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Kathryn Bewley (May 12, 1972)

Evlyn Dorn

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. KATHRYN BEWLEY

May 12, 1972
Whittier, California

By Mrs. Evelyn Dorn

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

- DORN: This is an interview with Mrs. Kathryn Bewley, May 12, 1972, in Whittier, California, Evelyn Dorn interviewing. Kathryn, where were you born and when did you come to Whittier?
- BEWLEY: Well, I was born in Long Beach [California]. My parents lived in Pasadena [California], and I was two weeks old when we went to Pasadena. I came to Whittier in 1914 when I started high school.
- DORN: Was your father in business here in Whittier?
- BEWLEY: Yes.
- DORN: What business was he in?
- BEWLEY: He had a grocery store and meat market, called the Central Market.
- DORN: Speaking about grocery stores and meat markets, were you ever in Mr. Frank Nixon's grocery store out in East Whittier on Whittier Boulevard?
- BEWLEY: Oh, many times.
- DORN: What do you recall particularly about Mr. [Francis Anthony] and Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon? Was Hannah Nixon in the store at that time?
- BEWLEY: Yes, she was.
- DORN: And Mr. Nixon too?

BEWLEY: Yes, and the boys. One of the boys was often there. He was just a little boy at that time.

DORN: Probably Donald [Francis Donald Nixon].

BEWLEY: Donald; I'm sure it was Donald. Yes, I used to go out on Saturday, like many Whittierites, and buy pies out there.

DORN: And what was your impression of Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

BEWLEY: Oh, I admired her very much. She was very forthright. When you wanted to talk to her, she was glad to talk to you, but otherwise she was just a quiet, dignified woman.

DORN: And what about Mr. Frank Nixon?

BEWLEY: Well, he was chatty, really. He was very friendly.

DORN: Would I be correct in assuming that you were brought up in the Friends church?

BEWLEY: That's right.

DORN: And, of course, you know the President is a Quaker.

BEWLEY: Yes.

DORN: Did you attend the Friends church here in Whittier?

BEWLEY: In Whittier.

DORN: And now, regarding your education, would you give me a brief resume of your education, where you attended school?

BEWLEY: I went to Whittier High School and Whittier College and had one year of graduate work at the University of California at Berkeley.

DORN: What was your major interest in college? Were you preparing to become a teacher and, if so, on what grade level?

BEWLEY: Well, high school teaching was what I was interested in, and I majored in Latin. I was interested in teaching Latin.

DORN: You attended Whittier High School and then later became a teacher there?

BEWLEY: That's right.

DORN: All right. Now, you probably know that the President graduated from Whittier High School in 1930. Would you recall some of the teachers that you had who perhaps had the President when he attended school there?

BEWLEY: Probably the one who comes to mind first is Mrs. Simpson. Her name was Miss Pearl Ellis at the time that she was my Latin teacher. And then I began teaching at Whittier High School the year after I finished at Berkeley. She was at this time the vice principal there. She later married, but she continued teaching for quite a long while. And I think probably she would have had as much contact with Dick as anyone. I also remember Mrs. Beatrice Counsel and . . .

DORN: How about Mrs. Brannon, Alta Brannon?

BEWLEY: Yes, Alta Brannon taught history and English. She was an excellent teacher. She might have had Dick. Mrs. [Jenniel] Lavin was there at that time. Miss [June] Steck was the Latin teacher, and I do remember that Dick took Latin.

DORN: Now, let's see, he was in school, probably his senior year, and then you quit teaching there the following year, is that right?

BEWLEY: Yes. I started teaching, it must have been about '25, and I stopped teaching in about '31.

DORN: Do you recall him in high school at all as a student?

BEWLEY: Yes, I do.

DORN: Did you have him in any classes?

BEWLEY: No.

DORN: Why did you particularly remember him in high school?

BEWLEY: Well, he was an outstanding student, both scholastically and also in activities. He was a very dependable, reliable young man, and he was really an outstanding leader all that time.

DORN: Yes. Do you recall that he was ever active in any sports in high school? At Whittier College they talk about him being on the football team and sitting on the bench . . .

BEWLEY: No.

DORN: . . . but you don't recall him being in sports particularly. Miss Steck, who was his Latin Club advisor, recalls that he

didn't very often come in after school to the club because he had to get back to the grocery store to work. Do you recall seeing him around school after school?

BEWLEY: No. I had no reason to have contact with him at school really. I just knew him through his work in activities really more than in classwork.

DORN: Yes. Well now, you came in contact with him later when he came back from Duke University as an adult to enter a law firm. You had contact with him then. Do you remember the first time you saw him as an adult, as a young lawyer? Do you recall anything about meeting him for the first time then and, if so, did he remember your being a teacher in Whittier High School?

BEWLEY: I really can't remember ever having talked about his high school days.

DORN: But you do remember . . .

BEWLEY: And really, I didn't know him personally until he was a lawyer in my husband's [Thomas W. Bewley] law firm.

DORN: Now, because he was with your husband's law firm, was Richard Nixon ever discussed as to his ability and so on in your home?

BEWLEY: Oh, yes, many times before he came he was discussed that way, because his reputation was that he was very able, and we knew with our connection with Whittier College that he had excelled there, not only in class work, but also in working with other people. We knew that he was very able when it came to . . .

DORN: And you and your husband discussed his ability and so on, even here at home talking about him.

BEWLEY: Yes.

DORN: After he joined the law firm, and you were the wife of a senior member of the firm, was he comfortable with you? Did he treat you any differently than he did any of his friends? I mean, at social events or such things as that, was he ever uncomfortable because you were the boss' wife, in other words?

BEWLEY: No. No, he wasn't. He was always friendly and outgoing, not garrulous at all, but really very friendly. I think the fact that his family and Tom Bewley's family had known each other for one or two generations back gave him a friendly footing here.

DORN: That was in Indiana, right?

BEWLEY: It was in Indiana and, actually, the Bewley family had moved to California because of the illness of one of the children, and they were able to make this move because [Franklin] Frank Milhous was the one who offered Tom's father a job. And this is why they came, really, to this part of California, because of this Milhous connection, so there was really a close relationship between the two families.

DORN: Do you recall being entertained in the Richard Nixon home or in the home of his parents, Frank and Hannah Nixon?

BEWLEY: We were never entertained in the Frank Nixon home, except when they had a reception for Dick and Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] after they were married, but we were entertained in Dick and Pat's home, both when they lived in an apartment up on Beverly Drive and after they bought a house out near the country club.

DORN: Did you happen to be invited to dinner?

BEWLEY: Not at the apartment but at the house.

DORN: On Honeysuckle Lane.

BEWLEY: Yes, that's right. I think that the thing that the four of us enjoyed doing, and including maybe a few more people, was going on beach picnics. We did this many times in the evenings.

DORN: Now, who would be on those beach picnics? Would there be other couples?

BEWLEY: Well, Helen and Julian Hathaway and Fred and Lucille Bewley. They went several times, and probably other people that I don't recall.

DORN: Getting back to Frank and Hannah Nixon's home, don't you recall being up there one evening--because I was there, I remember this--it wasn't after they were married, it was before they were married.

BEWLEY: I do remember that.

DORN: In fact, I think we had taken our children, too.

BEWLEY: And Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon] was there.

DORN: That was the home on Worsham Drive. And I remember you had your young children and I had mine. I remember that Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon gave a dinner party there. Do you recall that?

BEWLEY: Yes.

DORN: All right. Now when the President left to go to the South Pacific during World War II, do you recall the good-bye breakfast that we had over at the Harvey House at the Union Station?

BEWLEY: Yes.

DORN: What do you recall about that particularly, the people who attended and so on?

BEWLEY: Well, I don't really remember.

DORN: Were the parents there?

BEWLEY: I suppose they were.

DORN: Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon and young Ed.

BEWLEY: Yes, I'm sure they would have been.

DORN: You don't really recall that? Because I do want to ask you something else about Ed. He was just a very little boy. After the breakfast was over, do you recall that we all went down to the train, right down to the tracks--other than this we were up in the station--when Pat and Dick got on the platform. Do you recall what he did or said just before he went into the train?

BEWLEY: No, I don't Evlyn.

DORN: Well, you don't recall that he told Ed to take care of his mother?

BEWLEY: I know that he told Ed that, but I don't recall that this was the occasion that it was said. But many times through the years that came along. I can remember that Dick had given to Ed that special responsibility to take care of their mother.

DORN: Did you have any contact with the President in any religious affairs, any church doings or any of that sort of thing?

BEWLEY: No.

DORN: And do you have any knowledge of what prompted Richard Nixon to go with the OPA, the Office of Price Administration in Washington, leaving the law firm?

BEWLEY: I have no idea what prompted him except that he was anxious to serve the country.

DORN: Since Richard Nixon was reared in the Quaker religion and you were too, how did you feel about his going off to war?

BEWLEY: I think it doesn't really matter whether one is a conscientious objector or not to a Quaker. A real Quaker feels that everyone must make his decision for himself, and your decision should be dignified by your attitude toward it, that if it's right for him, you accept that.

DORN: Do you remember anything being said that he might be interested in entering politics after he had served in the war?

BEWLEY: At that time?

DORN: Well, or at any time later. Do you remember him ever saying that he was interested in politics, or as far as you're concerned, what do you recall about his entering politics?

BEWLEY: Well, as I remember it, it came as a completely new idea to us, and so far as I know, it was a rather new idea to him, that when he was coming back to Whittier this suggestion was made to him, that he was the right one to fill this particular spot that was now ready.

DORN: Do you recall how it was presented to him? Was it done through a letter while he was still in the service? Or do you recall anything about that?

BEWLEY: Well, I always thought that Herman Perry was the one who approached him about this, and whether he did it personally or through a letter, I wouldn't know. But I really believe it was Herman Perry who interested him in this opportunity and certainly Tom [Bewley] and [Jefferson G.] Jeff Wingert went along with him. This, again, was the same point of view that Dick had had all the way through school. He was always willing to serve where he could, and this was why he went into the Navy; that's why he went into politics.

DORN: Now I'm going to ask you something here about Pat Nixon. Would you mind commenting on the personality of Mrs. Pat Nixon, as the wife of a young lawyer?

BEWLEY: I knew her first, of course, before they were married, and thought her very attractive; and I knew--because I still had friends teaching at the high school--that she

was a very capable teacher. She was quite reserved, and it really wasn't until after they were married that I had a chance to see her more often and I really felt acquainted with her. She was interested in many things. One of the things that I remember most vividly about her was her concern about this new house that they had bought down on Honeysucke Lane, and her desire to have it attractive and yet to keep within their budget. And this was a little hard to do, but she did a great job of it.

DORN: Well, Kathryn, you recall the early days when we had the [Republican] headquarters, when he was running for Congress here in Whittier and throughout the 12th District, what do you recall about her wanting to help in seeing that he had a good campaign going?

BEWLEY: I remember that time very vividly because, really, all of his friends rallied around, and it was really a grassroots movement if there ever was one. Many, many people wanted to help, not only in Whittier but in El Monte and the other areas right around Whittier. And at that time, Tom and I became acquainted with a good many people we hadn't known formerly, men who wanted to work for and with Dick. It seems to me that I had never really known-- I had never been involved in politics in any way--but I have never known of a campaign in which there was so much friendship and love as there was in this; enthusiasm, but real affection, real concern about the whole situation, a feeling of respect for Dick, confidence in what he could do, and determination to help him, a willingness to help him in ANY way.

DORN: Do you recall going over to the airport when he may have come in there, and would there be a good crowd there, or who might be the people there? Would it be these volunteers who would go over to greet him as he came in? What do you recall about anything specific about one of those meetings?

BEWLEY: Oh, we all went. It seems to me that every time he came in there was a group meeting him and, here again, it was a friendly situation, not just politics for politics sake, but because we all were friendly and loved Dick. His family always went, even the little children went. And I can remember very vividly one hot day in the summer, standing there waiting. The plane was late, and we waited and waited, and there was a good-sized crowd, and reporters and cameramen around. And I was standing with Mr. Nixon, Frank Nixon. And the reporters and cameramen were really a nuisance. Mr. Nixon had a straw hat on, pulled down pretty well over his eyes to shade them, and this one reporter came up wanting to take his picture, and said, "Take your hat off." And Mr. Nixon said, "It's too hot," and left it on. And this reporter, in a very rude way, said to me, "Take the old man's hat off." And I've never forgotten that, because this is the other side of politics. I was used to the friendly, loving side, and here it was a rude, really a very rude comment.

DORN: What was Mr. Nixon's reaction to this rude act by this reporter?

BEWLEY: He didn't say a thing. But he didn't DO a thing either; he kept his hat on.

DORN: Well, the family had lots to put up with, didn't they?

BEWLEY: Yes, they did.

DORN: Kathryn, I know you have two boys, two sons. Do the children ever talk about the President, or anything that they particularly remember about when they were young children?

BEWLEY: Well, I'm sure my younger son has some very interesting memories.

DORN: Excuse me for interrupting you, Kathryn, but tell me, what is your younger son doing now?

BEWLEY: He's a biochemist, doing research work in the UC [University of California] Medical School in San Francisco. He is head of one of the labs in the hormone lab in the medical school there.

DORN: He has been working with a very famous doctor.

BEWLEY: Dr. C. H. Lee, who has done some very fine research work in hormone chemistry. Tom [Thomas Aden Bewley] got his Ph.D. under Dr. Lee and has been working in his lab for about four years.

DORN: That's wonderful. Now, excuse me for interrupting you; go ahead with your story.

BEWLEY: This particular story deals with the year that Tom was graduating from high school. And we were going back to Washington, and Tom had been wanting for a long time to take a trip by himself. He was thirteen years old, and we finally agreed that he could fly back to Washington alone, if he would stay in the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] and we could keep in touch with him that way. We had been in Washington when he was about five, and he had become very interested in the medical exhibits in the Smithsonian Institute. And so he wanted to spend a week, just in the Smithsonian Institute, which is what happened, really. So he left and spent this week as he really wanted to, and we knew that through Dick and Pat we could keep in touch with him.

When we went back a week later, we went from the airport directly to Dick's office. Rose Mary Woods met us and right away said, "Where is Tom?" And we said, "He's at the YMCA." "But we haven't been able to reach him. I've been trying to reach him by telephone and Pat's

been trying to reach him. They wanted him to come out to the house to dinner, to do something with them, and he hasn't returned a single telephone call." This alarmed me a little bit, so I immediately got in touch with the YMCA and yes, he was there. When we finally saw him that evening, we said, "Why didn't you return these telephone calls?" And he said, "I see them in Whittier. I can't waste my time in Washington."

DORN: That's just wonderful. I hope some day he will be able to visit the President in Washington and go over this story.

BEWLEY: Later, we went on up to the lake north of Toronto [Ontario Canada] for a week or so vacation, and then came back to Chicago [Illinois] to the Republican Convention there, where Dick was nominated as Vice President, and young Tom was with us during this time at the convention. So perhaps his attitude toward political figures changed a little bit after that.

DORN: Well, that's wonderful.

BEWLEY: One thing that Rose Woods said to us was, "Well, the girls had been so disappointed because they didn't get to see Tommy." And when I said that to him, he said, "Well, I'm not interested in little girls." But we did go out to their house a couple of evenings. We got to see the girls and they got to see him.

DORN: Well, thank you very much, Kathryn. This has been a most interesting interview, and I certainly appreciate your time.

BEWLEY: Well, I've enjoyed talking to you.