



9-10-1972

Virginia Counts (September 10, 1972)

Evlyn Dorn
Whittier College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://poetcommons.whittier.edu/nixon>

Recommended Citation

Dorn, E. (1972). Virginia Counts (September 10, 1972). Retrieved from <https://poetcommons.whittier.edu/nixon/125>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Projects at Poet Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Richard Nixon Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Poet Commons. For more information, please contact library@whittier.edu.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MRS. VIRGINIA COUNTS

September 10, 1972
Newport Beach, California

By Mrs. Evlyn Dorn

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

DORN: This is an interview with Virginia Counts, who is Mrs. J. Curtis Counts of Washington, D.C., on September 10, 1972. This interview is being made at the home of F. Donald Nixon at Newport Beach, California, Evlyn Dorn interviewing. Virginia, let's begin by your telling me where and when you were born and a brief resume of your education and your career.

COUNTS: I was born in Los Angeles, California, December 13, 1913. I lived pretty much in the old city; went to grammar school at Tenth Street Elementary and then on to Alisandro Street School. From there I went directly to high school, (in those days we didn't have an intermediate school) Belmont High School, and from there I went to USC [University of Southern California]. I started out to be a dentist, took my pre-dental and a year of dental school. Then came the depression and I didn't have the funds to go on, so I took a part-time position with one of the professors who taught at the dental school, whereby I could work in the afternoons and get a full schedule in liberal arts, so I transferred over to liberal arts, and it was, of course, at this time that I met Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon.

DORN: Virginia, while attending USC I understand that you became a close friend of our First Lady, Pat Nixon. Please give me some of the details of your first meeting with her. What was your first impression of Mrs. Nixon?

COUNTS: Well, I was first impressed by her kindness to me. We had an education class together. I remember we didn't have, either of us, much money then, but I one day said, "Gee, I sure wish I had a new lipstick," and the next day at school she brought a new lipstick to me. She was like that.

DORN: Were you in any of her classes, at all? Did you ever see her in class? For instance, do you know anything about her study habits? Did you consider her particularly brilliant, or was she just a hard worker?

COUNTS: She was a hard worker, but she also was very smart.

DORN: And you did have some classes with her?

COUNTS: Yes, we had classes together.

DORN: Did you ever actually share any living accommodations together?

COUNTS: Well, yes we did, in this respect: I lived off campus at home with my parents, which was a little ways away, and Pat lived in a little bungalow court, which was right across the street from the Coliseum on Menlo Avenue, [Los Angeles, California] since destroyed for a parking area. So this was much more convenient to the campus, and I stayed with her many, many times. She did share the bungalow with her two brothers.

DORN: Were they in school with her at the same time?

COUNTS: No. Well, one, Bill [William G. Ryan], was working at the studios, and I can't recall where Tom [Thomas S. Ryan] was working.

DORN: But he was not actually in school.

COUNTS: He was not actually in school.

DORN: Did you and Pat ever attend any social affairs together?

COUNTS: Oh, yes. Mostly, at that point, we went to the sporting events. We liked the basketball games and the football games. And we went to parties. We didn't go out together a lot on dates.

DORN: You didn't actually double date together, while you were in school, I mean?

COUNTS: Yes we did. We did double date on occasion.

DORN: When you and Mrs. Nixon were students at USC, did you or Mrs. Nixon have jobs to help you through school, as so many students did?

COUNTS: Oh, yes. As I said, I was working afternoons for a dentist, and Pat was working for Dr. [Florence] Watts who, I believe, was head of the Education Department. She did office work for her, in her office. And then we would take special jobs. As I said, we liked the sporting events at school and so we were quite friendly with many of the athletes, and THEY usually got first call for the special jobs. And they would say, "Hi, Virginia, there's a call in for a movie job." So we would rush down to the employment office so that we'd be the first there to get the call, and we loved those particular jobs. They paid well.

DORN: Didn't you and Pat go out on some sort of a cosmetic inquiry or something to do with hair grooming or hair preparation?

COUNTS: Yes, that was another one of these short-term jobs that we got through the employment office at school.

DORN: How did you work that? Did you go from house to house?

COUNTS: No. It seems that there was a lawsuit. We never did get called into court or anything, but it seems as though there was a lawsuit going on. One firm had a certain kind of a hair treatment. It was quite expensive; it was used in the better shops. Then another company came out with a product that they packaged to look very much like the same product, so we would have to go make an appointment--the two of us would go together--make an appointment at a beauty parlor. The company had given us the name of various shops. And we'd go in and have our hair done. Now one would have their hair done, and they'd ask for this treatment.

DORN: Unknown to the beauty parlor?

COUNTS: Oh, that's right, they didn't know. And the other one would just sort of play like they were doing homework, or something, and we were to note which bottles were actually being used, whether it was the real product or the other one. We went from Beverly Hills [California] to Long Beach [California] getting our hair done. Since a really good operator could tell if you had recently had this hair treatment, after we'd get all beautiful we'd have to go home and wash it all out. We'd style our own hair, then, and get ready for the next job. We'd take turns having our hair done. It was lots of fun.

DORN: It was sort of like detective work, wasn't it?

- COUNTS: Right. We were never actually, as I said, called in to testify. I don't know if there ever was a suit or not. We never followed it through.
- DORN: Well, now, after graduation, did you and Mrs. Nixon continue your friendship--I'm sure you did--and how did you meet the President?
- COUNTS: We did continue our friendship, even though she went out to Whittier to teach school and I remained working for a dentist, by this time full time. We met at the Duke-USC football game. I'm trying to think what year it was-- it must have been about 1939. Anyway, it was at the Rose Bowl football game that we met the President.
- DORN: And were you with Mr. [J. Curtis] Counts?
- COUNTS: I was with Mr. Counts.
- DORN: And Pat was with Dick?
- COUNTS: We double-dated, so to speak, and after the game we came over to my home and had a little supper party there.
- DORN: What was your first impression of the President the first time you saw him?
- COUNTS: I guess maybe I was impressed by his wit. He was fun to be with.
- DORN: I suppose that you as young people, the four of you, shared social activities together. Could you tell me what Mr. Nixon's interests might have been particularly, other than the football game that you attended? Did you attend dances or parties?
- COUNTS: Mostly home parties. We loved just to go to different homes. We had a little group, and we would go for potluck suppers. We'd each bring something. We also loved the travel dinners, as we called them.
- DORN: Oh, yes, progressive dinners.
- COUNTS: We'd go from home to home.
- DORN: Did you come out to Whittier [California] a good deal?
- COUNTS: Oh, yes. And we'd play games. We liked to play, oh, charades, or the President would play the piano and we'd sing, just good old times.

DORN: When were you and Mr. Counts married?

COUNTS: We were married October 10, 1940.

DORN: Were the President and Mrs. Nixon in attendance at your wedding?

COUNTS: Yes, they were.

DORN: Were they part of your wedding party?

COUNTS: They were part of our wedding, Mrs. Nixon being a bridesmaid, and the President one of our ushers.

DORN: You had become pretty well acquainted, hadn't you? Do you recall the year that the Nixons were married?

COUNTS: Oh, yes, because it was June of the same year that we were married [1940].

DORN: Did you attend their wedding?

COUNTS: Yes, we did.

DORN: And where was it?

COUNTS: At the Mission Inn, Riverside [California].

DORN: Were you part of that wedding party, or just guests?

COUNTS: Actually, we were guests. It was quite a small wedding. There were just a few guests, mostly family.

DORN: Do you remember anything significant during the days that Mr. Nixon and Mrs. Nixon and you and Mr. Counts were together that may have given an inkling that Mr. Nixon might be interested in entering politics? In other words, how did you become aware of Mr. Nixon's decision to run for Congress? Of course, there was an interim there.

COUNTS: Yes. We were a little separated during the time he was in the service.

DORN: Yes.

COUNTS: And they moved to San Francisco [California]. I think perhaps it was in San Francisco when we visited them in their little apartment there after he had come back. I'm not quite certain whether he was actually out of the service or not at that point, and she was working

for the Office of Price Administration. I think then there was just a little bit of discussion about what to do in the future.

DORN: Now, Virginia, I understand that between the primaries and the election date, that the four of you took an automobile trip together. Would you tell me about that?

COUNTS: Right. It was right after the primary when Mr. Nixon opposed Jerry Voorhis. Let me go back just a little bit, because there were two reasons, I guess, why we went up to British Columbia [Canada]. First, Pat and another girl friend, Margaret [Theriault], and I had made a trip together the year before we were married. The three of us had a wonderful time, and we thought that would be just a great trip for us to take also. Secondly, Mrs. Hannah Nixon thought that her son seemed very tired, and she thought it would be a great idea, too, for him just to get away and relax, because he was a very intense person, and he was so wrapped up in that campaign and worked so hard that he needed some relaxation. So because of the two encouragements, I guess, we did take that trip. We had a lot of fun. He was wrapped up, however, in that campaign. I think it took two days before he really could relax.

DORN: I was going to ask you if he was relaxed at all.

COUNTS: He was after that, but it did take awhile. And then, even so, we were in--oh, I can't recall the name of the little town, where you take the ferry boat across . . .

DORN: . . . to Victoria [British Columbia]--Port Angeles [Washington]?

COUNTS: Port Angeles. When we were there we spent the evening and then the next day he wanted to stay in the room and work. And he worked and the three of us, then, went to see one of the factories where they make the plywood. So we took a tour and he was working.

DORN: That was before you got into Victoria, right?

COUNTS: Yes.

DORN: Then, from Victoria you must have gone back to Vancouver, [British Columbia], did you?

COUNTS: Yes.

DORN: And then down to Seattle [Washington], because I had an interview here recently with Mr. Harold Smith of the Seattle Times, and he has some pictures of you and Curtis and Dick and Pat, and I think he had given you a tour of Seattle.

COUNTS: Right. He was very kind, took us out and showed us the lake [Lake Washington], and we had a VERY nice time.

DORN: Since moving to Washington [D.C.], you and your husband have renewed your good friendship with the Nixons, and I know that you have been guests at the White House and you have spent a weekend at Camp David [Maryland]. How do you feel about the President's attitude toward you now, as compared with when you were just four young people having fun together? Do you notice any change in him?

COUNTS: Well, not really, because even in the early days he was always thinking. He was fun and, as I said, I liked his wit, and he still has that. But in the background, he's just always thinking.

DORN: A lot of people have said, or a lot of the press have said, that he's aloof and a loner and all of that. Do you feel this way about him?

COUNTS: No, I don't at all. In fact, well, let me tell you what a warm person he was at Camp David. They had their dog up there, and I thought it was really kind of cute. But it was just like the old days, just like at home. We had steak for dinner one evening and there were a few little scraps left on the plate. Manolo [Sanchez] was there. The President asked Manolo if he would come and get the scraps and cut them up and bring them back to the table. So he sat with King on one side . . .

DORN: This is King Timahoe?

COUNTS: Right, but I call him King, which was the name of the Red Setter dog he had in Whittier.

DORN: Yes.

COUNTS: And here he was, sitting at the table while we're having dessert, feeding King.

DORN: Yes. I think one of the hardest things that he'd had to contend with since he went to Washington was that he has been accused of being an insincere person. Do you feel this way about him, at all?

COUNTS: No, not at all. And one thing, I will say this about him, to this day--and he ALWAYS has done this--if my husband has done a job well I know he'll receive a little note in the mail, just wonderful the way he will remember that. And then too, during the second [Dwight David] Eisenhower Inaugural I was in an automobile accident and wasn't able to attend, and he was just so thoughtful and kind, and sent me all

the programs and one of the inaugural medals, all the things that I missed from not being there, he sent those to me.

DORN: I remember that. I remember we missed you so. I think that you and Curt gave Larry [Lawrence M. Dorn] and me a couple of tickets that you had. Curt had sent them out to us. Virginia, when the President was a young lawyer in Whittier, did you meet his parents?

COUNTS: Oh, yes.

DORN: What was your impression of Hannah [Milhous Nixon] and [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon?

COUNTS: Oh, they were very nice, and just really the kindest people. And I'll never forget the first time I ever met them. We had been out to one of our little group parties--this was before we were married--and a terrible rain storm came up, just a really bad storm. So they thought that we shouldn't go home, that we should stay over with them. So the President and his brother Don [Francis Donald Nixon] said, "Oh, you must come to the house. Our folks won't care. We have lots of room." So I called my parents to make sure it was all right if I stayed. It was all right, so we stayed all night there. Well, Mrs. Hannah Nixon didn't know us at all. And the next morning she prepared the most beautiful breakfast, homemade waffles, sausage, eggs, and she was just so happy to have us there, just made us feel really at home.

DORN: She was a great lady. She was a fine person, and Mr. Frank Nixon, too. When you first met the parents, did you feel there was a particular difference between the two people? Mr. Frank Nixon has been referred to as being very short and perhaps a little cross, and Hannah was this warm, wonderful character. Did you notice that in your first meeting with them?

COUNTS: I don't think so. I don't have this recollection of him at all.

DORN: He was always very kind whenever I saw him. Now, when did you meet Don and [Edward Calvert] Ed Nixon, the brothers? I know you're very good friends.

COUNTS: Well, around that same time, I guess. Don was in this same little group that we used to exchange parties with. And of course, Ed was just a little boy, a very cute little boy.

DORN: Yes, a little skinny kid.

COUNTS: Yes, right.

DORN: Well, you've had a nice relationship with this family. I know that you're very close to Clara Jane [Nixon] and Don, and as I say, to the President and Pat, too. And it is a nice feeling to be this close to such a wonderful family.

COUNTS: Well, it is, and it's especially nice to know they haven't changed, and they do try to include you when appropriate in some of their social affairs. They are generous people.

DORN: Yes, they are. Can you think of anything else, Virginia, that you would like to add to this interview? Anything about your early schooldays with Pat, or your early meeting with the President? Does Curtis see the President quite often in his work in Washington?

COUNTS: On occasions, I would put it that way. I think perhaps we see them almost more socially, because of the way things are and the way things operate through the White House. The personal contact is usually someone below, that is, usually one of the White House aides.

DORN: Yes. And I presume you attended the weddings of the girls [Tricia and Julie Nixon].

COUNTS: Oh, yes, we did, both of them; in New York and at the White House.

DORN: Well, if you can't think of anything else, I'm going to thank you very much for this interview. It's very interesting, and I know that future historians will thank you for the time you've given us.

COUNTS: It's been a pleasure to visit with you.

DORN: Virginia, before we close here, can you recall any of the fun times that you people all had together, when you would go out in the evenings? Can you recall any of the incidents that might have happened?

COUNTS: Oh, well, first of all, one of the fun things that we used to do was ice skating. We had loads of fun. And that was one thing, I don't know why, but Dick just never could seem to quite get the hang of this, and he would be on the floor--on the ice, I should say--as much as on the skates, and we had loads of fun. There was a place in Hynes, California, at a rink there, and then later on we used to go to the Pan Pacific [Auditorium].

But one time, I remember, we were at the senior Nixon's home before we all went out. We were going to have a daring evening and try a new night club in town, that really was just dancing

and dinner, this place called Topsy's. Well, in the closet at the Nixon home there was an old raccoon coat, a typical old college-day raccoon coat.

DORN: Was this at the home of his parents?

COUNTS: At the home of his parents. So, Dick dared my husband to wear this out, which he did, and we all had a lot of laughs about it. Of course, everyone was shocked when we walked in. [Laughter]

DORN: We interviewed Margaret Theriault--she was Margaret O'Grady--just recently and she recalled Alyce Koch. Now they were all part of the group. How about the [Jack A.] Drowns, were they part of your group?

COUNTS: No, actually the Drowns came in just a little bit later. It was Margaret Theriault who introduced Pat to Helene Drown, who was a new teacher at Whittier [High School]. Margaret was leaving Whittier High School and Pat was still there, and she introduced the two of them. We've been a friend of Margaret's for many years.

DORN: We interviewed Jack [Drown] just the other day. We haven't yet gotten to Helene, but we do have an appointment with her. Well, you young people all had a lot of fun together in those days, didn't you?

COUNTS: It was fun, and we had to make our own fun.

DORN: Yes, meeting in each other's homes.

COUNTS: Dick played the piano. He seemed to be kind of the one telling the stories.

DORN: How did you feel about Pat being the wife of a young lawyer? Knowing her in school as you did, did you feel that her role as the wife of a young lawyer was a good one for Pat?

COUNTS: Well, at first--I don't know how to word this, exactly--in school she was not the real social type, because of working and concentrating on her studies. She didn't have the freedom to get out and do things like this.

DORN: She had lost both of her parents, hadn't she?

COUNTS: Right. So, at first I thought this might be a little difficult role for her, because she would have to be out meeting the public, and have to become a little bit more of an extrovert, but she certainly took over. She's tremendous.

- DORN: Yes, she's doing a beautiful job of it now, and the whole country loves her.
- COUNTS: She always had a way about her, too. She dressed very simply, but she always had a way of just adding a belt or tying a little scarf, or something, to make an outfit look really sharp.
- DORN: I've heard other people say that. Didn't she go to work in a hospital in New York one time? Was that during her school years?
- COUNTS: That happened before I met her.
- DORN: I see.
- COUNTS: Apparently, not much before that. She had an aunt, I believe, who was one of the nurses in the hospital. But that really occurred before I met her.
- DORN: Virginia, when you have visited the White House, is it difficult for you to address the President? Do you almost want to say, "Hello, Dick," or how do you manage this?
- COUNTS: Well, it is hard. I do want to say, "Dick," but there's something about that office that is so awesome that it's becoming more natural to say, "Mr. President." But I recall the first time I went to the White House. It was when Pat had her birthday party when he first came into the White House. It was in March . . .
- DORN: . . . 1969.
- COUNTS: Right. And I was preparing myself to go through the receiving line, because I knew I was going to have to say, "How do you do, Mr. President?" And so I kept saying to myself, through the line, "Now, you mustn't say, 'Dick,' you have to say, 'Mr. President.'" So when I got up there, what I said was, "It's really great to call you 'Mr. President,' after all these years, Dick!" [Laughter] But Dick just reached out and gave me a kiss, which just shocked me and everyone else.
- DORN: Oh, yes. And I'm sure he calls you Virginia.
- COUNTS: Yes. It was a little embarrassing, but it just came out. To me he still is a warm, friendly person.
- DORN: Sure. Virginia, do you have any correspondence with him, like handwritten correspondence, throughout the years?

COUNTS: I believe I may have a few things.

DORN: Of course, we're always thinking about the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, and so I hope that you will preserve these for posterity.

COUNTS: Well, I'll look. I'm certain that there are a few items relating to things of my husband that I might find.

DORN: I certainly thank you, Virginia. This is very interesting, and I appreciate your giving me this much time.

COUNTS: You're welcome.