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H. Esther Williams (August 16, 1972)

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Whittier College

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Second Oral History Interview

with

MISS H. ESTHER WILLIAMS

August 16, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #2 with Miss H. Esther Williams here in Whittier, California, in her residence on August 16, 1972, Arena interviewing. We were discussing the question of the President's participation in his graduation exercises at the East Whittier Elementary School. Would you mind going over again the year of his graduation, and whatever you recall of the experience?

WILLIAMS: The exercises were held in June, 1926, and there were twenty-nine in the graduating class. I recall in looking at the program that the address was given by Dr. Walter Dexter, who was then president of Whittier College. And also, the history of the class was given by Richard Nixon, who was the class president. There was an invocation, and I think I can get a copy of the program if you would like it.

ARENA: That would be fine, yes, and of course if there's any charge in the way of xeroxed copies, be sure to let me know.

WILLIAMS: Mrs. Evelyn Flowers Barnes was the principal at that time at East Whittier.

ARENA: And I believe you said you think she's still living, or you know she's living in Three Rivers, California. You have been in touch with her.

WILLIAMS: That's right. I have called on her a year or two ago and I think she's still there.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, we can check this later, if you have her telephone number I would appreciate it, or her address, but we can check that later. I did want

to ask you, for the record, if you think that Dr. Dexter may have served as a model for Richard in his own speaking, his own way of life in a way, because, not only on this occasion but the President became a student at Whittier College while Dr. Dexter was president, so obviously he had the opportunity to come into contact with Dr. Dexter on several occasions, and whatever you would like to say about that?

WILLIAMS: I am sure that Richard would admire him very much, because he was very much interested in people of that type, I think, who were outstanding speakers, and we considered it quite an honor to have him come and give our commencement address as president of the college.

ARENA: Do you recall what the subject was for that graduation exercise that Richard delivered--the President?

WILLIAMS: No, I don't. It was just given as the history of the class, so I presume that it took their class from the first grade through the East Whittier School, giving events that happened and members that had entered and gone through the eighth grade.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, I believe Richard was nine years old when he came to that area and, therefore, had had some schooling in Yorba Linda [California], of course, first. Did that seem to have any special significance, the fact that he had not started at the East Whittier Elementary School?

WILLIAMS: No, it didn't make any difference at all. He was accepted.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, was his family in evidence, in the sense that, did his mother attend PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] meetings? Did you have occasion to meet her on such circumstances?

WILLIAMS: She came occasionally, but she was busy during the daytime and couldn't attend, but she did attend any night meeting, or if Richard was ever in a program or anything that he had concern with, there were some members of their family present.

ARENA: Do you recall, speaking of programs, that he possibly participated in any musical programs?

WILLIAMS: I looked that up and I couldn't find that he had, but we used to have somebody play on the piano for us to march in in the morning, and I rather think that he did play once, but I'm not at all certain about that. Some of the students took part in it.

ARENA: Was it common for students to have musical training, as you think back or were there, say, in a class of maybe twenty or twenty-five, one or two, or did there seem to be more and did the school offer any musical education?

WILLIAMS: No, the school did not offer any musical education. However, there was a music teacher who was available and sometimes some of the children would take private lessons. Well, I would say there were not too many, but there were quite a few who would start music, piano especially.

ARENA: We were also mentioning off the record, and I would like to have you comment on it on the record, your acquaintance with a gentleman that the President has admired and has stated so publicly on occasion and in his book, Six Crises. I'm speaking now of his football coach at Whittier College, Chief [Wallace] Newman. I was just wondering whatever comes to mind about your firsthand contact with him, and indirectly if any of the members of your family had any contact with him also?

WILLIAMS: I've known Chief Newman since he was up at Whittier College, though I didn't attend Whittier College, in a business way. I've known him in Whittier, because he was quite a good friend of my brother's and later on they went on a camping trip to Arizona. My brother was so interested in all the knowledge that Chief Newman gave them of the Indians and of the country around where they visited.

ARENA: Do you recall how they traveled? Was it in their own transportation or by bus, or . . .

WILLIAMS: No, my brother took our car, and they took their own equipment, cooked out, slept out.

ARENA: As far as you know, was this a common habit of the Chief, taking such camping trips? Do you know, for example, if he ever did this with college students?

WILLIAMS: I don't know. No, I don't know.

ARENA: Did you personally ever discuss Indian history or did you discuss anything with the Chief over the years, and I'm just wondering what sort of a person was he, in that sense?

WILLIAMS: No, I didn't really discuss. . . . I have had a speaking acquaintance with him, often just stopped on the street and talked to him just a little bit, but I really haven't. It was my brother who really was his friend.

ARENA: And this brother's full name is Paul Williams.

WILLIAMS: That's right.

ARENA: Who is now living in Laguna?

WILLIAMS: Seal Beach [California].

ARENA: At Seal Beach, and I believe I've had the pleasure of interviewing his wife, Mrs. Paul Williams. How can you account, just from your observations, for the popularity of the Chief with someone like your own brother. Did your brother himself ever indicate why he enjoyed the Chief's company?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think that he's a person who enjoys people. He mingled with the businessmen down town, and that was where my brother really got acquainted with him. He would come down town and have coffee and mingle with the group in that way.

ARENA: Is there any other phase of the President's life, in addition to this firsthand contact with him in school as his teacher that comes to mind that I haven't raised in the way of a question myself yet or brought up? For example, the period when he was acting in plays at the college or in the community, his serving as a lawyer. I was just wondering if you had any firsthand contact with him during these years?

WILLIAMS: No, I really didn't. I knew him here in Whittier, and he served as president of our Whittier College alumni at one time I think. I had met him at committee meetings.

ARENA: Do you have any recollection about when that took place, in the way of general recollection we could maybe use the war as a period. Was this before the war?

WILLIAMS: This was before.

ARENA: I see.

WILLIAMS: Well, it was just after he started his law office. Now that was after he came back, wasn't it?

ARENA: Well, no, he did start his law office before the war. That was 1937.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think it would be about that time.

- ARENA: I believe we were mentioning off the tape some of the people both you and he knew in common. I'm thinking, for example, of William Hornaday, who is with the United Church of Religious Science, as indicated in the Los Angeles Times Saturday, August 12, 1972, page 23, part 1, which will pinpoint exactly where this information is given about his church. I'm just wondering if you had any firsthand contact with Mr. Hornaday, who I believe was a fellow student of the President.
- WILLIAMS: No, I have had no contact with him, but I do know Ezra Ellis, who was our minister here in the First Friends Church, who later went to Los Angeles, and I think he is teaching in their School of the Religious Mind. Isn't that what it is?
- ARENA: And let me be sure I do correctly understand you. Did you say that he taught in this church of Mr. Hornaday's?
- WILLIAMS: They have a school, I think, of some kind. His name is given as a minister, but I think he is teaching or gives lectures for them.
- ARENA: They evidently do have speakers, and the speakers are announced. I don't see the word "school," but this, of course, does not mean that it is NOT one, and there could be regular course lectures, and I'm sure there are.
- WILLIAMS: Yes. I'm sorry that I'm not more accurate on that.
- ARENA: While we're on that subject, the President has stated in his book Six Crises, I believe in the chapter dealing with the campaign of 1960, that his mother had hopes that when he grew up he would be a missionary in Central America. I'm just wondering if anything like that, or any interest was ever shown on his part that you can think of, especially during his youthful elementary days when you were his teacher?
- WILLIAMS: No. I really had never heard that before.
- ARENA: As a matter of fact, he did belong to such groups as, of course, Sundays he attended Sunday school classes and also taught, even as a young lawyer, taught certain Sunday school groups. I'm wondering now if you had any contact with him along these lines, maybe working with him or committees that dealt with that question?
- WILLIAMS: No, I didn't happen to. I think they were all connected with the East Whittier Friends Church, and I attended here in Whittier.

ARENA: Then, while he was a young man, he was a member of Christian Endeavor and would meet with this group from time to time, including meetings in private homes. And here again, I'm wondering if any experience comes to mind; one, if you heard of such a group; and two, if you heard of his role in such a group, the Christian Endeavor?

WILLIAMS: Well, I knew that he was active in the young people's group there in East Whittier, but I don't know of any definite time.

ARENA: May I ask you this though. What do you know about the Christian Endeavor group? In other words, was it just made up of Whittier people? Was it made up of different denominations? Whatever comes to mind about that group, especially around the time when he would have been in it, which would have been the high school and college years, roughly the period, say, '28 through '34, '34 being the year that he went off to Duke [Law School].

WILLIAMS: Well, it was in different churches, the Christian Endeavor Society. Different churches had that for their young people, high school and college age. It was quite a common thing. It would meet on Sunday evening early and they had their meeting and their organization before the evening church service. I know he was active in the East Whittier one. Yes, I would say it was a national organization in the churches.

ARENA: I wonder if I could ask you this broad question, in view of your firsthand experience as an elementary teacher. Bearing in mind the conduct of the average student in the classes when the President was a student, bearing in mind those years, bearing in mind subsequent years, to what extent was discipline a problem or not a problem? To what extent were parents called to come to school to handle discipline problems in the President's time when he was attending? I believe the date of his graduation was 1926, so we'll say that period, compared to subsequent years?

For example, some interesting phases of comparison would be the period around the time of World War II which would stand out. The war began in Europe, of course, in 1939. We'll take that as a period. And then, if there were any significant changes in the way of the students' overall conduct in class, disciplinary problems, what were these changes like, and about when do they begin? It's a broad philosophical, and yet at the same time, personal question, in the sense that I'm asking you to kind of recapture the life of the time, the life of the school as a whole when the President was a student, and compare it with subsequent years.

WILLIAMS: The discipline in that time was very different. In fact, we just would have a very few outstanding cases that we had to do anything about, and about all you had to say was, "You'll have to go to the principal's office."

ARENA: Just for the record, was Richard ever a disciplinary problem?

WILLIAMS: No, he was never a disciplinary problem. He was a very very cooperative student, I would say, and very quiet in the classroom, never caused any disturbance of any kind, or I would have remembered that. [Laughter]

ARENA: I believe I may have interrupted you. You were saying that the means of handling discipline was a threat to send someone to the principal?

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's right. And I only remember on very few occasions the principal calling in the parents. But I remember once or twice that the parents came to school and we might be called in. In fact, I think in those days the principal had the permission to do some spanking in the office. I remember when they would call a teacher in to witness one or two. But that didn't last very long. That was soon done away with.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, was that policy of spanking still in existence, though, when Richard was a student, as far as you can recall?

WILLIAMS: I would think. . . . Yes, it was, because I remember that principal that we had then. She used that method on very extreme cases. But it has changed; the type of discipline has changed a great deal. I don't know just what year, I couldn't pinpoint that exactly. I would have youngsters say to me, "Well, I'm going to tell my parents about that." In other words, we didn't have the backing sometimes that we used to have, because you just say, "Well, I'll have to report that," that was enough for most of them. And then later, of course, we have more parents coming to know about the situation and often taking the side of Johnny.

ARENA: I wonder if I could ask you another broad question which would take in your experience, that only someone with your experience could answer. But thinking back over the years of the students you've had, and then seeing them grow up, enter their place in life, either with a profession or a particular occupation, to what extent--and bearing in mind, especially, the age of Richard Nixon, 1926, that particular generation--to what extent, if you ever thought about it, did the personality and the promise of the student materialize? For example, was there a nice, quiet girl whom you knew would grow up to be a teacher and she turned out to be a ballet dancer; or a young man who looked like he'd be a doctor but he turned out to be a mechanic? Was that, as you think back, fairly accurate? Did you find that youngsters who showed certain tendencies, showed certain interests and, of course, including Richard, did he show any indication of entering and becoming the

type of person that he is today, and that is a politician and, of course, a successful one? But I'm not just thinking of him; I'm thinking of that as an overall question, but definitely including him.

WILLIAMS: I'll have to give that a little thought.

ARENA: I know you do, and I had to give it a little thought in asking it.

WILLIAMS: Well, I think most generally, it's been interesting to live in the same community and see some of these youngsters grow up and have now prominent places in our community. One of them is a very good lawyer here in Whittier and several of them are in business here and another one is a judge, Judge [Merton] Wray here in Whittier, and it's been very gratifying to see how they have turned out, you might say, in life. [Laughter]

ARENA: Without mentioning any particular names, were you pleasantly surprised by the way they turned out, as compared to their conduct and their promise? And by promise I mean their grades, their interest in math and their interest in the academic subjects?

WILLIAMS: They were all youngsters who had good grades and were interested in school, and their parents, particularly were fine, cooperative parents, and it seems to me that the background of the home had a great deal to do with it often.

ARENA: As this interview is coming to a close, I want to be sure to make one final question that leaves nothing out that you would like to include yourself. In other words, is there any subject at all that I have not touched upon that you would like to raise at this point? Take as much time as you wish.

WILLIAMS: I don't think so. I think you've covered it very well, Dr. Arena. I'm just afraid that I haven't been able to answer as fully all the questions, because it's been so many years elapsed in between.

ARENA: One question does come to mind. I know we did discuss your correspondence with the President and any papers that may still be in your possession. And just to be sure, would you know if any of, we'll say, his test papers or any essays he may have written during that period may still be in existence, as far as you're concerned?

WILLIAMS: No. No, I wouldn't know of any.

- ARENA: Do you recall anything in particular about his serving in that capacity? Do you recall his, say, calling you up in the middle of the night for a meeting, or some campaign, to do something about the alumni situation?
- WILLIAMS: [Laughter] No, I don't think so. He made a very good president and carried on the alumni affairs very well.
- ARENA: Was this an elected position, would you happen to recall, or an appointed one by the president of the college?
- WILLIAMS: It's not appointed by the president of the college, elected by alumni members, I think.
- ARENA: Have you served with the alumni before or since that time?
- WILLIAMS: No, I have not.
- ARENA: What do you recall of the responsibility, say, of both you and the President? To what extent were you drawn together? Were there so many formal meetings of the staff, of the officers, say, during that time? Did they meet in your home, possibly, his home, or the school office or law office?
- WILLIAMS: We met up at the college, I think. And I represented a class, a group of classes, rather than an office. They had representatives for certain years of classes and I was one of those representatives, and as I recall, we met up at the college.
- ARENA: Do you recall that later on he went on to become a member of the board of Whittier College Trustee? I was wondering if you do recall that, and if there was anything significant about that new position?
- WILLIAMS: No. I remember of attending the year that he was given an honorary degree. He came back and gave an address. I don't believe he was Vice President then.
- ARENA: I guess it goes without saying, that he was attached to Whittier College. I'm wondering if you would have any other references or experiences that would indicate this strong attachment to his alma mater, other than what we have said: His willingness to serve in the alumni association, his willingness to become a trustee. Is there anything I have left out that might indicate additional examples of this strong attachment?
- WILLIAMS: I don't recall any now. I don't think of any.

ARENA: Would the school have had the policy of having either the so-called intelligence tests, aptitude tests--did they have the policy of giving such tests, and they may be on record somewhere?

WILLIAMS: No. No, we didn't give those tests at that time. I remember a good many years ago someone went to the registrar out at the office, and they went back and the only records they had of him were in the registers which we kept of attendance. I thought it was interesting that--I think it was the year he was in my classroom--he had perfect attendance, and we used to give little certificates for perfect attendance because we tried to encourage children to come, and I thought that was interesting, his attendance was perfect.

ARENA: Just to recapture briefly your recollections of Elizabeth [Griffith] Milhous, who lived with the President's grandfather for a while--the President's grandfather as you know is Franklin Milhous and, of course, his wife, Almira [Milhous]--but what DO you recall of Elizabeth Milhous, the President's great-grandmother?

WILLIAMS: I recall that she used to attend our Friends church here in Whittier and sat down in front and wore a Quaker bonnet.

ARENA: And what year?

WILLIAMS: I think it was about 1912.

ARENA: Thank you very much for the privilege of this interview.