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Earl H. Chapman (December 3, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

COL. (RET.) EARL H. CHAPMAN

December 3, 1971
Santa Rosa, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

Col. Chapman taught at Whittier High School when Richard Nixon was a student there, and later, when Patricia Ryan was on the faculty. He had later contacts with the Nixons in Washington.

The interview begins with Col. Chapman's recollections of his early life. He was born in Connecticut in 1896 and brought to California the same year. He attended Whittier area public schools and graduated from Oregon State College [Corvallis, Oregon] in 1922, after service in World War I.

Col. Chapman's interview continues as he discusses his teaching career, which began in 1922 at Whittier High School. Then the following verbatim dialogue took place:

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ARENA: We'll go back, now, to this period when the President was attending school. I'm very glad that we've had this discussion, and you're giving us the background of your experience, theoretical as well as practical. What is the first occasion, that you recall, of direct contact with President Nixon on the high school level? And would I be correct in assuming that that WAS the first time you met him, that it was during high school? You didn't visit the grocery store, for example, in East Whittier, or know any of the Nixons or Milhouses or relatives before the contact on the high school level with the President?

CHAPMAN: No.

ARENA: That was the first time.

CHAPMAN: The first time when Dick came to school there. I didn't even realize that he had been at Fullerton High School two years before he came there. And as I was saying just before we started this other conversation about the teachers being dedicated, it showed the leadership of Richard Nixon, to me, when you mentioned that he came to Whittier High School after completing two years at Fullerton High School, in that Dick was elected president of the student body. Now, the vice president of the student body was usually a junior in the school. I don't recall whether Dick was vice president for the year before he became president or not, but if he was, coming as a new student into a school, without having a big, wide circle of high school friends, if he was elected vice president of the student body in his junior year, it shows what outstanding leadership he had, to be selected where he was practically unknown, and to step into that position. And I remember him as president of the student body, in which he made a very fine appearance and conducted the business of the student body in the meetings in a very fine manner.

ARENA: What particular characteristics or mannerisms of his stick out in your mind, even today, say, that impressed you? Can you think now of the particular things that impressed you? Of his approach, his manner of delivery, whatever he said and how he said it, whatever comes to mind would be very helpful.

CHAPMAN: Well, whatever comes to mind may be colored a little bit by recent years, of having seen him on TV and having known him, but as I see him, it was a very direct and frank approach, in which he seemed to have a great deal of confidence in himself. And I remember the first time I saw him after he had been elected to Congress. I called on him in his office. At the time he was very much occupied with the Alger Hiss case, and I noticed how dedicated he was to getting that man out of a position where he might injure the United States. In fact, Dick wanted me to get ahold of the dossier on Hiss and read it for myself, but I was very much occupied with my Army work at the time, and I didn't have an opportunity to do it. I met Dick prior to his being elected to Congress, after I hadn't seen him for quite some time, when he was in the service. It was very peculiar, in that I had information that Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] was in Washington, D.C. [District of Columbia].

ARENA: Just to be sure here: Had you met Patricia Ryan, later Mrs. Nixon, of course, while she was teaching on the high school level?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes.

ARENA: And you were still on the staff then?

CHAPMAN: Yes. I was still there.

ARENA: This would have been around 1938, '39, and of course, they were married in 1940. You recall that?

CHAPMAN: That's right. I don't recall the marriage and that, because I left there in October, 1940, I believe it was. It may have been before that. But I remember Pat well at teaching. She was very well-liked. She taught, if I remember correctly, in the business department.

ARENA: She was also busy with some extracurricular work. Do you recall what that was?

CHAPMAN: No, I don't recall that.

ARENA: The so-called Pep Committee, which I think took care of the pep rallies and that sort of thing.

CHAPMAN: That's right. I don't remember that. But I do remember Pat. She was a very affable, kind person. She was full of energy herself.

ARENA: She was new. Did that create any special problems, or did you see anything in particular about her character from the fact that, in a way, she was a newcomer, as was the President, and how did she take with her fellow colleagues, as well as with the students?

CHAPMAN: Oh, just fine. She . . .

ARENA: I take it there was no similar case here, as there was with the other teacher, where, because of a lack of competence or other traits, the students, as you say, drove the teacher out of the school, literally. There was nothing like that with her.

CHAPMAN: No, no. Pat was very friendly, a very strong personality. Everybody liked her.

ARENA: At the same time, how was she at, say, handling the students disciplinewise, in that situation, if that came to your knowledge?

CHAPMAN: Well, I think, if I remember correctly, Pat was a rather young, vivacious lady herself, and of course, that would instill in the high school youngsters a great, great degree of confidence. And they all liked Pat.

ARENA: Do you happen to recall, by the way, that she dated any of the men, any of the teachers?

CHAPMAN: No.

ARENA: Now when you say no, you don't know whether she did or not?

CHAPMAN: No, I don't recall. I had no idea that she dated any of them at all. But it was a very interesting coincidence how I happened to see Dick again when I was stationed in Washington in 1942. I had heard that Pat was in Washington, D.C., so I picked up the telephone. Her name was in the book, so I called her and I said, "How long you been here, Pat?" She said, "Three months." I said, "Where are you living?" And she said, "Where are you living?" When I told her she started to laugh. I said, "Where are you living?" And then I started to laugh. For three months she had been living almost around the corner from me in an apartment house, but we hadn't run into each other. So, I used to see Dick about every two weeks, just to say hello. "How are you, Dick? How're you getting along?"--when he come down from Massachusetts, I believe it was, where he was taking indoctrination when he was in the Navy.

ARENA: You might recall that just before he entered military service, the Navy, just before, he was with the OPA [Office of Price Administration]. Was it during that period at all that you had contact with him?

CHAPMAN: No.

ARENA: It was after he entered service.

CHAPMAN: It was after he entered service. I didn't even know that Dick was with the OPA.

ARENA: He was, as a lawyer. He had practiced law in Whittier, and then went as a lawyer with the OPA. Do you mind if I ask this, Colonel: First of all, were you aware that the President was of the Quaker faith?

CHAPMAN: No.

ARENA: During the period that he was in high school, and then around the time that you re-met him in 1942, you were not aware that he was of the Quaker faith?

CHAPMAN: No.

ARENA: I see. May I ask you when you first came across that information?

CHAPMAN: I don't remember.

ARENA: Because the question I was going to ask, and now it doesn't make much sense, but I was going to ask,

were you surprised? Maybe if not in his case, did you know of other cases where Quakers traditionally took a pacifist role regarding wars and fighting, of course, where in his case he had joined a combat branch of the service? And yet he had been a birthright Quaker. His mother was a birthright Quaker. Did you ever come across that situation, by the way?

CHAPMAN: Of any other people?

ARENA: Yes.

CHAPMAN: I don't recall now, but I know that I have known of some; several of my friends were Quakers.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask if you had any discussion with them about it? Did they ever give you their reasons for doing that?

CHAPMAN: No.

ARENA: It never came up. Well, that takes care of that. I just wanted to be sure. If that event did come up in any way, you might have recollected. Then, you did not know him or have direct contact with him about his OPA service, Office of Price Administration. What were some of the things that you do recall that you discussed with him during the period that you knew him in Washington while he was in military service?

CHAPMAN: Well, I don't think we had any heavy discussions about the military, at all. Usually it was that I would just go over there and say, "Hi, Dick."

ARENA: Did you talk over old times, for example?

CHAPMAN: No. We didn't seem to talk over old times. I seem to remember that it was probably only two or three times that I saw Dick when he came back to Washington.

ARENA: And these would be brief occasions.

CHAPMAN: Yes.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask how he looked to you?

CHAPMAN: Oh, he looked fine. He was full of energy. I remember the first time that I went to his apartment where they were living. Evidently he had an upstairs apartment, too, and I heard him call down. He says, "Hi, Earl. I'll be down in a little bit." He was evidently dressing at the time, and then he came down.

ARENA: Do you know if he had the use of a car, or had a car at that time?

CHAPMAN: No, I don't. I didn't have one myself. We were all awfully busy. You remember, the war was going on, and it was busy, busy times. We didn't have much time to ourselves. I was working, myself, about sixteen hours a day.

ARENA: Did you ever come into contact with him again while he was in the service, after that period?

CHAPMAN: No, I did not. The next time, he was in Washington as a member of the House [of Representatives]; and then the next time I remember about Dick and Pat was that Pat wrote me to say they were coming back to Washington, and Dick had been elected to the Senate, and could I find them a place to live, because living quarters were at a premium. I don't remember just what year that was. I think it was about . . .

ARENA: He was elected to the Senate in 1950, as a representative in Congress in 1946, which means that he entered then, was sworn in, 1947. The election year is the even year, and then after January he actually moved to Washington.

CHAPMAN: I did find them an apartment, which I think they kept temporarily. Later, they moved out into another section of Washington, D.C. But Pat wrote to me and asked if I could find a place for them in which to live. I did, because one of our colonels was moving, transferred overseas, or something, and I got their apartment for them. I remember, also, that later my wife and I went over to visit one evening. Dick stayed and visited with us, and then he excused himself; he said he had to go back to the office. Pat said, "That's the way he works. Sometimes he will work most of the night, then sleep in the office and go directly from there to the Senate."

BEGIN SIDE I TAPE II

ARENA: And the question I just brought up was the manner in which you and the President got together in Japan. How did you know one another would both be there?

CHAPMAN: Well, [Robert] Bob Lake, one of my former students, was an employee of the State Department and was in the Embassy in Tokyo.

ARENA: And Bob Lake was from Whittier, also.

CHAPMAN: He was also one of my students at Whittier High School.

ARENA: And in this case, you knew that you had him for Spanish. Was he in your Spanish class?

CHAPMAN: No, I don't remember much about it, but he was a very good friend of mine, always had been as a kid in high school. And when I learned that the Vice President and his wife, Dick and Pat, were coming through Tokyo, through channels I tried to get assigned to them as an aide, a military aide, but somebody along the line scotched the thing and I didn't hear any more about it. I found out through Bob Lake that the Embassy people were surrounding him and guarding him and Pat, too, as they didn't want anybody else to meddle in and to make contact with them except themselves. In fact, I learned later that it was one of the wives of their own diplomatic family over there who was assigned to Pat as her secretary. So I sat down and wrote a little note and gave it to Bob. I asked Bob if he could slip it in through the lines, which he did. Pat either called herself, or had someone call my wife, to be sure to come over to the Embassy that evening.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, when a top official like that, a President or Vice President, visits a foreign country, is there a set residence where they reside? For example, do they stay in the official Embassy building, or in the residence of the ambassador? Is there a set arrangement?

CHAPMAN: Well, I would imagine they would stay in the residential area of the Embassy, with the ambassador and his family.

ARENA: Not necessarily in the building itself, or it could be? I'm thinking, for example, in Mexico City [Mexico] there is an official Embassy, and I'm almost certain that the ambassador does not live in that building. It might vary from country to country, I don't know.

CHAPMAN: I think, too, in most of the countries as I have observed, there is a business area of the Embassy and then there is a separate residential building or area from the Embassy building itself.

ARENA: And on this occasion, do you recall where the President stayed in Japan?

CHAPMAN: He stayed at the Embassy. Now, where the residence was in the Embassy, I don't know. Where I went, well, they were holding a nice, big dinner for him. In fact, I got there before they had finished dinner. The dinner then adjourned and they came into this large room. The large dining room was off from the room where we all assembled. Later, businessmen from Tokyo, Americans, came in.

ARENA: On this point, Colonel, as you know, there are various things written about the President and the social side of the man. As one who has known him way back in his high school years, and has seen him personally over the years from time to time, would you comment on that general area, the sociable side of Richard Nixon, whether it would be at an Embassy affair, whether seeing him at a high school social affair, or not necessarily at a social affair, but just as a sociable human being? Would you take that whole question, and say as much as you can and want to on that side?

CHAPMAN: Well, I think as much as Dick can, in his busy day, he likes to be sociable. He likes to be around people as much as he can. However, in my observation of Dick of late years, after he got into politics, he is just so preoccupied with the problems of politics that he doesn't have the time to devote to social life. I think that, from what I have read, that he has come out more toward social life. Of course, that's a necessity with the diplomacy that is required of people on the higher strata. I know that we officers in Washington, in my assignment there, I was assigned to the Latin American Attaches who came, and we had to go out of our way to be available for official affairs with them. We had to make ourselves available to provide social affairs. I will say this, that even as busy as Richard and Pat Nixon were when he was elected to the Senate, in February of 1952, when I had my orders to go overseas again, he and Pat were not too busy to find out. Now, how they found out, I don't know. Whether we had called them and told them we were leaving, or what had happened, but they did find out that we were leaving Washington for me to go back overseas again, and they took the time out to have us to lunch at the Senate. And an interesting thing to me was that, as these various senators were going through the Senate dining room, Dick was busy at that time explaining to us who was a good, solid senator and who wasn't. I won't mention the senator's name, but I remember that Dick pointed to him and said, "There's a screwball." And he had sized him up correctly, because in my estimation, he WAS a screwball.

ARENA: Just to make certain, and to get this on the record, Colonel, the fact that he was in Washington, and obviously it is the business of a person in politics to see people, and obviously to make friends, so that he can be known, and of course, there is the pursuit of the almighty vote, is it your estimation that the President was having this sociable meeting with you for any practical purpose, other than just paying a friendly call? Is there anything that he could benefit in a political or personal way, other than just a personal sociable enjoyment?

CHAPMAN: No. In my little status in life, I couldn't have benefitted Dick a bit. It was a personal, friendly gesture on his part and on Pat's, because, here we

were, back in Washington, and I was leaving, and they just wanted to have a little farewell.

ARENA: Going back to the high school period and the sociable side of the President, from your knowledge and first-hand contact and obvious interest in students, not just interest in the classroom as an impersonal thing, but you obviously were interested in students as such; was he a loner? Was the person who had the loner type of personality able to win elections, as he obviously did, including the one of manager, which handled funds for athletic purposes, as well as some other student extracurricular affairs? Whether you recall President Nixon personally, would the average student elect a person who was not easy to get along with? Was it possible for him to win elections and not be a person who mixed easily with the student body?

CHAPMAN: I don't think so. I think in the age of a high school student he had to have a social contact with the students; especially, here he came into the school at the beginning of his junior year and was able to become president of the student body a year later during his senior year. I don't remember if he was elected vice president or not, but it was the custom that the vice president would be a junior and would succeed himself to the presidency, and I'm sure that's exactly what happened to Dick. Now I may be wrong, but I never have thought that he was antisocial at all. In fact, since he and Pat have gone into The White House, I have lost contact with them personally because of my own belief that a man and woman in that position are so busy that they shouldn't be bothered. Now, after I left Washington and while he was Vice President, I had immediate contact to them. I had their own private telephone number in Washington, and I used to write to them.

ARENA: Now this was made available to you by . . .

CHAPMAN: By them; their own unlisted phone number. I used to write to them, and I'd always get an answer back. In fact, when Dick was running for governor, I remember writing to him on an occasion where I had become aware that it was pointing toward his teaming up with a certain political figure, and I personally wrote to Dick, and with my small knowledge of politics, and my not-very-strong ability to give advice, I did write to him, and told him I was surprised to learn that they were saying that he was getting mixed up with this individual, and I said, "For heaven's sake, don't do it. As a layman here on the outside looking in, it might work adversely." And when I wrote to Dick or Pat, I always got an answer back.

ARENA: On the question of the sociable side of the President, may I ask the same general question regarding

Mrs. Richard Nixon? Was she easy to get along with?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes. And when Dick was running for governor, she came here to Santa Rosa in his behalf, my wife went down to see her, and she was glad she went. She really had a nice visit with her. And I was sorry that I was out of town or somewhere, and I couldn't get there.

ARENA: This question is meant to include the period of the high school years, when you knew Miss Ryan as a teacher. Would the same thing hold true--she was easy to get along with?

CHAPMAN: Oh, yes. She was a very, very fine, very sweet person. It was so refreshing to have a young teacher come in who was cooperative and who could handle her own teaching problems; she didn't have free sledding without any disciplinary problems. But I never got any disciplinary problems to handle from her; whereas, some of those old maids--and one or two of them who were married--thought they were martinets, or whatever they're called on the feminine side. That was most of my trouble.

ARENA: Your position and responsibility included receiving complaints or receiving students who were disciplinary problems for ANY of the teachers at that time. In other words, you're saying that you didn't receive any students or so many from Miss Ryan. That was a part of your job, to receive them if she had students whom she couldn't cope with?

CHAPMAN: That's right.

ARENA: And she wanted you to handle them--as you recall, you never had one . . .

CHAPMAN: I never had one from Pat.

ARENA: I see. While we're on this high school period, I'd like to establish this area of your possibly teaching the President Spanish. You're not 100 percent sure that you taught him Spanish, but you think it would have been possible. Is that how you feel?

CHAPMAN: I think it was. My recollections are that if I did teach him Spanish, he was better than an average student. He would be at least a B student.

ARENA: Do you know that he went to Mexico for his honeymoon?

CHAPMAN: I didn't know that.

ARENA: Did you teach Spanish, if I may get personal--and there's a reason for it--by calling on firsthand experiences? Did you say such things as, "When I was in Mexico City," and so forth?

CHAPMAN: Yes.

ARENA: Do you think that was one of the things that might have given the President a personal interest, and Mrs. Nixon was interested in Mexico, too. Obviously, they agreed on Mexico. I'm just wondering if you think you might have had a direct influence on their joint interest in Spanish-speaking countries, because they chose Mexico for their honeymoon. And from time to time she has spoken in Spanish in addressing people in Latin America.

CHAPMAN: It could very possibly have been, because in my teaching of Spanish I didn't confine the youngsters to the book. I think that using just a book is the poorest way to learn a language. I used to make the youngsters sit on their books, and then I said, "Imitate me." I said, "Read that." And they would read it as though they were speaking English. They would think in English and read it. For instance, the word comes right to mind now, Cabeza. I'd say, "Read that. Cabeza." I'd say, "You learned to talk English by hearing it. You're going to learn to talk Spanish by hearing it. You repeat now. Imitate me, CABEZA." I would bring in personal things about the people who spoke the language and the country, and if Dick was in my class, possibly he got interested in Mexico through this channel.

ARENA: He would have been exposed to that type of teaching and your enthusiasm.

CHAPMAN: And he would have possibly developed a desire to go down to Mexico. Although, you must remember that there were a great many Mexican people in the population in Southern California in the twenties and thirties, and still are.

ARENA: How would you describe the relations between those of Mexican background, Mexican heritage, those who were Spanish-speaking, and the non-Mexican-background people?

CHAPMAN: Oh, there were many American people in Southern California at the time who thought of the Mexican in the peon class; they wanted to keep them in the peon class socially. Now, in the thirties, during the summer I ran the swimming pool and taught swimming, for seven years. There was pressure on me at that time to have separate swimming periods for the Mexican children and white children, but I'd never do it. I was raised with the Mexicans. That's how I learned to talk the language. In the Rivera Grammar School when I went to school, we had Mexican children come to school who couldn't talk English. We had Mexican workers' children living on the ranch. Their fathers were cutting wood.

They talked nothing but Spanish. They outnumbered my brother and me. If we played with them we had to learn their language.

ARENA: In any of your experiences with the President, whether it was during the high school period, during the early political period, in Congress, or right up to the present time, when you have been in contact with him from time to time--such as in Japan--did you ever, under any circumstances hear him refer to the Mexicans as this low peon group?

CHAPMAN: No, I don't think he would.

ARENA: Just for the record.

CHAPMAN: If he had an interest in going to Mexico, he certainly wouldn't have had that feeling toward the Mexican people. We must admit that there are stratas of life governed by the capabilities of the individual, but as far as those capabilities are considered, whether he is to be a laborer, whether he's to have a blue collar job or a white collar job, should make no difference as to his own personality or being a human being. I'm sure Dick Nixon would feel that way and would have felt that way from the time that he was a youngster on up.

ARENA: In this interview, is there anything that I have not brought up? As we come to a close, is there anything that I have not touched upon that you would like to say at this point?

CHAPMAN: No. Not a thing. I think that you have brought out things, Doctor, in a very, very fine manner. You have brought things to my mind that I didn't know about Dick Nixon himself.

ARENA: Well, I do try to do my homework on his life. Thank you very much, Colonel. I really appreciate the hospitality and the contribution you have made to history in this interview. Thank you.