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## Evlyn Dorn (March 21, 1973, fourth interview)

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Fourth Oral History Interview

with

MRS. EVLYN DORN

March 21, 1973  
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #4 with Mrs. Evlyn Dorn, Whittier, California, March 21, 1973, Arena interviewing.

As you know, Evlyn, although we've touched on your role as President Nixon's first legal secretary, you were involved for so many years with him that we really have not covered the entire subject. That's why I would like to go back to it with some more questions. For example, going back to the idea of his being your boss, I'd like to ask you how he was to work for? I'm thinking of what secretaries are expected to do besides taking dictation and handling correspondence. I'm thinking of his maybe asking you to run any errands. Did he ask you to buy lunch for him? Anything like that that comes to mind.

DORN: Mr. Nixon as a boss, I would say, was a very considerate man. It was a pleasure to work for him, because as a lawyer he always had his facts before him. He had worked hard on preparing before he came to a point where he was going to dictate. He didn't demand perfection in his work, but he expected it, and you expected to give it to him. You wanted to do your best for him. He always used a yellow legal pad and he would have little notes to himself on the pad before he would state to dictate. He had things fully prepared and it was a pleasure to take dictation from him. He was rapid and he was thorough. Sometimes he would go back and say let's change this or let's change that, which of course many men who are dictating, do. But when he was finished you knew you had a good article. I've heard him make the comment, "Never make a statement unless you can follow it up with a fact." And I think he worked on that premise.

As far as buying lunch or running errands, when he was first going into Congress, or when he was in Congress and would come back here and perhaps work in the office for a few days, he didn't take time to go out for lunch. Sometimes the office would be filled with people waiting to see him. So I would go downstairs to the drugstore in the building here and get his lunch, usually a hamburger and a pineapple malt, and bring it up and just put it before him and he would eat it then. Otherwise he probably would have gone without it.

ARENA: Did he ever show any particular fussiness about food, or request anything special when it came to your ordering food for him?

DORN: No, never. It was just something to eat at lunchtime and a hamburger seemed to be the easiest thing to bring upstairs and he enjoyed eating it. No, he didn't ever suggest that I get him anything in particular.

ARENA: Was there ever any indication during this time, especially, that he had to watch the amount of food that he had to eat? Was he worried about anything like a diet at that time?

DORN: Not at that time that I know of. I don't know about his eating habits at home. No, he wasn't watching any particular weight problem at that time.

ARENA: Without mentioning any names, some lawyers might spend as much time outside, socializing and even playing cards to socialize. Was there anything like that with President Nixon during his working days?

DORN: No, I'm sure there wasn't. He was in in the morning early, he worked through, and he worked hard and was thoroughly prepared with all of his facts, and he seemed to store up this information, and when he needed it it was there.

ARENA: On the question of his legal work and his being prepared, do you recall that anyone ever complained to you, or did a complaint ever come across your attention about his work?

DORN: No. I have heard people mention that his integrity and his honesty were NEVER questioned. And in writing wills, he was particularly considerate of people when he was writing wills, and in the suggestions that he gave them; things were handled very delicately and with a lot of consideration.

ARENA: And this is taking into account the fact that he was rather young, and wills usually deal with the elderly.

DORN: Well, not entirely. That is something that a lot of people think is true, but that's not true. A lot of people don't wait until they're ready to go before they write their will, no. Particularly where there are small children concerned, many young people set up a trust fund for the children, or a guardian of the children's person and/or estate in the event of the death of the parents. No, wills are not made entirely by the elderly any more.

ARENA: On the question of your being his secretary, can you recall in general how he treated you if any accident occurred? I'm thinking of maybe spilling some ink or a typographical error. How did he react to any accidents that may have occurred along those lines, and if there are any specific incidences that come to mind, would you relate them?

DORN: I can't think of any accidents.

ARENA: Also, I wonder, while you were working for him in those days, did you do any work, any special work or regular work for him at home, and how much of that did you do? Did he come to your home, maybe, sometimes to talk it over with you? Just let me ask you that first.

DORN: Not as much as he did when he was working on his campaign for the Congress. At that time he came to my house almost every morning. That way he could get away from the telephone. He would dictate to me and I would prepare the papers and bring them back up to the office. Once in a while he came down to my house, as did Mr. Bewley, several times. I would work for a while, and then I would decide I was going to stay home for a little while. But during the time I stayed at home if the office was busy, Mr. Bewley would call and say, "Could I come down and give you a will?" or, "Could you do an accounting for me?" And so I would do it, and then I'd think I might as well be at the office, so then I'd go back into the office for a while.

ARENA: Did Mr. Nixon meet the other members of your family, your husband and children, and what were some of their reactions to him at the time?

DORN: Oh, yes. We were a small law firm here in Whittier, and Whittier was rather a small town, and we had a very friendly, nice association in the office, and Mr. Nixon came to my home many times. And my son Mel [Lawrence Melvin Dorn, Jr.] who is now an adult and a real estate broker in Santa Rosa [California], recalls that Mr. Nixon came to our home. Mel had just come home from school on his bicycle as he saw Mr. Nixon in uniform walking up--we have a little hedge on either side of the long walk in front of our home--the walk. He came in and sat down in the living room, and Mel came in from school. As a

young boy, he was quite impressed with Mr. Nixon. He was in uniform, which impressed him, and he looked very handsome in his uniform. He had just come from Washington, I believe, to appear before the Fact Finding Committee when he was considering running for the Congress. After he had gotten through with the meeting that day, he came down to my house and discussed it with me, talked about it, and Mel was impressed that he had done this. He just recently brought that to my attention again.

ARENA: While we're on that subject of this period, the OPA [Office of Price Administration] and the Navy, let me start off with the OPA, from the standpoint of any recollections you may have at all. Do you recall that he discussed that he was planning to go with the OPA in Washington in 1942?

DORN: I don't recall very much of when he left the office and went to the OPA. We knew he was doing it, of course. But while he was in Washington he did write several letters, by hand, to Mr. Bewley, or he would say hello to everybody in the office. He told us a good deal about the work he was doing. I think he was particularly interested at that time in tire rationing, and he wrote about that in his letters. And we were always delighted to get a letter from him. It was very informative. And Mr. Bewley has all of those letters, which he has told me he does want the Nixon library to have, eventually.

ARENA: On the question of the Navy period, anything that comes to mind on that, Mrs. Dorn?

DORN: When he was at Ottumwa [Iowa] he continued to write letters. He was still interested in what was going on in the office. Some of the clients who were there had been clients of his, that Mr. Bewley finished the work for. And he was always interested. He was particularly concerned about a business deal that he had been in called Citrifrost. And there was one particular person here in Whittier who was unhappy with the way that had turned out. And Mr. Nixon was very concerned about that man and wanted to make sure that he didn't lose any money in the deal. So we had letters from him from Ottumwa, Iowa, regarding this.

ARENA: Based on the correspondence that dealt with his war experiences, thinking about all the time that you have known him, even right up to the present time, would you say that he did speak any length of time recounting his war experiences? Is this something that would come up rather commonly, or, as you think back, is this something very rare?

DORN: I don't remember that he discussed any of his war experiences with me nor in my presence. I do recall that he wrote many letters from the South Pacific when he

was on Green Island and the other islands down there. He wrote letters telling us what the conditions were, but he wrote those letters to the firm, really to Mr. Thomas W. Bewley. I don't know whether I got this out of a letter or how I heard this, but I remember that he was very dissatisfied at being in Iowa. He spoke about the fact that he wasn't very happy fighting a war in the middle of Iowa, that he would much prefer being in one of the combat areas.

ARENA: I recall that we discussed his departure from Whittier for the South Pacific. I just want to be sure that it's clear on the record that this was not the first time he was departing from Whittier. Would you mind going over again this idea that he was transferring in a way, from Ottumwa, Iowa, where he had been dissatisfied, and he was getting his wish about going to the South Pacific?

DORN: When he came from Ottumwa Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] was with him. He was scheduled to go to the South Pacific, so they came here for a few days to say good-bye to his parents. They left from here for San Francisco [California], where he went overseas, and Pat lived in San Francisco while he was overseas.

ARENA: As you know, we are trying to contact friends of the President and Mrs. Nixon while they were in San Francisco.

DORN: They are Robert and Gretchen King. Mr. King was with the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] at that time. And Gretchen, his wife, went to work for the Office of Price Administration where Pat Nixon was working and she became acquainted with Pat. Pat was alone, since Dick had gone to the South Pacific. The Kings were very kind to her and very interested in her, and they would have her spend the weekends with them sometimes. Pat had a very small apartment in San Francisco, and the Kings would have Pat out for a weekend many times. And then when the President came back to San Francisco, the Kings became acquainted with him at that time. He was there two or three months, and they became very good friends. I met the Kings for the first time at the Inauguration in 1953. They were always very interested in his career.

ARENA: And just to wrap this up concerning his wartime experiences and your recollections of comment about them from others, do you recall any contact with his parents or any of his brothers and their passing along any information that you want to have on the record? This would be any time that he was in the service, in Rhode Island or Ottumwa, or the South Pacific. I just wonder if Mrs. Hannah Nixon and you would run into one another, if you maybe visited at the store, and Mr.

[Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon would bring up maybe the latest letter from their son.

DORN: I didn't have as much contact with Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon at that time as I did later. But I would go out to the store and Don [Francis Donald Nixon] was always there, the brother. We probably passed the time of day by mentioning the President, but I don't remember anything in particular.

ARENA: And Evlyn, I wonder if I could take this right up to the present time regarding the attitude of the family. I'm thinking of Mrs. Hannah Nixon, did she bring up those war years, being a Quaker, opposed to it in principle?

DORN: I don't recall that Mrs. Nixon ever discussed his war years with me, personally. She was always very proud of the pictures that she had of him in uniform, and while she, with her Quaker faith, objected to war, I think that she was very proud of the fact that he had felt that he wanted to serve his country.

ARENA: Is there any subject among these that we have been discussing or anything that you want to dwell on before we bring this interview to a close?

DORN: No. I don't recall any conversations with the elder Nixons about his war years.

ARENA: Finally, Evlyn, as an overall assessment, how was he from the standpoint of being conscientious with his law work? What comes to mind more than anything else?

DORN: He was always in the office early, and he worked hard. He prepared his work always, making notes to himself. If he wasn't working on a case, he was always reading-- we had a very fine library. He didn't indulge in wasting time or going out for coffee several times a day. He constantly was working or reading.

ARENA: Thank you very much, Evlyn, for this interview.

DORN: You're welcome.