



2-25-1972

## Forrest J. Easley Jr. (February 25, 1972)

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### Recommended Citation

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. FORREST J. EASLEY, JR.

February 25, 1972  
La Habra, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Forrest J. Easley, Jr., J stands for Jones, residing in La Habra, California. We are now in Whittier, California, February 25, 1972, Arena interviewing. May we begin, Mr. Easley, by my asking you where and when you were born?

EASLEY: I was born January 14, 1929, in Los Angeles, California.

ARENA: And what is the first occasion as far as you can recall in which you met President Nixon?

EASLEY: The first occasion that I can recall was one afternoon when Mrs. Hannah Nixon and I were cleaning her house in preparation for Dick's arriving home from Duke University. He arrived early and I met him on that occasion. I was a youngster at the time. I guess I was probably ten years old.

ARENA: And so that would have been around the middle of the 1930's. This might help to refresh your memory, he attended Duke Law School from 1934 through 1937, so it would have . . .

EASLEY: Well, maybe he was away in politics. I thought he was away at school, but maybe this isn't the case.

ARENA: Unless there might have been a special occasion that brought him back to Duke. He did study for the Bar that summer when he graduated in 1937 and was admitted and began practicing in 1937. What was your connection with the Nixon family?

EASLEY: My connection with the family was that of being a youngster employee in the grocery store. I started at 25 cents an hour and that's what I ended up receiving--no, I think Mrs. Nixon did raise me up to 35 cents an hour; but mainly the connection was through working in the grocery store and also my acquaintance while attending the East Whittier Friends Church.

ARENA: Over the period roughly or exactly if you remember, when were you actually working in the store itself?

EASLEY: I believe I started working in the store in 1938 and it continued during the time I was in grade school and also my first years in high school at Fullerton High School.

ARENA: And, of course, during this time you would have had direct contact not only with the President but with all the members of the immediate family, such as Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, Mrs. Hannah Nixon, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] and Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon], as he is known by his close friends. What type of work did you do in the grocery store?

EASLEY: Well, I did practically everything from candling eggs to putting groceries on the shelf and keeping the produce department up to snuff. I scraped the butcher block in the butcher department. I helped Frank and Don cut meat. I ground hamburger and sausage. On numerous occasions Hannah Nixon gave me the project to get Eddie to eat something because he was a real fond devourer of candy bars. She couldn't ever get him to eat much so she would have me go back and prepare something for myself and try to encourage Eddie likewise to eat also. I even washed the dishes and the butcher equipment and what have you back there.

ARENA: Do you recall that not only did you look after Eddie in the store, but did you possibly take him to a different event, we'll say some daytime babysitting, to a ball game or anything like that?

EASLEY: No, we never really had events like that that we went to. We did have an event one time that was kind of a commercial enterprise, where Eddie got the idea that he would raise some money by raising some chickens, so we raised I guess it was two hundred or three hundred chickens in the backyard of the store there at Whittier Boulevard and Santa Gertrudes [Avenue]. From time to time when I first started working for the Nixons I used to go with Hannah to their home over in La Habra Heights and we would do various different things from cleaning the house and getting things in order when Dick would come home on his visits from being out of town. After they moved from La Habra Heights I performed the like-type chores when they moved to their residence on Whittier Boulevard just west of the county line, and in addition to that, Mrs. Nixon . . .

ARENA: Excuse me, would that be the present Scandia Gardens?

EASLEY: No, that residence which is now the smorgasbord was the residence that Hannah and Frank Nixon took after they retired. That's the old Macy house. It belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Macy Smith, and the residence I'm thinking of, firstly was in the La Habra Heights off of Highway 39 and the second residence they lived in was on Whittier Boulevard west of the county line on the north side of the boulevard. It as an old house that was later purchased by Leland Jordan. After they moved from the house on Whittier Boulevard they moved to a house in the hills behind Whittier College and I went up there on numerous occasions also.

ARENA: That would have been the house on Worham Drive.

EASLEY: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall the residence at La Habra Heights as being the one chosen for any particular reason? Was there the notion that it might be healthier living there or was a nicer home? Do you recall any particular reason why they would go way out to La Habra Heights?

EASLEY: Well, the first home they had was a ranch home which also encompassed some citrus groves, oranges and lemons. That was the first house in La Habra Heights. The second house was on Whittier Boulevard. The third one was the Whittier Hills behind Whittier College and then at a later date they moved to the old house just adjacent to the grocery store across the street from the Friends church and then they later moved over on Highway 39, which is the old Macy Smith house, and which is now the smorgasbord you are speaking of. He was a pioneer type of individual in the East Whittier and La Habra area. He owned several large citrus groves there.

ARENA: In your working for the Nixons do you recall that you handled the money, say, the cash register?

EASLEY: Oh, yes.

ARENA: How were your bosses to work for, in the sense that you were working for the family, of course, and did you find that there was any confusion from the standpoint of taking orders some someone like Mr. Frank Nixon and someone like Mrs. Hannah Nixon and even Donald, who I understand took care of the meats, and when Richard was in town or in the store? Was there any particular problem there?

EASLEY: Not really any problems per se. All I can say is I was very definitely inspired by Mrs. Hannah Nixon. She was one of the finest ladies I have ever known, a very devoted lady. I don't know when she found time to go to sleep, because when I came to work she was there and she had been there for some

time and when I left in the evenings she still continued to work and that lady, she was just one of the finest and most appealing persons I have ever come across, a devoted individual. She was devoted to her church, she was devoted to the business.

With respect to any conflict, the only conflict we ever used to have, and it was a situation where Frank was hard of hearing and on occasion his hearing aid used to go on the bum and Hannah would give me certain directions to do things and Frank wouldn't be aware of them because he couldn't hear what was going on, and he would see me doing something else and he would, in turn, want me to pursue another project.

Hannah used to run the store from the ground floor and Frank used to sit up in a little kind of an office or a tower, which was part of the old Friends church, actually part of the steeple, you'd say. He would climb up this narrow staircase that was cluttered with paper boxes that had been thrown up there to be used at a later date and Frank used to sit up there and kind of peer out at what was going on in the store below. And it was a real interesting place to work and very inspiring. Frank was very diligent and, if I might say, stubborn in a lot of instances but a very fine gentleman. In working with Don, Don pretty well stuck to the meat department along with his dad and basically Hannah ran the grocery end of the store.

ARENA: Do you recall that Mr. Frank Nixon had any particular habits or interests or special things that he liked to do?

EASLEY: Not necessarily. He was a hard-working individual. He was very diligent. I don't recall any habits . . .

ARENA: I'm thinking for example in particular that he liked to discuss politics and even argue.

EASLEY: Well, of course, I was a youngster at the time and he never discussed politics with me, although I did hear him from time to time discussing certain aspects of political life with customers that came in, but never with myself personally, although when I say--I don't say he was a man that liked to argue but he was a man of very definite opinions and he was very staunch and stern in his feelings in a lot of respects. But I don't say he would pick an argument with somebody just for the mere sake of argument, but he was pretty strenuous and an old Quaker-type individual who had strong and stern feelings about a lot of areas but not argumentative, so to speak.

ARENA: Do you recall that he did not allow cigarettes or alcohol in the store while he was there?

EASLEY: Now, I do know from time to time there was no alcohol in the store whatsoever. They did keep a carton or so of cigarettes under the counter and chewing tobacco and things like this, packages of Bull Durham for special customers that came in and I think now that you mention it and bring it up, basically

Frank didn't allow these things, but Hannah being the kind of a lady she was and trying to accommodate people, she was a very gracious lady. I'm sure she didn't do this out of disrespect to her husband, but only to try to accommodate other customers. But I know I remember selling chewing tobacco and Bull Durham and I think they had a couple of cans of snuff laying around, although they didn't use it.

As far as Frank being argumentative, I don't think this was the case. Maybe there might be some people who obtained this impression, but you know he was deaf in one or both ears and he wore a hearing aid and I guess in those days the hearing aid wasn't perfected too well, along with the failure of batteries and what have you, so he did talk loud because he couldn't hear. He couldn't hear how loud he was talking, so I think a lot of times people misinterpreted that he was being argumentative, but I'm sure this wasn't the case.

ARENA: Do you recall that you were attending Fullerton High School all the while that you were working in the grocery store?

EASLEY: No, really the first occasion I had to work in the grocery store was when I was attending Lowell Joint Elementary School, which was the only elementary school in the district. I guess there was somewhere in the vicinity of seventy kids in the entire school for the entire eighth grade.

ARENA: Do you recall that Edward attended with you and, of course, was younger, and Donald at that time?

EASLEY: Don was out of school and wasn't a student at that time. He was working full-time in the grocery store. Eddie, I believe, was two years behind me in school and he didn't really work per se in the grocery store. Eddie was lots of fun. He was a gangly sort of a kid. He was full of mischief, safely so. His mother would send him off to do something and he would arrive at the spot to do it, but within a few seconds he would either be out playing with the dog in the back or having some sort of a fun time for himself. He wasn't very industrious along those lines, but he was a very studious and smart young fellow.

ARENA: Do you recall if there were any others besides yourself who had the job of working in the store while personally looking after Edward?

EASLEY: Yes, Gladys Starbuck worked in the store from time to time, although the lady that really spent a lot of time in the store in addition to myself and Hannah Nixon was a lady by the name of [Frances Hibner] Frankie Milhous, who has since deceased.

ARENA: And it sounds as though she would have been a relative. Would you happen to know how, by any chance?

EASLEY: She was related to Hannah. I think she was her sister-in-law. Her husband was Frank [McClure Milhous] and so it's easy to sometimes get the two confused. The husband was Frank and her name was Frankie Milhous. They lived in the city of La Habra in a wood frame house north of the boulevard. Directly across the street [Charles William] Billy Milhous resided.

ARENA: Is there any particular incident concerning your contact with President Nixon above all others that stands out, say, the freshest in your mind, of your personal contact with him? I'm sure while you were working there you heard things about him while he was away, possibly reading about him in the newspapers; do you recall a personal incident that you witnessed that left a lasting impression on you?

EASLEY: Well, of course, I guess when you receive certain impressions from a family after you receive them over a period of time they're not as distinct as they would be from a first impression. All I can tell you is that I was very impressed as a youngster growing up by the family entirety. Hannah thought the world of Dick. She was very proud of him and the occasions that I had contact with him was very generous, he was very good to his mother, he was just a very congenial and gracious kind of jovial individual. He was always full of what you might say dry humor and he wasn't an overbearing sort of person in any situation that I ever came in contact with him. Of course, it was a "Hello and how are you?" and he wasn't a big shot politician, so to speak. He was a guy who came home to see his family and visit with the members of the community, and he was always just an ordinary sort of a common Joe sort of individual but very sincere.

ARENA: Although you were quite a bit younger than the President, did you ever come in contact with him through any outside groups or organizations? I am thinking, for example, you may have heard of the 20-30 Club and the service organizations, and possibly you might have had contact with him, say, seeing him appear in plays as an amateur volunteer local actor.

EASLEY: No, I never had an occasion to be involved with him in any respect except my associations with the family in the grocery store. I'm not a politician myself. I've never asked him for anything or called on him or his family for anything with respect to favors or anything along this line, although I was aware of the fact that he was much involved in the community in civic functions and service organizations of this nature.

ARENA: Do you recall ever having any direct contact with his wife, Mrs. Patrician Nixon?

EASLEY: No, I think she was from the Artesia [California] area or some place down there and never did I come in contact with her.

ARENA: And you have never had any contact with him while he was married or during this period, which would have been 1940.

EASLEY: No.

ARENA: So this period of working in the grocery store and looking after the youngest brother of the President, Edward, all this took place before he was married, do you recall?

EASLEY: No, he did occasionally come into the grocery store or into the home when I was working with Hannah and he would bring his wife, but I never had any social--I was just kind of an innocent bystander employee type. I was never a close contact or close friend with him.

ARENA: Do you recall that Mr. Frank Nixon and Mrs. Hannah Nixon were doing some baking around this time, by the way?

EASLEY: Yes, I can very vividly remember that. Next to the grocery store there was an adjacent, I guess you would call them a flat, as they would be called back East. They were apartment-type flats and they were adjacent to the grocery store and Mrs. Hannah Nixon and I on numerous occasions would go into these flats--one she had for her own personal use. They sometimes stayed there overnight rather than going to their other residence, and we would bake pies.

ARENA: And when you say we, you do mean we?

EASLEY: Oh, yes.

ARENA: You participated in that also?

EASLEY: Oh, yes. We would cook the cherry ingredients and the apples and the peaches and the apricots on these little four-burner gas stoves and then she had these old high ovens that she used to use with respect to baking these pies. She was a real fine cook along with being a good business manager. Actually she ran the store.

ARENA: If you don't mind my dwelling on this pie baking business a moment longer, since you're really the first person I've talked to who had that experience, who actually helped to bake with them? Would you mind recalling all that you can in the sense that you mention the particular pie and the particular ingredients, the particular source; for example, were the berries fresh or were they canned and any other particular things that would be of interest and that means everything of filling the picture as much as you can, including the price of the pies, the delivery to the customer and so forth, whatever comes to mind?



EASLEY: Well, the pies were fresh pies. They were not canned cherries, as I recall. I know she used to send me down next door to the grocery store to get fresh cherries and we would pit those cherries and we would peel the peaches and cut those up and the apples likewise, or apricots or whatever it might be, and she would actually prepare these pies. They were legitimate home-made pies. I was always amazed at the making of the pies because she never seemed to have a recipe per se on paper. It was always in her head and if you haven't worked with Hannah Nixon and being the fine, patient lady that she was in all the instances I ever had any contact with her, she would throw these pies together. She'd put a cup of sugar in here, some baking powder there and roll out the dough and what have you. She never had any recipe like I said, so to speak, and the kitchen was always in utter chaos. So I couldn't keep abreast with her in keeping the place cleaned up or what have you because she would make the messes with respect to making the pies and what have you faster than I could follow behind her to keep cleaned up. And that's pretty much the way it was, not only in making the pies but also the other aspects of the grocery store. Everything was kind of in a helter-skelter sort of a situation but very smoothly run. The place wasn't dirty, don't misunderstand me, but it wasn't tidy.

If you could understand this lady, she was extremely hard-working and always diligent in her doing something. I know in many instances people would come in and would request these pies and she would always be sold out, or oversold so to speak, and she would have to at the last minute, either late in the evening or early in the morning, cook up another batch of pies because somebody had requested more than she had on hand. I don't think she could have ever baked enough pies to satisfy the need, because she was just such a tremendous pie maker. I don't think she made any money on the pies. I think really it was more of an accommodation. Had she spent all of her time making pies, she probably would have lost money in the grocery store. I do remember this and I have followed the grocery industry somewhat since then only from a bystander's standpoint, because I grew up in this mama-and-papa-type operation and now we have the supermarkets and what have you.

This lady was just a fantastic individual. Everybody practically bought on credit in those times. It wasn't a cash-and-carry-type operation, so we used to--our cash flow wasn't what you would hope it would be. People would put everything on the tab, so to speak, and then when the fruit would be picked and the checks would come in from the packinghouse, then they would pay their monthly bill or quarterly bill or however it worked out. And the same thing applied as far as the butcher was concerned. We would go in the grocery store and write up a tab on it and post it on their particular ledger, and then at a later date they would come in and make either a token payment or pay a good portion of it if not all of it. But Hannah was a very devoted lady. She loved her family. She was always talking about Dick. She was humbly very proud of him.

ARENA: How would she demonstrate that? How did you get the impression that she was humbly proud of him?

EASLEY: She did it in a discreet sort of a manner. She just didn't come out--she wasn't this type of a person--she wouldn't come out and tell you she was proud of her son or proud of Eddie or proud of Don. You could just see in her own actions and the light in her eyes, and the little twinkling comments she used to make that she was just very fond of her family and especially proud of Dick because of the accomplishments that he had made.

ARENA: All the time that you knew Edward and to talk to him, whatever you recollect from those conversations and brother Donald. Was there ever any intimation that there was any jealousy on their part that the mother or the father was giving brother Richard more attention or more love or more credit than they? Did that ever come up at any time at all?

EASLEY: Never. You never got the slightest impression that she favored one over the other. The only instance that I can ever recall with respect to feeling of remorse was the fact that in earlier years there was either a son or two sons who had passed away and from time to time she would feel a little remorseful or make some comment about these youngsters who had been lost. I know that Eddie was a late arrival as far as her time in life was concerned, and sometimes I guess some of the older fellows used to kid old Frank as to how he brought about such an occurrence, but as far as Hannah was concerned you sometimes within your heart wanted to kind of slow her down, because you couldn't comprehend how she had the energy and how she had the drive to do what she did in a twenty-four-hour day.

She used to wear this old, kind of a maroon coat, and she was stoop-shouldered, if you recall, and her face was not disfigured, but she didn't have a perfect profile or she wasn't a pretty lady; but you saw so much beauty in her smile and the twinkle of her eye that it just overcame everything else. And you sometimes just wanted to hold her back because you couldn't understand how she could continue to go on like she did. She worked night and day, seven days a week. And if she wasn't burning the night oil at the grocery store she was up cleaning the house someplace before everything else transpired for the next day. I don't know when the lady took care of her own personal necessities, because she was just giving and going for everybody else, and always in a rush, rush hurry.

ARENA: Do you ever recall her making the comment which President Nixon has referred to in one of his books, that his mother had dreams that he might someday be a missionary in Central America? Did that ever come up in any way?

EASLEY: No, she never made a comment that I can recall along those lines. The only comment that I can recall is that she was hopeful that Dick would be a good, honest politician and pursue himself along these lines. At that stage there were several people in the La Habra and Whittier area who were of a missionary type who had gone to Central America; Homer Sharpless was one of them, and other people in the vicinity.

ARENA: Was there a Mr. Raymond Burbank?

EASLEY: Yes.

ARENA: Did you know him?

EASLEY: Yes.

ARENA: Did he go abroad for missionary activity?

EASLEY: Yes, he did, but I never can recall Hannah making any comment or aspirations with respect to Dick or Eddie or even Don.

ARENA: In other words, you don't recall even while Edward was a youngster; of course, now Donald was pretty well set and brother Richard was pretty well set. He had his law degree. You don't recall her, we'll say, harping on a particular theme that Edward should become this or that? You don't recall that?

EASLEY: No, as far as I can recall, all she wanted Eddie to do was gain some weight. [Laughter] He was quite a skinny, fragile fellow and kind of a genius or a straight "A" student, so to speak, and he never really cracked a book. He was just naturally so inclined. I never heard her make any comment with respect to Don or Eddie or other people in their family along this line as to what her aspirations were. I think she was more concerned about them being good Quakers and being good, honest people, not that they weren't, or were inclined to go in a different direction, not by any stretch of the imagination, but she was just a wonderful lady. In fact, I think the President looks like his mother and walks like his dad. [Laughter]

ARENA: Are there any other comparisons or differences you can note, say, where your knowledge of the President and your intimate knowledge of his parents, where you could say this trait comes from the mother and this trait comes from the father?

EASLEY: I would say that without exception he is probably more like his mother than he could ever be like his father. I mean his father was a different personality, not argumentative, but more boisterous, more definite in his opinions; not that the President isn't, but I think the President was just gifted with a lot of the fine qualities that his mother possessed.

ARENA: Was there any indication that the mother, who you say had quite a bit to do with actually running the store, also had an interest and more experience than might be supposed in politics, government? Was there any indication that she might have known more than one would suppose? I get the impression that she was quiet and reserved and not a politician, but is there any indication that that doesn't give the whole side of the story?

EASLEY: I think you're correct there. She was a very well-rounded lady. I mean she just wasn't a hausfrau by any stretch of the imagination, or one who worked in the grocery store under the husband, Frank. I think you got the impression all the way along in the various lines you worked with Hannah and you observed her, whether it was in the church or whether it was in the grocery store, or her handling of people or her comments of people after they would leave the store, she was never a bitter person. She was always very humble and very gracious. She was always worried about the store and how they would make ends meet and how they would be able to pay Smart & Final [Wholesale Grocers], because some of their customers weren't coming across in those times with the payments on their grocery bill, but she was never ever anything but very courteous and very kind with the people. In fact, I used to think that she was extremely overspent herself in every aspect in trying to be a fine woman and example.

As far as politics are concerned, I'm sure she understood government. I'm sure she understood the aspects of the government, not lightly so, but she wasn't a flag waver but she was one of depth. She was by no stretch of the imagination a grandstander. She was just a person that it was a real pleasure to see her, to work with her and to observe her, and you could just tell there was a whole lot there.

ARENA: She did belong to some organizations, such as the East Whittier Women's Improvement Club, I understand, and possibly different committees of the East Whittier Friends Church; did you have any opportunity to observe her in this capacity as we'll say as an organization woman? Did you know if she had any particular functions or responsibilities and how she accomplished them?

EASLEY: I would say, as best I can recall, she was one who was instrumental in doing the job that she did by virtue of her actions and by virtue of how people would observe her. She wasn't one who would get up and give speeches or she wasn't the chairman type that would barnstorm something through or she wasn't a hardsell sort of a lady, not at all. She worked on various committees that I was aware of in the church, but you gained the knowledge of what she was pursuing by virtue of the actions and the way she pursued them, not because she got up on the pedestal or pulpit, so to speak, and made speeches or tried to put her point across in this manner.

ARENA: I believe you mentioned that you were a member of the same church, the East Whittier Friends Church, and if it isn't too personal, I believe you mentioned this off the tape, and of course we can remove it if you wish. You had married a Catholic, and having this intimate association with Mrs. Nixon and knowing that she was very sincere and very dedicated to her Quaker beliefs and knowing that you were just more than a hired hand, in that you looked after a member of her family and, therefore, there was a kind of special relationship between you and her, did she know at the time that you were going with a Catholic girl, did you marry the girl while she was living and what was her reaction to that fact, if that came up in any way?

EASLEY: No, it never did come about, and I better give you a little background on that. My wife [Dorothy Easley] was raised in a Catholic environment and her entire family is and was Catholic, although at the time my wife and her family came to Whittier they lived in the rear apartment that was moved from the side of the store to the back of the store and they rented from the Nixons. At that time when my wife and her family came to California they attended the East Whittier Friends Church. My wife had for a time left the Catholic faith, so really the fact that my wife had been a Catholic really was of no concern to Mrs. Nixon as far as I was able to determine, but at the time I was engaged to my wife she attended the East Whittier Friends Church. She sang in the choir and for a time, as I mentioned, had left the Catholic Church but at a later date after Mrs. Nixon's passing, returned to the Catholic Church, so there was really no conflict there as far as religion was concerned because it wasn't obvious that my wife-- or maybe Mrs. Nixon wasn't even aware of the fact that my wife had been or was a Catholic at one time.

ARENA: Then it never came up that Mrs. Nixon or any of the Nixons knew that you were dating and marrying a Catholic girl. In other words, did that knowledge come up as far as you know? What I am interested in as you might surmise is did they show any disappointment, did they show any prejudice if they knew that she was a Catholic girl?

EASLEY: I never knew of any instance when Mrs. Nixon was prejudiced against anybody or anything or any religion for that matter.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did you note that there were ever any blacks or Mexicans who not only dealt with the store, but had some intimate contact with the family? In this sense was there not any prejudice but was there any positive association? Did you, say, see a black or someone of a Mexican background eat at the supper table or something like that?

EASLEY: I don't think Mrs. Nixon was prejudiced in any way. Of course, I never saw any black or Negro people in the store because they just weren't in that area, not that they weren't allowed or she wouldn't be happy to have them come in. There were numerous Mexicans who came in the store. They worked for the Murphy and Leffingwell Ranch, and they would come in and buy their groceries and their staple items and what have you and even some of them had credit accounts there, so I know she wasn't--she never made any mention about the Mexican people or minority races in any way that I can ever recall and knowing the lady as I did, and do, she wasn't the type of person that would have any prejudices, so you didn't look in wonderment at how her thinking would be or what her reaction would be because it was just a foregone conclusion that she was not prejudiced of anybody.

ARENA: Mr. Easley, I can't thank you enough for the benefit of this interview and your answering all of my questions so fully and frankly. Thank you.