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Carter Barrett (August 25, 1972)

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ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MR. CARTER BARRETT

August 25, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

Mr. Barrett, a pioneer in the California avocado industry, was a resident of the Whittier area since 1914.

In the beginning of his interview, Mr. Barrett discusses his family's background, his early days in Lawrence, Kansas, and his move to California.

His verbatim recollections of specific contacts with Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon follow:

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BARRETT: All right. I had a very large and prominent nursery in partnership with a man at La Habra. As cars often do, his would break down once in awhile. And at the time, Dick's father . . .

ARENA: And by Dick, you mean President Nixon here.

BARRETT: Yes. [Laughter] They had that store out there across from where Don [Francis Donald Nixon] had his fine store across the street.

ARENA: Do you remember the original grocery-gasoline store?

BARRETT: Yes, I do, very much so, because when I come in, walking from La Habra, Dick's father would pick me up and we'd have very nice conversation all the way into Whittier. I always found him a very pleasant, a very fine person of reasonable circumstances.

ARENA: What else do you remember about some of the things that you and he discussed? Maybe what his politics were? Maybe his ideas on religion, bringing up children, whatever comes to mind would be very helpful, Mr. Barrett.

BARRETT: Those are the things that I know. I knew that he and I were at odd ends then, politically, because he had been a Democrat, and I had always, with two or three exceptions, been a Republican.

ARENA: In other words, you're saying that at one time he had been a Democrat.

BARRETT: Right. I don't know; I think that he may have been a Democrat at that time when he was bringing me in in the car.

ARENA: Let me say this: According to some of the books that have been written, Mr. Frank Nixon back somewhere in the nineties had met Mr. [William] McKinley personally, and Mr. McKinley admired his fine horse back in Ohio in a little local parade, and from that time on he became a Republican. That's an over-simplification, but that's what some of the books say. He changed when he met Mr. McKinley, so that would have been before he came to California. To be sure, as far as your knowing Mr. Frank Nixon, you're not saying that he was a Democrat in California. You knew that he had been one before.

BARRETT: That is correct.

ARENA: That is correct. Well, I just want to be sure I understand you correctly.

BARRETT: And that is a very interesting little sidelight, too, because I hadn't heard it or been aware of it in just that way, but I can really believe it. But he was a fairly simple man, a very decent and honest man.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you smoke and drink . . .

BARRETT: I don't.

ARENA: . . . because he was pretty well opposed to both of those things.

BARRETT: We both agreed thoroughly on that. I never have done either. Well, I won't go into that, 'cause that's my personal stuff. I don't object to it, but it doesn't have any bearing on this. I've been stopped twice by the police up here because now I have my personal. . . . I don't always walk straight.

ARENA: Is that because of your age?

BARRETT: I think that has something to do with it.

ARENA: Are you under any medication?

BARRETT: No. I haven't had a medical doctor for ten years. I have largely gone with the chiropractors.

ARENA: May I ask you this: Did you ever attend--unless this is personal, of course, then don't answer it . . .

BARRETT: I won't.

ARENA: All right. Did you ever attend any religious services with Mr. Frank Nixon, or have any occasion to see him, we'll say, in Sunday school where I understand he taught, or anything like that?

BARRETT: No, because I was brought up an Episcopalian. I was head usher down here at St. Matthias [Episcopal Church]. And I didn't know the Nixons at all until the time when my friend, downstairs here, that used to be the . . .

ARENA: Mr. Herman Perry.

BARRETT: Mr. Herman Perry got me interested when Dick ran for Congress the first time; and, as I have told you previously, I can check that date absolutely, but . . .

ARENA: Oh, that particular date would be about 1945.

BARRETT: Yeah, that's about when it was.

ARENA: Right, and I would like to go into that a bit later, but I want to be sure on this side of Frank Nixon, I would like to be sure, because you may recall that in his acceptance speech, President Nixon mentioned--by acceptance, I mean as candidate for the Republican Party . . .

BARRETT: I understand.

ARENA: He mentioned that his father did not have more than a sixth-grade education and was interested that the boys all get a good education. I was just wondering, from your own personal contact with Mr. Frank Nixon, did that subject ever come up? Do you have any occasion to recall his talking about education?

BARRETT: Yes, more in general terms, but he was very much for it. And I used to see them, after I got to know them at all in that first Congressional trial, I got to see both of them more or less together at times.

ARENA: And by both, you mean Mr. Frank Nixon and his son, the President?

BARRETT: Yes, that's right.

ARENA: All right, now before we get up to that, I want to be sure we bring back your memory as much as possible to that early, early period, when the President is growing up out there in East Whittier. Do you recall your shopping in the grocery store at any time? Did you have any occasion to use that store?

BARRETT: Yes, particularly after I met the father, and he had been kind and courteous to me. And when I could, I got what I could out there.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you this regarding his kindness and courtesy: Were there any times when, if you were discussing politics, he got kind of excited, we'll say, or overly enthusiastic?

BARRETT: I can't remember anything of that sort.

ARENA: How about on the question--just to be sure we cleared up, once for all--on the question of religion: Did you ever have any arguments, or did he ever want to argue religion with you?

BARRETT: I think we pretty much agreed. I don't think there was any occasion for argument.

ARENA: Not necessarily regarding Frank Nixon, but regarding your living in Whittier as a whole, did you as an Episcopalian, living in a Quaker-founded community, ever feel that there was ever any prejudice against you, that you were not being treated just like anybody else? Did you ever suffer anything like that?

BARRETT: No, Sir, I did not.

* * * *

As his interview continued, Mr. Barrett discussed his contacts with and recollections of Oscar and Olive Marshburn, the President's aunt and uncle; the historical background of the avocado industry in California; and then the following verbatim discussion of the 1946 events occurred:

* * * *

ARENA: That's what I want you to talk about, not politics so much as the man, Richard Nixon, at that time [1946].

BARRETT: Well, I tell you, the first thing was, I was desperate for somebody to throw Jerry Voorhis out. I don't know that you remember Jerry Voorhis at all. He's got a book now.

ARENA: I was not in California at that time, no.

BARRETT: And it didn't look as though anybody could. [Herman] Perry thought that Dick had a chance, and he encouraged a lot of us who were all along with him, and I used to see him in the bank occasionally, and we were just thrilled to death when we found that we could put Dick over.

ARENA: When was the first time you personally felt convinced that you would like to back him; and secondly, when you thought he might have a chance, maybe, to even defeat Mr. Voorhis?

BARRETT: I couldn't give you [dates] without referring to my diaries.

ARENA: I'm not thinking about a particular date or year, but I'm thinking more about the events. Was it hearing Richard speak somewhere, not worrying about the date here, was it your firsthand exposure to him, or was it your exposure to the family, remembering what Mr. Frank Nixon was like, and thinking, well, he's the father, and the youngster must be like him? I don't want to put ideas into your head. I'm just trying to get you to think about why it is that you would have backed young Richard Nixon.

BARRETT: Well, primarily, as I have stated in the first place, because I wanted somebody that had a chance to throw Jerry Voorhis out. He was a Democrat and had been in there a long time and nobody thought anybody could beat him. And Jerry I didn't see at all. And so I had at that time my secretary who had no legs, and he could get a telephone, so I paid the telephone bills and we paid up to forty dollars a month during that campaign for Congress the first time, and he was as much of an influence on me then as anybody else was. It was more that, I think, than any personal contact with Dick at that time. Later on I came to know the President himself pretty well.

ARENA: Can I ask you to describe that? How is it that you knew him and what you thought about him when you saw him close up?

BARRETT: I didn't have anything but the utmost respect. I knew his personal history because I knew so many people that had known the family around, and I had known the

family and all, and the fact that he had what it took to become a congressman when everybody else thought it was impossible, almost, was enough to sell me on him for life.

* * * *

The interview ends with an effort to elicit what Mr. Barrett knew of the Wingert and Bewley law firm and this concluding dialogue:

* * * *

ARENA: As this interview comes to an end now, Mr. Barrett, is there any question about the President and his family that I have not raised that you would like to raise yourself at this point, anything you would like to be sure is on the record, so to speak?

BARRETT: I think that the family has come up from a very low level, as far as wealth and all is concerned. From the standpoint of character and all, I think that it's one of the best we've ever had, and as I just said, we have crises in our history and we've always had somebody raised up to see us through.

ARENA: Thank you very much for giving me the privilege of this interview and answering all of my questions so frankly and so fully, and I know my fellow historians join me in that. Thank you very much.

BARRETT: I appreciate the opportunity.

