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Edith Jessup Comfort (June 2, 1972)

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Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MRS. EDITH JESSUP COMFORT

June 2, 1972
Ardmore, Pennsylvania

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Edith Jessup Comfort. The maiden name of Mrs. Comfort is Edith Jessup. She is from Ardmore, Pennsylvania. We are now in the library of Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania. This is June 2, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mrs. Comfort, may we begin by my asking you, with your permission, when you were born and where?

COMFORT: I was born in Los Angeles, California, 1901.

ARENA: And would you mind giving an idea of your educational background and your career to date?

COMFORT: I graduated from Los Angeles High School in Los Angeles and entered Whittier College in the fall of 1918. Went to Penn College, Iowa, my junior year and graduated in 1922.

ARENA: Just to be sure, Penn College is located where?

COMFORT: Oskaloosa, Iowa. It's now William Penn College.

ARENA: And we were discussing off the tape your interesting genealogy, which is very closely connected with the rise of the city of Whittier [California], which as you know was founded in 1887. And here we do have in front of us a little booklet which reminds both of us of some of your family connections. Would you mind stating those for the record.

COMFORT: My great-grandfather, Jonathan Bailey, was one of the founders of Whittier and my mother and her family moved to Whittier--I don't know the year--in the

early days, and my father came to Whittier from Iowa. They were married in Whittier at the old ranch house in Whittier. It was always a second home for me. The family gathered there for many happy occasions.

ARENA: As you know, there are in the Whittier area two Friends churches, one is the East Whittier Friends Church and the other is the First Friends Church. Both of these are now considered in Whittier. East Whittier has been absorbed by Whittier, and I just want to be sure as to the church that you attended when you were there.

COMFORT: I was a birthright member of the First Friends Church of Whittier.

ARENA: Did you possibly ever attend the East Whittier Friends Church or know anything personally about its rise?

COMFORT: I presume I visited there. I don't have any definite recollection. My grandfather, Elias Jessup, was the first pastor of the First Friends Church of Whittier.

ARENA: As you know, the President's grandfather, Franklin Milhous, was one of the early pioneers in a way. He came ten years after the founding of Whittier and settled there in 1897 from near North Vernon, Indiana. I was just wondering if you recall any of that side of the President's family, the Milhous side, including not only his mother, Hannah [Milhous Nixon], but his grandmother, Almira [Milhous], whom I think was called Aunt Allie by many people, and whatever comes to mind concerning that part of the President's genealogy.

COMFORT: I do not know them. I have met his mother. I know his aunt, Olive Milhous Marshburn, quite well from the early days, but I don't know his immediate family personally. I knew Jessamyn West, a cousin, who was in college when I was.

ARENA: From the standpoint of the President's genealogy which does come to mind, how would you describe as you knew her, the President's mother, and give an idea of about the time you did meet her personally? You need not worry about the exact year, but about when, so we would know at what point in her life you are describing her, from your firsthand observations.

COMFORT: I didn't really know her. I had met her at the church, I presume. I didn't know her personally. Of course, many of my relatives knew her.

ARENA: How about the President's cousin and famous authoress, of course, Jessamyn West?

COMFORT: Jessamyn West lived in the dormitory when I was there. I think she graduated a year after I did and was in many of my classes and was a very delightful person. Of course, I knew her quite well living in a small dormitory.

ARENA: Was there any indication at that time, when you were both fellow students, that she was headed for a career in writing, which she has since undertaken so well?

COMFORT: She was very interested in English and a very eager student. I don't remember thinking of her as an author. I thought of her as a very interesting person with a very inquisitive mind.

ARENA: In view of the fact that so many of her plots are of a historical nature and they tend to deal with Quaker history particularly--I'm thinking especially of The Friendly Persuasion and Except for Me and Thee--do you recall her interest in history as well, or were you in any of the same classes with her in history or discussing subjects of a historical nature?

COMFORT: No, I was in her English class but not in her history class. I can recognize many of her characters or the types of many of her characters in her books.

ARENA: Did you possibly have a history course with Professor Paul Smith?

COMFORT: No, I had no courses with Paul Smith. He came to Whittier [College] when I was a sophomore, I believe. I was away in my junior year and I didn't have any courses with him.

ARENA: As you know from living on the East coast, there are certain differences and how deep and how complicated we certainly don't have time to go into now, but I was just wondering if you would touch on some of the obvious differences between, we'll say, the Western Quaker--I'm thinking of the Quaker of Whittier in particular--that you have had direct contact with and the Quakers from the East, from the standpoint of possibly better understanding the environment in which the President as a Quaker grew up. I'm thinking here of the great majority of people who are not Quakers who have stereotyped notions of the Quakers. In every school, public or private, the name William Penn is virtually a household word, and I think most

people think of William Penn and the Quakers and that's it. And yet, as you know, there are differences. So whatever time you would like to take in discussing that, please feel free to do so.

COMFORT: I think the Eastern Quakers have a broader conception of what I think Quakerism really is. That's my feeling now. I had to learn my way around among Eastern Quakers. We were in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for many years before coming to this area and associated with the Friends there. I think the Friends that I have known here, and in the West, the Friends here have been perhaps more concerned with social issues, implementing our beliefs by action. I don't like to use the word concern because it has different meanings I think, but I think there is a liberality here which I didn't feel there at the time I was there.

ARENA: I was thinking also in terms of the formal structure. Correct me if I'm wrong, but is there something to the effect that the Western Quaker tends to have a pastor in the church and in the East there is more of the so-called silent Quaker meeting. To what extent is that true and how fundamental a difference do you think that is?

COMFORT: The structure of our meeting is quite different. Of course, there are pastoral meetings in New England and other parts of the East. I had to get used to the non-pastoral, silent type of meeting. It is a very different structure. My grandparents used to tell about this kind of meeting in Ohio and it sounded very strange to me then. Now, I think it's THE meeting--the way of worship for me.

ARENA: Would another difference be the question of evangelism? One hears the expression evangelistic Quaker regarding the Westerner; I am wondering if that brings anything to mind--whether there is a valid contrast there between the Quakers of the East and the Quakers of the West, that they are more evangelistic.

COMFORT: I think they are--they were much more evangelistic, of course, as they went West.

ARENA: I don't know really if I am using the word correctly or if maybe we should dwell on it a bit more. I am thinking more of someone going after converts, more or less the layman's use of the term, and you might want to speak more about that.

COMFORT: We don't do that very much here. In fact, we're accused of not encouraging people to join our society at times. We lean over backwards perhaps. I think here we tend to be very much involved in social issues, I believe more than we

were in the West when I was there. We feel that our Quaker beliefs lead us into the world and our belief of that God in every man makes us try to speak to that. Therefore, we are involved in racial issues and in peace. Other testimonies seem to spring from this belief, and I don't believe this is emphasized too much.

ARENA: A direct tie up with evangelism and the President could be his very own words. In his acceptance speech for the Republican Presidential nomination for the last election, he does mention that his mother had hopes that as a young man, he would grow up to be a missionary in Central America. I don't know if you recall that statement or not, but that would not be a surprising statement regarding the Western Quaker but less likely as far as the East is concerned.

May I ask you your husband's full name and if you will, his career from the standpoint of what he taught at Harvard [University] and here in the East, and if he had any professional career or experience in the West at all?

COMFORT: His name is Forrest D. Comfort, two r's, Forrest Duane. He was born in Iowa. He went to Penn Academy and graduated from Penn College. During the war years he was in France with the early Friends Service Unit. Clarence Pickett was very influential on the Penn College campus. He was minister there and many conscientious objectors were in the first unit that went to France, and my husband was in that unit, in 1918 or '19.

ARENA: The other person that comes to mind from Whittier, who I think your husband would officially call a conscientious objector, is Mr. Oscar Marshburn, and I know you know Mrs. [Rose Olive] Marshburn. I don't recall, and maybe you will, if he went abroad though as well. I know he was a conscientious objector in World War I.

COMFORT: I don't know.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if your husband and he did get together possibly because of their common outlook regarding the war?

COMFORT: We've met them many times in our trips to Whittier and have met him in the East. I don't know whether Oscar was in France with the early units or not.

ARENA: How would you describe, if you will, a person like Mr. Oscar Marshburn?

COMFORT: I think he is a very dedicated Friend, certainly interested in making a better world through helping people, and I think a very good interpreter of the peace testimony.

ARENA: Were you aware that they both had been in Africa for a year?

COMFORT: Yes. We saw them recently in Florida when they were on their way from one of their missions. They devote a great deal of their life now to--they work with the Service Committee. They were in the Near East some years ago.

ARENA: I didn't mean to cut you off from describing your husband's career. Would you mind continuing that.

COMFORT: Upon graduating from Penn College he went to Nebraska Central College, a small Quaker college in Central City, Nebraska. I joined him there. The first year we were married, we taught there. Then we went to Haverford Graduate School for one year, and he got his master's [degree] in philosophy under Rufus Jones and then we moved to Harvard. We had both gone to Harvard summer school prior to that. We moved to Harvard and we were there for twelve years. He was working in the psychoeducational clinic at Harvard. From Harvard we came to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] and he was counselor and psychologist, working with children and adults, and for many years he was at Episcopal Academy. And then he came to Haverford College and he was at Haverford College for twelve years as counselor and psychologist. We also worked many summers with the American Sons Service Committee in Mexico. We directed work camps, both of us. Our interest was in Mexico since we had spent many summers there.

ARENA: Some Quakers from Whittier mention having gone to Mexico for the purposes of possibly settling down. I am thinking of one person in particular, Clayton Votaw's relatives, maybe his father or uncle. But I am wondering if that comes to mind that there has been this interest in Mexico from the standpoint of . . .

COMFORT: There have been mission groups there. Dr. [William C.] Bruff's wife, Miriam Kelsey Bruff, her father was pastor of a Friends church. He was a prominent physician in Whittier, very much interested in the peace cause. He is not living now. There has been an evangelical group in Mexico, a mission group. The Service Committee does not really affiliate itself with any religious group. We are a Friends group and we have many denominations working in our work camp group. We are there to help the Mexican people. We have many opportunities to express our beliefs as well as to try to implement them. It's a very rich experience to work with the people. We worked in a small village. We found it most rewarding, both in working with the college students from America and becoming acquainted with the Mexican people.

ARENA: In the forties after the war I, myself, was a summer student in Mexico, 1947 to be precise, and I recall such Quaker groups, and it has been said that that formed the idea and maybe the nucleus of the Peace Corps. But the Peace Corps idea owes something to that experience. I believe one of the top men in the Quaker echelon was one of the advisors for the Peace Corps to the President. Is that true?

COMFORT: They came to the Service Committee for suggestions and worked with them.

ARENA: Is that program still maintained?

COMFORT: Yes, and a very active program in the early forties. We went down there first in the early forties.

ARENA: And, of course, not just Mexico. I happened to have come across former students in the Caribbean in general and other parts besides Mexico. To tie this in, the President did go to Mexico for his honeymoon. As far as you know, was there ever any connection between that, we'll say, and his growing up as a Quaker, from your own experience?

COMFORT: Not as far as I know. I can't say.

ARENA: Would you mind giving an idea of your obtaining the position in the school where you did teach the President in the fifth grade. That is, just what were the formalities from what you recall and the final cementing of the appointment--your becoming a teacher, and what would the correct title of the school be?

COMFORT: It was the East Whittier School. It was not incorporated in the Whittier City school system then. We were in the county school system.

ARENA: And the grades that it did encompass at that time?

COMFORT: From first grade to eighth grade.

ARENA: And then the student would go right to high school.

COMFORT: Yes. I applied. I happened to know some of the board members. Some of my relatives lived across from the school and I was known and got the job. I had to have a teacher's certificate. I think I acquired that by being a college graduate.

ARENA: What was your own inspiration in choosing teaching as a career, from your recollections of it?

COMFORT: That's a difficult question.

ARENA: Well, let me ask you this. Were either of your parents teachers or any of your close relatives?

COMFORT: Some of my relatives had been teachers. I suppose this seemed the natural thing to do. I think I wasn't planning on it as a career.

ARENA: As you know, there's a very close bond between the Quakers and education, from my own experience in the United States. Here we are in Haverford, a city in Pennsylvania, and if I'm not mistaken it started as a college and the city grew around it. In the case of Swarthmore [Pennsylvania] there is a city Swarthmore and a college. In the case of Whittier, I think the city came definitely first, but the academy and then the college followed shortly after. As you recall, the city was founded in 1887 and Dr. Charles Cooper, known by many as Charlie, insisted that it be a college rather than calling it an academy, so that was the roots of the college; but at any rate they did set up an educational institution in one year after the founding. Would you want to say anything about that from your own personal experience as a birthright Quaker and as an educator, and as a person who has lived many years on this earth?

COMFORT: Wherever the Quakers went in their pioneering days, one of their first concerns was education, and as I remember reading some of my grandfather's diaries and hearing the stories, when there was just the barren hills, they said we must have a school. And my father and many of my relatives and my grandfather helped haul bricks up the hill to start building the college. Quakers were always interested in education.

ARENA: Just for the record, your grandfather was Jonathan Bailey.

COMFORT: He was my great-grandfather. My grandfather on my father's side, Elias Jessup, and his sons I think all probably helped, with their hands, to build the college. This is what people did. It was a very barren country and I have often wondered why the spot was chosen. When I grew up it was a beautiful city, orange groves and walnut groves, and now it's foggy and smoggy, perhaps.

ARENA: There's no perhaps, unfortunately.

COMFORT: I think Quakers have always been interested in education and reading Quaker history. The Quakers moving across the country, this was one of their first concerns and they sacrificed to give money or time to make the institution possible.

ARENA: Has it been your experience, too, that the denominational aspect of the schools--I'm thinking of the colleges, again taking advantage of your broad experience in education, not just among the Quakers--that the Quakers have not in any way put restrictions on entry into their schools from the standpoint of religion or racial origin or nationality?

COMFORT: I think that has been generally true.

ARENA: I think off the record we were discussing the question of the blacks who were in Whittier, and you were trying to think if there were any in your day. I do know there were several in President Nixon's day. One was a fraternity brother whom I have had the pleasure of interviewing. So far as your own recollection goes, of course, there were very few blacks in Whittier to begin with.

COMFORT: I don't remember even a black family there.

ARENA: Maybe you recall this name, Orville Espolt, who I think was born in Whittier.

COMFORT: Yes.

ARENA: He had several photographs, that is his hobby as a matter of fact, and there were at least three showing blacks and maybe this might spark a cord. One shows a black driving a team of horses, two horses, on the Franklin Milhous ranch, and he seemed rather certain that Franklin Milhous had brought this black with him from Indiana. In another case there was a photograph showing the young Hannah Nixon in an elementary school, possibly Bailey Elementary School, but showing Hannah Milhous Nixon, the President's mother, with maybe fifteen or twenty students, and there were two blacks in that same group, if that rings a bell in any way.

COMFORT: I just don't happen to recall any. I was brought up to feel that there was no difference in the races. My family had no prejudices. There weren't many black people where we were living.

ARENA: How about those of Mexican origin?

COMFORT: I remember the Mexicans in later years. Of course, in the East Whittier School we had the migrant laborers who came in to pick walnuts--largely walnuts--and the children had to be taken care of. In the East Whittier School, for instance, we would sometimes have fifty or a hundred extra children for a short period. This was a difficult situation to

adapt the program to. I don't think there was any feeling there should be a barrier. It was a matter of trying to give the children as much as we could in the short time they were with us. Finally, special school rooms were built for the period they were there, so they could have the maximum amount of help. They weren't quite ready to absorb the work that the children were having who were there all the time. Miss Wicker had a group.

ARENA: Miss Wicker, and in this case we are speaking of Miss Emma Wicker.

COMFORT: Yes.

ARENA: There is now, of course, at the East Whittier Intermediate School, an Emma Wicker auditorium. What do you recall of her as a person and as a teacher? Evidently she made some impression to have an auditorium named after her.

COMFORT: She was a very fine person and very warm and understanding and interested in the children. She taught first grade. She worked with the younger children and they loved her and she loved them. She was an excellent teacher. I knew her personally quite well and I valued her friendship. I used to see her in later years when we would go out to visit, but I think she was a remarkable person. She was patient and understanding. She knew her teaching techniques but she was interested in the children. I can understand how an auditorium would be named for her. She taught for many years, I don't know how many. Until her retirement she was there.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: And Mrs. Comfort, we were just mentioning the connection between your family and the Lou Hentry Hoover School, and did you know her personally?

COMFORT: I didn't know her personally. My father, who spent some time in Oregon, knew her in Oregon. I think he went to school with her and I think my great-grandfather perhaps knew her. I met her at Penn College many years ago, but I did not know her. The Lou Henry Hoover School in Whittier is built on the site, the old gravel pit, which my great-grandfather owned and which my grandmother inherited, and when I used to visit my grandmother at the old ranch house, we would see the wagons go by and count the wagons. I think it was 25 cents a load for gravel, something like that. It was just a big hole in the hill. Now it's this beautiful school.

ARENA: I believe it may have won a prize for the architect. And we did mention off tape the name of that architect, William H. Harrison, Bill Harrison, known to the local people. I believe you said something about having his father as your English teacher.

COMFORT: His father was a very dynamic English teacher in Whittier College. He was also at Penn College. My husband had him at Penn College. He was a very interesting teacher and Shakespeare was his great love, I think. I knew him at the college. I do not know his son.

ARENA: Now, getting to your direct contact with the President when he was your student in the fifth grade, why not try to recall as much as you can and whatever you can about every aspect of that contact from the standpoint of what you taught, what you do remember of him as a student. Whatever comes to mind and take as much time as you like.

COMFORT: The East Whittier School, we were starting the departmental system in the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade. I had the seventh grade classroom, so Richard Nixon was not in my classroom. I think penmanship was one of the subjects that I taught. It was taught in a rather fantastic way in those days.

ARENA: So that everyone who sees his signature has you to thank for that.

COMFORT: My husband wouldn't approve of that because he can't read my writing. I'm not sure if he was in my history class. He was very much interested in history. He was a very quiet little boy. I didn't know him really personally very well. I was a young teacher learning my way also.

ARENA: About how many students would you have had altogether?

COMFORT: I think we had about twenty-five or thirty in each class.

ARENA: And would you have seen him every day or was penmanship maybe three times a week and history . . .

COMFORT: I think I saw him every day. I think of him as a loner. I think he was very studious, very quiet and certainly never causing any disciplinary problems in the classroom.

ARENA: Do you recall that there were disciplinary problems?

COMFORT: Just normal buoyancy, I think. I think we had a very interesting group.

ARENA: This is where my stereotyped notion of Quakers gets in my way. Of course, little boys will be little boys no matter where they are.

COMFORT: They were just very normal children.

ARENA: I'm sure they were.

COMFORT: Gaiety and pranks.

ARENA: I would like to record for the sake of history that you do have this large roll-out heavy paper photograph showing the entire school. I don't know if there are others like that around, but I think it is important to know that you do have such a photograph. Have you had it yourself all of these years?

COMFORT: Yes, it was taken when I was teaching there and for some reason it has been in my old trunk. I got it out a year or two ago to show my grandchildren.

ARENA: Do you recall what the normal day for the fifth grader was at that time? For example, when did school start; what was done about the lunch period; did they go home or bring lunch? In other words, the routine of the school, even though you may not recall too much individually about the President himself.

COMFORT: School started at 9 o'clock. We had the flag salute in front of the school, the entire student body, and then the children went to their homeroom.

ARENA: Excuse me. Was there a passage from the Bible that was read in those days?

COMFORT: No, I think that wasn't a problem then. The two years that I was teaching there I don't recall that we did. The children from the fifth grade on went to their homeroom in the morning. We had to take the roll and work on our registers and then they went to their classes. I think later the departmental system was discontinued in the lower grades. I believe we had a lunch room. Some of the children brought their lunches and some of them ate in the lunch room. We had a playground for the morning recess. I don't know about the athletic program. I think I took my turn on the playground, certainly not coaching any sports. The children left at 3:30 in the afternoon, many of them went by bus. I don't know whether Richard Nixon went by bus.

ARENA: The intersection now is known as Santa Gertrudes [Avenue] and Whittier Boulevard. It may have been different at that time.

COMFORT: Well, I am sure that he probably would have gone on the bus. I don't recall the athletic program other than it was free play. I think we had baseball teams and basketball. I don't really know what Richard Nixon did.

ARENA: Were there anything like school plays that were put on at that time. Evidently he enjoyed doing this both in college and after law school where he appeared in community plays. Were there any plays at that time?

COMFORT: We did class plays. I wasn't involved with Richard Nixon in any of that, but I coached some groups. Yes, we had school plays and programs, special programs.

ARENA: Just to be sure, did you have any other members of his immediate family, his other brothers? There was Harold [Samuel Nixon], there was Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] and much later, of course, there was Edward [Calvert Nixon], but I am almost sure Edward went to Lowell School.

COMFORT: I didn't know any of the others. I presume Donald would have been there, but I couldn't say personally.

ARENA: Did you have any contact with any board members who may have been Milhouses or relatives such as Mr. [Oscar] Marshburn, who became a board member later on.

COMFORT: He wasn't a board member then. I don't believe any of the board members in my time were his relatives. I can't recall.

ARENA: Finally, may I ask to what extent were conditions for the teacher something you could live with yourself at that time? Were the board members easy to get along with? Was the pay adequate? Of course, the pay is never enough, but what do you think of that school's educational system from the standpoint of the faculty?

COMFORT: I found it a very happy place to work. It was a new experience for me. The principal, Evelyn Flowers, was a very fine, creative person. I think the conditions were very pleasant for the teachers. The pay was quite in line with that time. We were under the supervision of the county--we had county supervisors who appeared suddenly and unexpectedly, which was always exciting.

ARENA: Were there any penalties for getting married or being a married teacher, by any chance, at that time?

COMFORT: I don't believe there were any married teachers in the school at that time. As I think back, I don't think married teachers were very popular in those days.

ARENA: I believe I've come across that idea.

COMFORT: This was in '22 and '23. It didn't concern me because I was going to another part of the country. I taught in another part of the country, so I wasn't involved in this personally.

ARENA: Finally, Mrs. Comfort, as this interview is coming to a close, much more than forty minutes as we had feared, but is there anything that I have not asked or any point that has not come up that you would like to raise yourself at this time?

COMFORT: I don't really think of anything. I didn't know Richard Nixon too well. I remember him very clearly. I think of him with a book and a rather serious expression. I don't remember seeing him laugh very often.

ARENA: Thank you very much for taking the trouble to allow me to have this interview, for answering all of my questions so frankly and fully, and I know my colleagues in history including Dr. [Edwin B.] Bronner, who is a librarian historian, will be in your debt in the future. Thank you very much.

COMFORT: Thank you.