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Evlyn Dorn (May 8, 1972, second interview)

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Second Oral History Interview

with

MRS. EVLYN DORN

May 8, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #2 with Mrs. Evelyn Dorn. Today's date is May 8, 1972. We are in Whittier, California. Mrs. Dorn, may I begin by reviewing your personal contact with members of the President's family? For example, I know you had frequent occasion to visit with the President's parents, Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank and Mrs. Hannah Nixon, and I'd like to concentrate at first with Mr. Frank Nixon--some of the incidents that I know you and I have discussed off the tape, I'd like you to consider, now, putting on the tape for the record. And these won't necessarily be in chronological order, but they'll be incidents that you do recall and we want to put them down before you forget them. And among those that come to mind first is the one which, speaking of oral history and the tape, in which the President himself actually made some effort to preserve his own father's voice on a tape. Would you mind recalling and giving us your recollection of that incident?

DORN: Mr. Frank Nixon was not feeling very well. He was a victim of arthritis. The President wrote me a letter and asked me to rent a tape recorder, and he sent a check for a hundred dollars and suggested that he would send more if it was necessary, and asked me to get the tapes and go out to his father's home and ask him if he would relate some of the stories that he used to relate to his own children. The day that I received the letter, or a day or two later, before I actually had a chance to talk with Mr. Frank Nixon about it, he fell and broke his hip and was taken to the hospital. He was there for several days. And when he came back, he never really recovered from that. I suggested on two or three occasions that perhaps he would like to tell some of his stories,

and he would say, "Well, I don't feel well enough today. Let's wait a few days."

I always felt that the President had done this more for, perhaps, giving his father something that would please him, to tell these stories over again, knowing that Tricia [Nixon] and Julie [Nixon] would be hearing them, more than his actually wanting these stories on tape. I could be wrong there, but I always felt that he had done this more for his father's sake than his own.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, Mrs. Dorn, do you remember any of these stories yourself? Were you, possibly, in the presence of Mr. Frank Nixon when he was recounting some of these stories, either to his grandchildren--any of the grandchildren, not just the President's children--or where he was just recounting them to you?

DORN: No. I don't recall ever hearing any of the stories.

ARENA: Do you recall the President himself ever going into any of these stories that his father may have recounted?

DORN: No, I don't recall that he ever told me anything about the stories, or even that his father had told him stories. The first I learned of it was when he asked me to get the tape recorder.

ARENA: As an overall review, when you stop to think of all the times you were with Mr. Frank Nixon, was he given to that sort of thing? Did he talk about historical events in his own life, or those of the family, or was he a person who liked to talk about current events, things happening in the world or in the community and the country at the time?

DORN: Yes, he did like to talk about current events, happenings and community affairs. In fact, he took the Congressional Record. He studied it. He liked to talk politics to people who were around. But as far as any other type of stories, I don't recall that he ever mentioned these.

ARENA: Now you do recall that, from time to time, the President's active political career kept him and his wife [Patricia Ryan Nixon] away from home. What do you know about the role of the grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon as baby sitters during this time, and any of the stories that Mr. Frank Nixon may have told you concerning their different experiences?

DORN: There is one that comes to mind. The President at that time was campaigning for the senatorial seat, and they were out with the station wagon and making stops at

different places, and would be gone for three or four days at a time. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon had the grocery store, and they were working in the store during the day. There was a young girl who was taking care of Tricia and Julie at the Richard Nixon residence on Honeysuckle Lane in Whittier. But Mr. and Mrs. Nixon would go out and stay every night while the parents were gone.

I remember Mr. Frank Nixon telling me that it worried Tricia more than it did Julie that the parents were gone. Tricia, of course, was the older little girl. And he told me that on many occasions he and Mrs. Hannah Nixon would be asleep, and he'd feel this little hand on his face, and it would be Tricia--she was just a little tot--finding out whether or not her parents were home yet. And he said, "I'd just lift her in bed and put her down between us and she'd go to sleep and she'd be all right."

ARENA: To continue with this interview, Mrs. Dorn, may I ask you now to try to think back to some of the other relatives of the President on the Nixon side: Can I possibly get your thinking on this item first, though? Is it your overall impression that when you knew the President firsthand, that he had more direct contact with Milhouses than with Nixons, as far as your personal recollections go? When I say direct contact, let's say, face to face, and correspondence that you yourself handled, between him and his mother, and that sort of thing?

DORN: The Milhous side of the family is a very large family. I don't recall, when I worked with him at the office, that he wrote any of the relatives. At that time I was a secretary in the office, and as I visited in the home we would meet some of the relatives socially, but not too many of them in those days.

ARENA: From the standpoint of actually meeting relatives, we'll say in this immediate area, Whittier, would you say that there, as far as your own personal contacts are concerned, you've met more of the Milhouses than you have of the Nixons?

DORN: Yes, I think so.

ARENA: And to pursue that a bit further, when you did meet the relatives, quite commonly and quite intensively, would that be during your preparation or your assisting in the preparations for the transferring and the moving of the relatives to Washington, D.C. to attend the different inaugurations in which the President participated?

DORN: Yes. During the Inauguration of 1969 I was working for [Francis Donald] Don Nixon at that time. Don took on as a project for himself, and we had 203

relatives from the Nixon and the Milhous sides at the Inauguration--arranging for the securing of relatives' tickets to the ball and to the parade and to the ceremonies, and the festivities that were going on, everything but their transportation. We tried to see that the relatives were taken care of.

I really think there were probably more Milhouses than there were Nixons, because I think there ARE more of them. I became pretty well acquainted with the Milhous side through Hannah Nixon. I knew her sisters very well, particularly Mrs. Martha Gibbons and Mrs. Olive Marshburn, and I had met Edith Timberlake on many occasions at Mrs. Nixon's home. And then, of course, there were the children of these people that I had met, like Lucille Parsons. I've known her and consider her a very good friend. And [William Alan] Bill Milhous and his family are friends.

ARENA: While we're on this topic of the preparation for the Inauguration and your role in that, would you mind giving the overall picture? Wasn't it more than just this last Inauguration in which you helped out?

DORN: Yes.

ARENA: I'm thinking of the Vice-Presidential ones, as well.

DORN: Yes. I don't know how I got so involved in that first one. I guess it was because I was working at Republican headquarters. But I arranged, personally, for many of the hotel reservations for people from Whittier, not just relatives, but these were friends that were going to the Inauguration. At that point I also arranged their transportation, and the hotels in which they stayed. Most of them were staying at the Shoreham Hotel. Dorothea Cox and Betty Lewis were working in Washington and they were working with me on this. They both worked in the Vice President's office. And we worked together on tickets and so on, and then each person went to the office and picked up his tickets when he got into Washington.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, since you were involved in these preparations for both the Inauguration of the President when he was Vice President, as well as President, was the work about the same, or did the Presidency involve about double the work?

DORN: Oh, yes, more than double, because the majority of the relatives wanted to go, and they knew that Don was looking out for this sort of thing. I had a regular card index file with all the relatives' names, and we would be in touch with them, whether they wanted to go or didn't. We handled their accommodations. We tried to house all of the relatives at one hotel, the Statler Hilton Hotel. There would

be some of the elderly relatives that perhaps wanted a son and daughter close to them on the same floor, so this involved all these sort of arrangements with the hotel. Sara Currence and Roberta Dorn were sent to Washington, and they worked in the campaign in New York.

ARENA: For the record, would you mind stating your relationship with a Miss Roberta Dorn?

DORN: Roberta Dorn is my youngest daughter. She went to work on the campaign, assisting [Edward Calvert] Ed Nixon in New York. Sara Currence was Ed's secretary. Ed had charge of the mail coming in for this campaign.

ARENA: This would be the campaign in 1968?

DORN: Yes, the Presidential campaign. Roberta went to New York at Ed's request. He had known her slightly as a youngster, but he had met her at the Republican Convention in Miami [Florida], and he needed someone to assist him, and he called me and asked for Roberta's address and her phone number, stating that he wanted to call her. So he called and asked her if she would be interested in coming back there. She at that time was working for Orange County [California] as a Probation Officer, and she was delighted, of course, and she was on the plane and gone to New York in two or three days. That is where she met Sara. They worked together in New York for several months. Then when the time was getting closer to the Inauguration, Sara and Roberta were sent to the Statler Hilton Hotel in Washington, where an office was set up for them. They handled preparations for all of the relatives from that end, and I handled them here from Don's office.

ARENA: Was that the main leadership in these preparations? You were the main one here and Miss Dorn and Miss Currence were the main ones in Washington?

DORN: That's right. And they were the ones that were responsible for hotel accommodations, those that wanted to be close together on certain floors, and handling of all tickets for each relative. When you have two hundred people coming in all about the same day or so, you have to have your preparations pretty well coordinated.

ARENA: Mrs. Dorn, historians would never forgive me if I didn't ask this question: What was it like, being at the Inauguration, and so close as you were to it?

DORN: Very exciting. The girls [Roberta and Sara] had two rooms as offices. Things were pretty hectic and they were very, very busy, and the Pentagon sent over six or eight military aides, so that they could assist the girls. Don Nixon and his family had a certain driver who would be

responsible to take them places, to the ball, or to the concert, or wherever the festivity was. Ed Nixon had a military aide for his family. Some of the elderly relatives had an aide assigned to them to look out for them and see that they were cared for in reaching their destination.

ARENA: With this great responsibility, did you still find time to attend these affairs and enjoy them?

DORN: Oh, yes. You would find yourself getting ready almost in the elevator for the next event. No, it was very, very exciting. I work better under pressure anyway, so I just loved it. It was just marvelous.

ARENA: In your preparations for the Inauguration, those for the Nixons as well as for yourself, did you have the opportunity to meet with the President, face to face, during the excitement and confusion, on any of the occasions?

DORN: The Presidential staff and the First Family were housed on the twelfth floor of the Statler Hilton Hotel, and no contact was made by the family or friends prior to the Inauguration. Mr. [Lawrence M.] Dorn and I were invited to the White House to a reception in the East Room the day following all of the festivities.

ARENA: Do you recall that the schedule of events allowed for the relatives and the President to meet, so to speak, alone?

DORN: Right after the Inaugural ceremony and the parade, the family was invited over to the White House where he met with them. That same night was the night of the ball, and that winds up all the ceremonies.

ARENA: Do you recall seeing the President dancing at the ball? Were you at that particular one, or at that particular time, when he came and went?

DORN: He came and went, yes. This last time there were at least five balls, at different locations. No, I really don't think I saw him dancing. I don't think anybody danced very much, it was so crowded. It was just like a huge gathering of people, everybody dressed up and looked lovely, excitement in the air. I saw him and the First Lady arriving at the ball, and he spoke there for a few minutes, but I don't recall that I actually saw him dancing.

A few years before this, at the Republican National Convention in Chicago [Illinois] in 1960, I saw Ed Nixon and Gay [Lynne Woods Nixon], his wife--they had just been married a few years--and Ernest Nixon had not yet met Ed's wife. And I remember when he saw her for the first time. He stood off and

looked at her and said, "My, aren't you a pretty little thing!" Then he said, "I will say this, that the Nixon men certainly know how to pick beautiful wives."

ARENA: And Mr. Edward Nixon's wife's name?

DORN: Gay Lynne. I would like to add a note of interest here. At the convention in Miami, Florida, in 1968, and after the nomination, the President gave a small party at the Key Biscayne Hotel. Mr. Dorn and I were included in this party, and I was very touched to see Ed and Don Nixon go to a telephone in the lobby and call Mr. Ernest Nixon, Uncle Ernest, in State College, Pennsylvania, and talk with him and share the excitement of the event with him over the telephone. He felt he was not well enough himself to attend the convention and said he wanted to save his strength to attend the Inauguration, which he did. Dr. Ernest Nixon was a great favorite with the Nixon brothers.

ARENA: While we're speaking about arranging affairs involving the Nixons, would you mind going into the question of your role in the wedding of Mr. Donald Nixon's daughter, Miss Lawrence Nixon?

DORN: I was working as secretary to Donald at that time, and this was a very large wedding. It was at the Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach [California]. The family lives in Newport Beach. There were 1015 people invited. There may have been a few who were not there. It was a beautiful wedding. The President was a guest. The President and Mrs. [Patricia] Nixon and Tricia [Nixon] came to the wedding. And because of the fact that the President was there, it required a great deal of security. The President was an San Clemente [California] at the Western White House, and I was down at Donald's home a good deal of the time, with final preparations, and the President would send messages there. For instance, he sent a message up that he wanted to sit with the family, where Edward sat, and he didn't want any special favors done for him, but he wanted to be treated just like any other guest who was coming to the wedding.

On the morning of the wedding, the Secret Service was at the church, fine-tooth-combing the bushes and the trees and the buildings all around, to make sure that the security was right. The guests were to arrive at a certain hour, and many came very early, because the church held about a thousand people, and the people who were invited had to have a card showing that they were an invited guest. This was suggested by the minister, who thought there would be people who would try to crash the wedding.

Everybody got into the church, and then the President was to arrive at a certain moment. We had arranged that IF he should come a few minutes early, he would be taken into a

little anteroom there. The girl who had the guest book, who incidentally was Roberta Dorn, would go in there and have him sign the guest book. But the Secret Service arrived with the President and Mrs. Nixon and Tricia right at the split second they were supposed to come, and they came into the church and signed the guest book in the foyer of the church, and then went down the aisle. And of course, the whole congregation stood when the President arrived. But he just acted like any guest who might be in there, and he didn't want any special favors done for him.

ARENA: Mrs. Dorn, from your long and direct association with the President, and as a participant at this wedding of Lawrence Nixon, would you say that the President enjoyed himself on that occasion? How would you describe his feelings and his participation in that family wedding?

DORN: I think he was very much at ease, very relaxed, and I think he thoroughly enjoyed it. After the wedding was over, we went outside of the church to a lovely garden. There were many photographers there, of course. There were many pictures taken of the wedding party, with the President and the minister.

The reception was given at the Newporter Inn [Newport Beach, California]. The President came in a car, and to get over to the Newporter Inn he was put in a car, and a helicopter picked his party up at a different point, just for security reasons, and he arrived in the helicopter at the Newporter Inn. Mr. Dorn and I and Rose Mary Woods and Roberta and her escort, and some of the other people who had something to do with the workings of the wedding, all sat in the back row, and then we were told to advise as many of the relatives as possible to go over to the Newporter Inn and the President would be arriving there as soon as possible, and he wanted to visit with his relatives previous to all the crowd.

He came in very relaxed, and I was standing a little bit back in the crowd, and he reached over among the crowd to shake hands with me, and I felt very honored about that. Mr. Dorn happened to be near the front door when he arrived, and he walked over and said, "Hello, Larry, how are you?" And he seemed to be enjoying himself. He was meeting with a lot of his relatives, and a lot of old friends, and Pat enjoyed herself, and Tricia did, I'm sure. And of course, they had security around them pretty tight. Then we also had security at the door, so just anybody couldn't walk into the reception.

ARENA: Mrs. Dorn, I want to thank you again for allowing me to privilege of having this second interview with you. Thank you.

DORN: You're welcome.