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Mary Fae Pickering (October 19, 1971)

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Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

Mrs. Mary Fae Pickering

October 19, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview with Mrs. Mary Fae Pickering. The interview is in Whittier, California. The date is October 19, 1971, Arena interviewing. Can we begin, Mrs. Pickering, by my asking you where and when you were born?

PICKERING: I was born in 1910 in Indiana.

ARENA: Where in Indiana, and when did you come to California, and why, do you know?

PICKERING: I was born outside of a very small town in Indiana, Greensboro; it's not more than a wide place in the road really. I don't think it's grown since then. My father had a farm in Indiana and times were a little hard and he had heard glowing reports about California, and having a sister out here who was teaching school he decided to bring the whole family to California and start a new life out here.

ARENA: What is your father's name and how many children were there who did come out? Was your mother still living too when you came out?

PICKERING: Oh, yes.

ARENA: How many were there in the family who made that move?

PICKERING: There were four children in my father's family, two boys and two girls. As I say, we had lived near this very small town. Our experiences were quite limited. I can't recall that we had eaten in very many restaurants. We had never been on a train, never been in a hotel and it was quite an experience, as I remember their telling about it, to pick up and move this family of four children and come by train to California.

ARENA: Your father's name, Mrs. Pickering?

PICKERING: Jesse Earl Moffett.

ARENA: Do you remember the year of the move?

PICKERING: It was 1917.

ARENA: So you were some seven years old at the time. And the sister who was a teacher, do you recall what community and is that where your father moved to when he came to California?

PICKERING: His sister was Mary Moffett and she was teaching at the time in the schools of Santa Maria [California] and that is where we landed when we came to California. But there were, it was a community of Catholics and beans and saloons at that time. My family felt it wasn't the right place to bring up four children.

ARENA: To the newcomer to California, such as myself, where does Santa Maria come into the picture? Where is it located in California?

PICKERING: Santa Maria is somewhat north of Santa Barbara, really midway in the state.

ARENA: You didn't live there yourself for very long with the family, so you don't have a very clear picture of it, I suppose.

PICKERING: No. A matter of a few months. We had friends in Whittier at the time who had come from Indiana earlier and since my parents had decided for the reasons that I mentioned that they didn't want to stay in Santa Maria, we headed out to Whittier where the friends were.

ARENA: And you have been here ever since.

PICKERING: That's right.

ARENA: Do you recall where your father moved to in Whittier at the time, when he did move to Whittier?

PICKERING: Yes. We didn't move into Whittier, we moved into East Whittier because he was looking for citrus property to buy. And the first house that we rented was on Colima Road, until he had time to look around and buy property.

ARENA: There was a structure already there; he did not build it then.

PICKERING: No.

ARENA: Do you recall the very first occasion that you met any members of the Nixon family or relatives of the Nixons, the Milhouses, in Whittier or in the area such as East Whittier, you personally?

PICKERING: I can't say I remember a really specific time. Well, we went to the East Whittier Friends Church and this was our contact with them. But frankly, I can't say I remember Dick Nixon very well, but it was his mother that I had more contact with.

ARENA: Actually the Nixons moved into East Whittier in 1922; they had been living in Yorba Linda where Dick was born, and the father moved to that intersection which is now Santa Gertrudes and Whittier Boulevard. Were you there then before that period, before 1922? Coming from Indiana in 1917 and staying a short time in Santa Maria.

PICKERING: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall such things as the end of the building of the first church that was used by the East Whittier Friends Church, which became the basis for the market and residence of the Nixons?

PICKERING: I'm not sure I understand.

ARENA: I understand that the first building of the East Whittier Friends Church was purchased by Frank Nixon and moved from its site to become part of his early property and his early market. Now I was just wondering if you had any personal recollection of that business, where it was moved?

PICKERING: No, I'm afraid I don't. I think I have heard this related, but I don't recall it.

ARENA: Do you recall the appearance of the marketplace itself, as a youngster going there?

PICKERING: Yes, I have a vague picture of that.

ARENA: Do you recall anyone referring to that as being formerly a church, although you might not recall the move or anything like that?

PICKERING: No, I can't say I do.

ARENA: Then was your first contact as you recall in the church itself and the first person that seems to come to mind would be Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

PICKERING: Yes, that's right.

ARENA: In what connection in the church? Were you on one of the particular committees or the choir with her? Do you recall what your association was with her?

PICKERING: Yes, I recall very well. She was my Sunday School teacher when I suppose I was about eleven or twelve years old, something like that.

ARENA: Would you describe, Mrs. Pickering, to the best of your knowledge, everything in connection with your Sunday School and especially with Mrs. Hannah Nixon, such things as when Sunday School classes were held, how long, how many months out of the year, what was done in the way of formal work in the classroom, were there any special trips, were there special projects, whatever you can recall concerning it?

PICKERING: Well, I recall first of all that it was held in a little bungalow out in back of the church. Whether it was a temporary building at the time, I sort of assume that it was.

ARENA: Was it just a one-room affair too?

PICKERING: It was a one-room affair but there were several classes being held in this one room. There were partitions as I recall. This was a class of just girls. In those days the boys were always in a separate class and the girls in a separate class.

ARENA: Possibly in another partitioned area, girls and boys met in the same building but not in the same class?

PICKERING: Right. I think so. Yes.

ARENA: Would you recall possibly if President Nixon was himself attending around that time?

PICKERING: Yes, I'm sure that he was. He was a couple of years younger than I am.

ARENA: This might refresh your memory. In an interview with Miss Jessamyn West she noted that her father was the President's Sunday School teacher and I was wondering if you recall him, the father teaching around that time? Do you recall him at all? You don't recall what he looked like or having had him?

PICKERING: No, I'm afraid I don't.

ARENA: The other person who was teaching around that time, and Miss Jessamyn West had him actually, was Mrs. Nixon's husband, Frank [Francis Anthony Nixon] himself. I wonder if you remember his being in the building around the same time?

PICKERING: Oh, yes. I remember Frank well. He was a man that you noticed because he was rather outspoken and rather stern.

ARENA: Before we go on ahead, in particular, which we will later on, then we'll go back to this main question of your recollecting all that you can about your Sunday School experiences including, of course, the role of Mrs. Hannah Nixon.

PICKERING: I really don't remember very much then. She actually taught us, that is in formal lessons, formal instruction, but I certainly have a vivid picture of the kind of a person she was. She was a perfectly gentle lady, very soft-spoken most of the time; we were lively girls and giggling and talking. As I remember she sort of waited until we settled down a little bit, and then she would speak up and really had a great command of us just because she was so gentle and soft-spoken.

ARENA: In other words where discipline, where control of the class enters in, I'm not thinking of discipline in the sense of punishment but just the idea of controlling the class so that instruction could take place, her method that you recall was not one of loudness, of sternness and yet she did have control of the class of girls.

PICKERING: No loudness at all. That's right.

ARENA: Do you remember about the size of the number of girls?

PICKERING: Possibly a dozen. But she did exert this control but it was done in such a gentle way. She was just really a saint-like person. She was just so kind and yet she let us chatter on and she listened. The only thing that I remember at all about any instruction really was one time we got to questioning her about being saved. That was the term, of course, that was in use in those days, everybody must be saved. We all said, "Well, how do you know if you're saved? If you think you are saved does it make any difference to you, make any difference in your life?" All I can remember is that her answer was, she didn't go into a great many details but her answer was just full of conviction, "Yes it certainly does make a difference and you'll know it when it happens." Just by her faith and conviction it made you feel that it was real and genuine.

ARENA: You don't recall and, of course, at that age I wonder if anyone would do it anyway, but you can't recall complicated theological, religious, intricate discussions?

PICKERING: I don't remember that she led us in any discussions like that. As I said it was just her quiet nature and the way she lived that led us to respect her.

ARENA: Do you recall that she used day by day examples to illustrate her points, contemporary events, that you referred to things in Hollywood or things in the local community or things in the Bible itself? Does anything like that stand out in the way of examples that she used?

PICKERING: I'm afraid that I can't recall.

ARENA: Do you recall the length of time of the Sunday School lessons? Was this an ongoing thing every Sunday, every week out of the year?

PICKERING: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Do you recall how long in that period you had her as your instructor; was it a year, more or less? Did you get a different teacher every year?

PICKERING: I can't recall that exactly. I would assume that it was probably a year. She was very busy with her family and work in the store, and then I can't remember just when the brother became ill. Harold [Samuel Nixon] was it?

ARENA: Harold, yes.

PICKERING: This took a great deal of her time, the care of him and the worry about him, I'm sure. So just how long she taught the Sunday School class I don't remember, but I think it must have been a year.

ARENA: Were you aware that she left East Whittier from time to time for Harold's sake so that he could live in another climate?

PICKERING: Yes.

ARENA: Is there any other occasion such as that where you had an intimate contact with members of the Nixon and Milhous family? Were you ever in class with any of the boys at school; were you ever in plays in church; were you ever in the choir with any of the members of the family, the boys, father and mother?

PICKERING: I don't recall any instances like that.

ARENA: Did you ever have supper with the family; did any members of their family come to supper in your folks' home at any time?

PICKERING: No, we weren't that intimate. This class of girls had lots of parties and we had potluck suppers with the Nixons.

ARENA: The girls including yourself had, through the Sunday School arrangements, potluck suppers. Would you describe one of them, give us an idea of just how Mrs. Nixon's class conducted her Sunday School potluck supper.

PICKERING: You know, I just can't remember that. Isn't that terrible I would have forgotten such a thing. I just remember that we had lots of food and you know what eleven and twelve year old girls are like. We just giggled our way through the evening, and as I recall she stayed quite in the background and we just had a good informal time. But in detail, no, I don't really remember.

ARENA: Do you recall anyone, I'm thinking of the President in particular, playing the piano or playing any musical background to your party? Do you recall seeing a piano in the home by any chance?

PICKERING: No, and I don't recall that Richard ever came around. He probably was shy of the girls at that point. I don't remember seeing him when we were there.

ARENA: Do you recall ever hearing or seeing Richard play for the church, any instrument at all?

PICKERING: No, I don't recall.

ARENA: You don't recall his being in the choir or seeing or hearing him in that connection either? And I don't recall if I did get a flat yes or no from the idea of your ever being in class with any of the boys, Richard or Edward [Calvert Nixon]. Edward would be much younger, he was born in 1930, or Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] who was a couple of years younger than the President.

PICKERING: I just remember them vaguely but not specifically in any class.

ARENA: Do you recall yourself shopping--now we'll leave the school and religious situation--in the store itself and who waited on you and how that took place?

PICKERING: Yes, I remember being in the store many times and it seems like either Mr. or Mrs. Nixon waited on us, but most of the time we had our groceries delivered and Dick often delivered them.

ARENA: Do you recall the car or truck he used and what age level he was doing this? This might help to refresh you, his high school years were 1926-1930. He graduated in 1930. He went on to Whittier College 1930-34.

PICKERING: I would assume this would be his early high school years.

ARENA: Did he come in a car, too?

PICKERING: Yes, in those days youngsters could drive at the age of fourteen, so it could have been when he was as young as that. I don't remember. I do remember his saying one time when he came with our delivery that "My, you people sure use lots of cheese." And you know when he was Vice President and Seth [Pickering] and I took our three boys and went back to Washington and Dick was so gracious and invited us into his office, and I introduced myself by my maiden name to refresh his memory, and before I could go any further he said, "Oh, yes, you used to live on Colima Road and I delivered your groceries." Isn't that amazing that he could recall offhand?

ARENA: What was the attitude or reaction of your children to that?

PICKERING: Oh, they were thrilled to pieces, of course. He autographed a picture for us and they were quite impressed.

ARENA: Are there any other recollections that you have or any other incidents such as that concerning the store, really concerning any of the members of the family including what you recall? How you would describe the store from your memory? Was it a cold store; did it have heat in the winter time, was it crowded and so forth?

PICKERING: Well, I suppose it was a typical store at that time. It had a rough wooden floor as I remember; I don't think there was a covering on it. It was warm and it was crowded. It had a friendly and cozy atmosphere.

ARENA: Could you look into the living quarters by going into the store? Were the back rooms inhabited where there would be a door showing, say, into a kitchen or into a bedroom or sleeping quarters, but not within eyesight of the customers coming in?

PICKERING: I don't recall that you could see into any of the living quarters, no.

ARENA: Do you recall if your father or any members of the family purchased gasoline from the store--they also sold gasoline?

PICKERING: I don't believe so. My father had a couple of tractors and I think they had other arrangements about their gasoline for the tractors.

ARENA: Again, not forgetting that we want to look at Frank Nixon's personality and your recollection of him, I would like to make sure we've covered all the possible acquaintances and experiences you may have had with the President personally. Going beyond that, he would appear as you know in debates, this is before the political period, all this is before 1945, where schools would debate against schools, where he participated in college debates.

He played football, but we know he sat on the bench most of the time. This is to help refresh your memory. He also appeared in plays that were put on by the Community Theater. And he also was a member of some of the service organizations where he may have participated, as you know the Kiwanis Club does today in some public work. They put on the 605 game and collect tickets.

Do any of these experiences bring to mind any personal contact with the President that I mentioned here? Maybe you saw him in a play or in the high school debate or anything like that, or saw him sit on the bench at some of the Whittier College football games?

PICKERING: No, I really can't say I recall him in any of these situations. As I said, I was two years ahead of him and busy with my own affairs, and then after I graduated Seth and I were married and we moved to Baldwin Park [California] and were out of the Whittier area for a few years.

ARENA: You say you graduated from which school?

PICKERING: Whittier College.

ARENA: Oh, you did attend Whittier. He attended there for four years. Again he was there after--he would be there the last two years you attended.

PICKERING: Yes.

ARENA: At that point had he entered into any activities while you still were on the campus in which you noticed his participation?

PICKERING: It is difficult to subtract what I think I actually think I recall and what I have been told that he did. It seems like I do recall his activities in debating, but I can't recall anything specific.

ARENA: Do you recall--of course you were probably out by this time because he was elected to president of the class at the end of his junior year and would take over in his senior, which would be the period '33, '34--that that was the year he promised to bring dancing officially on the campus. I was wondering if you were in the vicinity at that time and if you were aware of that campaign pledge that he had made and the talk or the publicity that that was bringing on. If you recall anything about that, even though you weren't a student at the time?

PICKERING: I remember hearing that this was his pledge all right. But the campaign for getting dancing on the campus started back several years before that.

ARENA: Do you recall, possibly, the names of the students or persons who were responsible, who were leaders in that? What it would help establish, in a way, is whether or not the President knew these people personally and was carrying on a kind of commitment or pledge to them.

PICKERING: I can't remember exactly who.

ARENA: It had been an ongoing thing anyway?

PICKERING: Oh, yes. And wasn't Dr. [Walter F.] Dexter still president in '32 about, or '31?

ARENA: He was during this period, yes. The person who keyed me on that most recently was [Richard] Dick Thomson who was in the same class as the President.

PICKERING: I think it was the senior class of 1932 which had the first official dance and Dr. Dexter approved this and gave us his blessing to go ahead and have a dance.

ARENA: Do you recall the reaction or any difficulties that fell upon Dr. Dexter as a result of that?

PICKERING: Of course I wasn't aware what criticisms came to him, but I'm sure there must have been some because there was a great deal of criticism from various groups in the town, particularly the Baptist Church. They sent representatives up to the student body meetings, up in the old Founders Hall where we always had our meetings on the main floor there. They protested this and thought we were really going to the dogs.

ARENA: That was in 1932?

PICKERING: I think so.

ARENA: Do you recall that this was also discussed in the newspapers? Was this the subject of editorials, and probably was the subject of straight news reporting? There probably were reports--I don't want to put words in your mouth--but do you recall that newspapers took this up in any way?

PICKERING: I have a feeling they did, because it was quite a subject, it was quite a controversy. The church which is at the corner of Bailey [Street] and Comstock [Avenue] was having a series of revival meetings, I guess they would be called in those days, and this was one of their concerns: What was happening to the Whittier College students; and the students were invited to come to their meetings when dancing was discussed. We went once. It was a subject that was very much on the minds of the townspeople.

ARENA: Also, regarding this question of dancing. You may be aware of the fact that the East Whittier Women's Improvement Club--I think is the full official title--was the seat or location for a dancing club. Mr. Grant Garman, whom you may know, was explaining the history of that group. Possibly that got into the picture in some way too. Dances were being held there and also eventually got into the high school itself, although this

came in the late 1930's because Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon herself was one of the chaperones at these dances along with Mr. Grant Garman. So there were other groups that were leaning towards the idea of having dances. Nevertheless, there was still opposition. Do you recall, possibly, Mrs. Hannah Nixon ever bringing this subject up maybe when you met her in town or in the store? What her reaction was to the fact that her son, the President, was involved in this kind of controversial student activity at that time?

PICKERING: No, I'm afraid I don't.

ARENA: Now, is there anything I've left out concerning opportunities that you had to meet with the President personally, at any point, before we move on to your recollections of other members of the family, including Frank Nixon whom we mentioned earlier?

PICKERING: No, I don't recall any other contacts.

ARENA: Possibly alumni day affairs or commencement exercises that you attended where he was one of the speakers?

PICKERING: Oh, yes. When he came back and was the speaker on campus, that was when he was Vice President, wasn't it?

ARENA: I did mean the period before that.

PICKERING: Before that. No, I don't recall any contact at all.

ARENA: This is a question I could not ask of anyone and I can't help but ask of you, because you're in a position to have an opinion regarding the troublesome activities of the students from the point of view of some people in the community, such as the question of dancing which must have made some people unhappy. Would you say that there was any more or less community college friction then as compared with today? Now you see why I say you're one of the persons who could answer that--that I could not ask of everyone. You were a student, you were a member of the community in that period, the 1930's, and you are a member of the community today.

PICKERING: Do you mean communication?

ARENA: Communication, student difficulties with townspeople on dancing or other questions, in as broad a perspective as possible.

PICKERING: I'm not sure my opinion is too broad, but it does seem to me there was more communication between the townspeople and the college students then than there is now. We were recalling this when the Roxy Theater burned, because every time there was a home football game we had a parade downtown and ended up--the night before the game I guess it was--we had a serpentine type of parade all over town and ended up at the Roxy Theater where we had a rally. I'm sure the townspeople were more aware of the students in that regard than they are now.

ARENA: Were townspeople as well as students invited into that rally and invited into the building?

PICKERING: I don't know that they were particularly invited. I remember that there were some there.

ARENA: They were invited, of course, to witness the serpentine parade.

PICKERING: Right. There were people watching and practically everybody in town went to the game. Business came almost to a halt. A good many of the games. . . . Well, I suppose the reason they were in the afternoon was because we didn't have lights probably. But everybody went to the game, and for various reasons they don't now. I think the Friends Church had a much closer contact with the college; that connection has become almost nil.

ARENA: Today the school is not considered officially a Quaker college, although it was founded by the Quakers first as a prep school, then an academy, then the college, although a very intimate connection in the beginning. To pinpoint the location of this Roxy Theater for any of the uninitiated, for those who will be studying this and who are not acquainted with Whittier, what would you give as the address of the Roxy Theater?

PICKERING: It was on Philadelphia Street, on the south side, between Bright [Avenue] and Washington [Boulevard].

ARENA: It was the subject of a devastating fire not too long ago.

PICKERING: It was originally the Scenic Theater in those days instead of the Roxy, but it was the center of activity.

- ARENA: Would it be used first as a theater, a legitimate theater where plays were put on in which possibly the President himself participated--the Community Theater of that day?
- PICKERING: No, I think it wasn't used for that. I think the Women's Clubhouse was used.
- ARENA: The one in Whittier, not East Whittier?
- PICKERING: Yes, the one in Whittier was used for the Community Theater things. But plays did come to the old Scenic Theater and the Lions Club always had its annual production there, so it was used for a theater and for meetings, community activities.
- ARENA: Was it owned by the community, Mrs. Pickering?
- PICKERING: I don't remember. I don't think I know that.
- ARENA: If there is nothing else that comes to mind concerning personal contact with the President, and this, of course, is the period before 1945, can we go back to your recollections of the other members of the family? We did discuss Mrs. Hannah Nixon. To make sure, is there any other contact with her that we haven't mentioned, for example, her selling of pies; do you recall eating them personally?
- PICKERING: No, I don't remember about that. I'm sure we didn't buy any of her pies. My mother was a good pie baker too.
- ARENA: Do you recall ever eating in the lunch counter that was set up in the original market place--coffee or anything like that?
- PICKERING: No, I don't.
- ARENA: Then, the next person we'll bring into existence here is Mr. Frank Nixon, your recollections. How would you describe the President's father? And if you wish you may describe incidences in which these general terms about his personality would be illustrated, particular instances if you can.

PICKERING: As I mentioned earlier, he was a serious type of a person, quite rough appearing and quite outspoken. I think Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon was the deeply religious one in the family, although I don't know whether that's fair to make a judgment like that, but this is the way it seemed to me, that Mr. [Frank] Nixon was not as deeply religious a person as she was. But I recall that he was keeping the store open on Sundays and at some point in his life--and it vaguely seems that the illness of Harold comes in here and had some influence--Mr. Nixon realized that his keeping the store open was wrong in his mind and in the minds of others, and he got up in church and testified to this effect that he had been wrong and he was asking God to forgive him, and he would not keep the store open on Sundays any more.

ARENA: That's very interesting, Mrs. Pickering, because we do associate the Quakers with speaking as they move by the light, or you put it more exactly. . . .

PICKERING: Well, as the spirit moves them is the thing in the Friends Church.

ARENA: And that would be considered an example of such an activity. Do you recall any particular circumstances surrounding that--Harold had just died or had he taken ill recently--if you can? Was Mrs. Nixon away, possibly, at that time looking after Harold in Arizona, for example? Whatever you recall about the circumstances surrounding that. It must have been a very moving thing, whether it was the President's father or anybody. I'm sure it would have been moving to have someone get up and do that.

PICKERING: Well, it was quite impressive. I don't remember whether Mrs. Nixon was away or not, but it seems to me that it was at a time when Harold was having one of these serious spells. It seems like it was before his death, but I couldn't be sure.

ARENA: Another thing in connection with that incident is the fact that, if I'm not mistaken, both the East Whittier Friends Church and the First Friends Church in Whittier itself have pastors, and there is the distinction between those who do not use pastors at all, where you would imagine there is more of that sort of thing. That would be a guess on my part. Was Frank's

experience unusual in that it was unusual for a person to get up as he did and speak or even though you do have pastors that is still quite common for this open and public testimony, or open and even silent prayer, even though this particular group of Quakers here in California and here in this particular area have the pastors?

PICKERING: No. This wouldn't have been an uncommon thing. It really isn't an uncommon thing today. This is a part of the Quaker tradition that each individual has the right to express himself in meeting as he is moved or as he sees fit.

ARENA: Again, for the purpose of those who are not Quakers who will be studying this interview some day, would you describe the circumstances of the religious services where this part would come in? Is there a portion of the services, attended by the people, where this is encouraged or allowed, say, before or after the reading of the bible, before or after the sermon, would it take place at any time where, we'll say, the pastor is not speaking?

PICKERING: Yes. This is called our communion time. And it is a silent, spiritual communion as contrasted with physical observation of communion in other churches. It normally would come after the sermon, but it doesn't have to, and in olden times I imagine there wasn't very much of a sermon because, as you said, they didn't have pastors years ago, and the communion time was a very big part of the service.

Today, at the First Friends Church in Whittier the communion time normally comes after the sermon, and it is--most of the time there is nothing spoken. Every once in a while though someone will bring a concern and get up and speak.