing, as you know. He became deaf as he progressed in years, and this annoyed him and caused his temper to be somewhat short, and people interpreted this as his being gruff. Very often he didn't hear the whole thing and responded before he should have, and there was that part of it. But, to go back to the customers that carried the chip, and there were some, they had a political peeve, or something of that sort, that they wanted to see if they could rub Frank Nixon the wrong way, and they'd try it, just for fun . . .

ARENA: By the way, would this be pre-Richard Nixon's entry into political life, as well?

NIXON: Well, I think so, yes. He had arguments with many, many people. Some of them were hard put to get around him, if he made up his mind that he didn't need any of that salesman's product that day. And many of them tried, without success. I don't know if you got the interview with Floyd Wildermuth, but he could tell you a good story about my father and a salesman who came in the store one day.

ARENA: Will you put that down for the record, just to be sure? I did get the interview with Mr. Wildermuth.

NIXON: Yes. Well, I don't remember it as well as I should, and third hand isn't as good as second hand, but we'll see if we can get Floyd onto that. My father was positive and firm in his decisions, and I think that is what bothered people. They couldn't recognize when he'd made up his mind and refused the decision, or failed to recognize it altogether. We who were around him could see it, if there was an impasse developing because he had already made up his mind, so we would figure out a way to get them apart, and explain to the person that he wasn't going to change his mind today. "Come back tomorrow and try it in another direction." Something to that effect.

I'm not as good a one to recall those years in the thirties, but I do have vivid memories of the 1940's and late thirties, of the grocery store and what went on in there. There were some salesmen, for example, that NEVER had a problem. George Irving, Sr., for example, would come in and sell that Bishop's candy. He never had a problem with my mother or father or any of us. He was always just that kind of a man. But others were hard-sell salesman, and they just did not go over with my father, although my mother would sometimes listen to the pitch and see a value in the product and decide to stock some.

ARENA: As an example of the other type--without mentioning any names--there were those who tried to sell your father a certain brand of gasoline or oil, we'll say; do you recall anything about that yourself? Do you recall his bringing it up?

NIXON: No. The gasoline station, you see, was in the early thirties. They really dropped that toward the end of the thirties, or they leased it out. I know that they did have an aversion for certain brands of gasoline. I believe it was Standard gas in those days, although those attitudes changed as they went along. But Standard Oil Company for some reason, I think, as he explained it, was accused of something or other which just didn't seem ethical to him and he wouldn't take any of their gasoline, wouldn't put it in his car. If he was out of gas, he wouldn't buy that gas. He'd walk to some other service station.

ARENA: One gentleman told a very interesting recollection, that when he and your father and the President returned to Duke University, your father was going to continue on to Washington, D.C., because he had to relay possibly a gripe or complaint, but he was going to try to see the President of the United States. The gentleman who recounts that was Mr. Edward Rubin. I was just wondering if that story or account has ever come up, in your own knowledge in any way.

NIXON: No.

ARENA: He thought it was remarkable, especially in view of what happened later on, that here this small grocery store man was going to try to get to see the President of the United States because he had some complaint or some message that he wanted to deliver. I think it was a complaint, to be precise.

NIXON: Well, depending on the time. . . . You don't recall the year?

ARENA: It may have been the very first year that your brother attended Duke [Law School], which would have been '34.

There was some advertisement to the effect that someone was looking for a ride, and he definitely wanted a ride. That's how he got to meet your brother. He was an upperclassman, this Edward Rubin, who is now in the Century City area of Los Angeles [California]. And I believe it may have been that first year, because he met. . . . Do you recall, for example, that your father did attend, did make that trip the first year?

NIXON: I believe he took them back. Several of the boys went; I don't know how many. I think even my brother Don might have gone, to a school back in Greensboro, North Carolina, at that time. At any rate, I wouldn't be surprised if he had gone back up through Washington, D.C., and then on out from there.

ARENA: On that score, there is the written account that's been published that, because of your father suffering frozen feet due to the open trolley cars--I've forgotten the city, offhand . . .

NIXON: Columbus.

ARENA: Columbus, Ohio. That as a result of that he wanted to address the legislature; and I believe he did, personally. Do you recall that he did that in California, by the way, or recall his talking about THAT particular incident, or doing similar things?

NIXON: I don't think he addressed the legislature in Ohio nor in California. He made his points through the people who were in there and should be representing the people. For example, there was a very sharp young attorney in Columbus who was sympathetic to the trolley car motormen's plight in the Columbus winters, and my father approached him and said, "If you will promise to get legislation passed to close the vestibules on these trolley cars, we will find a way to get you elected; in other words, we will support you 100 percent and we'll beat the bushes to get support that will get you elected." And it turned out that he did, and the vestibules were closed the next year.

ARENA: Do you believe that your father's great interest in politics may have stemmed from such successful participation at that? Or were there similar instances of his participation in local politics, from your own recollections, and then from what you have heard about?

NIXON: Well, he was not averse to approaching anybody who held the key to getting a problem solved.

ARENA: And by the way, to be sure that we're in complete understanding, this, of course, is all before your brother entered into politics in '45.

NIXON: Yes; these are the early years. The Columbus, Ohio, episode occurred back in the early 1900's, 1905 or so.

ARENA: Yes, but even my follow-up question, his other possible entry into that sort of politics, I'm relating that just to the pre-1945 period.

NIXON: His interest in politics could very well have been reinforced by successes in his early life.

ARENA: Were there any others, besides that particular incident, where he . . .

NIXON: There were many stories of the kinds of things he would do. I don't think any was quite as dramatic as that one he did when he was young, but if he saw something that appeared to be out of line to him, whether it had to do with taxes or whatever, he'd write a letter and send it in, send it to the President. Didn't make any difference who he was writing to.

ARENA: Any possible copies of such letters, by the way?

NIXON: Oh, no, I doubt it.

ARENA: Not that he would have used carbon paper, I'm sure, but maybe scratch paper; but as far as you know, there are no old letters like those around. By the way, in other interviews I've come across the idea that your uncle, Ernest Nixon, may have attended some commissions or some meetings in the thirties regarding agriculture. As you know, this was his specialization, and the potato in particular. Do you believe your father's interest in politics may have been sparked by his association with his own brother, and that they were possibly in contact . . .

NIXON: His interest in politics, of course, developed before Ernest was out of school. His first encounter with William McKinley, which I related earlier; his operation in that Columbus trolley-car thing, those were all while Ernest was still not out of high school, I suspect. But they did reinforce one another as they went along in years, because Uncle Ernest was a very interesting, well-educated man. My father respected him and was very, very interested in the kinds of things he would bring up.

ARENA: Of course, it's natural and easy to see the connection between this interest in politics and your brother's eventual interest and participation. What would you want to say about that, from your own recollections and experience? To what extent do you recall, for example, your father and your brother, Richard, discussing politics? Or was this a sort of result that was not apparent on the surface? Or were there

actual discussions between your brother and your father, over the years? For example, if your father was going to write a letter to the President, or participate in a campaign, even if it was just talking up a local candidate, was it in such a manner that everyone was aware of it? And did you see any particular reaction of that awareness on the part of your brother, Richard?

NIXON: Well, we did not have the political discussion at the dinner table. We did not have it at work, unless the customer happened to engage my father in a political discussion and my brother and I had to solve it. But I cannot really put my finger on when those kinds of things might have come up. I did not hear them discuss politics . . .

ARENA: You don't recall, for example, your brother taking on your father, possibly, with a disagreement in politics, or yourself.

NIXON: No.

ARENA: Would that have been, do you think, out of filial respect or just good judgment on the children's part?

NIXON: Well, it was not a matter of taking him on, but of drawing him out. It was always interesting to draw him out, how he felt about this or that.

ARENA: Could you describe that experience? Could you describe that process?

NIXON: No. Well, I could describe it to the extent that you could imagine it. You knew that he had an opinion about almost everything, and if you wanted to know what that opinion was, or if you wanted to be brought up to date on how he might have changed his opinion, you would say, "What about the gold standard?" And then he would start, and he would go along as long as you would allow him to go, or as long as he thought he had time to talk about it.

ARENA: Would he kind of lose himself in the subject, and you would be the victim, say, putting you in the position of the opposite point? Was there any tendency like that? That is, he would get so worked up that if you happened to be there you were getting the brunt of the argument, that he would assume that you were the enemy, so to speak?

NIXON: No, the enemy was out there. . . . Not the enemy, no. It was rather the opposite point of view was always there, and he recognized exactly where he stood, but didn't always know exactly where the opposite point of view came on and got off.

ARENA: Was there a tendency, do you think, or was it just a question of your being too young to appreciate it; did you find that he was logical and emotional, and that one way outdid the other? Or was there a judicious example of both sides of the man here in discussing these things? Would he pause and let the other person give his point of view, listen to his arguments and answer his arguments? Did he debate--let me put it that way--when he was arguing with someone?

NIXON: No, not in that sense. He would make his point and leave the argument, if the other person was not going to listen to his. Very often, you see, that was the case. If you listened to his argument, he would listen to yours. But if you wanted to make your point and were going to be deaf to his, he would very abruptly make his point and leave the scene. That's where you got the stories about his being short-tempered. He was short-tempered with people who were that sort. But if you were a person who would listen, and agree or not agree--it didn't make too much difference if you agreed or didn't agree--if you didn't agree, though, you'd better be careful how you let him know WHY you didn't agree. Why didn't that logic make sense? Then you'd have to say, "Well, now, consider this or consider that," and go about it in a rhetorical sense. And I think many people were successful in parrying with him in that way.

ARENA: Can you think of an incident where he was discussing something with someone, and he changed his mind; some great issue, say a Supreme Court case? Well, that would have been '33, but something dealing with politics where you can recall he changed his mind over a significant issue?

NIXON: No, I can't. He was always dead set against what Franklin Roosevelt was saying. He felt that Herbert Hoover had proposed all the things that Franklin Roosevelt enacted--I should say, proposed most of the successful things--what he considered successful things that Roosevelt enacted, and that Roosevelt went far overboard in getting those passed because he had the Congress in his pocket, and did too many other things. He NEVER would change his attitude toward Franklin Roosevelt. He admired Hoover. The New Deal was bad medicine for a country that didn't need that kind of medicine. It needed medicine in 1930, but the Democratic Congress would not go along with Hoover, and so we got into a worse depression than we had started out with. These were his opinions, and he held them steadfastly.

ARENA: As you know, there is a kind of personal tie between Whittier and Herbert Hoover. His wife, Lou Henry Hoover, lived here for a while. Were you aware that your father was aware of that? Did he ever meet, for example, either Mrs. Hoover or the President himself?

NIXON: Not until President Hoover was long out of office. I think it was even in the fifties when he first met him.

ARENA: Ed, were you personally ever in your father's Sunday school classes as a student, yourself?

NIXON: No.

ARENA: That has come up, obviously, in many interviews. I have had the good fortune of meeting some of his former pupils. I was wondering, though, indirectly if not directly, if you were aware of his preparation for these classes, of their scope, and the general impression that so many have that he would bring in relevant topics of the day, in the discussions of the religious topic of that Sabbath.

NIXON: Well, it was always a matter of relating the Ten Commandments to everyday living. That probably would explain why he would do that, although I didn't witness it myself. I know that we had our Sunday school lessons at home as well as at church, and so the topics of the day were the most important things that you could discuss, especially when it came to a Sunday school lesson, because if you could not justify the life that you were living and the things that you were doing, from moment to moment, by the standards that you are trying to preach, then don't preach. That was his philosophy about living up to what you proclaim as a belief. He felt that, to go along during the week doing one thing and then on one day of the week reversing it, was not the Christian life.

ARENA: In other words, let me ask that question point blank: Is it your impression, from all of your recollections of your father, that one did not practice the Ten Commandments just on Sunday?

NIXON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Would an example of that be--again, I don't know the accuracy of this story, but I've heard it--that he did not feel that he would ever attend a dinner in a church, because that was not the place for one to eat? Have you heard that yourself?

NIXON: Oh, he was very dead set against having potluck suppers in the basement of the church. He opposed the establishment of a kitchen in the church. He felt that it was a place for worship and that there should be no frivolities around it, frivolities in the sense that it was what could be done at home. You could use the church for a gathering place, a meeting place, for the facilities it offered, such as for recreational activities for the children. In other words, he didn't so much oppose having a basketball court built as he did having that

kitchen facility built in the basement and having banquets and things of that sort in there.

ARENA: Do you recall to what extent he and your mother hosted visiting ministers? I'm thinking of one particular case where a person interviewed recalled that his uncle and he and a nephew came along and ate, following the delivery of a sermon at the East Whittier Friends Church. Was that a fairly common thing, hosting . . .

NIXON: Oh, yes. Sunday dinner after church was nearly always for more than the family.

ARENA: Do you think this was a calculated thing, that your parents wanted to expose you to these . . .

NIXON: I don't think that was the purpose, no. I think the purpose was extending hospitality to those who were visiting in the area, or whatever.

ARENA: Were you born too late to experience the great gatherings of the clan? Of course, where your grandfather was concerned, that's true, your Grandfather [Franklin] Milhous. But could Grandmother [Almira] Milhous carry on that tradition, which was very solid?

NIXON: Oh, yes, the family reunions at Christmas were a tradition that grew and grew, and by the time I came along they were quite large, because I was the last of the first cousins on my mother's side, and I guess altogether there were around thirty first cousins. So we had a very large gathering at my grandmother's house every Christmas.

ARENA: That was the main one, at Christmas.

NIXON: There were programs of music that the children had prepared all year, you know. It was their recital time.

ARENA: Were these formalized, to the extent that they were written?

NIXON: No, but my Aunt Olive Marshburn and Uncle Oscar [Marshburn] were sort of the executive aides to my grandmother.

ARENA: They were living with her at the time?

NIXON: Yes, they lived in the house and managed it for her, and the Christmas program was carried out according to their mental notes. They knew who was to perform, what was the order of the day, and they just sort of easily brought it along. They would assemble us all in the living room at the

proper time, put the boys out to play football at the proper time, send the little ones upstairs to play games at the proper time, and so on, and it was quite an affair. Everyone always enjoyed going to it.

ARENA: There are so many of these topics. Obviously, we could spend hours, but to bring, maybe, some of the key points to a head here. . . . We've been, I would say, concentrating on your parents. On this note of the family reunions, I don't think I would be wrong in saying that the emphasis was on the Milhous side of the family. To what extent was your father's being an outsider--in the sense that he came in as a Methodist, became a Quaker, he did not have the education that the traditional Quaker either expected or had in Whittier at that time--what complications, if any, do you think that meant for your father personally, as well as maybe explaining his own personality, his getting along with the other relatives, and that of course, reaching down and affecting you?

NIXON: He didn't have any persecution complex or inferiority complex or any level of paranoia that might have come from that idea. I'm sure that the level of his education had that kind of an effect on his personality, in the way that he responded to someone who was well-educated. He was respectful and wanted to hear them out. He was more careful in hearing out someone who was a well-educated person.

ARENA: Was there bragging, for example, about Brother Ernest?

NIXON: There was an expression of pride. And furthermore, it was plain that he. . . . You have to straighten out one other thing here, too, and that is that there were many Quakers who hadn't as much education as HE had, although in the Quaker tradition around here they tried to get everybody as much education as he could get. There were circumstances surrounding every family that would mean that he would get one level or another of education. And I think the fact that the Quaker, or the Friends church in East Whittier . . .
[end of tape]