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H. Esther Williams (July 17, 1972)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MISS H. ESTHER WILLIAMS

July 17, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with H. Esther Williams (H, which is used as the initial in front of the name, stands for Helen), here in the residence of Miss Williams in Whittier, California, July 17, 1972, Arena interviewing. Just by way of recapitulation with some off-the-tape comments, and then we'll go into detail on whichever of these points you wish to discuss in detail--you do have some connection with the Ohio background of the Milhous-Nixon side, as you mentioned, and we should look into that. You also had direct contact with one of the young ladies the President knew as a young man, Miss Ola Florence Welch, now Mrs. Gail Jobe, who, I just learned from you, taught for a while at East Whittier Elementary School.

It is also noteworthy that, from your long residency in this area, you knew such close relatives of the President as his aunt and uncle on the Marshburn side, Mrs. Rose Olive and Mr. Oscar Marshburn; also, Mr. Griffith Milhous, who was the half-brother of Mrs. Hannah Nixon. These are things that we will look into in detail later on, and we may not finish at this first sitting, but I do want to get them down so that we don't forget them.

Also, there is the important point raised that you knew the young married couple [Francis Anthony] Frank and Hannah Nixon when they were living briefly in Lindsay, California, where the President's close aunt, Mrs. Jane Beeson, is still a resident, and we will certainly want to look into that. Now, I've just given this resume to be sure that neither of us forget these points for further exploration

And may I begin in the way of asking you questions, by pinpointing your own background in the sense of chronology and date-wise, by asking you where and when you were born?

WILLIAMS: I was born in Mount Pleasant, Ohio, November 6, 1897.

- ARENA: Before the tape was on you mentioned that there was a connection in the President's family background that ties in with that same area. Would you mind repeating that for the record?
- WILLIAMS: The Milhous family, when they moved to the west, settled near Mount Pleasant, Ohio, and owned a farm there for some time.
- ARENA: And I believe you said it was near, was it Steubenville?
- WILLIAMS: Mount Pleasant, Ohio, is near Steubenville. It was one of the headquarters of the underground slavery trade. They brought slaves up there.
- ARENA: The underground railroad, I believe.
- WILLIAMS: Railroad--I'm sorry.
- ARENA: That's quite all right. And do you recall, yourself, as you were growing up there, references to that part of history? Had that been mentioned, maybe, in your own local school or in your own local church? Had this connection with the underground railroad, that is?
- WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, and I have seen where they had in the cellar, places built for slaves to hide.
- ARENA: May I ask you if you, yourself, maybe since that time, have gone back to this area and visited the original Milhous farm that you mentioned, and in what condition is that, if I may ask, as far as you know?
- WILLIAMS: I have been back there visiting, but at the time I was there, they didn't have it located, but my mother thought she remembered where it was and talked to Olive Marshburn about it. Then later, when Olive and Oscar have gone back, last year, they were able to locate what they thought was the farm.
- ARENA: And since they have come back, you have spoken with them, and you know that they have visited it.
- WILLIAMS: Yes.
- ARENA: Fine. May I also ask you what else you recall about the nature of the Friends community of Mount Pleasant? Am I correct in saying that it was, say, like Whittier, a community founded by the Friends?
- WILLIAMS: Yes, that is correct, and they had an early Friends Academy there and that, I think, is mentioned by some

of the Milhous people, that some of their relatives went to this academy.

ARENA: Would you mind, also, giving a summary of just where you were educated; for example, if it was an elementary school, where; if it was a public school, and take us right through your educational background.

WILLIAMS: Well, I went to about the fifth or sixth grade in Mount Pleasant schools, which was a rural, small village school. And then we came to California for a winter to visit with my grandparents, so I was in the fifth grade out here and then returned. Later we returned to live in California. We came to Whittier, and I was in the seventh grade here in Whittier.

ARENA: Do you recall the name of the school you attended here?

WILLIAMS: We went to Jonathan Bailey School, and Milo Hunt was the principal at that time. And then we moved to Lindsay [California] up in the San Joaquin Valley and I was in the eighth grade there.

ARENA: Would that be right in Lindsay or in the Strathmore area?

WILLIAMS: No, we lived right in Lindsay. Strathmore was about five or six miles south, and that was where the orange groves were. Lindsay was surrounded by orange groves.

ARENA: And then you came back?

WILLIAMS: I graduated from Lindsay High School in 1916 and entered Whittier College in 1916 and graduated in 1920. Then I did some graduate work over at the University of California. I taught then in Iowa two years.

ARENA: Excuse me, when you said the University of California, was that in Berkeley [California] or Los Angeles [California]?

WILLIAMS: Los Angeles. In 1922 I had planned to do more graduate work to teach in high school, but there was this opening in East Whittier to teach mathematics in the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades, and I took that and stayed there until I retired in 1962.

ARENA: That's quite a record. Was that very common, to have departmental teaching in those early elementary grades?

WILLIAMS: They were just trying it out. They did it in the Pasadena schools when I moved to California. That was one of the things that was very hard for me to adjust to as a youngster. But I think it was being tried out, and they did it in the Whittier school here, too.

ARENA: Do you recall if they continued to do it while you were there, or did they stop it?

WILLIAMS: Oh, they stopped the departmental work, I don't know just how many years, but I would say ten years or more and then we had our own classes.

ARENA: And while you were the elementary teacher of President Nixon, was that system in operation then?

WILLIAMS: That system of departmental work was in operation then.

ARENA: And precisely what grades, then, and what subjects did you have the President for, Miss Williams?

WILLIAMS: I taught arithmetic and also we had a classroom where the class would report in the morning for attendance.

ARENA: Would that be considered his home room?

WILLIAMS: Home room, that's what it was. And I had the sixth and seventh grades for my home room. And then I taught arithmetic to the sixth and seventh grades.

ARENA: I'm just giving a kind of summary interview at this point. I want to get the overall picture of your direct contact with the President, as well as indirect contact with him, such as knowing his parents, his other relatives, and I'll just continue along this line then. So, therefore, you had him as your own pupil for two years. Then, may I ask if you had any direct contact with him after that period for any reason?

WILLIAMS: Only in connection with the alumni of Whittier College. He was president, I think, one year of the alumni of Whittier College, and I remember going to meetings. I think I was on some committees with him then.

ARENA: Do you recall about when that may have been? Would it have been when he was a practicing lawyer? He had finished his law education.

WILLIAMS: Yes, and it was before he was married, I think, but he was here in Whittier.

ARENA: Fine. That would put it somewhere between 1937 and 1940 when he was married.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

ARENA: And that is, as far as you can recall, the last direct contact with him.

WILLIAMS: Yes, I think so.

ARENA: But I did want to put down for the record, and then we can look into it as time permits, the fact that you did know one of the young ladies he knew as a young man and was interested in, of course. This was Miss Ola Florence Welch, now Mrs. Gail Jobe, who did teach in East Whittier Elementary School. Do you remember the years when she was teaching there, about?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think it would be around 1937.

ARENA: Because he and she graduated at the same time, I believe 1934 from Whittier College.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

ARENA: And then she may have gone somewhere for graduate work . . .

WILLIAMS: Yes.

ARENA: . . . for a couple of years.

WILLIAMS: Yes. I think it was around 1937 or maybe a year before that.

ARENA: And, although we're not interested in politics per se--we're just interested in the President's pre-political years--but just for the record, did you have any direct contact with him since he did enter politics in 1945 on?

WILLIAMS: No, I have had no direct contact.

ARENA: And if it isn't too personal, may I ask if this means that you did not engage, we'll say, in any direct political activity with one of the Republican groups or organizations?

WILLIAMS: No. I belonged to the Republican women's organization and I was sent as a representative of the East Whittier School to a tea that was given for Mrs. Nixon in Los Angeles.

ARENA: Would this be Mrs. Hannah [Nixon] or Mrs. Patricia Nixon?

WILLIAMS: Yes, Mrs. Richard Nixon.

ARENA: How long ago was that, if I may ask, about?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was when he was running for Vice President.

ARENA: I see. Well, the first time, of course, was 1952, and then the second time, four years, would be 1956.

WILLIAMS: The Republican women were giving a tea or something at the Ambassador [Hotel] and I got to leave school and go over and represent East Whittier [California].

ARENA: I see. But now to go back chronologically, may I ask you, if it isn't too personal, what the reason was that brought your parents to California and, therefore, you yourself?

WILLIAMS: Well, my grandparents were coming out here. They had been coming out here and liked California, and they felt that we should come out here.

ARENA: And your grandparents were living in Mount Pleasant, also?

WILLIAMS: Yes, but they were moving out here, and they settled here in Whittier.

ARENA: May I ask what your grandfather's occupation was?

WILLIAMS: Well, I guess you would say he was a farmer. He had a large farm back there.

ARENA: Californians prefer "rancher", of course.

WILLIAMS: Yes, but he didn't engage in that. He was retired when he came. And he was an ordained minister in the Quaker church. Of course, he didn't hold any church at that time.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask if there was much difference, if any, from the standpoint of the organization of the Quaker church, we'll say, there in Ohio, as compared to. . . . Was it in East Whittier where your folks and you settled?

WILLIAMS: No, here in Whittier.

ARENA: Right here in Whittier. Was there much difference that YOU can recall? I'm thinking, for example, of the idea that pastors were used at all; that music, as is the case here, was used. Were they pretty similar as far as that was concerned?

WILLIAMS: Yes, they were very similar. We had a pastor in Ohio and we had one here.

ARENA: Just for the record, did you, yourself, attend religious services, ever, for one reason or another, in the East Whittier Friends Church, where the President and his immediate family attended?

WILLIAMS: No, I never attended out there.

ARENA: And was there an occasion where you may have seen him or again his immediate family, his parents, at the First Friends Church in Whittier itself? Did he possibly deliver a sermon or some talk at the First Friends Church that you recall?

WILLIAMS: The Nixons?

ARENA: Well, especially the President and, then, beyond the President, his mother and father.

WILLIAMS: No, I don't recall any.

ARENA: May I also ask you about the religious contact that you had with the Nixons, while we're on the subject of religion, although it means moving ahead for a minute, to go up to Lindsay and recount what the religious experiences there were for his parents and their first-born son, Harold [Samuel Nixon], whom you mentioned off the tape a few moments ago; whatever you recall about the dates, the absence of a physical building for the Friends Church there, and what was done in the way of conducting services?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was just a growing community and we did not have a Friends church.

ARENA: Excuse me. To be sure, about what were the dates on this again?

WILLIAMS: Well, this would be 1910; from 1910 to 1916 we lived in Lindsay.

ARENA: And that would have been the time when you would have run into the President's parents.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

ARENA: Possibly 1912. I believe they were married in 1910, and somewhere, maybe between 1910 and 1912.

WILLIAMS: Yes, I think that would be it. And the church up there was in the process of building a church. They met at the little Presbyterian church on Sunday afternoon, and I recall the Nixon family, Mr. and Mrs. [Francis Anthony] Nixon and their young baby, Harold, coming to church there.

ARENA: About how many were in the congregation, from your recollection? I don't recall you to be exact.

WILLIAMS: I don't imagine, not more than fifty.

ARENA: Would you say they were a minority in Lindsay in that area then too?

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's true.

ARENA: Any idea what the major denomination would have been? Would it have been the Presbyterians themselves, do you think?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think the Presbyterian and the Baptist churches were the largest churches.

ARENA: And were most of the people at that time earning their income from ranching and farming? Was that the main income?

WILLIAMS: Yes, that was the main income.

ARENA: Do you recall, yourself, the President's parents, Frank and Hannah, discussing why THEY were up there in that particular area at that time? What had brought them up to the Lindsay area?

WILLIAMS: No, I don't recall hearing that.

ARENA: Now, maybe then or since, did you come across anything along the lines that it was his father-in-law, Mr. Franklin Milhous, who owned land up there in that area and was allowing Frank to try his hand? Does that ring a bell?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I remember hearing my mother say that Frank Milhous had a ranch near Strathmore [California] and that's where they were.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you to comment, or make any observations you care to, on the fact that, here you had a young lady, the wife, Mrs. Hannah Nixon, who had been in college, not graduated as far as I know, but had attended college, and had a sister, Mrs. Jane Beeson, who was a teacher and had attended the Indianapolis Music Conservatory, if I'm not mistaken, but at any rate, these very well-educated young ladies were out in this pioneer community, and you would know better than I about its pioneer conditions. How did they seem to take to it, especially the President's mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon], from your own recollections? What was her attitude, fortitude, and her holding up--if there was strain that you could see--holding up under the strain of these fairly rugged conditions?

WILLIAMS: Well, I remember she was in groups with my mother, in church groups, and she was always very well thought of, and I think a person who made the best of everything. I don't recall ever being out to their ranch, but I know she was in the women's groups with my mother, and my mother thought very highly of her.

ARENA: I think we were discussing a moment ago the question of the religious situation in Lindsay, and the role of Mr. Frank Nixon and Mrs. Frank Nixon and Harold, and you recalled one incident which was very interesting. I wonder if you wouldn't mind repeating it on the tape concerning this one incident?

WILLIAMS: Well, on one Sunday at the services in the Presbyterian church, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon sat in front of us, and they had Harold who was then, I'm not just sure whether he was a year old or more, with them. He began getting very fussy. One would take him and try to quiet him, and then the other one, and finally Frank Nixon took ahold of him and put him over his arm and walked out and, youngster-like, I turned around and looked in time to see him giving him a spanking as he was going out the door. [Laughter]

ARENA: Was there one more yelp?

WILLIAMS: I expect. I don't remember that. I turned around before my mother would speak to me.

ARENA: While we're on this subject of Frank Nixon, did you have any occasion to meet him personally in another situation, not only there in Lindsay, although we should exhaust that first? For example, did you ever actually see him on the farm or maybe doing some carpentry work?

WILLIAMS: No, I was never out there. It was just at the church where I came in contact with them.

ARENA: The other question about him: In subsequent years, did you, for example, through teaching his son, maybe meet Frank Nixon who visited you in school for any reason, including participation in the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association], if there was such a thing at that time?

WILLIAMS: No, I don't recall him coming to school. And his mother, of course, was very busy in the store. Though I just don't recall any incident, I'm sure she came. I know she came and was very concerned when Harold was sick. She was concerned about the children, if they were getting enough fresh air in school.

ARENA: On the matter of Harold, as a matter of fact, did you have him as a student?

WILLIAMS: No, I did not. He was in the lower grade and, of course, that was before Richard was in my class.

ARENA: But he did attend the same school.

WILLIAMS: Yes, he did.

ARENA: Had you any contact yourself with that illness, in the sense that you were aware that it was tuberculosis or anything like that?

WILLIAMS: No.

ARENA: Is there any other occasion that you can think of where you came into contact with the President's parents, not only on the school level now, but in the grocery store itself? For example, did you ever do any shopping there or eat in their little, I understand, extended luncheonette?

WILLIAMS: No, I never was, that I recall, in their grocery store. We later ate when the son had an eating place there. We used to eat there very often, but I don't recall being out there at all when they had the store.

ARENA: How would you describe Lindsay at the time the young Nixon couple, Frank and Hannah Nixon, were living there? I'm thinking now, not only in terms of religion but in terms of the size of the community, the city proper, the number of ranches around it. And maybe it might be helpful to get a better picture of comparing it with what you did know, also, in the way of a small community, Whittier. Was it larger or smaller, more prosperous, less prosperous? Maybe using Whittier as a basis for comparison we could get a clearer picture.

- WILLIAMS: It was smaller, and they were starting new orchards around there, and there were often ranchers from Whittier that went up there and they had ranches.
- ARENA: Was that one of the main reasons why people from Whittier went up there because of local promoters in this area?
- WILLIAMS: I think so. It was a newer area opening up.
- ARENA: How would you compare the schools there with the ones in Whittier, especially your own, East Whittier Elementary School?
- WILLIAMS: They were very good. I came south to Whittier College but most of my classmates went north to [University of California] Berkeley and Stanford [University].
- ARENA: Would you mind, also, going back for a moment over the question as to your own personal motivation and interest in becoming an elementary school teacher?
- WILLIAMS: Well, I think it was my mother who influenced me. She had always told me that she thought that would be a very good thing for a girl to go into, that it was a nice profession.
- ARENA: Was that something, for example, that began very early?
- WILLIAMS: Very early, and so I just really planned to do that, all the way through high school and then through college.
- ARENA: And for the record, may I ask if you have regretted or were happy that you had made that decision that took so many years of your life?
- WILLIAMS: No, I never regretted it, and I enjoyed it very much.
- ARENA: Miss Williams, may I thank you very much for the benefit of allowing me this oral history interview with you at this time. I hope that we will be able to continue, at your convenience, at an early date in the future. Thank you.

The following letter was sent to Dr. Arena to be added to the interview:

6031 S. Washington Ave.
Whittier, Calif. 90601
July 14, 1969

Dear President Nixon,

This year the East Whittier School Annual gave special recognition to the sixth grade class of 1924 of which you were a member.

I was very glad to have in my possession and to make available to the school this class picture which includes a young man destined to be the President of our country. I do not recall the names of all the class members, but I do enclose a picture identifying those I remember.

We hope that this picture will serve the purpose of further documenting the life of a great American statesman and a President in whom we take great and particular pride.

I have followed your progress through the years and I have been inspired along with your countless other Whittier friends by your fearless and constructive approach to our nation's problems.

We are happy that you and your family will be spending some time this summer in Southern California. Not only are we proud of you but also of "Our First Family."

My best wishes to you and your family.

Sincerely,

Esther Williams
(teacher 6th grade in 1924
East Whittier Elementary School)

LETTER APPENDED.

XEROX COPY OF PHOTOGRAPH APPENDED.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

The Western White House
San Clemente

August 21, 1969

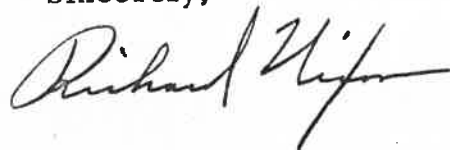
Dear Miss Williams:

I was pleased to hear from you again and to receive, through the courtesy of Miss Jane Butterfield, the photograph of my 1924 Sixth Grade Class at East Whittier Elementary School. It brought back wonderful memories of those days in the 20's when life seemed so carefree and uncomplicated. You must derive great satisfaction from your career in teaching and the fact that you remember so many of the names reflects your deep personal involvement and responsibility toward your pupils. I am sure each of them would be as flattered as I am to be remembered by his Sixth Grade teacher.

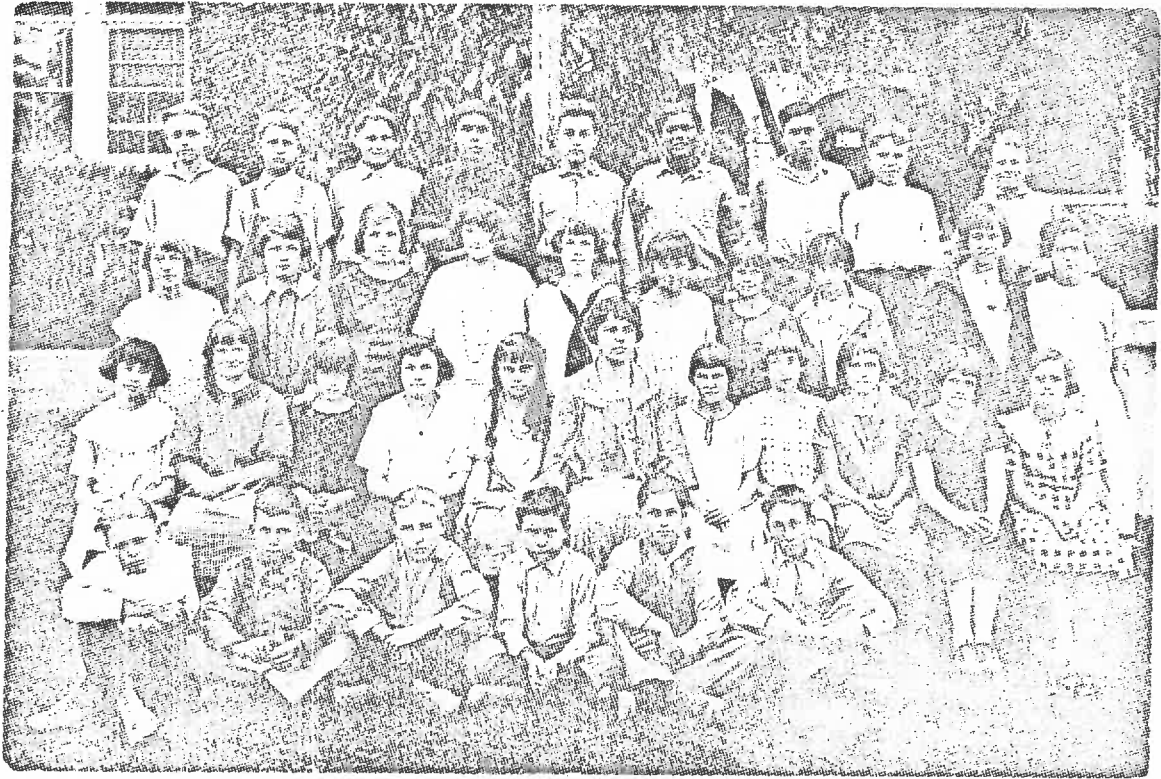
Your generous expression of encouragement means a great deal to me as well, and I want you to know how much I appreciate your support and continued confidence.

All of the Nixons were delighted by your letter and the picture and we join in sending our gratitude and best wishes to you.

Sincerely,



Miss H. Esther Williams
6031 South Washington Avenue
Whittier, California 90601



Left to Right.
Front Row

- 1- Robert Plotts
- 2- -
- 3- -
- 4- George Loomis
- 5- Edward Flutot
- 6- Joe Card.

2nd Row

- 1 Estelle Davies
- 2 Harriet Palmer
- 3 Hazel Bell
- 4 Emma Rankin
- 5 Doris Howe
- 6 teacher E. Williams
- 7 Barbara Cogburn
- 8 Frances Johnson
- 9 Elizabeth Rees
- 10 -
- 11 Pauline Bolton

3rd Row

- 1 Ruth Ware
- 2 Doris Hinshaw
- 3 -
- 4 -
- 5 Mildred Wright
- 6 Margaret Mitchell
- 7 Ruth Lily Mc Gee
- 8 Judy Tompkins
- 9 Cecelia Harris
- 10 Beulah Gault

4th Row

- 1 Wallace Morrison
- 2 Elden Hostettler
- 3 -
- 4 Salvador Lopez
- 5 Eddie Eddy
- 6 -
- 7 - Lopez
- 8 Richard Nixon
- 9 Linnell Taylor

7th. grade 1925