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Thomas T. Seulke (October 19, 1971)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

THOMAS T. SEULKE

October 19, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Program

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Thomas Seulke. Is there an initial in the name?

SEULKE: That's right. Yes, T.

ARENA: Thomas T. Seulke. And what does the T. stand for?

SEULKE: Theodore.

ARENA: We are in Whittier, California. Today's date is October 19, 1971, Arena interviewing. Shall we begin, Tom, by asking you where and when you were born?

SEULKE: I was born in La Habra, California, on April 9, 1918. That would be roughly in the East Whittier area.

ARENA: At that time was it considered part of East Whittier, by the way, or was it known as La Habra?

SEULKE: It was known as La Habra. But all of our activities, church and so forth, were back towards East Whittier.

ARENA: What church, if I may ask, did you belong to and maybe you still belong to the same one?

SEULKE: East Whittier Friends Church.

ARENA: You're a member of the East Whittier Friends Church.

SEULKE: Yes.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask also, are you a birthright Quaker, Tom?

SEULKE: Yes, I assume that I am.

ARENA: As you know the President is a birthright Quaker and also a member still officially of that same church. To get right to the point, where and when was the first time you met any of the Nixon or Milhous family?

SEULKE: That would be hard to say exactly.

ARENA: In your recollection.

SEULKE: Being a relative I was with them most of the time, I suppose.

ARENA: Then we will begin with that. Precisely what is your relationship with the Nixon-Milhous family?

SEULKE: My mother was a Milhous. Dick's mother Hannah was a Milhous. Their fathers were brothers. Now that makes me a--our mothers were first cousins so I imagine Dick and I would be, what, second cousins.

ARENA: I would imagine, but the technicalities I'm not going to swear to. You're certainly close cousins, that's for sure. What was your mother's first name?

SEULKE: Blanche [Neva Blanche Milhous Seulke].

ARENA: What was her father's name?

SEULKE: Charles [Wright] Milhous.

ARENA: Who were some of the other members of the Charles Milhous family because I might have interviewed some of these ladies, if you don't mind?

SEULKE: She had one sister, Lucile Ware [Gertrude Lucile Milhous Ware]. Her married name is Ware. A brother, Frank [McClure] Milhous. He was the oldest of the four. Bill [Charles William] Milhous, her younger brother and he is the only one left living at this time.

ARENA: You know, there is a Bill [William Alan] Milhous at the Seafare Inn.

SEULKE: That's his son.

ARENA: So the first Bill Milhous who is still living would be a key man to interview. If I'm not mistaken, Bill did bring this up by the way, young Bill Milhous. He mentioned that his father was traveling and he still might be.

SEULKE: I think he is.

ARENA: Still is traveling. That's a good sign if he can do that. If I'm not mistaken, is it outside the country that he's traveling?

SEULKE: I think he started inside the country and I think it took him outside.

ARENA: That's wonderful. That establishes the relationship. Now what are your earliest recollections of coming into contact particularly with the Nixon family or the President's family itself? You say you were more or less in and out of the house all along, I guess. Is there some first experience that stands out in your mind when you first came in contact with them, and your cousin Frank [Francis Anthony Nixon], your cousin Hannah [Milhous Nixon] and the other brothers?

SEULKE: My father [Theodore Henry Seulke] passed away when I was six years old, that was 1924. He worked on a ranch for my grandfather, my mother's father, Charles [Wright] Milhous. In the wintertime it was kind of slow. He worked sometimes in the wintertime in the old market with Frank and Hannah Nixon; not much but some, through the winter months. I imagine it was after my father's death that I came probably closer with my Nixon relatives. Being the only boy with three sisters I kind of relished the fact of being around boys, and of course the Nixons had only boys. I would stay there sometimes in the evenings and stay all night. We'd sleep upstairs over the garage at the old house on the boulevard where the old market was. At that time there was a service station, they had a small market in conjunction with the service station. Then as it grew--I'm not sure of that date, I think it was 1929--they built the new East Whittier Friends Church. The old church building Frank Nixon purchased and moved across the street and down about a block and worked it over and made a pretty nice market out of it. He closed it in. At that time I became a little more acquainted with the Nixons probably. I started running around with Don [Francis Donald Nixon] some. He went to church there. Of course, he went to East Whittier Grammar School and I went to Lowell Grammar School, but we'd run around a lot together and couple of the other boys around the neighborhood, George Burnett, Roger Burnett, Herman Brannon. Then of course you'd get in contact with Dick off and on, but Dick was quite the studious type and he spent most of his time after school studying.

ARENA: The fact too that at that period, his being a couple of years older, even a couple of years could have a difference when you're that young, in addition to the fact that he was studying; or did that make a difference?

SEULKE: No, that didn't make any difference. Don actually was a year older than I am, maybe two. And of course Dick is older than he is, which is probably a factor that I wasn't ever really real close with Dick. But, of course, staying there at the house and Dick was there and he would come in the market in the evenings after school once in a while. Don worked at the market quite a bit.

ARENA: Since I realize you have an appointment and this is going to be a brief interview I would like to get a general picture, and then in the future if you will allow us, and you come back, I'd like to go into detail on some of these main, general points. So let me just more or less see if I get a good outline of your contact with the President and his family. First of all is the fact, of course, that you grew up as a relative and a nearby living relative. Then there is the fact that you actually lived in the house for a while.

SEULKE: I would stay there a night or two once in a while, not actually live with them. I was in and out of the house.

ARENA: So it wasn't, again, just a question of being a nearby living relative, from time to time you actually visited. Do you recall, by the way, if the boys or the President himself visited your home in the same way, that he might stay a night? Do you recall situations like that?

SEULKE: No, I really don't. I've known him to come down in the daytime, we'd play as young kids. I can't remember any time he ever stayed at night.

ARENA: There is that important all-around contact on a day to day basis. The next thing is, were you ever in class-- by class I mean school, and not the church school now but the public school--with any of the boys themselves? Then, again, the difference in age. I just wanted to be sure.

SEULKE: No. Of course, they were in Whittier schools and I went to Fullerton schools.

ARENA: I believe you did mention Lowell [Grammar school], and Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon] came along later and Eddie attended, but you being older than he. . . .

SEULKE: I think Don's brother spent a year at Lowell before he went to East Whittier [Grammar School].

ARENA: I see. You might have had the same teachers and, of course, you had the same building. We might go into that later, just what you recall of the building and the teachers. That's one area. Did you ever go on any trips with the family, do you know? Frank, I understand, did drive from time to time. It was a question of his being out in Arizona, I believe. Do you recall ever going on any trips with any members of the family?

SEULKE: No. I didn't take any trips with them.

ARENA: The area of the church. You are a member of the same church. Did this include your seeing or knowing President Nixon's religious experiences, including teaching in Sunday School and including his musical contributions to the church in any way, either singing or playing the piano or organ?

SEULKE: Now Dick taught for--I don't remember the exact period of time--but for a while Dick taught the young married people's class and, if I remember right, that would be before he was married.

ARENA: Which is very interesting. I believe you've mentioned the fact that it is possible to locate some of these people and you could give us the names. That's fine for future interviews.

SEULKE: I was telling Evlyn [Dorn] out there that Dick talked Don and I in singing in the choir, but that didn't last too long.

ARENA: That's something we'll want to go into, whatever it was. We'll want to go into the fact that he did help to teach you and Don for the choir; very interesting. The other area of contact would be your working in the store from time to time. Do you recall the very first time that you began working in the market?

SEULKE: While I was in high school and I worked there after school.

ARENA: What period, when did you graduate from high school?

SEULKE: I got out of high school in 1936, so I'd say '32, '33, around in there.

ARENA: Good, then we'll go into that because that will give us a chance to see you describe the store, not only the parents but the entire family. We'll take time to do that. Then, after that period I believe you worked closely with Donald Nixon, the President's younger brother. Do you recall the period there when you worked with Donald and the work itself?

SEULKE: I'd say I started actually working steady in the store in 1936. I worked until 1940 with Don's folks. I left the store and went into another business and came back in '45 when Don took over the market from his folks, and stayed with Don from 1945 until 1956, '57.

ARENA: I won't keep you any later because I know you do have this other appointment. By going over this interview, we'll begin fresh next time and zero in on some of these topics that you mentioned. Thanks very much.

SEULKE: She wanted me to mention the ring bit. Do you want that on here or later?

ARENA: If you have it fresh in your mind and if you have time, I would sure appreciate the experience dealing with the President's engagement ring to his wife, Patricia [Ryan Nixon].

SEULKE: Dick called the store one day. At that time we had delivery service. Twice a week we delivered up in Whittier proper and Dick had called and asked what time I'd be in Whittier, and I told him, oh, roughly 2' o'clock. So he asked me if I would go to Malins [Flower Shop] right here in town and pick up some flowers and take them down to Whittier High School where Pat was a teacher. He told me her room number and just to deliver these flowers for him. I said, "Sure." When I got to Whittier I picked up the flowers wrapped in green paper at the flower shop, took them to the high school, found the room, and of course, as a young boy I was kind of embarrassed walking on the school ground with a bunch of flowers. I took them in to Pat. The kids were gone and she was cleaning up, getting ready to leave. When I came back to the store, Dick's mother asked me if I'd taken the flowers up to Pat and I said, "Yes." She said Dick had called and wondered if I had. Then I found out later that Dick had purchased an engagement ring, put it in this bouquet of flowers before I picked them up and that's how the ring was delivered, and I didn't know it. But Pat didn't know it either. She took the wrapping off the flowers, put them in a vase, threw the paper in the waste basket. Dick found this out, went down to the high school, got there just when the janitor was dumping the trash and they went through it and they found the ring box. I thought that was kind of unique and different.

ARENA: A very near miss. Thank you very much. We'll get together as soon as it is convenient for you.