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Homer B. Bemis (January 19, 1972)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. HOMER B. BEMIS

January 19, 1972
Fullerton, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Homer B. Bemis, B. (middle initial) stands for Benjamin, in Fullerton, California, January 19, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Bemis, may I begin by asking you where and when you were born?

BEMIS: I was born in Iowa, May 9, 1898.

ARENA: Do you recall the city there?

BEMIS: Hawkeye. It has about two hundred and fifty population, and that's what it had at the time I was born.

ARENA: Was it a rural community at the time?

BEMIS: Rural.

ARENA: And still is.

BEMIS: Still is.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask what your father's occupation was?

BEMIS: He was a farmer.

ARENA: And how did you find yourself coming to this area, right here to California, and to Yorba Linda, where you also lived?

BEMIS: Well, my father, of course, owned the farm there in Iowa, and he also had a brother at the same time who was farming in Iowa who came west. This brother came to Whittier, where he was the foreman for the Murphy Company in planting their lemon orchards in East Whittier. And he induced my father to come out to California, so he sold the farm and we moved to California in 1910.

ARENA: You might recollect that Whittier and East Whittier were Quaker-founded communities. Do you mind if I ask if your father was a Quaker?

BEMIS: No, he wasn't.

ARENA: Any idea how he got tied in with the Quakers, though?

BEMIS: Well, Yorba Linda was a new subdivision at that particular time, and they were selling that subdivision in the Whittier area to the people who lived there who happened to be predominantly Quakers. And at that time he bought twenty acres of land in Yorba Linda and went out and built a house there.

ARENA: Would that be within that same year that he moved to Whittier in 1910 that he moved to Yorba Linda--that same year?

BEMIS: Well, shortly after, about six months later.

ARENA: And that would make you about twelve years old at the time.

BEMIS: Twelve years old.

ARENA: And you went to the elementary school in Yorba Linda, too?

BEMIS: Yes, I went to elementary school, and we had just one room and eight grades. And we had just one teacher.

ARENA: Do you recall her name, by any chance?

BEMIS: Yes, I do. Miss Longnecker.

ARENA: Do you think she might still be living?

BEMIS: No. She was probably, at that particular time, fifty-five, sixty years old. Of course, kids always think anybody over twenty is an old person, you know. She was a good teacher, too.

ARENA: And how would you describe learning in a one-building, one-room schoolhouse with all those grades? Did you feel as though you had any special problems then?

BEMIS: Well, the main problem we had at that particular time was to stay out of trouble-[Laughter]. Just a good deal like it is today. But, no, I think the one-room school had its points. The children knew they had to behave, in the first place. I was guaranteed a good going-over at home. If I got a whipping at school I was going to get another one at home. Well, that only happened once. I learned a lesson.

ARENA: In other words, there was a close tie-in between the family and the school, and that included the discipline itself?

BEMIS: Yes, absolutely--discipline--you could always depend on it. If you got disciplined at school, you could figure on it at home. It was just automatic.

ARENA: Now, if you were there in 1910--I'm sorry if you did mention this, but what was the grade that you were in?

BEMIS: Sixth. I went to school three years in grammar school in Yorba Linda, and my last year we moved into the new schoolhouse at that time, which had four rooms. And that's where I graduated from the eighth grade.

ARENA: Well, you might or might not know that the President was born in 1913, so obviously you did not come into contact with him on the elementary level, but possibly some of his relatives, such as his oldest brother, Harold [Samuel] Nixon. Do you remember Harold?

BEMIS: Yes, I remember Harold very well, but he was in the lower grade. I think he might have started to school about the last year that I was in the eighth grade.

ARENA: Another relative would have been the Wests, Jessamyn [West] and her brother, Merle [Eldo West]. Do you remember coming into contact with them?

BEMIS: Yes, I knew them well. Jessamyn and Merle, both were passengers on the high school bus when I drove it later on in life when we were in high school. I drove the high school bus for a couple of years and Jessamyn was always a passenger on it. I could tell you some things there.

ARENA: I wish you would.

BEMIS: [Laughter] Jessamyn was our problem child. Now, if she hears this, she's going to be real pleased to know that it didn't bother us at all. But when the bus would come to her corner, I'd always toot the horn. She lived about a half a block from the corner, three hundred feet from the corner. I'd always toot the horn, because I knew Jessamyn wouldn't be ready. She'd come flying out of the door with her books under one arm, pulling her sweater on with the other, just obviously in a tearing yank to get down to the bus but not ready to. But this always happened. [Laughter] She was always a little bit late getting down to the connection.

ARENA: And you wouldn't say that was typical. The average student was not that late or not that. . . .

BEMIS: Most of them were standing there waiting when the bus came along. They were always ready.

ARENA: What grade was this for, again, do you recollect?

BEMIS: This was in high school. I was a senior and I suppose she was probably a freshman.

ARENA: And the school was where?

BEMIS: Fullerton.

ARENA: Was in Fullerton, I see.

BEMIS: Yes. Fullerton High School.

ARENA: That's because--correct me if I'm wrong--there was no high school in Yorba Linda, itself.

BEMIS: That's right. Fullerton High School, and there was none in Brea [California]. Fullerton High School and Anaheim High School and Santa Ana High School were the only ones in northern Orange County.

ARENA: And you, as a senior, were allowed to drive the bus.

BEMIS: Yes. I was seventeen years old when I started to drive the bus. And it was on dirt roads in Yorba Linda which, when the rains came, it was just like glass, slick as the dickens. Many times I fought that bus over those greasy roads to get out to the pavement where we could get on into town. I learned how to drive in mud early in life. That was a chore.

ARENA: Just to be sure, of course, the President came much later, and you don't recall his being on your bus for any purpose, at any level of school?

BEMIS: No. No, he was later. You see, I was fifteen years old when he was born. In fact, he hadn't gotten into school yet when I graduated from high school.

ARENA: He would have started, oh, around 1913, plus five, probably around 1918, 1919.

BEMIS: That's right.

ARENA: Yes. Would you describe that bus? The make, for example, and what condition it was in, and if you recall the cost, who did the maintenance, and so forth.

BEMIS: Well, we had a mechanic at the high school who maintained the buses and we had three buses going out from the district. One went to La Habra, one went to Yorba Linda and the other one went to Buena Park area. And we had this mechanic, he took care of them. They were White buses, limousine buses. They were built on the basis that the passengers all faced each other on two benches along the side, with limousine windows, and the entrance door was in the back.

ARENA: Was there any separation at all in the way of arm rests or anything?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Only two benches. And I imagine no seat belts, either.

BEMIS: No, no seat belts.

ARENA: And I can see some of the problems, going up and down some of the bumpy roads.

BEMIS: Oh, sure. Sure. Well, of course, there was one thing about it: We weren't rolling along at seventy miles an hour. If we were doing seventeen, we were going faster than they asked us to drive. And those White buses had one peculiarity, they were long. And the engine and the rear axle were so far apart it took a long drive shaft to connect them. And if we drivers would happen to exceed the speed limit at which they were allowed to go--which we did, you know, after all, just being kids we did--why, it would whip that drive shaft out of round and come up and slam on the floor of the bus, you know, and well, you were done right there. You had to stop and have it fixed. Well, I did that once. I

didn't lose my job over it, because they didn't have anybody else that could drive the bus.

ARENA: And that's the only thing that would have caused that. They knew you were speeding. That would have been proof.

BEMIS: No question about it. And I knew that they knew and I admitted it right off the bat; and that, I guess, saved my job.

ARENA: Do you recall how many the bus could hold, and how many you would pick up?

BEMIS: About twenty.

ARENA: And you would pick up twenty, full bus.

BEMIS: Around twenty, twenty-two. The driver had two seats along side of him, just ordinary open seats. Of course, the whole bus was enclosed and weather-proof and all that.

ARENA: When you say it was a white bus--just to be sure--was that the brand name or the color?

BEMIS: No, no. It was the brand name. It was painted black, with natural wood for the window sills. It was nice looking, for that time.

ARENA: Any idea if any of those old buses are kept around, for any reason at all?

BEMIS: Gosh, I don't know.

ARENA: You haven't seen any yourself?

BEMIS: No, I haven't seen anything like that. Those buses were sold the last year I drove the bus. I drove the bus two years. The last year I drove the bus they had changed to the Moreland. That was an open bus with side curtains on it.

ARENA: And was that not only a different bus but a new bus?

BEMIS: That's right. It was a brand new bus.

ARENA: Whereas, these White buses were old to begin with, or old when you took over that particular . . .

BEMIS: Well, they were just three or four years old when I took over. They had been imported from some other school. They bought them from some other school. They were three or four years old at the time.

ARENA: Do you recall if those who were picked up by bus had to pay in any way . . .

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: . . . or was that strictly a part of the educational budget?

BEMIS: No charge at all. Another thing is that they allowed us to take the bus to different entertainments. At the high school in the evenings, why, we would carry whoever wanted to come from Yorba Linda, we'd bring them to the entertainment and back again, free of charge.

ARENA: You, yourself, were paid what, if I may ask, for that?

BEMIS: Twenty dollars a month.

ARENA: Would you be given extra for these extra entertainment drives?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: All included as part of your obligation.

BEMIS: In the first place. In the second place, we weren't supposed to take any tips. But once in a while some kind lady would leave fifty cents or a quarter or something like that, which was big money.

ARENA: I was going to say, twenty dollars a month in those days wasn't bad for a youngster in high school.

BEMIS: That wasn't bad.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how you got the job in the first place?

BEMIS: Well, this Sam Walker that I talked to you about--Dr. Walker over here in East Whittier--I have his address and I'll give it to you . . .

ARENA: I would appreciate that.

BEMIS: Sam drove the bus the first year. Then he graduated and was leaving the school so they had to get somebody else, and I was the one that Sam had used as an

understudy. I'd driven the bus as an alternate for him, and when he had to leave, then I inherited it. Tickled to death, too.

ARENA: Were there ever any serious accidents that you were involved in yourself, other than that broken drive shaft?

BEMIS: No. Well, one time I came down to a corner at Valencia [Avenue]--no, it was at Placentia [Avenue] and Palm Street, out there this side of Yorba Linda. It had rained the night before and I came to that corner, and I didn't see it or realize that water had washed some dirt onto the road on that corner, and you couldn't see it. And just as I came to it I saw it, of course, naturally I tried to brake to a stop; I didn't make it. I completely swapped ends with that bus. It turned around just as slick as a whistle and headed in the other direction, but no damage. It did it easy and no damage. But if I had been going fast it would have been kind of dangerous.

ARENA: Returning for a moment to Jessamyn West. As you know, she is a famous writer. Was there any indication when you knew her that she had this ability in writing? Do you recall, for example, that her name was in any of the local newspapers for winning contests or reading a story, or anything like that, any indication?

BEMIS: Yes. Jessamyn was one of the members of the debating team in the high school, and she was always good at writing composition, and so on, in her English classes. She always read a lot.

ARENA: What year was she there when you were there, Mr. Bemis?

BEMIS: 1917.

ARENA: I was wondering from the standpoint of grade. I know you were a senior when you drove. . . . And she was what year?

BEMIS: About a freshman.

ARENA: She was a freshman. I see. I was wondering if you saw her in any of these debates, or heard her participate in any program at all, if you recollect any experience like that, personally?

BEMIS: No, I don't, personally.

ARENA: But you knew of it, and was she fairly well-known, or known at all as a kind of bright light in Fullerton High School?

BEMIS: Yes, she was bright. She was a brilliant . . .

ARENA: And that was fairly well-known.

BEMIS: Oh, yes. Jessamyn was always sharp as a tack. She was always right out in front. One of the reasons I knew about the debating was because a couple of years before that I, myself, had been on the debating team. And, of course, I had a little interest in seeing who was following along, you know.

ARENA: Do you recall whom you debated? Was it just within Fullerton High School, or did the debating team compete against other schools?

BEMIS: Oh, yes. The year I was there we went to the finals and won the finals in Bakersfield [California], against Bakersfield. Bakersfield came here, however, for my angle of it. And I don't remember what in thunder we debated about. I guess it didn't make much difference. [Laughter]

ARENA: Were these attended by the public, as well as the students and teachers?

BEMIS: Oh, yes.

ARENA: And were they fairly popular, too?

BEMIS: Yes, quite popular.

ARENA: Where would they have been held? In the school auditorium?

BEMIS: In the school auditorium. Yes, they were quite. . . . And of course, you know, back then your entertainment feature was just a whole lot different than it is now. In fact, they organized entertainment features that brought quite notable figures here. For instance, William Jennings Bryan came to Fullerton High School. Madame Schumann-Heink.

ARENA: Excuse me, the second name was?

BEMIS: Schumann-Heink.

ARENA: Who was that? Would you mind spelling it?

BEMIS: Well, let's see now. Madame. . . . What the dickens was her first name? She was a famous opera diva.
S C H U M A N N . - H E I N K .

ARENA: And on what occasion, and about when was it that William Jennings Bryan appeared, as close as you can recollect?

BEMIS: Yeah, I would say that that was right around 1913.

ARENA: That would have been the year when President Woodrow Wilson was sworn in, and around that time. . . . I don't know for sure if he came in as Secretary of State, but he was President Wilson's Secretary of State for awhile. Do you happen to recall if he was introduced as the Secretary of State, or anything like that?

BEMIS: No, I don't remember that. All I can remember is that he was a very fluent speaker, as you know.

ARENA: What was the occasion for his being there, again? This doesn't have anything to do directly with the debating at all?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: But this was one of the programs that you would have As you say, there wasn't much in the way of There was no TV, of course, not much movies to the extent that there is today. And he would be brought in. I didn't mean to cut you off, but what was the occasion for his appearing? Who sponsored him, for example?

BEMIS: Well, I think he came through on the Chautauqua Circuit. Now, whether it was actually a Chautauqua Circuit. . . . But it was on an entertainment circuit that he came through, and these other people did, followed along then at different times.

ARENA: Were you present at that appearance of Mr. Bryan's?

BEMIS: Oh, yeah, sure. I sat right down there in front, and the reason I remember him so well is because, you know, a good speaker will do one thing. They will pick out someone in the audience to whom they speak. They don't go off across very much. A good speaker will pick out someone and speak to them, because they're putting a message across. By gosh, I don't know why he did it, but he picked me. That old boy looked me--you know, it scared me to death, he was quite a notable figure, you know--right in the eye, and all that speech, it embarrassed me.

ARENA: It so happens, by the way, that 1913 was the year that President Nixon was born, so you know he was not there, enjoying that.

BEMIS: No, he wasn't there.

ARENA: What year were you in, again, in that year in high school, on what level?

BEMIS: 1913, I was a freshman.

ARENA: A freshman, so your graduating year would have been '17, yes.

BEMIS: 1917. I was 15 years old in 1913.

ARENA: And the freshman year, I guess, is a very impressionable year, and you did have a lasting impression of Bryan?

BEMIS: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Did you hear him on any other occasion?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you this: Of all the people--and I know you've seen people, now, a lifetime of public speaking--how would you rank him, of all the public speakers you've ever seen or heard, personally?

BEMIS: Well, he was close to the top.

ARENA: He has that reputation, as being an outstanding speaker.

BEMIS: Yes, he was a very smooth speaker, and tied his ideas together. He didn't wander around, you know, off in left field.

ARENA: Was there a microphone system at that time?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: So, it was strictly his natural voice.

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall, well you were fairly close, was he looking at you?

BEMIS: Well, they could hear him any place. He had a booming voice, a marvelous voice.

ARENA: Do you recall what his subject was?

BEMIS: No, I don't.

ARENA: Do you recall if he had a particular accent? He was, I understand, from the west--"silver-tongued orator of the west," he was called.

BEMIS: He had a middle-west accent.

ARENA: Did it sound very peculiar?

BEMIS: No, no. It wouldn't to me, because mine was middle-west, too, you know. But he wasn't Bostonian, in that sense of the word.

ARENA: Pictures of him that I've seen indicate a kind of heavy-set fellow; these of course, were in his older years. How would you describe him physically?

BEMIS: He was, well, just about five-feet-eight or nine, about my height, and he'd weigh a hundred and seventy, somewhere in there. And he, you know, wore the vest and the cutaway coat with the tails.

ARENA: And the coat was kind of long, in pictures you see of him, yes.

BEMIS: Yes, cutaway and tails, there.

ARENA: From your recollection, that wasn't the common or popular fashion for men then, either, was it?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: And that was his normal dress.

BEMIS: That was his trademark.

ARENA: Plus some black--not a bow-type tie, or was it?

BEMIS: Well, it was a kind of flowing--as I remember him--a kind of a flowing bow, not a stiff bow tie.

ARENA: Do you recall his hair? I believe pictures show him with hair fairly long--and white, of course--in back, and possibly balding on top.

BEMIS: A little bit, but quite a head of hair in the back. Kind of down to his collar, you know.

ARENA: Do you recall how he was introduced, and would there have been such a thing as an encore? For example, did he deliver a formal lecture? I realize you're not sure what he talked about, but do you think it was a political talk?

BEMIS: No, it wasn't a political talk. It was more like. . . . Of course, it isn't popular today to have anything in the mind of an inspirational talk.

ARENA: That was my next question. Did it deal with religion?

BEMIS: No, not religion in the sense, but, as I remember it, it was just a pep talk for kids to work good in school, get good grades.

ARENA: Oh, it was directed to the high school audience, too.

BEMIS: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Although the public was there.

BEMIS: They were invited if they wished to come. Now this occurred--every Wednesday at 11 o'clock we had the school assembly, and this was at one of the assemblies.

ARENA: Do you recall that he was paid, from your own knowledge?

BEMIS: I suppose. Of course, I wouldn't know about that, but I suppose so.

ARENA: Do you recall that he made frequent Biblical references? I'm thinking of someone like Billy Graham, who, of course, is an ordained minister, and was he possibly a minister himself?

BEMIS: I don't think so. I don't remember that kind of an angle at all. More just a pep talk for young folks.

ARENA: Do you recall that either before or after he mingled with individuals in the audience? Did people come back and talk to him later?

BEMIS: No. They could go up on the stage and shake hands with him, if they wanted to, which I did.

ARENA: Did you talk with him personally?

BEMIS: No, you didn't get much to say, just that you enjoyed the talk, and that's it, you know how kids'll do, duck their heads and run.

ARENA: Do you recall that his wife might have been with him, seated on the stage and introduced, or anything?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: By that "no", you know that she was not there, or you don't know?

BEMIS: She was not there at all; not to my knowledge.

ARENA: Do you recall that the newspapers gave him quite a bit of publicity in the local newspapers, before and after?

BEMIS: No, I don't. I don't know a thing . . .

ARENA: Of all the programs you do recall, would you say that was the most memorable one, by the way?

BEMIS: Well, it was a good stand-off. It was a real outstanding one.

ARENA: As far as you know, do you think that practice was continued, even in President Nixon's time? He entered Fullerton High School in 1926 where he stayed for two years and then entered Whittier High School in 1928 and graduated from Whittier High in 1930. Do you think that same policy was in operation, that he could have met a famous speaker such as that in the same way?

BEMIS: Well, I wouldn't doubt it. Yes, because even today they have a certain number of people like that coming into the high school, and I think it was still in vogue then, because television, of course, was in the future, movies were more or less transitional then, talkies hadn't come in yet, and people depended on entertainment around their schools more.

ARENA: For you in the vicinity of Fullerton High School or aware of it, by the way, when the President was a student there, for those two years . . .

BEMIS: Well, yes, I was here, but . . .

ARENA: . . . you weren't paying attention to what was going on. For example, if he was debating or he was in the debating society, you don't recall that, from first-hand knowledge.

BEMIS: Not from first-hand knowledge.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you what you did do after you graduated, and what did you take up yourself on the high school level?

BEMIS: Well, I graduated from high school and then I was one year in junior college, and then the United States Navy got me in 1918. I enlisted in the Navy. I spent a year in the Navy, during the close of the war.

ARENA: You were still a resident, excuse me, at Yorba Linda.

BEMIS: Yes.

BEGIN SIDE II OF TAPE I

ARENA: I believe I had just asked you about your career, the subjects you majored in in high school, and then what happened after that.

BEMIS: Well, I worked in the oil fields, as I mentioned, for a couple of years, and then I bought a dairy ranch over in Chino [California] and operated that for three or four years. And then in 1924 I sold the dairy ranch and moved to Fullerton, went into the real estate business and I've been in the real estate business ever since.

ARENA: I want to be sure to pick up that military period there. I believe you said, just after we went off the tape, that you did go into the Navy. Would you mind describing that period?

BEMIS: Yes. Well, I was in the Navy, inducted at San Pedro [California], and after training I was transferred to a lighthouse tender in San Francisco [California], and worked up and down the California coast and the Oregon coast in the lighthouse service, as an adjunct of the United States Navy. The Navy took the lighthouse service over during the war. We manned it. I was a quartermaster and rose through the grades to where I was chief quartermaster on the lighthouse tender. The lighthouse tender was the Madrona, U.S.S. Madrona. M A D R O N A.

ARENA: And would the quartermaster be, if I'm not mistaken, the one in charge of supplies, issuing supplies?

BEMIS: No. The quartermaster is in charge of navigation. He takes care of the wheelhouse and the steerage and the signals and the. . . .

ARENA: In other words, you were in charge of the steering of the ship.

BEMIS: Yes, that's right.

ARENA: And what was the basis for your obtaining the knowledge of learning how to steer a ship? Was this completely information obtained through naval training itself?

BEMIS: That's right.

ARENA: You hadn't done anything like this before?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Had you been on a ship before, if I may ask?

BEMIS: Well, just out deep-sea fishing or something like that.

ARENA: And how long was your stay in the Navy?

BEMIS: Just one year.

ARENA: Now, you were still a resident of Yorba Linda. Your family was still in Yorba Linda, and you recall we mentioned the fact that this was a Quaker community, and you might recollect that the President engaged in combat service, was assigned to combat service during World War II. What was the situation from your first-hand knowledge of the Quakers and Yorba Linda in particular regarding World War I?

BEMIS: You mean whether they had objectors?

ARENA: Whether they had objectors, and, for example, the Nixons in particular. Do you recall Mr. Frank [Francis Anthony] Nixon's views, or any of the other Quakers, concerning that subject in World War I?

BEMIS: That hadn't become popular at that time. In fact, I don't recall anyone who became a conscientious objector. Now, no one liked the war, we'll have to admit that. No one likes that, no matter what your religious affiliation. Of course, the Quakers are noted for the fact that they take the peaceful attitude, which is fine. But at that time young fellows weren't hiding behind that angle of religious belief. I was a member of the Quaker Church. In fact, that was the only church out there for a good many years, and it was just natural to become a member of the Quaker Church. My first wife was a member of the church.

ARENA: From the community of Yorba Linda, by the way?

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: Would you mind giving her name, by the way?

BEMIS: Pike P I K E, Helen Pike. Her father [Loren Pike] and Frank Nixon were partners in the care and maintenance of orchards.

ARENA: Did that also include the care and maintenance and use of a tractor? Were they together in that operation as well?

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: That was mentioned by your sister [Viola Bemis Page] and Mr. [Gailerd C.] Page.

BEMIS: Yes, that's right. They were partners, and Frank and my father-in-law operated that for several years.

ARENA: On this question of the war, I notice that you wanted to make some of your ideas clear, and from the standpoint of history there are two things here: One, the actual facts of the situation; and two, the interpretations and views. And I want, if you don't mind, to try to get at some of the facts. And this doesn't mean you are for or against, as I ask these questions. It's just to see what the facts of the situation were. As a matter of fact, for example, do you recall that there were any meetings, special meetings called by the Quakers concerning the participation of the U.S. in war, even before we got into it, as was happening in some places around the country, not only by Quakers. But, just from the standpoint of factual information, was there anything like that in a small community like Yorba Linda?

BEMIS: No, I never heard of it.

ARENA: As far as your own personal knowledge, did Frank Nixon himself take any position regarding the U.S. going or not going into the war?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: And once we got into the war--World War I--do you recall his saying anything one way or the other?

BEMIS: Well, Frank--perhaps you have heard this from another source--Frank always ran on a pretty short fuse. He was a fine fellow and I admired Frank very much, and we were good friends, always were good friends, and I was up to see him just a few days before he passed away. But, Frank always ran on a very short fuse, and if there had been any idea that he was opposed to the war, we'd have known it.

ARENA: If he was. . . . In other words, he kept it to himself.

BEMIS: That's right.

ARENA: When you say he made his views known--put it that way, another way of saying he had a short fuse, had a short temper--the views on which he did make himself known seemed to be on what subjects, as far as you recollect?

BEMIS: Well . . .

ARENA: Would he argue religion, for example, with people?

BEMIS: Oh, some. But not in the sense that. . . . No, Frank wasn't a zealot, if you want to put it that way.

ARENA: Would he say, in effect, 'My religion is better than yours,' if he was talking to someone of a different religion?

BEMIS: No. Not at all. He wasn't that kind. He was a good deal like my father-in-law. He was accurate and honest, and that's kind of gone out of style now, to be square that way. That's gone out of style.

ARENA: By your father-in-law, here, I want to be sure, you mean Mr. Pike?

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: What was his first name?

BEMIS: Loren.

ARENA: L O R E N.

BEMIS: Yes. And those fellows, you know, well, they were just four-square, that's all there was to it.

ARENA: Was Mr. Loren Pike a Quaker, too--excuse me?

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: Now, if you don't mind, on the question of your being a member of the Quaker Church, would that have been a situation where you were a convinced--in other words, you were not a born, or you're not a birthright Quaker?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: So you did become a convinced Quaker.

BEMIS: That's right. Well, the main thing is this: I was born a Methodist. We lived in Yorba Linda. It was the only church there, and I went to the Quaker church.

ARENA: What was the official name of the church? Would it have been First Friends Church? Do you recall?

BEMIS: Yes, First Friends Church of Yorba Linda.

ARENA: As far as you know, would there be minutes that might go back to that period?

BEMIS: I don't doubt it.

ARENA: . . . of the Friends there.

BEMIS: Yeah, I don't doubt it. They were bound to. . . . Now, Mr. Hurless Barton would know that probably better than anyone else, because he. . . . He's a Methodist now, I think, but at that time he was also in the same position I was in. It was the only church and . . .

ARENA: Were you aware then, and you might have been aware since then, that Frank Nixon had been a Methodist to about the time of his marriage?

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: Did that come up then? Do you recall discussing that with him in any way?

BEMIS: No, Frank. . . . Of course, our age bracket was so far apart there. I used to help Frank out. In fact, when I bought my first piece of land, I bought a piece of his ranch out there, a half acre, and built the first house I ever built, when I was first married.

ARENA: This would be the Yorba Linda lemon area that he had?

BEMIS: Yes, where my sister, Mrs. Eichler, lives now.

ARENA: What is the spelling of her name?

BEMIS: E I C H L E R.

ARENA: And she lives there now. It is Mrs. Eichler?

BEMIS: Yes.

ARENA: And her husband's first name?

BEMIS: C. H. Eichler.

ARENA: Thank you. And was there the possibility that you might have been one of Frank Nixon's Sunday School pupils, by any chance?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: But do you know anything about that?

BEMIS: Yes. I know that he taught Sunday School, but not my class; but Lee Vernon was our Sunday School teacher.

ARENA: Of the Quakers?

BEMIS: Yes, that was in the Quaker church.

ARENA: Would you mind describing what your Sunday School classes under Lee Vernon were like, to the best of your knowledge?

BEMIS: Well, there were about four or five of us fellows. We were different ages; we'd separate about three years.

ARENA: And the boys were separated from the girls.

BEMIS: Oh, yes. Gosh. You bet your life. They had to have the boys' class and the girls' class, and we had our own room. Our room was in the belfry. [Laughter]
Which was fine for us, you know, 'cause we could tussle around up there all we wanted to.

ARENA: When did the classes meet, and how long?

BEMIS: Well, they'd meet at 9:30 and that ran till about 11 o'clock, then they'd disband to go to church.

ARENA: Were you not in Frank's Sunday School class because of this age difference, or it just so happened that you were not in Frank Nixon's class?

BEMIS: The age difference, I think it was. I don't know exactly, but I'm sure that was it.

ARENA: Do you ever recall discussing with Jessamyn West the fact that she had been one of Frank Nixon's Sunday School pupils? She has mentioned that in writing.

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Do you recall discussing that with her?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Do you recall discussing that with anyone, what Frank Nixon was like? Or what do you imagine--and make the difference clear--One, did you discuss with anyone what he was like as a Sunday School teacher; and two, what do you think he was like, if you didn't?

BEMIS: Well, I think Frank would carry quite a bit of humor into his teaching. Later on in life I did some of that in our Methodist church. And I found that the boys paid a good deal better attention if you caught their attention with some funny incident or story and tied it in with the Biblical reference. But I think Frank was that kind. He was always good-natured, except when he got excited, or something of that nature.

ARENA: As you know, the President has mentioned in writing and some of his speeches that his father did not have much formal education, not much if any, beyond the sixth grade. I was wondering if you were aware of that at the time you knew him and how this affected his personality, his manner with people. In other words, did you find that there was a gap between him and people with more formal education, or was he a person who could communicate with anyone on any level?

BEMIS: I think he could, yes. He was good. I think that Frank read a lot. He was well-informed, in my opinion.

ARENA: How about his grammar, and things like that?

BEMIS: It was good. Of course, now, you have to remember that he married Mildred. . . .

ARENA: Hannah Nixon.

BEMIS: Well, yes. Mildred in those days.

ARENA: Oh, I see. She was known in those days as Mildred rather than as Hannah.

BEMIS: Yes. Mildred Milhous Nixon. And then, later on when they moved to East Whittier, she adopted Hannah. I guess that she must have been christened Hannah. Of course, I knew her real well. She was a good friend of the family.

ARENA: And you were about to say concerning Mrs. Nixon?

BEMIS: Well, yeah. She had had the advantage of more education, and I think Frank just naturally pulled himself into line and matched her ability.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you know if she taught him? In other words, do you know that he spent time with his wife as a pupil, where she would correct him in a formal way?

BEMIS: No, I don't know about that.

ARENA: You don't know about that. Did you ever observe this, since you knew both of them, obviously, quite well? Did you ever see Mrs. Nixon correct Frank Nixon in your presence, on a point of grammar or spelling, or anything like that?

BEMIS: No, never did. We were quite closely connected. In fact, the matter is, the morning Dick was born I went over to get a quart of milk from the Nixons. That's where we got our milk. In those days you'd go get milk from a neighbor who happened to have a cow. Well, Nixons had this cow and we bought milk from them.

ARENA: To be sure--1913, of course, he was born. You were born in 1898, so you were fifteen years old, so you would have good, clear faculties at that point. Please continue.

BEMIS: Well, fairly clear. So, at any rate, we lived about a half a mile from the Nixons and I went over that morning to get the quart of milk, and Frank was pretty busy around there, and finally I got the quart of milk and he said, "Well, just wait a minute. I got something else to show you." And he went in and got this baby out. Of course, he didn't amount to much then. He didn't look like one of the Presidents of the United States, that's a cinch. [Laughter] But he brought this baby out and showed it to me and said, "That's what came during the night." Well, I was fifteen years old. I didn't have anything but embarrassment on my mind, you know. And I said, "What are you going to call him?" And he said, "Well, we named him Richard."

ARENA: That was about the extent of the conversation?

BEMIS: That was it. And I grabbed the milk and left for home.

ARENA: And you were alone at the time.

BEMIS: Oh, yeah.

ARENA: Completely alone. Do you recall where you were when he brought the baby out? In other words, about what time of day?

BEMIS: Oh, that was about 7:30.

ARENA: Would it have been light, or just about getting light by then . . .

BEMIS: Oh, yes.

ARENA: . . . and weatherwise, was it still a bad day?

BEMIS: Well, it was a clear day, but it was nippy. It was about like it is this morning.

ARENA: Do you recall that the baby was crying at the time?

BEMIS: No, he wasn't crying. He was just red. [Laughter] That's all. He didn't amount to much. But Frank was real proud. Of course, they never had any daughters.

ARENA: Was there any indication that that was on their mind, that they didn't have any daughters?

BEMIS: Not that I know of, no. But that was my first introduction to Richard Nixon. I reminded him of that years later when I met him when he was Vice President. I met him in Chicago [Illinois]. I reminded him of the fact that he didn't amount to much the first time I saw him.

ARENA: Do you recall if anything took place, if your parents or anyone visited the Nixon home to see Mrs. Nixon that day, or days later? Was there any sort of custom or any traditional thing when a new baby was born in the area?

BEMIS: No, I don't remember anything.

ARENA: Did you ever hear, and was it your experience, that this was the first baby born in Yorba Linda?

BEMIS: Oh, I don't think so.

ARENA: Can you think of any other case where a baby might have been born before . . .

BEMIS: I expect there was, but I never had tied it to being the first one, never had. You see, both of his brothers. . . . No, it was Harold [Samuel Nixon], was older; then Dick, then Don [Francis Donald Nixon], and then Edward [Calvert Nixon]. I think that's the way it is. He had an older brother at that time, who has since passed away.

ARENA: On the matter of the President growing up at that time, 1913 to the time he moved away, you had more chance, obviously, of seeing him--1913 to 1922--what do you recall of him as he did grow up? You were not in the same classes, but what do you recall of his activity in the area of Yorba Linda?

BEMIS: Well, the only two other things I recall is, when he must have been about three years old, the two families, the [Loren] Pike and [Frank] Nixon families took their horses and wagons and went to Laguna Beach [California] to camp for a week. And I remember going down to see them. Of course, my wife then was a daughter of the family, and so I took my bicycle and rode down there to do a little visiting. The Nixon family and the Pike family were camped on the beach, right in front of the Laguna Hotel. Of course, you couldn't do that now, and they were the only ones there. People did that in those days. They'd take their outfits and go to the beach, or the mountains, and set up their own individual camp. My next . . .

ARENA: Excuse me. And that would have been an overnight situation, as well as one-day camping.

BEMIS: A full week.

ARENA: A full week?

BEMIS: Oh, sure.

ARENA: Was the camping equipment full canvas type of . . .

BEMIS: Well, just barely, because they didn't have anything in those days. I think that they used what we call a fumigating tent for a tent, which was all right. It was good protection and all that, but it certainly wasn't like our travel trailers of today.

ARENA: And this was strictly by horsepower, getting there and getting back to Yorba Linda.

BEMIS: Oh, yes.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did the Nixons ever have a car while they were in Yorba Linda, to your recollection? Near the end, or anything like that, bearing in mind they moved away in 1922.

BEMIS: Well, they must have had, but now I lost track in that area. They must have had. I'm sure they did. Pikes had a car as early as 1913. They had a car, I don't remember the Nixons. . . .

ARENA: I believe I might have cut you off. You were about to say something after Laguna. Were you about to recollect something else?

BEMIS: Yeah. My second recollection was when Dick was about three years old, right about in that same period of time. He was, like all kids, interested in the Anaheim Union ditch that ran by their house. And several near-accidents and several accidents have occurred in that ditch, with children drowning, you see. And Frank of course, was cautious to keep the kids away from it, but Dick, being of kind of an inquisitive nature, would continually get back to that ditch, and throw rocks in it, and so on. Frank came up behind him one day and just lifted him up and threw him in the ditch, just literally threw him in.

ARENA: And you saw that, yourself?

BEMIS: No, I didn't see it. I heard about it. [Laughter]

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you when you heard that and from whom? That's a very interesting story.

BEMIS: Yeah. I forget who I heard it from, but I tell you it was a joke.

ARENA: But this was something you heard back in that time?

BEMIS: Yeah. Right away, soon as it happened. And of course, that cured Dick from going to the ditch. That was the end of that. From then on he was. . . .

ARENA: You say that Frank was kind of heavy-handed when it came to discipline with the boys.

BEMIS: Absolutely. It had to be. He wasn't mean, but he just insisted on discipline.

ARENA: Was the discipline by loud words, as well as by swift physical spankings, or both?

BEMIS: I think it was just, "here this is it and do it now."
I don't think he was ornery, or anything like that.
He just insisted on good discipline, and Mrs. Nixon
did, too. She was, of course, a good deal more soft-hearted
along those lines.

ARENA: Do you recall that any of the boys. . . . Actually,
there were three there, Harold and Richard, and the
very next year Donald was born, although he was born
in the grandfather's house, I believe.

BEMIS: Yes, I'm sure.

ARENA: Any idea why that did take place, why he would have
been born out of Yorba Linda, because they did come
back and remain there until 1922?

BEMIS: I don't know, unless being closer to medical facili-
ties or something of that nature. Of course Edward,
he was born after they moved to . . .

ARENA: 1930, in Whittier.

BEMIS: . . . Whittier.

ARENA: Well, speaking about those three boys, as you saw
them growing up when you did, did there seem to be
any special favoritism toward any one of them?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Did you notice that Frank favored one of them over the
other?

BEMIS: No.

ARENA: Was he easier on one than the other, or anything like
that?

BEMIS: No, not a bit of it. I don't remember Donald, except
to know that he was just there. Of course, I knew
Harold because he was a little older. I knew him as
a child, and then Dick.

And then the next time I saw Dick or had any connection
with him was when he was a young attorney over in La Habra
[California]. He came in to La Habra and set up his law office
there and maintained a space in a real estate office with a
fellow by the name of [Benjamin J.] Roberts. And I went over
there one day to do some business with Roberts and I saw Dick
working there in his office, just a matter of. . . . Incidental,
you know. I didn't have the occasion to speak to him, even, at
that time.

ARENA: That was the first time since that Yorba Linda period. And you knew it was the same Richard Nixon.

BEMIS: Oh, yes, you bet.

ARENA: But it was mostly a question of "Hello" and "Goodbye".

BEMIS: That's right.

ARENA: Do you know if this Mr. Roberts is still living, by the way, and his first name?

BEMIS: No, he isn't living. He's passed on. I was just trying to think of his first name when I mentioned it there.

ARENA: I'm sure we can find it.

BEMIS: Oh, yes.

ARENA: I believe I did ask you, and I want to be sure, about your own work, as you were recollecting your experiences after high school. I believe I cut you off when you were doing some work in the oil fields. I was just wondering, has that been your lifetime work, Mr. Bemis?

BEMIS: No, I went in the oil fields as a matter of expediency, and then I bought a dairy ranch in Chino [California] and operated that for four years, and then I sold out and came to Fullerton and went into the real estate business, with Dick Nixon's uncle, Hugh Nixon, by the way.

ARENA: Hugh.

BEMIS: Yes. He's passed away since then, but Hugh and I were partners in the real estate business for several years.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if any of Hugh's children, or his widow, might still be living?

BEMIS: Well, his second wife is still living. She's living in Oceanside [California], Helene Nixon. She was, in fact. . . . She went back to the inauguration.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if Hugh was the brother of Frank, himself?

BEMIS: Yes, that's right, Frank's brother. He had two other brothers.

ARENA: One was a Dr. Ernest [Nixon].

BEMIS: Yes, who was a state college professor in Pennsylvania, and the other one was named Walter [Wadsworth Nixon]. I think he lives in Fullerton yet. I'm not sure about that.

ARENA: There is a Wildermuth, who is evidently a relative of one of the Nixons. Do you recall . . .

BEMIS: Yes, that's a sister.

ARENA: The sister.

BEMIS: That was Carrie, Carrie Wildermuth [Carrie May Nixon Wildermuth Skinner]. She was a sister.

ARENA: How would you compare the difference between the two, knowing both of them as you did, Frank and Hugh?

BEMIS: Well, Hugh was more of a happy-go-lucky creature, but they all had that Nixon dogged determination. That's one thing that Dick has inherited from his father, a dogged determination. Now Hugh would get on a deal and he would just hang to it like a dog to a root, and Dick has that same quality. Frank had that same quality.

ARENA: Mr. Bemis, I'm very grateful for your allowing us to have this interview.