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## Irma McConnell (October 5, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. IRMA DAVIS McCONNELL

October 5, 1972  
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Irma Davis McConnell. Mrs. McConnell is the wife of Mr. H. G. (Horace Grant) McConnell, also interviewed today here in Whittier, October 5, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mrs. McConnell, in order to get some background to the statements that you will make later on, could I get some general information about your own background? For example, may I begin by asking you where and when you were born?

McCONNELL: January 26, 1897, in Columbus, Kansas.

ARENA: And how is it that you find yourself in Whittier, and when did you first come here, and what was your educational background?

McCONNELL: We came as a family to Whittier, my father and mother and two sisters in 1921.

ARENA: When did you and where did you attend school, if I may ask?

McCONNELL: In Joplin, Missouri. We lived there before coming to California.

ARENA: How far along did you go in your school years?

McCONNELL: Second year in high school, and then I went on to a business college.

ARENA: From your own general recollection, when did you first meet or see President Nixon in your life?

McCONNELL: I was working at the Leffingwell Ranch office, which was near their market on East Whittier Boulevard, and we used to walk up to the market at lunch time. In the

summertime the children would be there, and that was my first recollection of knowing which one was Richard Nixon.

ARENA: They had moved to that area from Yorba Linda [California], you may recall yourself in 1922. When did you first start working at the Leffingwell Ranch?

McCONNELL: The latter part of 1921. We came to California in February of 1921, and I went to work there I think that next summer. I don't recall exactly.

ARENA: Do you recall the work being done on what became the Nixon home and the Nixon grocery store, and the Nixon filling station then, do you recall?

McCONNELL: Yes, I remember them building the store building and the home at the corner of Whittier Boulevard and Santa Gertrudes [Avenue].

ARENA: Did you have an automobile yourself, or did someone drive you to and from the Leffingwell Ranch?

McCONNELL: Bus transportation.

ARENA: And where did you live yourself around that time, Mrs. McConnell?

McCONNELL: I lived in what used to be the 400 block of North Comstock.

ARENA: About what intersection would that be now, 1972?

McCONNELL: Broadway.

ARENA: Broadway and Comstock [Avenue], I see. What are some of your recollections of the young children, especially President Nixon during those years? Did you see him working in the store, playing? What do you recall of him?

McCONNELL: Well, I remember his older brother working more, and he was in the store more often, I should say.

ARENA: By his older brother, that's right. He would be quite a bit older.

McCONNELL: Harold.

ARENA: This would have been Harold [Samuel Nixon], yes. Let me ask you first: What do you remember about Harold, his appearance. As you know, he did die from his trouble with tuberculosis.

McCONNELL: Yes.

ARENA: Anything that comes to mind about Harold?

McCONNELL: Well, he was a very nice boy. In fact, they all were. We always enjoyed going up there. Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon was a wonderful person. And we would just chat with them, like you do with children.

ARENA: In other words, it wasn't just a matter of your going there and buying some items and leaving, but you even spent a little time chatting with different members of the family.

McCONNELL: Yes, if they weren't too busy in the store, we did.

ARENA: How about being able to chat with the father, Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon? Was he one you could easily chat with?

McCONNELL: Well, no. He was usually busy, and Mrs. Nixon usually helped us and talked to us.

ARENA: Do you recall necessarily that you paid for your items in cash, or did you have an account where they kept a record?

McCONNELL: Cash.

ARENA: Did your entire family deal with the store, or was it just you because you worked there?

McCONNELL: Just me because I worked so close.

ARENA: Do you recall the boys, not only in the store, but I'm wondering outside and playing, either with one another or with other neighborhood children?

McCONNELL: I don't recall any other neighborhood children, but I saw them playing out there, not that I had any personal knowledge of it, but I just saw them playing, all of them.

ARENA: From your own recollections, did the President as a youngster and the other boys seem to be dressed, we'll say, shabbily, very well, or just average boys at that time in the community? I'm wondering, for example, from outside appearances, did they seem to be poor, did they seem to be very well off, or again, however you want to put it?

McCONNELL: Well, I would say they were just like normal boys of that time with very moderate means. I didn't notice anything outstanding or anything shabby about them.

ARENA: How about encountering the President or any of the other members of the family outside the store? I'm wondering, for example, in the city of Whittier at that time, in other shopping areas or even in church, or in any other areas like that?

McCONNELL: No, I had no connection with them other than that.

ARENA: Did you ever see the other members of the Leffingwell Ranch? I'm thinking of other girls working there like yourself, other workers, families that lived there. Did you see any business dealings between these and the store, and what would you say about that?

McCONNELL: Well, I'm sure the families, different ones, shopped there, but I had no connection with that.

ARENA: For example, I'm wondering if you possibly saw deliveries being made by the boys, Harold or Mr. Frank Nixon, any deliveries from the grocery store out to the ranch?

McCONNELL: No, I didn't know any of that. I knew they made deliveries.

ARENA: You never witnessed any.

McCONNELL: No.

ARENA: Just to be sure, from photographs I've seen, I know they tended to have some bad rainstorms and some flooding. I'm wondering if there were ever any bad conditions where maybe the groceries were delivered in bad weather or vice versa, where you could not get to the store because the water was too high? Any bad experiences like that come to mind?

McCONNELL: No. I know we had hard rains, but I don't remember anything like that.

ARENA: Do you remember if you usually purchased the same item or items when you did visit the store? What was your purpose in visiting the store?

McCONNELL: Well, we'd just walk up there at lunch time to get something extra for our lunch usually; that was all.

ARENA: You didn't buy your lunch or eat your lunch there.

McCONNELL: No, there were no facilities for that.

ARENA: And when you say walk, about how much of a walk was it from the standpoint of minutes--ten minutes, five, or a longer walk than that?

McCONNELL: Probably between five and ten. It was just a short distance.

ARENA: When was, if you remember, the last time you had this sort of an association with the Nixon family? One way, of course, would be when did you cease working at the Leffingwell Ranch and you would not be close? That might give some idea?

McCONNELL: I believe 1923 was the last time I actually worked there. About that.

ARENA: And again, just to be sure, did you ever meet any other members of the family not immediately connected with the store? I'm thinking, for example, of the President's grandparents who lived on in Whittier itself, and some of his aunts, such as Mrs. Rose Olive Marshburn. Did you know the Marshburns or other Milhouses or even some uncles like Griffith Milhous who taught at Whittier city schools, like the John Muir Junior High School? I'm just wondering if you had any contact with any of these members of the family?

McCONNELL: I knew Mr. Marshburn in later years in the business.

ARENA: Would this be Mr. Oscar O. Marshburn?

McCONNELL: Oscar Marshburn, yes.

ARENA: Thank you.

McCONNELL: I had met some of the Milhous family, I don't recall just where, but some place, somewhere. I just met them, I didn't know them.

ARENA: What is your overall recollection of the Milhouses and the Nixons from your overall association? In other words, is it your impression that they were easy to get along with, they were very prominent in the area, or they were just average folks? However you want to put it, and I don't mean to put words in your mouth.

McCONNELL: Well, I always thought they were very well thought of in the community, respected people, and they were a very well accepted family as far as I have heard. Mostly it's what I've heard, as far as the Milhous family, other than Mrs. Nixon. I knew her more.

ARENA: Is there anything that you want to say about Mrs. Nixon in particular that comes to mind, not only at the time of your direct contact with her at the store but maybe in later years, including the years when her son became famous? Any personal experiences you may have had with her, and take as much time as you like.



McCONNELL: I didn't have any personal experiences, but she was a person I always admired from the time I met her and read about her through the years that Richard Nixon was in office. She was a lady I always respected.

ARENA: Remembering her working in the grocery store, and then remembering her as the mother of a well-known personality, not only in the United States but, of course, more and more in the world, did she seem to change, herself, as you recall her, from the person working in the store to the mother of a well-known personality? For example, if you encountered her in the city somewhere, did she take the time to talk with you; did she recall you in the early years?

McCONNELL: Well, I scarcely ever was any place where I met her after that, but as I knew her in the store, I would say that she would be just the same wonderful person as she was in the store.

ARENA: Just one more final question, to be sure. As the young Richard Nixon was growing up and he was receiving some fine honors in high school and in Whittier College; he was attending debates, we'll say, both in high school and in college; he won the oratorical contest, you may recall, and he went on and received awards, student government offices during this time, did you come across the name in newspapers? I'm just wondering, was his name something that you, the ordinary citizen of the city, would note and remember from your firsthand contact?

McCONNELL: Oh, yes. I used to read it and recall about having known them.

ARENA: From your recalling him as a little boy, do you find that you were or were not surprised that he was doing that well, both in high school and in college, and later, of course, became a lawyer?

McCONNELL: No, I wasn't surprised, because there was the background there that you would know that the children were well brought up, and I'm sure that you would recognize that in them.

ARENA: Knowing the family as you did, or seeing them in the store, you would say that they were the result of that family's upbringing.

McCONNELL: I would say so, what little I knew. Of course, that was only over the space of a few years.

ARENA: Yes. I want to be sure, as we close this interview, that we have covered all of the possible contact you

may have had. Is there any question or any experience that I have not gone into that you would like to raise at this point yourself, anything I have not covered?

McCONNELL: Only, I met him at one meeting where he spoke.

ARENA: That would be President Nixon.

McCONNELL: Yes. Not President then, he was just a congressman.

ARENA: But he was in political office.

McCONNELL: Yes, he was in a political office.

ARENA: Do you remember about the year? Was it right after the war or a long time after the war?

McCONNELL: Probably in 1949 or '50.

ARENA: Then he would have been a congressman or running for Congress, right after the war, and running for office in 1946.

McCONNELL: I don't recall if it was 1946 or later. Oh, take that back. It was later, I'm sure. I was with my husband when I met him, so he would know what year, but I just don't remember. In '48 the first meeting would have been probably '47 or '48. And then in '48 we were in Washington and I met him again there.

ARENA: How did he react to you, living in the capitol of the country, a member of the government, and having seen you when he was a little youngster? How did he act toward you?

McCONNELL: Well, he didn't remember me, of course, but then he was just very gracious. We enjoyed the meeting very much. We had lunch at the House restaurant.

ARENA: What do you recall about Mrs. Richard Nixon, and did you know her in any connection before she became Mrs. Richard Nixon?

McCONNELL: No. I met her after she was Mrs. Nixon, at the same time I met him.

ARENA: What IS your recollection of her as a person, personality?

McCONNELL: I think she's wonderful. You're not a stranger, you're not any different. She meets you on your own ground so to speak.



ARENA: Well, Mrs. McConnell, I want to thank you very much for granting me this interview and for answering all of my questions so frankly and fully and giving us the benefit of these firsthand recollections and impressions of the President and different members of his family. It all will be a part of the historical record. Thank you very much.

McCONNELL: You're very welcome.