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Evlyn Dorn (May 4, 1972, first interview)

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Oral History Interview

with

MRS. EVLYN DORN

May 4, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Evelyn Dorn in Whittier, California, May 4, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mrs. Dorn, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

DORN: I was born in Vancouver, British Columbia, and came to the United States in 1916.

ARENA: In view of the fact that President Richard Nixon has cited his association with you--we know that you were his first legal secretary--in a formal speech in Canada, and the speech is dated April 13, 1972, at a dinner honoring the President, during the exchange of toasts between the Governor General, Roland Michener, and the President at a dinner in Rideau Hall, the Parliament House, Ottawa, the President mentioned you, I would like to ask you about your Canadian background. But for the record I would like to repeat his reference to you, and this is a direct quote:

"My secretary many years ago, when I was a young, practicing lawyer, was then an American, but she was very proud that she had been born in Canada. And as a result, after my wife and I were married, about thirty years ago--you wouldn't know it, but it was that long ago--but in any event, the year that we were married, we, with another couple, drove on a vacation to Canada. We were in Victoria, British Columbia, and brought back many pleasant memories of our first visit to Canada. It was because my secretary recommended that we go there, and we had no regrets."

Also, in the paragraph just above, he refers to pleasant associations with Canadians by saying:

"That is another thing we have in common-- but in any event, may I tell you what one American and his wife--what we have in common with Canada, and why we feel especially close to Canadians."

And it was following that little introduction that he mentioned you. And with that brief reminder, Mrs. Dorn, may I ask you to give the background of your own family, your father's full name, your mother's full name, whether or not your father was born in Canada, for example, and his occupation; anything that comes to mind regarding your youth in Canada.

DORN: I was one of three children. My father's name was Robert Whiteside. My mother's name was Fannie Whiteside, but my father always referred to her as Frances. They were both born in Toronto, Ontario. My maternal grandfather was born in London, England. I really don't know where my paternal grandfather was born. He died at an early age and I didn't know him at all. I have a sister, and I had a brother. My sister still lives, but my brother passed away about five years ago.

My father was in the salmon cannery business up the coast of British Columbia. He worked for the Western Fisheries Company, which is still in existence, and then he went into the salmon cannery business for himself. He had canneries at Ocean Falls, British Columbia, and up the coast at a place called Bella Bella, and I think one at Bella Coola. I know his brother had one there, and I think he did, also.

ARENA: Now, when you did come to the United States in 1916, was that the time you came to stay for good, and if so, had you ever made any visits, maybe with your family, or with anyone, and where, to the United States before 1916?

DORN: In 1916 we came to California, my mother and father and sister and brother and myself. I had never been to California before, but my mother and father had made visits down here several times. My brother came with my mother at one time. But we had visited back and forth in Seattle, Washington, which was only about a hundred and fifty miles from Vancouver.

ARENA: Mrs. Dorn, in view of the fact that you were the President's first legal secretary, and in addition, accompanied him on campaign trips that he has made around the country; but, as you know, this project does not deal with politics as such, and we will not go into it; but

in view of the fact that you have had this long association with him, it would be rather interesting, from the standpoint of education, to know precisely what your educational background was that made it possible for you to not only get the position in the first place, but to have such high professional ability that you not only did your job with the top law firm in Whittier but the President depended on you for many personal secretarial functions over the years. With that in mind, would you give us, as much as you can recall, your educational background?

DORN: I attended school in Vancouver. I attended the Central School, which was an elementary school, and I attended the King George High School in Vancouver. Then when I came to California I attended Woodbury Business College in Los Angeles, which is still in existence.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how it is that you chose that as a profession, being a legal secretary?

DORN: I don't know that I chose being a LEGAL secretary, but I had always wanted to be a secretary, and my first position was with the Barlett Music Company in Los Angeles. After being there a couple of years, we moved to Seattle, where I was employed by the City Directory (R. L. Polk & Company) for about a year, and then went with the Keaton Tire and Rubber Company. We moved to Los Angeles again and I went to work for an attorney, where I got my legal training.

ARENA: But the training as a legal secretary you learned on the job, so to speak?

DORN: Yes, the man that I worked for at Keaton Tire and Rubber Company in Seattle (James Tormey) had a friend in Los Angeles who was an attorney and who was looking for a secretary. This attorney's name was Ernest Noon. Mr. Tormey had given Ernest Noon my name and he called me and asked if I would be interested. I was working at that time for an oil man, and I said, "No, I wouldn't be interested in changing positions," because I had a very nice position as it was. He asked me to come over on my noon hour, that he'd like to talk with me, and I did. He suggested that I come into his office and he would teach me how to be a good legal secretary. I thought that was an excellent offer and opportunity, and so I decided to go to work for Mr. Noon.

ARENA: Thank you. Now I would like to approach the subject of your direct contact with President Nixon. Before doing that, would you mind giving just a general picture, not going into detail at all, but a general picture as to your overall direct contact with President Nixon, from the standpoint of when you first met him, about when.

DORN: I was employed by the law firm of Wingert and Bewley in Whittier, and the President came in there to talk with Mr. [Thomas W.] Bewley about working for the firm, and that was the first time I'd ever seen him (in 1937). It was a small law firm. There were the two attorneys and then Mr. Nixon came in.

Whittier was a small town in those days, and everybody knew everybody else, more or less. I did have some social contact with the President in those days. I was in his home for dinner, and we enjoyed a few things socially. Mr. [Lawrence M.] Dorn and I and [Patricia] Pat Ryan and Richard Nixon used to go to nearby Artesia [California] to ice skate. There was a new ice rink opened up a few miles from Whittier. We went out to dinner, had a friendly relationship.

ARENA: Did you have direct contact with his parents?

DORN: Yes, I knew his parents. They had a store in East Whittier. I don't recall the first time I met them. The brother, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon], was the butcher, and I used to go out there and pick up meat sometimes. I was in the [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon home.

ARENA: And this would be true of Edward [Calvert Nixon], the President's other living brother?

DORN: Yes. Edward was just a little boy in those days, and he was always around the store, and then when the President's family moved up on Worsham Drive [Whittier], they were in Whittier more than they were out in East Whittier. I knew Edward and I knew Donald.

ARENA: Would this be a correct general statement, Mrs. Dorn: That from that time, 1937, to this very day, which is May 4, 1972, you have been a close friend of the President and his family and immediate relatives?

DORN: Yes. Of course, I'm not in close contact with the President now, because he IS the President of the United States and I don't see him very often. But I became very well acquainted with his mother and his father when he ran for the Presidency in 1960. I was asked by him to take care of his mother's affairs as far as appointments and telephone and that sort of thing was concerned, because she was getting so many requests from reporters and authors and writers, and so on. So her telephone was wired into my home, and she received no direct telephone calls at all. I screened all of her telephone calls and sat in on all of her interviews, and became very well acquainted with Mrs. Hannah Nixon. I took her to different social affairs where she would be the guest of honor, and for that year I was very busy with Mrs. Nixon.

And then I worked for Don Nixon as his secretary when he was in the restaurant business. I just recently left Donald and came over here to this project as Research Consultant. So I have known Donald and his wife [Clara Jane Lemke Nixon] and family very, very well, and I still am a guest in their home in Newport Beach [California] on many occasions.

ARENA: I would like to ask about your recollection of the President's departure during the war years from the Los Angeles [California] railroad station, whatever comes to your mind about the background of that incident, his leaving, the actual incident itself, at which you were present, and then anything that comes to mind following the incident that had something to do with it.

DORN: He was scheduled to leave, I would say, around the middle of the morning from the Union Railroad Station in Los Angeles. We decided, those of us in the office, that we would have a little good-bye breakfast for him. So Tom and Kathryn Bewley, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon, Edward, Mr. Dorn and myself, and Bernice and Ray Williams all went into Los Angeles to the Harvey House, which is the restaurant at the Union Station, and we had a little breakfast party. He was in his uniform, looked very handsome, and Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon], of course, was there. So we had a very nice breakfast and a lot of small talk, trying to keep up everybody's spirits, particularly the parents'.

After breakfast we all went down to where the train actually leaves, which is a little distance down a long, long ramp. It was just about time for him to board the train, which he did, and he and Pat were on the step, the little block there that you step up on. And he stepped into the area there and he let Pat go ahead, of course, and we were all there to say good-bye. It's always hard to say good-bye to anybody when you know they're going off to war. Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon held up beautifully. Mr. [Frank] Nixon shed tears, and Clara Jane, Don's wife, when she saw Mr. Nixon crying she also wept. And the President turned abruptly and pointed his finger at Ed, who was just a little boy, and said, "Eddie, you take care of your mother." And then he disappeared into the train. It was quite a touching scene.

ARENA: Thank you very much. The next incident I would like you to try to recall is whatever comes to mind concerning the very first time the President did enter the law office where you served him as his first legal secretary.

DORN: I distinctly recall when he opened the door and walked in there. He had on a dark suit, a navy blue suit, as I recall, and he asked for Mr. Bewley. We knew

he was coming in, because something had been said about the young attorney who was coming into the firm or was going to be working for Mr. Bewley and Mr. [Jefferson G.] Wingert. Mr. Bewley at that moment was busy, so Richard Nixon sat down and picked up a magazine and sat there and looked at it. My impression of him was that he was a very serious young man. He didn't have anything more to say. He just waited about fifteen or twenty minutes for Mr. Bewley, and then I took him in to Mr. Bewley's office and introduced him. Incidentally, he got the position immediately.

ARENA: Mrs. Dorn, do you recall that you and he engaged in any small talk of any type at that point, even his mentioning if you were from Whittier, for example, or anything like that?

DORN: No, not then at all. After he came into the firm me was very friendly, and very relaxed, but on this particular occasion, no. He just asked for Mr. Bewley and I asked him if he were Mr. Nixon and he said he was, and I had him sit down and that was about all the conversation there was at that particular point.

ARENA: And would you mind going back on the record as to where that office was, precisely, and whether or not the building and office are still standing?

DORN: We are at Suite 607, Bank of America Building, corner of Greenleaf [Avenue] and Philadelphia [Street], 13002 E. Philadelphia, Whittier. The building is still there, and the suite is being used now by an accountant's firm.

ARENA: Could I ask you, as his secretary, what type of an employer he was, regarding dictation, regarding asking you to set up appointments for him, whatever comes to mind regarding the professional aspects of your contact with him as his secretary?

DORN: He was the junior member of the firm, and I think it was more of a relaxed feeling with him than it was with Mr. Wingert, who was the senior member of the firm. But Mr. Nixon was the kind of an employer that you WANTED to do your very BEST for. And I'm sure he has NEVER had an employee who wasn't loyal to him. I've known several of the girls who have worked for him in his political career who feel this way, and I don't think he ever DEMANDED perfection in your work, but he expected it, and you wanted to do this. You did your very best for him.

ARENA: From the standpoint of his giving you letters to transcribe, what do you recall about his rate of dictation? Was he easy to work for in that sense?

DORN: Yes. His dictation was rapid, but I was trained to take rapid dictation. He knew what he wanted to say, and it was really a pleasure to take dictation from him. He did keep up a good speed and spoke distinctly, and for a secretary that's rather important.

ARENA: Finally, Mrs. Dorn--and this is the last question for this interview--do you recall that there were after-hour assignments, including not only staying late in the office, but even at your home, where you would have some special work to do for him?

DORN: Not until he got into politics was there any real after-hour work. Then there were a lot of after-hours. This was an exciting thing. We were all anxious for him to win this election, and so I was always willing to work extra hours, and he came to my home many times to dictate, during the time that he was running for Congress.

ARENA: Thank you very much, Mrs. Dorn, for the privilege of this interview, and allowing history to record your firsthand contacts with the President.

DORN: You're welcome.