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## Eleanor W. Comroe (September 12, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. ELEANOR W. COMROE

September 12, 1972  
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Eleanor W. [Wheatland] Comroe, in her residence in Whittier, California, Arena interviewing. Today's date is September 12, 1972. Mrs. Comroe, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

COMROE: I was born in the Buckmaster house on Laurel Avenue. I think it might have been Barton Road then.

ARENA: That would be right in East Whittier, or Whittier?

COMROE: It was East Whittier then.

ARENA: East Whittier.

COMROE: 1910.

ARENA: Did you grow up and receive all of your education in this local area, and would you mind saying what the schools were that you attended?

COMROE: East Whittier School and Whittier High School and Whittier College, and then I went to Fullerton State College.

ARENA: Did you go to Fullerton after you graduated from Whittier College?

COMROE: I didn't graduate. My first husband died and I had to have something to do, so I went there.

ARENA: Actually, how much time did you put in at Whittier College, and do you remember the year which would have been your class?

COMROE: It would be 1933. I went two years, and then I just took art work the third year.

ARENA: I see. I want to be just as sure as possible. I'm trying, of course, to see how your attendance may have matched some of the years of President Nixon. He entered in 1930 and graduated in 1934. What years were you actually in attendance at Whittier College?

COMROE: I entered in 1929.

ARENA: Then you spent that full year, 1929-30.

COMROE: Yes, the first two years there.

ARENA: And then '30-'31, so his freshman year and your sophomore year would have been the same.

COMROE: The same.

ARENA: I see.

COMROE: And then I just took art work the third year, which would have been his sophomore year, wouldn't it?

ARENA: That's right, and you attended the full third year, only you just did nothing but art work. That's very helpful. Now, thinking back, may I ask you if you had met any members of the President's family, not only the President himself, but bearing in mind there is the Milhous side as well as the Nixon side. Have you ever met any of the Milhouses?

COMROE: Yes.

ARENA: Before you met the President?

COMROE: Yes, I met [Rose] Olive [Milhous Marshburn], but at that time you didn't go on other people's property unless you were asked. And I remember going up to the Milhous house.

ARENA: And this would be the so-called Milhous ranch house, too?

COMROE: Yes.

ARENA: Located where we now have the Quad Shopping Center.

COMROE: Yes, on Whittier Boulevard. And I don't remember why we went up, and if we did go in the house, we just went in. . . . I have a faint recollection of going through one door like that. And I have been in the Marshburn's house, and they have a mantelpiece made from the loquat tree that had been at the house there.

ARENA: Do you recall that you and any particular members of the family spent any amount of time together? I was wondering if you and maybe one of the girls, as a friend that you grew up with?

COMROE: No, because you see, Olive was older. I don't remember when she got married, but . . .

ARENA: You did know her before she got married, though.

COMROE: Yes, I think so. We went up there that time. I know that the Milhous chickens came down to our place.

ARENA: Do you remember seeing her mother, a grandmother of President Nixon, Mrs. Almira Milhous?

COMROE: I don't think so. I just don't remember.

ARENA: How about the grandfather himself, maybe working outside on the land?

COMROE: Well, I don't remember him. I do remember a man leaning over the fence, but I don't know whether it was a man that worked there, or what.

ARENA: Do you recall that there was a black man working on the Milhous ranch while you were growing up, at all?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: There is a picture showing a black man driving a team of horses, and I was just wondering if maybe you may have seen him as you were growing up.

COMROE: No, they drove cars, I remember. Now, somebody said that my brother and Nixon made mud pies, but I don't remember it.

ARENA: When you say your brother and Nixon, would this be President Nixon himself?

COMROE: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall that you may have gone along on trips to the beaches or where the boys played?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: Do you remember that you wanted to but they were a little against girls playing with them, or anything like that?

COMROE: No. I don't remember them at all.

ARENA: Now may I ask you if you remember the parents of President Nixon, not the grandparents at this point, but his actual parents, Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, and Mrs. Hannah [Milhous] Nixon?

COMROE: No, they lived out closer to my aunt, and my aunt went to their store.

ARENA: What was her name?

COMROE: Florence Pease. She was a Wheatland, too.

ARENA: Did you visit your aunt from time to time, and in that way get out to see the store and the Nixons?

COMROE: Well, I saw the store, but I didn't go there until afterwards. We moved out that way after my marriage to Ben Comroe. We lived out there, and we did go to the store when [Francis Donald Nixon] Donald had it.

ARENA: You were mentioning your knowing Mrs. Rose Olive Marshburn. I was wondering if possibly you came across some other relatives of the President. For example, he had an uncle by the name of Mr. Griffith Milhous, who I understand taught music for a while at John Muir Junior High School, and I wonder if you had any contact with him?

COMROE: No. Was there a Frank Milhous, too?

ARENA: There was also a Frank Milhous. One was the gentleman who owned the Milhous ranch. The full name was Franklin Milhous. And then there was Frank [McClure Milhous], who was a son of Mr. [Charles Wright] C. W. Milhous, who was in education and had a connection with a Lowell School.

COMROE: Was that Beulah Milhous' father?

ARENA: I'm not sure.

COMROE: I knew Beulah Milhous when I went to Fullerton [State College], and I knew Martha Gibbons.

ARENA: Martha Gibbons was a nurse, if I'm not mistaken.

COMROE: Yes, and she was my mother's nurse when my sister, Doris, was born.

ARENA: She was a sister of Rose Olive [Marshburn] and Hannah [Nixon].

COMROE: Yes.

ARENA: Speaking of your knowledge of these relatives and speaking of Riverside [California], did you know the aunt of the President out there, Mrs. Edith Milhous Timberlake?

COMROE: No, I just remember her name.

ARENA: Not getting to the President himself yet, but of all of the relatives, of which do you have the clearest recollection? Have you maintained your contact with . . . . When you say Ollie, you're speaking of Rose Olive Marshburn.

COMROE: Yes.

ARENA: Was that her nickname as a youngster, growing up?

COMROE: Well, that's the only name I know her by. Well, we're invited to a picnic this next Saturday at their house, but I don't think we better go, because of my husband having a heart attack two months ago.

ARENA: How would you describe Mrs. Marshburn, thinking back over your many years of association? The reason that would be significant is that, after all, she was the aunt of the President and had contact with him, and some influence. One can never be sure how much influence relatives have, but from the standpoint of describing her, as someone who was not a member of the family, how would you describe her?

COMROE: Well, I think I thought she was very pretty. She had blonde hair. I've always liked her. She's very nice and very thoughtful of people.

ARENA: May I be more specific and ask why it is that you liked her? What is it about her personality that you remember, in addition to these two reasons as to why you liked her?

COMROE: I know her more since I joined the Friends church. Before that I just knew who she was and had seen her.

ARENA: May I ask if you joined the Friends church because of her? Was she an influence in your making that decision?

COMROE: No, it was because of my first husband.

ARENA: May I ask his name?

COMROE: Wellman Haworth.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if your first husband was the gentleman who used to teach Sunday school in the East Whittier Friends Church? Do you have any recollection of that?

COMROE: No, because he went to the First Friends Church here in Whittier. Richard Power?

ARENA: I have some vague recollection of someone mentioning a Haworth who taught Sunday school classes, if this is the same person. Some of the pupils would be Harold Nixon, the President's brother, and people like Mr. Ralph Howe, a Mr. [Malin] MacMurray, and a Mr. Ralph Palmer. Do you know if your husband did teach Sunday school?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: I see; so that would eliminate that. Do you know if your first husband himself had had any contact with the Milhouses or Nixons? Was he a particular friend of the Marshburns?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: You don't recall, for example, being in similar social situations, maybe, where you and the Milhouses or Marshburns got together?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: Now, may I ask you if you can think back to the very first occasion that stands out in your mind when you met the President?

COMROE: I never met him. I remember him in high school, and he was on the debating team, and he debated with Marilee Mitchell, or whether they debated against each other, I don't remember, but I know they were together on the debating team.

ARENA: Just to be sure, did you ever attend any of the same classes?

COMROE: No, I didn't.

ARENA: How about some common school get-togethers, such as assemblies or maybe eating in the cafeteria? Do you

recall being thrown into situations like that where, even though you were not in the same year, you might have come together?

COMROE: No, I just saw him when we were walking around.

ARENA: And you knew who he was when you did see him.

COMROE: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Did you know him to talk to, in the sense that you would say, "Hi, Richard," if you were walking in front of him?

COMROE: No. I was very shy, so I didn't talk to people I didn't know. The only time I remember talking to him was when we were in the alley down here and he was coming down and I was coming up and we said, "Hello."

ARENA: And about when was that? Was that when he was practicing law? And when you say the alley down here, you're talking about the Bank of America alley?

COMROE: Yes. I think he was a congressman.

ARENA: I see. He entered politics, of course, and became a congressman in 1947. He campaigned in '46, so it was around that period after World War II, you believe?

COMROE: Well, I thought it was just before.

ARENA: It would have been after the war.

COMROE: In 1940.

ARENA: In 1940 he would have been a lawyer and he would have been around the alley. His law office was in this building.

COMROE: When was he a congressman?

ARENA: Congressman, he ran or campaigned in '46, and was sworn in in '47.

COMROE: I thought he was a congressman, so it would be after the war that I saw him down there.

ARENA: Oh, yes. Well, then, that is what the case would be. And that was just "Hello," or "Hi, Richard"?

COMROE: No, we just said "Hello."



ARENA: Do you recall, though, what he looked like, what type of a person. . . . I realize it's kind of difficult, but looking at him from a distance and not as one who grew up with the family and knew members of the family, what impressions do you have of him, even though . . .

COMROE: He was a nice-looking boy.

ARENA: Was he neat, we'll say, when you knew him in high school?

COMROE: Yes, he was very well-dressed.

ARENA: Did you have the impression that he was a kind of important young man, or important student on the campus? This would be the high school period.

COMROE: Well, only that the debating team was important.

ARENA: You knew of him on the high school level because of the debates, as well as on the college level?

COMROE: Well, I don't remember him in college.

ARENA: Do you recall his running for office? I believe you would have been a senior and he would have been a junior, and he ran against a student by the name of John Logue. Do you recall anything about that high school election?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: Now, although you didn't know him to talk to, when do you recall coming into contact with him before this congressman period?

COMROE: Just at high school.

ARENA: He graduated from East Whittier Elementary School.

COMROE: Did he?

ARENA: Oh, yes, and he had such teachers--and I've had the pleasure of interviewing them--as Miss [H. Esther] Williams, Miss [Edith] Jessup then, but now she is married, a widow, Mrs. Comfort; but there was a Miss Jessup who taught him.

COMROE: I knew her.

ARENA: So he definitely attended there and graduated there.

COMROE: I thought he went to Lowell.

ARENA: No, that would be his brothers; for example, Harold [Samuel Nixon]. No, I think Harold also went to East Whittier. I beg your pardon. It was Edward [Calvert Nixon], the youngest brother of the President, who attended the Lowell School District. Let me say this: He does not stand out in your mind at East Whittier Elementary School?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: What was your graduating year there? If it's of any help, his graduating year would have been June of '26.

COMROE: It could have been '25.

ARENA: A year ahead, again, yes.

COMROE: I was a classmate of Harriet Haisman, née Harriett Aiken.

ARENA: Oh, yes, that's right, and she was a year ahead of him. Do you recall any association with him regarding his acting? He appeared in some Whittier Community Players productions, and I wonder if you ever attended any?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: Do you recall that there was such a group in this period, the thirties, when he was appearing in the plays? Were you still living in Whittier? You were in high school, so you would have been living here, yes.

COMROE: I don't remember. Harriett played in some plays. Did she play with him?

ARENA: Frankly, I don't recall that coming up in the interview. One of the plays, if it rings a bell in your mind, was "The Dark Tower." But I don't want to belabor the point. Now how about the law practice? Any contact with him in that regard?

COMROE: No, I just knew he was a lawyer.

ARENA: To what extent do you recall the President's immediate parents? I know we touched on this, and I'd like to go into it now more in detail. Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon--what do you recall about him?

COMROE: Well, I didn't go to the store very much. I just remember my aunt talking about him.

ARENA: What kind of a reputation did he have through your aunt? Did he seem to be a man who was hard to get along with, a man with a temper?

COMROE: I don't know.

ARENA: May I ask if you think your aunt ever had any arguments with him?

COMROE: No, I wouldn't know that.

ARENA: There is the idea that he would argue politics. I'm just wondering if maybe your aunt had some vivid recollections about these political arguments.

COMROE: I don't know.

ARENA: May I ask you, from the standpoint of personal associations and recollections, what do you recall about the President's mother, Mrs. Hannah Nixon, at any period that you've known her? For example, even after you joined the Friends church, did you have any contact with her that way?

COMROE: No. Didn't they go to the East Whittier Friends Church?

ARENA: Regularly she did, but she may have attended such things as the Yearly Meeting at the First Friends Church, possibly.

COMROE: I didn't attend any.

ARENA: Well, aside from the contact of belonging to the same church, was there ever any contact through other means, common organizations, the Women's Club, or anything like that? Possibly working with some charitable organizations like the Red Cross?

COMROE: No. Only Ollie came to the circle and talked about their trip to Africa.

ARENA: From the standpoint of Mrs. Marshburn, Ollie, being a public speaker, even though this may have been a small or ordinary size audience, what impressions do you have of her as a public speaker, Mrs. Marshburn?

COMROE: She was very good. And also her husband came; they came to our Sunday school class and told about Korea one year, and that was very interesting.

ARENA: Do you think that the interest in missionary activity of Mrs. Marshburn. . . . Did it occur to you that this was shared by other relatives of the President? I'm thinking in particular of his mother. Did that ever strike you?

COMROE: No, because I didn't know her. I know sort of how she looked.

ARENA: But there was no direct contact at all.

COMROE: No.

ARENA: Do you recall, through your association with Mrs. Marshburn, that the President's mother hoped that the President as a youngster, would grow up some day and do missionary work himself? And my reason for saying that is that the President states this in his book Six Crises, in which he has some occasional biographical data, and that is one of the points. He mentions the fact that his mother hoped that he would some day be a missionary in Central America. I was wondering if maybe Mrs. Marshburn may have brought that up, or if you heard that in any connection?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: May I ask you if you've had any contact with the President's wife, Mrs. Richard Nixon, or Patricia Ryan, her maiden name?

COMROE: No. Another friend who taught at Whittier High School did.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask her name?

COMROE: Mildred Pullen.

ARENA: Is that a Mrs.?

COMROE: Yes. She lives at the William Penn Hotel now.

ARENA: Would you have any recollections of some key people who were, according to the President himself, an influence on his education? I'm thinking in particular of his history teacher and later president of Whittier College, Dr. Paul S. Smith. Do you have any recollections of him as a teacher, yourself?

COMROE: Yes.

ARENA: How would you describe him?

COMROE: Oh, he was very interesting.

ARENA: Do you recall that he made history interesting for you?

COMROE: Yes. Well, I don't know whether I was in his history class, perhaps some other class.

ARENA: Maybe a course in government?

COMROE: I just don't remember, but I did have him. I know he came in; or whether he substituted for somebody, I don't know.

ARENA: How about Professor Albert Upton?

COMROE: I didn't have any class with him, but I knew him. He was a colorful person.

ARENA: In what respects? How would you define colorful in this instance?

COMROE: Well, he had this little dog, and his movements were brisk, and things like that.

ARENA: How about Chief Wallace J. Newman, from a girl's point of view? Evidently many of the male students remembered him. The President has acknowledged him from time to time. What do you, as a girl, recall about the Chief?

COMROE: Well, he did a very good job. I don't remember if I ever talked to him. The last time I saw him was at Ray Johns' funeral.

ARENA: Just to be sure, this Johns would not be a St. Johns?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: On that question, did you ever have any contact with Mrs. Adela Rogers St. Johns, who lived for a brief period in Whittier?

COMROE: Well, her daughter went to a camp I went to. It was her daughter that was up at camp with us. She was an interesting person.

ARENA: The daughter herself. You don't recall meeting Mrs. St. Johns herself?

COMROE: No, I didn't. I knew she lived out there, and the St. Johns building, and so forth.

ARENA: As this interview comes to a close, is there any point that I have not raised or any question that I've not raised that you would like to raise at this time, yourself?

COMROE: No.

ARENA: Mrs. Comroe, then may I thank you very sincerely for taking the trouble to grant us this interview, and for answering all of my questions so fully. Thank you very much.