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Mildred Gibbons Fink (October 21, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. MILDRED GIBBONS FINK

October 21, 1971
Lindsay, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview with Mrs. Mildred Gibbons Fink in Lindsay, California. The date is October 21, 1971, Arena interviewing. This is interview #1. Shall we begin, Mrs. Fink, by my asking you where you grew up?

FINK: In Lindsay, four miles east and south of town, where I was born, on the same place that my grandfather set out in 1913. Frank [Francis Anthony Nixon] and Hannah [Milhous Nixon] lived there when Harold [Samuel Nixon] was the only child they had. In 1916 my father bought ten acres of it from Grandfather.

ARENA: And in this case by grandfather, you mean Franklin Milhous of Whittier [California].

FINK: Yes.

ARENA: And while we're on that subject, just what is your relationship--how are you related to President Nixon?

FINK: Our mothers were sisters. My mother was Martha [Milhous Gibbons], his mother was Hannah.

ARENA: You couldn't summarize your whole mother, of course, but how could you summarize some of the main activities or events of her life? Was she a professional woman? When did she get married? Whatever comes to mind that would help to give us a broad picture in a brief amount of time.

- FINK: She was second from the oldest in the family of Frank and Almira Milhous. She was married when she was almost thirty, in 1913.
- ARENA: A rough estimate around 1912. We can always check that out for sure.
- FINK: My father was about forty when he was married. He had worked a number of years on the railroad and then they moved to Modesto [California], and later to Watsonville [California]. They were farming.
- ARENA: He moved around different areas?
- FINK: No, that's why he got out of the railroad business as conductor with Southern Pacific Railroad, and eventually they bought the place.
- ARENA: And that's this area in Lindsay?
- FINK: Yes, in Lindsay.
- ARENA: You say it was thirty acres?
- FINK: It was. Harold Beeson bought twenty acres. He didn't live on it. We lived on the ten and had the house there, and Beesons lived out west of Strathmore [California].
- ARENA: And for a while, you say also, Frank and Hannah lived here but they did not own the land. They just worked it?
- FINK: I think that's the way it was. You asked about my mother. I think perhaps the best way to describe her would be to say that people still remember her, and by the way they talk you know that she was dearly loved by many people. She was a graduate nurse, Los Angeles General [Hospital], 1908, and didn't go back to nursing after she was married until I was about fifteen. In those days the nurse's day was a long, rigorous day-- a twenty-hour day was nothing too unusual, but she preferred the hospital with a "short" twelve-hour day, and did many hours of special nursing. I had the impression that she spoiled them almost irreparably. Her former patients say this: She was a good nurse, very conscientious. I can remember, "Don't ever take anything, even an aspirin, until you read the label, take the pill out, put the lid on the bottle, read the label, put it back on the shelf." That's the way it was done.
- ARENA: I believe you said it's only recently that she has passed away.

FINK: She died in 1968 in the Lindsay Hospital. Some of the nurses had worked with her when she was in the Lindsay area here in the hospital. They couldn't seem to do enough for her, because she was very undemanding as a patient. In fact, they would come in every fifteen or twenty minutes to see how she was, to see if everything was all right.

ARENA: What was the cause of death, if I may ask?

FINK: Well, I suppose, senility; ultimately pulmonary edema. This wasn't a thing of long standing. She knew when she wasn't really tracking correctly. She would sometimes laugh at herself; "Oh, I didn't say that right." Lindsay was a nice place for her to be because in her room, in the extended-care wing of the hospital, she could look out and see orange groves. She would say, "Oh, isn't it nice that I can see the orchard from here. I can just expect Papa at any minute to come down to the end of the row behind the team, and I just know I'll see him."

ARENA: Did she spend most of her life in Lindsay? Had she been here after your father bought his land and remained here, because I do believe she lived in Whittier for awhile near the Whittier College campus, but I have no idea how long?

FINK: They lived in this area until my father died in 1947. I think it was 1948 when she bought the little house in Whittier across the street from the school, the college.

ARENA: Any reason why she wanted to leave here that you can think of than living with you?

FINK: She wanted to live in town. She didn't want a brand new house. She didn't want a very tiny house. She certainly didn't want an apartment and she had looked. In fact, she and my father had both looked and couldn't find what they wanted until she found the little house in Whittier. Did you ever see it?

ARENA: No. I've been told it was close to the school, that's all, close to Whittier College.

FINK: Her lots are part of a parking lot now.

ARENA: Well, I guess I never will see it.

FINK: It was at the extreme east edge of that parking lot.

- ARENA: As you are going down Philadelphia Street, coming from the main part of Whittier, coming from Greenleaf [Avenue], it would be on the left side.
- FINK: Yes.
- ARENA: Because they do have parking lots on both sides now.
- FINK: It was a little old-fashioned, two-story house and just suited her things (antiques). Many pieces of furniture here were hers.
- ARENA: I noticed that you have some pictures of a motorcycle which you say was probably hers, and a letter regarding her ownership and use of the motorcycle around 1910. And if I may, this is a letter that was written by your grandmother, her mother, and postmarked Dennison, Texas, July 28, 1910. "Dear Mattie: How is thy side by this time? I hear thee has been riding on a motorcycle. I should think such a ride as that might jolt thy wound open." Which is quite interesting. And I believe you said it was only your mother that had the motorcycle or possibly others?
- FINK: Bicycle--the motorcycle belonged to a friend.
- ARENA: Oh.
- FINK: I am not sure of the ownership of the motorcycle, but the bicycle was her main mode of transportation.
- ARENA: She used the bicycle, rather than the car at this period?
- FINK: Well, there were, I think, not many cars.
- ARENA: Not in 1910.
- FINK: No, not very many. They had an Overland--I have a picture of their going through the Wawona Tree near Yosemite [California], Edith [Milhous Timberlake], Martha [Milhous Gibbons], Grandfather [Franklin Milhous] and Grandmother [Almira Milhous].
- ARENA: I notice that your grandmother also was prone to take long trips. I believe she attended President Nixon's Duke University Law School commencement.
- FINK: She wouldn't have missed it. I think she was eighty-three then.
- ARENA: She was quite up in years, yes.

FINK: She also went on trips with us--three girls, two grown-ups and Grandmother. Grandmother was about as wide as a handkerchief anyway, but this last package--"Oh, Petty (a name we all shared), just put it on my lap. I've lots of room." Well, if Grandmother had had her way, there wouldn't have been any way for her to see out. I think she might have objected had it come past her eyes, but that would be the only thing. She was very adjustable--the best traveler you could ever find.

ARENA: Was she prone to sickness along the way or problems like that?

FINK: I don't think she would have admitted it, had she been sick.

ARENA: And she enjoyed these trips?

FINK: Immensely.

ARENA: As well as the destination, the idea of the trip. To what extent did the President have an extended close contact with your mother and with you? For example, he actually lived for some six months in the home of Mrs. [Janel Beeson where the idea was to study and learn to play the piano. Was there a period of illness or a period of temporary, whatever the cause, where President Nixon lived with your family or vice versa, where you lived with Hannah and Frank Nixon, his parents, for a period of time?

FINK: Almost every summer I went down to Whittier. There were two cousins my age and I would stay either in Riverside [California] with Timberlakes [Philip & Edith Timberlake] or in Whittier with Harrisons [Russell & Elizabeth Harrison] or stay with Grandmother [Almira Milhous].

No, Richard was older. He was in my older sister's group. Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] was in my middle sister's group, and then there was my group. Christmastime we often went down. It was a very close family and there were many of us who could come. And it seemed to me that the little ones were off sleeping some place. We older children would gather in the stairhall, and it seemed the older ones were higher up on the stairway and I was down toward the bottom step. I remember those times pretty well because even within a family, you love everyone equally, but some people seem to mean more than others. I was always impressed with what Richard had to say because he sounded as if he had thought before he answered. (A characteristic of greatness--not shared by all of us!)

ARENA: What occasions offered the opportunity for you to hear him? In other words, would these be occasions of just cousins getting together or were there some formal occasions? Did you ever attend, say, his piano recitals here in Lindsay? Did you ever attend any of his graduations, even in elementary school? Did you ever attend any of the plays in which he participated on the college level as well as in the community theatre of Whittier, by any chance?

FINK: No, because our school was going on when his school was going on. However, piano recitals were general, I don't remember that Aunt Jane [Beeson] had a separate one for him, but I have a program in which he is listed as having played perhaps two solos, and I think a two-piano number or perhaps a duet. I don't remember how it was listed, but I have that program.

ARENA: Do you remember attending that, by any chance?

FINK: Certainly, I played the violin.

ARENA: To the best of your recollection, would you describe that recital, all that was involved, including the President's part, of course, but just what was done, who was there and how long did it take and whether refreshments-- anything that comes to mind regarding that?

FINK: At Aunt Jane's house things would be pretty proper because this is the way she likes them.

ARENA: Excuse me. This would be held at her house?

FINK: Yes.

ARENA: And not at the present one which is located just across from the Friends Church. This would be when she was living in the country or would it?

FINK: Yes, it was in the country, but the house has burned down since then.

ARENA: But the main thing is, it is not the present one?

FINK: No, nor the one north of town, where they lived for some time. But, I think they only had the one piano. They had a beautiful reed organ, also. And you asked me who was there? Some people who are still around the community--Harold Cameron who lives in San Jose [California], Frances Swanson, Eva Spangler (Goodman), Dorothy Bohland (Oftedahl),

Dorothy Seaman (Farrell), my sister Edith Catherine (Nunes), my sister Laurene Gibbons. I remember that particular program. Everybody was upset because the printed program said "Laurence Gibbons" and this caused a bit of commotion among the twelve-thirteen year old boys, because they thought my father [Laurance E. Gibbons] was going to play. They liked him and they kidded him about this. Instead, my sister Laurene was to play.

ARENA: How is Laurene spelled?

FINK: L A U R E N E.

ARENA: Are you aware, I'm sure you are, but your opinions or comments on this, that your cousin Donald's [Francis Donald Nixon] daughter Lawrene is spelled LAWRENE, if I'm not mistaken. How can you account for that?

FINK: Well, my father's name was spelled with a "U", Irish they say, and her grandfather's name was spelled with a "W". And incidentally there is a lovely letter that Richard wrote Lawrene [Mae Nixon Anfinson] to Clara Jane [Nixon] and Don, when Lawrene was born in which he commented on my sister, Laurene, and the similarity of names. He said some very nice things about Laurene. My sister died at twenty-five of cancer. She was a very courageous person. She was a nurse; but she would not fall prey to self-pity. She was very angry at one time when a very emotional teacher came in to her room and started to cry and in a quavering voice said, "Oh, my dear." My sister, almost as if she had been waiting for some time to really say something she felt like saying, said to her, "Don't put me in the position of having to sympathize with you." Which might have been a little strong but this was very late in her short life, possibly less than a month before she died. She was a very direct person.

ARENA: And she was not married at the time though?

FINK: No. She had been graduated from St. Luke's Nursing School in San Francisco [California] and had been out only two or three years.

ARENA: Any idea where that letter that the President wrote might be? He had written it to Don and Clara Jane, his brother and sister-in-law, and they should be the ones who would have it if it's still around?

FINK: It was in Lawrene's baby book, and knowing Clara Jane and Donald it's still there. They keep things. This was a very good letter, special I would say.

ARENA: Did you have anything you wanted to add to the question of the recital and your recollection of that? Please go on.

FINK: All the parents of all the children were there. Aunt Jane's recitals were pretty special, always homemade ice cream and always many cookies, perhaps some little sandwiches and always a punch bowl. After the recital Uncle Harold [Beeson] would play his mandolin and sing. Probably not then, but whoever could, played violin. Aunt Jane played the piano; we would sing. I remember "Moonlight and Roses" especially.

ARENA: And the singing would consist of popular songs of the day, or would they?

FINK: These would be popular songs. They were not hymns. They were happy songs of the times. Nothing too wild. I guess they had some pretty wild ones, but they weren't sung. Just fun singing.

ARENA: There was nothing like the frowning upon the music that does exist among some Quaker groups, I understand, where music is not only frowned upon, it is not tolerated? And there was nothing like that among any of the relatives that you can recall?

FINK: No, Grandfather had an accordian, and perhaps he played the guitar. I know my mother did and Mary Alice [Milhous Cummings] did. Mary Alice is Mother's half-sister--daughter of Franklin & Emily Armstrong Milhous.

ARENA: Your mother played the guitar.

FINK: Yes. Jessamyn's [West] account in the Friendly Persuasion seems to be much as I had heard it from my mother.

ARENA: But the account that there were some Quakers, and in this case some relatives, who definitely took a dim view, whereas it was very possible your grandfather's father was the one who started the pro-music interest among the family.

FINK: He just seemed to have so much music it had to have an outlet.

ARENA: Would I be correct in saying it was both your grandfather and grandmother, Almira, who had this strong interest? In this case, I'm thinking of Grandfather Franklin Milhous and Grandmother Almira, who were very strong, and when you would go to Whittier for these annual Christmas reunions it would be at their home?

FINK: Yes.

ARENA: So this love of music and music-playing instruments, as well as singing, was very definitely a part of that life and your growing up in it?

FINK: Yes. Uncle Griffith [William Milhous] was a music teacher. Uncle Griffith is Mother's half-brother--son of Franklin and Emily Armstrong Milhous.

ARENA: I have to interview him yet.

FINK: No, he's not here.

ARENA: Oh, I see. There is a Griffith Milhous in the Whittier area, though. Possibly, I thought he would be in the Whittier area. I'll have to check that.

FINK: No, he died when Ted Marshburn (Dr. Theodore Franklin Marshburn - Whittier) was still in elementary school.

ARENA: Oh, I'm sorry.

FINK: Well, you see, he was older quite a bit than my mother and Edith [Milhous Timberlake] in that family. I don't know how old he was when my grandfather married Almira.

ARENA: So you know he is not living, but he is the one that taught music in the Whittier area?

FINK: Yes, at the Whittier Boys' School.

ARENA: It was called the Whittier Boys' School?

FINK: I don't know what they call it now, but it was for boys who needed help.

ARENA: Oh, would this be the idea of the Nelles School for Boys, which is a school for boys who need reforming?

FINK: It used to be at the west end of Philadelphia [Street].

ARENA: And it still is.

FINK: What did you call it?

ARENA: They call it the Nelles School for Boys. And that is where he taught among other places?

FINK: I think he taught other places (private lessons).

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you could confirm this story that at a recital President Nixon leapfrogged over one of the piano benches and someone brought that fact to Aunt Jane Beeson's attention. She didn't witness it, but she was told that and she politely had him sit down correctly. You didn't witness that leapfrog, by any chance, or know anything about that story one way or the other?

FINK: I can't imagine it, at Aunt Jane's recital, with Uncle Harold there? If I did see it--boys leapfrog anyway and I always thought boys were kind of strange creatures because we had three girls in our family. It isn't really impossible, but if he did do it I expect Aunt Jane did ask him to sit properly, because you made your bows properly and you sat down so, and after you were on the bench you sat properly, put your hands correctly and all--not out of meanness or for arbitrary reasons, but because it is more enjoyable to watch one who is sitting properly than it is to see one slouching. And she thinks they should be dressed properly.

ARENA: Was Aunt Jane Beeson virtually the only source of such music lessons in this small community of Lindsay at that time or not?

FINK: No.

ARENA: About how many others do you think there might have been where youngsters could go and receive music lessons?

FINK: Well, I can think of four or five here in Lindsay. I'm going on this: People who are Richard's age or perhaps a bit younger who tell about different teachers. There were two in Strathmore [California]. Have you been to Strathmore?

ARENA: I intend to.

FINK: Strathmore is much smaller than Lindsay. There were many teachers in Porterville [California]. But, of course, since he was living with Beesons, Aunt Jane was his teacher. I think there were as many or more piano music teachers then than there are now because no radio, no television, no movies and that sort of thing; you played the piano or played an instrument. Most everyone, it seemed to me when I was a youngster, was taking some kind of music lessons.

ARENA: Do you recall Richard's--in this case President Nixon's--behavior during, before and after the recital, in this sense: Did he appear nervous; did he relish the experience; did he seem to need any prodding to do what had to be done? Is there any recollection in your mind one way or the other concerning any of this--your witnessing his behavior?

FINK: I don't remember anyone's ever being nervous at a piano recital because Aunt Jane saw to it that you knew your selection well enough so that you would feel quite confident about it, and she seldom allowed music scores to be used--music was memorized. I can't ever imagine his being nervous or upset about something he knew he was going to do anyway, or had to do anyway. He always seemed to be poised. His being so much older than I, I was quite impressed by his age, and in one sense I was thinking about the feeling of respect for him. Children don't show or have this feeling too often for another child. I've seen it among children in my own classroom, but rarely.

ARENA: Could some of the experiences that we were discussing a moment ago be brought in at this point, too? For example, the annual Christmas parties that were held in Grandfather and Grandmother Milhous' home in Whittier. From your standpoint, as a youngster attending these--I have interviewed those who are older--what were they like? When did they begin? When did they end? How about the traveling to and fro and all that? Whatever you recall of that would be very helpful.

FINK: They say the first time I went I was about a year old, and crawling around and all this sort of thing. My mother took us down on the train. We left from Strathmore and had the berth made up before we got on the train. We went to Los Angeles [California] and someone met us there. Anyway, we slept and got down there in the morning--that was a long time ago.

ARENA: Excuse me, but it did involve sleeping and traveling and therefore sleeping overnight?

FINK: Oh, yes, on the train. It took a long time. Until trains stopped running, it took eight hours. I took the children down on the train one time and it was--
FOREVER. The first trips after the train were made in a Mitchell touring car with isinglass side curtains. It was a very long trip, not over the beautiful roads we have now. I remember one time we were going and we came to the area south of Gorman [California] and a very strong wind caught the car. My father always had the side curtain off the driver's side, and the wind ripped the top off the automobile. We got a rope and tied it down, but my father would not go into the yard at Grandmother's with the rope showing. He waited until dark because it looked pretty crummy. It was a long trip but we always thought it was great fun. I admire my parents their fortitude because it was a seven hour trip. My father wasn't the best driver, but we would be down maybe two days, maybe three, and then come back home again. We couldn't go after we got smudge pots for the ranch, because then we had to worry about the

temperature and light pots on cold nights. We would stay at Grandmother's--my parents always stayed there. Sometimes we children would be farmed out to different sisters there in town.

ARENA: Do you recall with whom you stayed?

FINK: I stayed usually at Grandmother's until I got to be a little bit older, and then I would stay out at Harrison's. At grandmother's we younger ones slept in the green room, and Aunt Edna [Kimbrough Burdg] always slept in there. Aunt Edna wasn't anybody's aunt but she stayed there once in a while and she snored, powerfully. That was a fate about as bad as death not to get your sleep. I always thought sleep was really important when I was little.

You know it's a funny thing, I don't remember the food. I know there was more than enough for twice as many people, but somehow it wasn't important. The parlor was always closed off. There were sliding doors from the parlor to the living room, and then there was another door into the hall. The doors were kept closed until everybody was ready for the Christmas tree. And the Christmas tree always touched the ceiling and spread around. There was hardly any room for anybody to get in there, but it was great fun. Uncle Griffith would lead the singing. We always sang "Joy to the World." I expect Aunt Jane played, or maybe one of the children who could play well. We'd sing songs like that. Then we'd have the Christmas tree. I think gifts weren't all that important, I can't remember them. We had dinner and then there would be the dishes. Since I was a girl of the lower echelon type--dishes, dishes, dishes, washed by the ton in Grandmother's old copper sink in the pantry. There was always a lot of talk and a lot of fun.

ARENA: Was there going off to services at the First Friends Church at the time, do you recall?

FINK: Oh, I suppose so, if it were Christmas day and Sunday at the same time.

ARENA: I just wondered if you all went in one big bunch. Guess you'd have to, in the sense that there would be only one service.

FINK: Well, Nixons went to the East Whittier Friends. It's as simple as this: If we were in Whittier on any Sunday we went to church--probably to the "big" (First Friends) church "uptown" (Whittier proper).

ARENA: They came there in 1922 and stayed there really until he retired from the business there in 1947. This was Frank and Hannah. Then they left to live in Pennsylvania, so if that helps you in any way, between 1922 when they moved from Yorba Linda [California] all the way to 1947 they were in East Whittier. It was before that 1922 date that they were in Yorba Linda and also in Lindsay for a brief period, too?

FINK: I remember Yorba Linda. There were other relatives there--I remember vaguely going there. Now whether it was to see the Nixons or not I don't know. I do remember times when I went out to East Whittier after Nixons had the store. But I don't remember that we ever went as a big, big group to church.

No, it wasn't all dishes these Christmas times, which is all recorded, and people will think I felt a grudge. I didn't. I got out of as much work as the rest of them could. I did pretty well at that business. But there was a lot of fun and a lot of talk.

ARENA: Was there anything in the way of serious recitations, poetry or reading of the Bible? Was there a set time during the period when possibly Grandfather Milhous or Grandmother Almira would read from the Bible, or were there formal periods, and do you recall what they were like and who did what, including President Nixon, if he possibly was called upon at any time while you were there to address--it must have been a very august gathering of all the relatives and, of course, you were young. But I was just wondering if anything like that did come up, or if he played?

FINK: Oh, yes, anybody who could play the piano eventually was asked to play. The grownups sat in the living room and in the parlor. Different ones would perform and those of us who were lucky enough not to be able to play well enough weren't called upon. Re: Christmas "program"--a custom still observed at [Olive & Oscar] Marshburn's family party near Christmas.

Before any breakfast at Grandmother's house, each person recited a Bible verse, in turn, around the table. Grandmother was last to contribute and she read a scripture lesson from her Bible. A short grace from either the most honored guest or the youngest child, and then breakfast.

I remember Richard's reciting "The Village Blacksmith" for some occasion. That could have been Christmas for all I know. And another one: "The Wonderful Ride of Paul Revere."

ARENA: Whether he did it for that occasion or not, what do you recall about his recitation?

FINK: He said them very fast, simply because he seemed always in a hurry anyway.

ARENA: Do you recall how it was brought on? Was there a bit of coaxing? Was his father kind of edging him into the arena, so to speak? Do you recall what the background of the recitation itself was?

FINK: You were asked to do something and you might think "aah" but you didn't ever say it out loud. You did it if it were something you could do, and they didn't ask anything that was impossible, I think.

I remember sometimes my parents and we girls would go out to Nixons, and I can remember some pretty exciting arguments--they didn't concern me, they weren't fighting. It was politics --things that were being done in the nation--that sort of thing.

ARENA: Do you recall who some of the participants in the discussions were? Was it Frank Nixon?

FINK: Oh, everybody. I shied away from arguments. Frank and Donald and Harold and Richard, and I suppose Arthur [Burdg Nixon].

ARENA: Do you recall Arthur, by the way?

FINK: Yes.

ARENA: How would you describe him, because up to now no one has?

FINK: Oh, he was a lot of fun. As I think of him I think of Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon] in personality. He was a beautiful child. I remember the funeral--he and I were both seven I think when he died.

ARENA: Do you recall the cause of his death?

FINK: It was thought to have been tubercular spinal meningitis or tubercular meningitis, perhaps.

ARENA: This is little Arthur, not Harold.

FINK: My mother was there during his illness. She had been asked to stay with them to help take care of Arthur. Frank and Hannah didn't want to have an autopsy performed, thus the question of what the illness was.

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ARENA: What was the reaction of Richard Nixon, from your own recollection, to the death of his younger brother, Arthur? Maybe you might recall his conduct at the funeral itself or at home, if you remained in the area or anything like that.

FINK: Well, as I've said, at that time age made a greater difference than now. I don't remember too much about him especially. I remember Aunt Hannah and Uncle Frank seemed to want to hold me in their laps quite a bit. This was rather unusual for them, but this was what they wanted to do. I remember it was especially sad. I remember that I didn't really want to look at anybody, I didn't want to see their sadness. I haven't thought of this for so many years. But I do remember their holding me close.

ARENA: On the question of the deaths of the sons, as a matter of fact, do you recall that ever coming up afterwards by Frank and Hannah Nixon or by the boys themselves, referring to either of the boys after they had died, Harold and Arthur?

FINK: Yes, "We did this with Harold," or "Harold and I did this." It was just a normal conversation.

ARENA: The reason I asked that, we were mentioning before, possibly not on tape, and maybe you don't want to discuss it, the attitude of your mother regarding death and the different attitudes held by some of the other members of the family.

FINK: Death is inevitable. She was very unhappy when death came cruelly or at an untimely age. You were asking if that was the first funeral I had gone to. No, I can remember my Great-grandmother's [Elizabeth Griffith Milhous] funeral when I was five, six perhaps. Great-grandmother Elizabeth Milhous was my Grandfather Franklin's mother. She was ninety-six or so when she died.

ARENA: Was she the one that was known as the preaching Quaker too?

FINK: Right. I can remember her very clearly.

ARENA: Please, whatever you can remember would be very helpful.

FINK: She didn't have a great deal of hair, but she always wore a little band around her head and it seemed to me a little cap, usually. This is possibly why Grandfather didn't have much hair, Grandfather Franklin. He wore wigs. And I'll tell you about that.

ARENA: That would be very helpful.

FINK: He would take my mother to the wig maker and say, "I want to have a wig made of hair just the color of this child's." My mother had auburn hair. In going through mother's things I came to a box that looked strangely familiar, I think it had been given to me one time with stationery in it. So I opened it. And in opening it, the sides came down so far that a vacuum had been created and the contents of the box flew out--three of Grandfather's wigs. Well, it was quite a traumatic situation. I was sure there was a little animal in there. The wigs went across the room. My sister was going to go through some things and I put everything back together and said, "You can go through these." She did exactly as I did. The vacuum created an explosion of wigs and, of course, the great yelp. So, that is the story of Grandfather's wigs. He was surely buried with one, but we keep things in our family and why the extra ones were kept, I don't know why. They were in very good shape.

ARENA: Was it, from your recollection, a touchy subject among all of the relatives; were you cautioned by your mother not to bring it up in any way or not to look at it, or anything like that?

FINK: No. Actually I was only nineteen months old when Grandfather died. But when he went swimming, I don't know whether he had his wig on or not. I have a picture where he is swimming with a handkerchief tied around his head, or a cloth of some type. And when he did orchard work, you know, it was pretty dusty walking behind a piece of equipment pulled by a team of horses, he wore a cloth around his head. I don't know whether it was to keep his wig clean or save his wig. Maybe it wasn't even on. I don't know.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if that trait of baldness, possibly premature baldness, is inherited by any other members of the family?

FINK: Yes, me.

ARENA: How interesting.

FINK: Yes, what is it they say? The maternal grandmother determines the hair pattern.

ARENA: I see, because the President doesn't seem to have that problem.

FINK: No. He's getting a little bit higher forehead, but then that's all right, too. But there are some of us-- my mother's hair was very thin. My hair unfortunately is in that shape. But, no, as a subject it wasn't touchy, as I heard about it. At that time wigs weren't as common as they are now, and I was pretty impressed when Mother said that her father wore a wig. Of course, at nineteen months old I didn't remember it. The family would talk about many things. Mother talked about relatives three or four generations back as if they were her contemporaries. And perhaps this was one reason why death was no great traumatic thing to her. She grieved, yes, but it was part of life.

ARENA: We were speaking I think when the tape was off, and it might be worthwhile looking into now that it is on again, the matter of the game known as Pit. Would you describe that, please?

FINK: Very noisy. Uncle Frank, my father and Donald and Richard, Edith and Laurene, my sisters, and possibly my mother. She liked to play games. I don't know whether Aunt Hannah played or was there at the table. She wouldn't have made much noise, I'm sure. But it was very noisy, and they would get a corner on rye and I think that was good, but I never could tell what was good and what was bad because it was so noisy..

ARENA: Did it involve any particular items such as cards or any particular things?

FINK: Yes, cards.

ARENA: It was played with cards?

FINK: Yes. It's a Milton Bradley game. I've seen it in stores recently. To some people in the family cards are not very acceptable things to have around. But these are not like playing cards, per se.

ARENA: I see, they are a special card just for that game.

FINK: Right.

ARENA: I see. How about Monopoly, which might have been of interest?

FINK: I think Monopoly wasn't around.

ARENA: At that time?

FINK: No.

ARENA: Speaking of cards, though, you know it has been said that the President was rather good in his Navy career as a poker player. Do you recall personally his playing cards, poker in particular, or anything?

FINK: No, that is all vicarious experience. You'd have to talk to my sister. I think he was said to have been adept at this sort of thing when they were going to Whittier College.

ARENA: Speaking of that "taboo" area, with quotation marks around it, the other taboo was that of drinking. Do you know if any of that took place during this period, you know, as youngsters smoke away from the parents, take a drink away from their parents?

FINK: You mean during college times?

ARENA: Well, any time, because the attitude, I believe, of Frank and Hannah was that they didn't enjoy it, they didn't enjoy seeing it, but I was just wondering . . .

FINK: It was forbidden.

ARENA: It was forbidden.

FINK: I never saw Richard smoke and I never saw him drink.

ARENA: That answers that. How about dancing?

FINK: I think for the very same reason, we just didn't dance when we were kids.

ARENA: I wonder if you were aware, though, when he campaigned at Whittier College for the presidency of the student government, that was his pledge, that dancing should be allowed on the campus, and I was just wondering if you knew anything before in his life that made him interested in that sort of thing, if that had come up, or any experiences that might throw light. . . .

FINK: I heard the other day that he hadn't danced until he was twenty-one. I wonder if this is exactly correct because of this story, and because there were dances at the college. In those days you couldn't turn on television, so you went out and did different things. There were always big bands in various auditoriums.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, were you also at Whittier College?

FINK: Not until I went back to start work toward my master's degree in 1966. I went down in 1970 to graduation ceremonies to receive my degree. I expect one of the reasons I chose Whittier College was because my grandparents were among the founders and my mother went there when it was called the Academy. I suppose it was comparable to high school. The first summer I stayed with Mother across the street from the school. I returned in 1968 and 1969, but her house was gone then.

ARENA: The Academy was a private prep school, in a way. It was the forerunner of the college.

FINK: Did you know that Aunt Hannah graduated three times?

ARENA: No, I did not.

FINK: One section was called the Academy. When they added two years she was graduated again. When it became a four year college she was graduated again. There might have been cause for sibling rivalry, both for the opportunity of further education and for the graduation gifts.

ARENA: Is there any other experience or any other subject that you wish to bring up regarding your personal association with President Nixon that I have not mentioned? Or not only with the President personally but other members of the family, that might throw light on his life up until 1945, the pre-political years.

FINK: Well, I can't think of a thing right now. There are many areas that haven't been covered. I know he was a person who could not tolerate unfairness.

ARENA: If you could think of examples or incidents that would illustrate these personality traits, so to speak, that would be very helpful.

FINK: I can only think of one and that can't be taped. I know there were other times where it was very clear.

ARENA: When you say unfairness, are you speaking about dishonesty in dealings with people?

FINK: Dishonesty. He was saying one time about someone having taken something from the store, and I can't attempt to tell what Richard told his mother. It was brief, but it was very clear how he felt about it and that person.

ARENA: Could you think of some illustrations of one obvious trait that the President has which is not to be a

quitter--where he keeps on trying no matter how strong the odds are against him--that has happened to him in his life? Can you think of experiences like that in his youth?

FINK: When he practiced the piano. Of course, I grew up with piano practice. It makes some people very nervous to hear a phrase played over and over and over. But it's so exciting when he gets it right and then puts it together into the whole thing--a really very difficult passage. I remember that part. I don't know if he was at our house, practicing, maybe it was at Beeson's, but I remember his practicing. He practiced as my sister practiced--in the same dogged determined way.

ARENA: Is it your knowledge or experience that any other relative besides the President was politely deposited with Aunt Jane Beeson for six months just to learn to play the piano, which happened in his case? He had been sent from Whittier by his parents to live there and study the piano, and that was the only reason.

FINK: Not from this family. There were Beeson relatives who stayed there. I can't remember many times in our house when there wasn't some kind of a relative--one cousin or another. One stayed the entire school year for the first grade and a semester when he was in high school. Different cousins stayed. They either needed a different school or maybe the climate was better. It wasn't an unusual thing in our family. As I think of it now, my going down to Whittier or to Riverside to stay for six weeks was nothing unusual then, but it seems strange now.

ARENA: On that general subject of the closeness of the Milhous family, do you want to add anything at all, in the sense that there was this closeness?

FINK: Many of my cousins are closer, I feel, than a lot of people's brothers and sisters are to them.

ARENA: In a way it's difficult to know, but do you think that was particularly something that was the result of Grandfather Franklin Milhous and Grandmother Almira Milhous?

FINK: And on back. It was a particularly happy, close-knit family as a unit. My mother says with the exception of one Sunday, she can't remember when there wasn't company there. Perhaps you've heard this story: One of the girls got fed up with company. She wanted just her family there, so she wrote in very large print and strung it across the front

balcony of the house. "Quarantine--Measles," or something. Grandmother and Grandfather or some of the girls asked, "What's the matter, no company?" They looked around and finally somebody found the sign. Now, I don't know who did that. I think it was Olive [Rose Olive Milhous] or Elizabeth [Milhous], but don't quote me. That was how they had a Sunday dinner with just family. It was a friendly home.

Grandmother's house was never locked, and I remember going in there two or three times. Somebody would take me down and I would go in, find a bed and say "Good morning" in the morning. That would be the first they knew of my arrival.

ARENA: Would you say from what you know of your mother's mentioning it and others in the family, that the Franklin Milhouses were very, very strict with the children and yet there was this closeness?

FINK: What do you mean by strict?

ARENA: In discipline, in doing whatever their chores were that were assigned to them, in attending religious services, in the administration of physical punishment. That's when they were real strict parents.

FINK: No, they weren't. I think Ezra [Charles Milhous] got a switching once. My sister was very impressed, because she would have been five when Grandfather died. She was teasing, or she was doing something naughty and Grandfather said, "If thee doesn't behave I'll give thee a switching." My sister didn't know what a switching was, but she asked her mother and decided it would be better to stop whatever she was doing.

No, they weren't dictatorial. I'm not too sure that there were assigned tasks. I may be wrong on this, but according to my mother there was some affluence and things were pretty easy in Indiana as well as out here. People respond to the love, fairness, kindness, integrity and gentleness which they are shown. Interest was shown in each person's activity.

ARENA: To what do you attribute the closeness of the family relationships after the children had left the nest? In other words, the family reunions were maintained even after the girls were married, obviously.

FINK: And to this day.

ARENA: To what do you attribute that?

FINK: Would it be old-fashioned to call it love? Families are special when you get to know them.

ARENA: Is there a prime mover or instigator for these reunions today, or is it a kind of spontaneous thing on the part of all the members of the family, just kind of naturally get together? And when you say you do it today, where and when, who replaces Grandmother and Grandfather Milhous today?

FINK: Olive and Oscar Marshburn have reunions at their house.

ARENA: And it's around the Christmas season, too?

FINK: Year before last it was Sunday, close to Christmas. Many of us were there. I enjoy going. You always see a different group of relatives and we all enjoy keeping track of the cousins and their children. It's something that to me is very special.

ARENA: To what extent did the President and his family, obviously he has been busy, but to what extent has he found it possible to maintain these reunions, also? I mean thinking back over the long period. Do you recall this happening during the Vice Presidential years, we'll say, during the period that he was a lawyer, just before military service? Do you recall the period when he was able to do this, too?

FINK: Yes, but this is getting into the period when I was married and my children were little. My parents could go, but we couldn't.

People went to Marshburn's after Frank's funeral and after Hannah's. It's difficult now because Richard and Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] are not treated so much as just one of the clan. There is too much awe.

ARENA: To bring together the pre-President Nixon and the present President Nixon as a relative sees him--and that is a question that only a person like you could answer, don't hesitate not to answer if you don't want to--but what qualities do you see in the President now, when you see him on TV [television] or when you hear him on the radio that remind you of the young President of your early period, say before 1945? What traits do you see today that seem to remind you of the early period?

FINK: I see him in a news conference, catching questions and I hear the clear answer without double talk.

ARENA: Can you recall that being a quality that he had as a youth as well?

FINK: Not as well-developed and sophisticated as it is now. Yes. I remember at the Inauguration we were asked to come to the White House after the Inauguration, and he said a typical thing as he came into the dining room, "Well, are you getting enough to eat?" Those are not the exact words. But he was concerned about the food. "Is there enough food? Is it good, are you enjoying it?" And, yes, of course we were. He remembered me and said I had no business being as old as I am. He remembered Larry [Laurence E. Fink], my son, who was twenty-six at the time. He had something special to say to each one. Of course, he remembered my sister very well. I don't know what he said to her. But this is the something-special-to-you sort of thing that we have come to expect from our relatives.

ARENA: Would you say that even if he were not President that would still be the same approach?

FINK: I think so.

ARENA: And in that sense, you saw your cousin Nixon rather than the President Nixon.

FINK: It's sad to see that he does have to be aware of everything he says and does. There are so many pressures on him. It's a shame that people can't see this warm, interested, concerned person who is really there. I wonder sometimes if it's because he's almost too soft-hearted. He can't let people get to him because it would tear him up. He is a very strong person, but being a very strong person doesn't mean he has a hard heart.

ARENA: Is there anything at all that you would like to add before we bring this interview to a close?

FINK: No, I think not. I expect after you have been gone for five minutes I'll think of a dozen things.

ARENA: That always happens. And I thank you very much for your patience.

FINK: I'm very proud of Richard. He's a great person.

ARENA: Thank you very much.