



5-16-1972

J. Curtis Counts (May 16, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. J. CURTIS COUNTS

May 16, 1972
Washington, D. C.

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. J. Curtis Counts, Director, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, in the Labor Building in Washington, D. C. Today's date is May 16, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Counts, may I begin by merely asking you to give a brief summary of your own background and career. For example, where and when were you born?

COUNTS: I was born in Goldfield, Colorado, on August 2, 1915. Goldfield was a mining town between Cripple Creek and Anaconda, and since has disappeared from the map.

ARENA: Did it disappear as a mere ghost town or was it flooded, as happens in some cases?

COUNTS: No, it disappeared as a ghost town. Cripple Creek, as you know, is still very well known and there still are mining activities. My father at that time was a miner and I lived in Colorado as an infant and then moved to California.

ARENA: Would you mind giving a brief summary of your formal education and your career to date.

COUNTS: Yes, I was educated in the public schools of California. I attended the University of California at Los Angeles. I received my bachelor's degree from the university in 1937. I did graduate work following that at the University of Southern California. I then went to work for the Douglas Aircraft

Company, really as a port in a storm. The draft had come along. I had been working my way through school as an estimator in a plumbing and heating supply house. Everything in the way of supplies were really commandeered by the extensive effort in building military bases and that sort of thing.

I went to work for the Douglas [Aircraft] Company in 1940, immediately prior to the war. I was with them during the war, and as part of their executive training and development program I was assigned to a foreign project, which was the only time in the history of the United States, to my knowledge, that a civilian project was operated during a period of war. We had the responsibility of maintaining allied aircraft in Gura, Eritrea and Abadan, Iraq. Those were our major bases. So, throughout World War II, I had the responsibility from the personnel standpoint of that operation. And following that I went into the corporate offices of the Douglas Company as a personnel administrator and progressed variously through the organization until I became Vice President of Employee Relations, where I remain^{ed} until the merger of the Douglas Company and the McDonnell Company, and for approximately two and a half years thereafter, at which time I accepted the appointment of President Nixon to be Director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. I think the significant thing about the appointment is that my selection was made by George Shultz, without the knowledge, at least to my information, of the President. And the fact that I did know the President and had a personal relationship with him came as a great surprise to Shultz, because we had never discussed it at all in any of our talks concerning the appointment.

ARENA: Was Mr. Shultz your predecessor?

COUNTS: No, George Shultz was the individual selected by the President to be the Secretary of Labor and, although this is an independent agency, we work very closely with labor and with commerce, and George apparently had the assignment of coming up with candidates for this particular position.

ARENA: You did mention coming to California from Colorado, when was that, Mr. Counts?

COUNTS: That was in 1917. I was two years old. My father had an individual friend by the name of Arvid Gilstrom, who was a very close friend who had come to Hollywood [California] and become a motion picture director and quite a successful one. As a result of that my father came to California and worked in the motion picture studios as a set builder and mill man and that sort of thing.

ARENA: Before you met the President personally and as you were growing up in Los Angeles [California], were you aware of the community of Whittier [California] and, if so, what impressions do you have of it?

COUNTS: Well, I was aware of the community because I was very much interested in athletics. I played baseball and was a fairly good ball player, and as a part of that experience I was playing ball in and around the various communities in Southern California, not in interscholastic leagues but in semi-professional leagues. I also became acutely aware of Whittier when [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon was teaching high school in Whittier and when, at her invitation, I was asked to address the Whittier High School student body at their athletic awards assembly.

ARENA: In what connection was that? In other words, your giving a speech in connection possibly with a Career Day or along those lines?

COUNTS: In connection with athletic awards and it was the type of speech that talked to the young people about the values of competition, the values of participation in athletics, that type of thing.

ARENA: Do you mind saying why she chose you?

COUNTS: Well, I suspect she chose me because I had had a very successful athletic career in baseball at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], was captain of the UCLA baseball team. She had come to know me as a result of her very close association with my wife, Virginia [Counts]. They attended the university together and were very close personal friends.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you recall that UCLA played Whittier, speaking of baseball?

COUNTS: No, we did not play Whittier in baseball at that time. In those days, however, the football team played Whittier and even as far back as then, UCLA was developing into a football power, at least in comparison with schools like Whittier, and they used to have double headers, like Whittier and Pomona and that sort of thing.

ARENA: As you know the President is interested in sports, especially football, in your meeting with him, in your association with him in this period when you knew Pat Nixon and your being with the President, what do you recall of the subject of sports between you and the President?

COUNTS: Well, he has always been tremendously interested in athletic activity--football, baseball, basketball, track or what have you. He is a genuine sports enthusiast, and I think probably the most significant thing about our relationship in the field of sports is that the first time I met the President

was at the Duke-Southern California Rose Bowl Game and this, I believe, was 1936 or 1937, and he and Pat were attending that football game, and I was with Virginia. At that time neither of us was married and we met at the football game, and following the football game we had an opportunity to become acquainted. We then had a very close relationship in terms of young couples running around together, if that's an apt expression. And during those periods and that time we very often discussed sporting events and batting averages and possibilities of winning championships and that sort of thing. The President was very perceptive, of very keen mind, and totally interested in sports.

ARENA: As you know, the President enjoyed playing football and possibly would have preferred being in the game rather than on the bench. But his coach was Chief [Wallace J.] Newman. Did you ever have the opportunity of meeting the Chief at any time?

COUNTS: I had the opportunity of meeting him, but not in connection with the President at all, or as a result of that relationship. I knew him and had the opportunity of meeting him through [William] Bill Spaulding, who was the UCLA football coach and who was a very close personal friend of mine.

ARENA: Would he be any relation of Richard Spaulding, a classmate of the President?

COUNTS: No, not at all. He was out of the midwest. He had a coaching career then. He came to California. He is deceased now and his son resides in Fresno [California]. He is also William Spaulding.

ARENA: Mr. Counts, of the various double dates that come to mind involving you and the President and his wife, Pat Nixon, would you mind recounting any of the incidents you do recall.

COUNTS: Well, there were several. I think the one that stands out most vividly in my mind is the trip that the four of us took together immediately following the President's first run for Congress--following the primary of his first run for Congress. At that time he was running against Jerry Voorhis who was the incumbent and a well-respected individual. The President received the Republican nomination, but in terms of votes cast he was several thousand behind Voorhis. In order to win, he had the task of coming up with a lot more votes and picking up a lot of independent and Democrat votes. We took this vacation and drove from Whittier on up into Victoria and Vancouver, Canada, and during that period of time it was a wonderful time to note some of his attributes that are still very evident. He is

a very intense person. He concentrates totally. His discussions, his attitudes and all involvements during this period of hours together, in driving and in constant association had to do with planning and developing and projecting the means of swinging this election successfully to his favor. It took him two or three days to unwind, but I think the evidence of his determination was shown then and, so very often, I think it's unfortunate that this determination, this seriousness of purpose and really this complete concentration are mistaken by people who don't know and understand him. He is a very warm person. He is an individual that has a good sense of humor and if you know him you can recognize it. On that trip we had an awful lot of fun, we relaxed and did many things. I don't think they are the kind of things we need to include in this sort of thing. But, for example, we went to the races, wined and dined in Canada at the Vancouver Hotel--did all of the things that any tourist would do.

Other things that I think were very important is that we used to go to Whittier and visit with the group that were running around together. We had these parties and everybody had lots of fun. Dick played the piano and we sang. We discussed, we argued. We did everything that any young couple would do today. We had lots of those opportunities, and because Virginia and I came from Los Angeles to Whittier--I lived in Hollywood and she lived in the Silver Lake area of Los Angeles--we from time to time were house guests of the Nixon seniors [Mr. and Mrs. Francis Anthony Nixon], and we had I think a very warm association.

ARENA: Knowing the President and Mrs. Nixon as you did before his entry into politics and knowing him as you do today, historians I think would never forgive me if I didn't ask you, has he changed, from the standpoint of, say, if you do go on vacation with him now, if you do take trips either short or long, to what extent--again without going into politics per se--has the job changed his personality from your own observations?

COUNTS: I think one of the most heartwarming things from my standpoint is that he is an individual that has NOT changed in his attitudes or friendship or relationship with his friends. Certainly, for example, one of the things that he does today that he did twenty-five, thirty years ago, is that he is appreciative of performance and he would write individuals such as myself, if there was an accomplishment that came to his attention, and congratulate them. If you got promoted, he would write and tell you how pleased he was. If somebody died in the family, like the mother or father of any of the group that we were running around with, he would write a letter that was really tremendous, and some of these things, I think, if you could pick up these letters, it would be really great. He does that today.

Now in terms of taking vacations and associations, certainly with his schedule that is an impossibility, but Virginia and I,

nevertheless, have been invited and have had the opportunity to share a weekend--both he and Pat, the four of us--at Camp David, and certainly every attribute that was present in our friendship in the early forties, late thirties, was evidenced there. He is a very warm human individual and I think a lot of the things, for example, the work that I'm in is a very difficult, time consuming, a demanding pressure-packed operation. It's a seven-day-a-week, 24-hour-a-day type of thing. He understands that, and he understands it not because I've told him so or other people have, but because in his experience he's had an exposure to it, and these are things that are really remarkable about the person because he really has background in terms of knowledge and experience. I think this sense of understanding creates a tremendous respect for him by anyone who has to do with him or is exposed to him.

ARENA: You touch on the idea of the President's interest in politics, which I am not going to go into per se, other than trying to gain your observations from the pre-political man and the interest and motivation looking back. Knowing him as you do today, and knowing his family as you do--you mention meeting with his parents--what do you recall that indicated at that time that he would want to with his law career go into politics, say, rather than into private practice where obviously he would have made more money? What is there from the standpoint of his personality that you recall, and if you can think of specific instances, that would indicate his motivation for choosing a political rather than a private professional career?

COUNTS: I think there were several factors, whether or not these were things that made him want to do it, I wouldn't say; but number one, he was an individual that by training, by his very own desire was one that wasn't about to quit until he got his task accomplished. He was going to be a success. When he was the City Attorney for Whittier he was 100 per cent pursuing that responsibility, with the idea of being the best City Attorney that Whittier or any other city had. And that was a step toward getting up the career ladder that he had trained himself for. Another talent that he had that I think fits in with the political thing was that he was a debater, he was an individual that could speak forcefully, he had a great command of words.

ARENA: If you don't mind my interrupting while you are on that point, the debating part of his life. Do you recall--excuse me for being so blunt--that he was obnoxious? Did he look for arguments when he was among friends or away, we'll say, from the debating situation, with you or with others?

COUNTS: No, he was not the type of individual who was obnoxious in any way, shape or form. He was not a know-it-all type of individual. He would explore objectively your

argument and your ideas and point out the fallacies and would make whatever arguments he needed to make his point. Not that our discussions were debates but there were discussions in which there were differences of opinion. For example, as to the merits of two competing teams he would always be very objective and he was not obnoxious, but he certainly could organize his thoughts and line up his points and deliver them effectively, and he had that talent. I think that when he was selected to be the candidate in the congressional district in which he resided that the same determination, the same attribute of being a winner and the best Congressman in Congress came right to the front. It was no different, to my way of thinking, than his whole makeup showed and was evident then. This Voorhis trip, he was going to win. He worked very, very hard to convince the independent voters and others who had not voted for him in the primary that he was the candidate. And then when he got into Congress, he sought to be the key figure on the committees to which he was appointed. And I know much has been written about his run for Senate and that sort of thing, but I think this dedication of purpose, this desire to be the best is something, plus the thing to my mind that has made it possible is his intelligence. He has the greatest power of concentration of any person I have ever seen.

ARENA: Would you venture a guess as to his method of training himself to concentrate, or is this something that you knew that he had all along.

COUNTS: No, I think this. In my opinion he had one of the qualities I think is so important and we don't have enough of, he had discipline. He was a person who had been taught by his parents that his obligations had to be carried through. The household chores, the work in the store, the attention to his studies and all, these were things that had to be given priority and placed first, and this kind of training I think gave him an organized responsible approach to whatever he was doing. His talents, the training he received, the education he received certainly were things that he developed to their fullest extent.

ARENA: There are two historical points I would like to clear up, if you can help me. One, you may recall that the President in a speech recently in Canada mentioned that a couple was with him on this trip to Canada. I was wondering if you know of that speech, in which he referred to his secretary, and he did not mention her by name but it was probably Mrs. [Evlyn] Dorn. His secretary told him how delightful a trip to Canada would be, and in the formal remarks in his speech he mentioned that his secretary was Canadian born, and he also said that he made this trip with another couple, and would that be you?

COUNTS: Well, I would not think it would have been us because the trip we made was up close to California to Victoria and over to Vancouver and his trip to Canada this time . . .

ARENA: Oh, excuse me, it wasn't this time, but a much earlier trip.

COUNTS: Oh, then it must have been us because I know of no other couple, and his saying this--that gives you an idea of the man's recollection.

ARENA: His secretary was overwhelmed by his reference to her bringing that up. The other point from the standpoint of . . .

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ARENA: I will repeat the question, in case there is any doubt. What do you have in the way of papers and correspondence that refer over the years to your contact and association with President Nixon, and to the best of your knowledge where are they located?

COUNTS: I suspect that we have several mementos that are connected with that association and very possibly some letters, papers that pertain to that relationship. Unfortunately, we are displaced from our residence which is still in Los Angeles. We have our home there and I suspect that whatever information we have is in our home in Los Angeles. But here again I will ask my wife. She can tell you much better about that than I can. I know that I did have in my office some papers that involved him.

ARENA: Mr. Counts, I want to thank you very much for giving your time and answering all my questions so frankly and fully, and I know I relay the gratitude of all historians for this information. Thank you very much.

COUNTS: Thank you.