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Lyman A. Dietrick (October 27, 1972)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. LYMAN A. DIETRICK

La Habra, California
October 27, 1972

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Lyman A. Dietrick, A., middle initial, stands for Abbott, of La Habra, California. We are in Whittier, California now, October 27, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Dietrick, may I begin by asking you, in the way of getting some background information on yourself, may I ask you where and when you were born?

DIETRICK: I was born in York, Nebraska, February 12, 1915.

ARENA: And would you give a brief resume of your educational background?

DIETRICK: You mean my whole education background?

ARENA: Right, in the way of whether you attended public schools or not and where, what state and if you went on through college and so forth.

DIETRICK: Well, let's see. I went through elementary school in Arizona and Brawley, California, down in Imperial Valley, and then I attended my second year of high school here at Whittier High School and then I went there three years.

ARENA: What was your graduating class?

DIETRICK: 1933, as a matter of fact I will be going to my fortieth soon. We're going to have a party. And then I went right on to Whittier College, entering in '33 and finishing in '37.

ARENA: And that means if you entered in '33, you were in Richard Nixon's senior year?

DIETRICK: Right.

ARENA: He graduated in '34, the spring of '34. Do you mind if I ask you what your major was at Whittier College?

DIETRICK: Elementary education, teaching.

ARENA: And your career since graduation and any subsequent education?

DIETRICK: Yes, I went on to the University of Southern California for my master's in education. And I have taken numerous courses since then, at one time approaching a doctor's degree at USC but I never quite made it.

ARENA: I was wondering about your actual experience in education. Has it been teaching, administration or both?

DIETRICK: Well, it has been both. I started out teaching in elementary school and did a little coaching in high school. That was all pre-war. And then I had four years in the service and then came out and got my administrative credentials and I was in administration for about eight years or so. Then I dropped out of that and went into a high school teaching situation where I have been ever since, teaching science.

ARENA: From the standpoint of coaching, had you been in sports at Whittier College?

DIETRICK: Very definitely. I may be one of the most involved people in sports at Whittier College, in the sense that I spent all my time in sports you might say.

ARENA: Were you possibly a member of the Orthogonian Fraternity which was Richard Nixon's also?

DIETRICK: Yes. I had a varsity letter up there for three sports for four years. In other words I was out all the time in sports.

ARENA: What are those sports?

DIETRICK: Track, basketball and football. I played all three.

ARENA: Then you also served under Chief [Wallace J.] Newman, as far as football was concerned?

DIETRICK: Very definitely. Not only did I serve but our family. Now my older brother who has now passed away--in fact he would be much better at this interview than I . . .

ARENA: Had he graduated from Whittier College?

DIETRICK: Right.

ARENA: What was his year?

DIETRICK: He graduated in 1933, one year before Dick I think. Should I refer to him as Dick or as Mr. Nixon?

ARENA: From the standpoint of history, we like to keep it formal and I ask the questions and refer to him as President Nixon.

DIETRICK: I think I'll stay with that too. [Laughter] But my older brother, he and President Nixon were very close friends. As a matter of fact, he was an usher at my brother's wedding and I was best man.

ARENA: What was your brother's full name?

DIETRICK: Lincoln Maurice Dietrick.

ARENA: And the name of the lady he married, her maiden name as well as married--if you remember her maiden name?

DIETRICK: Madelaine Walker.

ARENA: Do you recall the church where they were married and who was the minister?

DIETRICK: I can't recall the minister but the church was just one block down from the college.

ARENA: Would it be the Friends Church?

DIETRICK: No, not the Friends Church, on over a block.

ARENA: There is a First Methodist Church.

DIETRICK: Not the Methodist. It was the Episcopalian, I believe. There was . . .

ARENA: There is an Episcopalian not too far away.

DIETRICK: Yes, that was it.

ARENA: With very pronounced Spanish architecture style today.

DIETRICK: I don't know whether that church is still there or not.

ARENA: I think it may have been St. Matthias [Episcopal Church] as a matter of fact. It still may be St. Matthias. Was your brother also in sports as you?

DIETRICK: Yes.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if he had been in the Orthogonians?

DIETRICK: Yes, he was one of the original ones. Of course, President Nixon and Dean [Elwin] Triggs were the organizers of it and, of course, the reason I know about it is because my older brother and President Nixon were involved in this organization while we were living so closely with them.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, may I ask you the cause of your brother's death?

DIETRICK: He died of a heart attack about ten years ago.

ARENA: What is the first time you can recollect or say the first outstanding things that come to mind of your meeting President Nixon?

DIETRICK: Well, we had just moved to Whittier and this was about '29 and anybody who lived in those times knows how tough it was and we had moved to Whittier because my older brother was supposed to go to college and didn't have any job or anything, so we rented this service station from the Nixons, the Nixon service station and we moved into the back of it along with a couple of old truck houses out in back of their grocery store and we ran that service station for three years. And that's when I first met President Nixon and the rest of the family.

ARENA: I see. And that was the year 1929?

DIETRICK: '28 or '29 however that comes out. It might be '28.

ARENA: Looking at that picture which you showed me, I just wanted to ask some questions. First of all, do you mind if a copy could be made? You could keep it and make it and send us the bill or any way it is convenient, but we would like to have a copy. I notice that there is a sign at the very top--there are several signs--and one says Leffingwell Rancho Company growers of Sunkist oranges and lemons and then manufacturers of XXX spray products and XXX fertilizers, and that sign has a huge arrow pointing to the left looking at the picture, and there is your Leffingwell Rancho Company. I wonder to what extent you had any direct contact with that Leffingwell Rancho Company yourself? Did you have any reason to have any contact with the owners?

DIETRICK: Other than some of the personnel that lived there used to buy gas from us and we knew several families there rather intimately that worked down there.

ARENA: Would some of those families include Mr. Harry Schuyler?

DIETRICK: Definitely. I know Mr. Schuyler. I don't know whether he is still living or not.

ARENA: He is and I just happened to have seen him today and had lunch with him today, as a matter of fact. He is still hale and hearty.

DIETRICK: Yes, he used to come up there.

ARENA: Also, underneath that large sign. . . . Well, the thing I want to establish though, of course, that there was business between the Nixon grocery store and the Rancho Company and your business and the Leffingwell Ranch Company, there was a certain amount of business.

DIETRICK: Well, business in the sense of personal buying of gas for the people. We weren't involved, I don't think, in selling them any petroleum products, the ranch itself, if that is what you mean. And I don't know whether the Nixon store did that. I doubt that.

ARENA: I see. I do notice by the way that on the store, and correct me if I'm wrong, but where you have Nixon's service station painted on seemingly black letters against a white background, was that the color combination, do you recall, where it says Nixon's service station; do you think that was black paint and a white background?

DIETRICK: Not necessarily white. I forget just what the color that was. I think it was more of a lightish green. I'm not real sure.

ARENA: By lightish green, the wall?

DIETRICK: The wall, and then this would be black.

ARENA: And is that store there or that service station, is that a part of the grocery store, or was that the service station a part of it?

DIETRICK: This picture shows strictly the service station. Now next, right over here to the left, was the old store, which at one time was a church. That building was moved in, the way I understand it. Now previously I believe--now I have no knowledge of this--but it seems as though I remember that they had the groceries in the back of this and then they moved on over. Now I'm just surmising this.

ARENA: But as far as what you do recall in your time, that store that we are looking at in the picture, that building, did not house the grocery department at all, it was strictly the service station.

DIETRICK: We lived in back of it.

ARENA: Oh, I see. Your living quarters were there. As far as you know, did the Nixons say they used to live where you lived later by any chance? Had they lived where you moved to at one time?

DIETRICK: I don't know that. Of course, while we were living there they had a house in back, a nice house. In fact, that house may still be--no, no, no, I don't think it is still there.

ARENA: Was that living quarters attached to the grocery store or part of it? Do you remember that? There was past this service station building, then there was the grocery store, then there were separate living quarters where they lived.

DIETRICK: Yes, their separate living quarters was a nice house built in back of this. Now the grocery store, see, is over there, which would be to the east of the store.

ARENA: In other words, there were three separate structures.

DIETRICK: Right, plus the pump house.

ARENA: Let me establish this by the way. When you say we, do you mean your father and you and your brother, or was it strictly between your father and Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon that this arrangement was set up?

DIETRICK: When I say we [Laughter] I mean our whole family. There's our whole family.

ARENA: At the time that this was leased this Nixon filling station?

DIETRICK: No, this was toward the end of the time, but that shows you our ages, and we ran this as a family.

ARENA: That would be your father, of course, the gentleman at the extreme left, looking at him, and your mother?

DIETRICK: No, that's my sister. My mother isn't shown there. This would be my brother-in-law here and this would be my brother who was about the same age as President Nixon.

ARENA: And this would be the brother who is deceased.

DIETRICK: No. This brother is my older brother, the one who did know the President and this is myself here. See, I'm only seventeen years old here. And this is my younger brother who also went to Whittier College.

ARENA: I see.

DIETRICK: I started to tell you about that a minute ago. There's three of us who were at Whittier College for a period of about twelve years, and none of us were there at the same time. We all met our wives at Whittier College, and all of us played sports under Chief Newman, so we go back a long way. And this is my youngest brother here. He wouldn't remember--you might want to interview him.

ARENA: What is his full name?

DIETRICK: His name is Everett [Dietrick].

ARENA: What was your father's full name?

DIETRICK: Walter [Dietrick].

ARENA: And what do you recall about the leasing arrangement between your family and the Nixons?

DIETRICK: Well, it seems as though I remember that it was \$25 a month and we were there about three years.

ARENA: Was anything you made, you kept, or was there any profit sharing at all?

DIETRICK: No profit sharing, just straight type--that's the way I remember now. I wasn't really that on top of it to really say for sure.

ARENA: Was it a fairly busy station as business went in those days?

DIETRICK: Well . . .

ARENA: Well, let me say this, did it support you and your entire family?

DIETRICK: Well, let's say this, we eked out a living, but a living in those days was something. I don't think the Nixons were doing much more than that, because those were hard times. It was rough. See, even the price of gas there was ten cents. [Laughter]

ARENA: My goodness. Did you use the same brand all the time by the way, or did you experiment with different ones?

DIETRICK: No, we were using Richfield all the time.

ARENA: To what extent were stipulations laid down say in the understanding? Did you use Richfield because Mr. Frank Nixon preferred that you did or were you given pretty well a free hand in the running of the business?

DIETRICK: No, he had no say there. He might have tried because he and my dad were not--they were amiable but there was no loss of love you might say. [Laughter]

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, why?

DIETRICK: Well, in the first place my dad was not a businessman remotely.

ARENA: What had his occupation been before that if I may ask?

DIETRICK: Well, he was a college educated man and he had been trained as a teacher and he had suffered many hardships in the Midwest businesswise running farms and so forth. He started out to be a teacher and then he inherited the farm and went back, lost that, and he just wasn't a businessman. He'd have more money on the books owing him than he ever--you know that sort of thing. He was, you might say, too soft-hearted. And he was a man of strong opinion and so was Mr. Nixon, so naturally there would be some conflict there, because Frank Nixon, Mr. Nixon, was a very rough--oh, no, I shouldn't say rough, but he was very outspoken, very--he liked to--well, I'd say outspoken. Maybe that's the word.

ARENA: Do you think there was any problem because of the great disparity in formal education? The President himself has said that his father did not go beyond the sixth grade, do you think that caused any personality conflicts?

DIETRICK: Well, I don't mean to say there was a terrific conflict. You asked me a question here of what the relationship was and I'm not trying to make a big thing out of it, because they did have a certain communication that was fine, I am sure of that.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if your father was mechanically inclined in the same sense that Mr. Frank Nixon was? I understand he built many structures and possibly even converting that church into a grocery store among other things. I am just wondering if that caused any lack of rapport or anything like that?

DIETRICK: Well I wouldn't say that--well, as far as my father, he was not a mechanical man at all, and the kids really ran the service station, you might say, more than he did.

ARENA: Did your father maintain other jobs during this period, by any chance?

DIETRICK: No. No, he liked to--well, for instance, he liked to write poetry. I've got a whole book of his poetry that he wrote. Say there might be something in there.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if he and Mrs. Hannah Nixon, whose mother, Almira [Burdg Milhous], liked to write poetry, if your father ever did get together with the relatives--the aunts, the grandmother?

DIETRICK: No, there was no social contact at all.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, do you think this was because of the economic situation that social contact would have meant preparing meals, you know, for visitors and extra money, or was it just that there wasn't that much in common?

DIETRICK: There didn't seem to be too much in common really. Now another thing that I wish I had here was my mother's diary. My sister has it but I could get it in case you would want to look at it. There are several references in there.

ARENA: That would be most interesting.

DIETRICK: For instance, there is references in there to where she had gone over to babysit Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon].

ARENA: Who was born in 1930.

DIETRICK: And my sister--even though my sister lived with us there only a year, she was married and away, yet I think she did some babysitting also of Eddie.

ARENA: Just for the historical record, what is your sister's name and where does she live, and would the diary be in her home or do you think she may have this with some vault papers or put away in some special place?

DIETRICK: It's in her home. I just gave it to her. I had it until several months ago and she was up and she wanted to look at it. It covered many years, not just this period, but her name is Mrs. Ray Smith and her address 1201 O'Brien Street, Brawley, California, zip 92227.

ARENA: And the phone number, if there is one there?

DIETRICK: Phone number--I just don't have that here.

ARENA: That could be obtained through the information anyway, I am sure. From the standpoint of your own firsthand contact and we'll say observable contact, where you observed President Nixon during this period, first what about the firsthand contact? Whatever comes to mind from the standpoint if you went into the store what did you see him doing; did you talk to him; what were your recollections, if anything, of your conversations, of the type of personality he had when you knew him? Whatever comes to mind along those lines, your firsthand recollections of President Nixon during this period.

DIETRICK: Well, I was seventeen here toward the end of this period. As I said, my oldest brother was very friendly with the President. They went to college together and so forth. Of course, I did spend one year up at the college when he was still there so from that point of view I looked upon him with, what you might say, awe. Here he was, he had been president of Whittier High School and he was president of Whittier College student body. He was an outstanding student, an outstanding person and so my own idea was that he was just a great guy. As far as my early recollections . . .

ARENA: When you knew him in college, I'm wondering if you saw him when you were a youngster playing, what did he play?

DIETRICK: Oh, yeah.

ARENA: And working in the store and performing chores, along those lines, what comes to mind?

DIETRICK: Well, playing. Of course, everybody has said so much about President Nixon's football prowess, and I can remember playing pass and touch football. Let's see, there were three of us boys and then there was Don [Francis Donald Nixon] and President Nixon.

ARENA: Eddie was too young.

DIETRICK: And Harold [Samuel Nixon], of course, he was--and by the way that is one of the things I really remember is Harold coughing. See, he had tuberculosis and this was a terrible cough he had. And he soon passed away after that.

ARENA: Were you living there when he passed away? I believe the year was 1933, by the way.

DIETRICK: It seems to me we were there. I could be wrong, but I know that he was very ill and he had been away somewhere and then he would come back.

ARENA: Do you recall seeing him outside?

DIETRICK: Yeah and hearing him. But then getting back to the football, right out there on Santa Gertrudes [Avenue]-- that road that led down to the Leffingwell Ranch--see that road took only the traffic down to the ranch. It was not a through street.

ARENA: As it is now.

DIETRICK: Yeah, but that didn't occur until much, much later. So the traffic was rather limited and we would play pass-touch football out there.

ARENA: How was the President as a competitor?

DIETRICK: He would come out and play a little while. Now he wouldn't stay. He was usually too occupied. He would, of course, practice the piano by the hour. We could hear him from the house in back.

ARENA: By the way, there was no question that it was he practicing too?

DIETRICK: Oh, yeah, he would practice. And then he would come out and play awhile. But, of course, as far as his football, [Laughter] he, as everybody has said over and over again they didn't give him his letter until. . . . But there was nobody that had more zest and more fight, you might say. And, of course, I was a freshman at Whittier College when he was there but I always remember my brother, for example, who was a pretty good football player, he would describe how there wasn't anybody who could take any more than President Nixon. They would line him up out here as somebody to practice on and he'd stand right in there and that's pretty tough assignment you know to be out there while the boys who are going to play are out there taking shots at you, but that was his role and he was right there all the time. He would never try to get out of anything. I can remember that.

ARENA: Do you recall anything about his study habits or anything that comes to mind regarding him as a student, again from firsthand observation? Did you see him with a big stack of books coming home from school, for example, especially when you and the family were at the Nixon service station?

DIETRICK: Well, of course, he was well-disciplined. I don't really remember where he studied and so forth, but I do remember that he carried on. While he would be going to school he would be working in that grocery store. I would say he would be the first one out. There was a ramp that led down from the store rather than steps. See, the front of the store was on the level of the street.