



5-9-1972

Raymond N. Fleischman (May 9, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. RAYMOND N. FLEISCHMAN

May 9, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Raymond N. Fleischman. N. stands for Noel. Mr. Fleischman was born on December 24, which explains the Noel. We are in Whittier, California, today's date May 9, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Fleischman, may I begin by asking you where and when you were born?

FLEISCHMAN: I was born in Colorado at the Alamosa River Ranger's Station. My father was a forest ranger in the San Juan mountains in Rio Grande National Forest of southern Colorado.

ARENA: And the year?

FLEISCHMAN: I was born in 1914, December 24. Alamosa itself is a city in the middle of the San Luis valley in southern Colorado, and the river is also named the Alamosa River. It has its headwaters up near the Continental Divide in the San Luis mountains.

ARENA: And would you mind explaining how it is that you found yourself in Whittier in the 20-30 Club, in which you and the President were both members? And am I correct in stating that was the occasion of your meeting President Nixon, or had you met him through some other occasion?

FLEISCHMAN: No, I met him after I joined 20-30 Club.

ARENA: And would you mind explaining how you found yourself in Whittier and when?

FLEISCHMAN: Well, I went to the University of Colorado in Boulder and studied chemical engineering, and in June 1937 I graduated and I had a job with Globe Oil Tools in Los Nietos [California] which is near Whittier. And I came out here and moved to Whittier where I stayed on South Bright Avenue, and a friend of mine, Philip Efromson, was an engineer out at Globe Oil Tools and he was a member of the 20-30 Club.

ARENA: Excuse me. I want to be sure I get that spelling right for the record and looking at The Green Leaf of April 18, 1939, where your name is listed as a member and, of course, President Nixon and Mr. Philip C. Efromson. And as you said, you were an acquaintance of Mr. Efromson around that time also.

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, I was a co-worker with Mr. Efromson. He was a mechanical engineer with Globe Oil Tools and I was a metalurgist for Globe, and I was unacquainted in Whittier and Mr. Efromson brought me in to visit 20-30 Club and I became a member of 20-30 Club.

ARENA: Do you recall whether or not Mr. Efromson was a native of Whittier or had been living here longer than you?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, he had been living here several years. He was not a native. He was a graduate of Cal Tech [California Institute of Technology] but his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Efromson lived out on Strong Avenue and Phil lived with them. And he attended Cal Tech, and after he graduated from Cal Tech, he went to work for Globe as an engineer and that's where he was when I got there.

ARENA: I believe you were mentioning off the tape that Mr. Efromson has had some very important assignments and responsibilities since you have known him. Would you mind going over that again for the record, to help give us some idea of the caliber of the members who were a part of this organization, of which the President was also a member?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes. Mr. Efromson is one of the most brilliant engineers I know. He finished very high in his class at Cal Tech and was doing design work on oil drilling tools at Globe. And after I left Globe in 1940 when World War II began, Lockheed Aircraft Corporation gathered up a large number of engineers around the United States and sent them to a refresher course at Cal Tech and Phil was chosen as one of those to go and afterwards--well, Phil finished very high, if not the top man of that class--and then he was employed over at Vega, which was a division of Lockheed over in Burbank [California]. And he worked as an engineer all during World War II at Vega Aircraft Corporation and after the war he and some co-workers, who were men from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] went back to around the Boston [Massachusetts] area and designed a vibration testing machine under the name of Calodyne, Inc.

And they worked very hard to develop this and brought it up to a successful operation in a matter of six years, and then they sold the corporation to Ling, Inc. [LTV Ling, Inc.], and Phil then took an employment contract as part of the settlement for his share in the corporation. He worked a couple of years for Ling and continued with Calodyne and then he moved to San Francisco [California]. And now again he is employed by Ling Altec over in Anaheim [California] and is a very important engineer with them. But Phil is one of the most brilliant engineers I have ever known.

ARENA: Are there any other members besides President Nixon whom you recall of that period, who we'll say had similar success or went on to become prominent, such as Mr. Efromson? Of course, you're maybe not expecting these questions and some of the names might need a little more study. For example, do you still keep in touch with Mr. Douglas Ferguson? Did you know he is head of a bank here?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, he's president of Quaker City Savings and Loan. Yes, I see Doug frequently. [Melville C.] Mel Rich, [Richard] Dick Thomson has his own business here in Whittier. Dr. [O.] Mark Jenkins is still pulling teeth here in Whittier. He is a dental surgeon. Dr. [Horace] Wilson, of course, has long since passed away. Franklin Bowes has passed away as has [Michael] Mike Mayberry.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you maintain any contact with these members now in any way at all--any sort of anniversary get together for example?

FLEISCHMAN: No, we have nothing like that that I know of. I see many of them. Mel Rich, of course, is managing editor of the Daily News. No, he's editor of the Daily News. [Charles] Chuck Davis lives out in La Habra.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you why it was that you actually joined, in the sense that you could have joined other organizations? You did mention, of course, that it was Mr. Efromson who invited you. Would you say that was the main reason? You went by his recommendation and his sales pitch, so to speak to join.

FLEISCHMAN: Oh, that was the thing that introduced me to it but these were a nice bunch of fellows . . .

ARENA: You had known some of these fellows before?

FLEISCHMAN: No, I was unacquainted in Whittier. I knew nobody in Whittier and I was glad to get to meet a bunch of them. They were nice fellows and they had a lot of fun at 20-30 Club and it was a good activity, so I was glad to have this opportunity to meet men in Whittier my own age and it was good wholesome activity. The 20-30 Club did a lot of work in Boy Scouts. I became a Boy Scoutmaster in 1939-40, I think. I was a Scoutmaster for the troop sponsored by 20-30 Club.

ARENA: You stayed on as a member at least until 1940. Do you remember when you did leave or when maybe the organization ceased to meet?

FLEISCHMAN: No, I left Globe Oil Tools early in 1940 and I just don't recall. I began working with General Petroleum Corporation, and I think I probably dropped out of 20-30 Club about that time because I wasn't working in Whittier and I was probably pretty busy at the time. And that's probably about the time I dropped out.

ARENA: Now, Mr. Fleischman, getting right to the heart of the matter, do you recall the very first occasion on which you met President Nixon? Does it stand out in your mind? Was it something that was unusual or was he just another member at that time and you don't necessarily remember the first meeting with him?

FLEISCHMAN: Well, I don't remember the first time I saw him. I just know it was at 20-30 Club. He was a prominent member and he was noticeable because he spoke frequently. And when he spoke he had something to say and I recognized him as an outstanding speaker the minute I heard him. And he demanded your attention, because he usually had something to say and he said it well. I do recall, though, that on various occasions we went to district conventions and so forth, and I remember one time there was a carload of us, maybe two carloads of us, went down to Brawley, California. It's down in the Imperial Valley near El Centro. And we took a hotel room down there and on this particular occasion Dick Nixon was a roommate with [Donald] Don Strahl. It's here in the book.

Don Strahl worked for the telephone company here in town, and he was a prominent member of the 20-30 Club. As I remember, Don was a good amateur politician. And they were all interested in 20-30 politics at the time. I don't recall whether Dick was president at the time we went to this Brawley convention or not, but I do remember we had a lot of fun, and I remember the last night we were there that Dick was at the microphone talking and he referred to himself as the future governor of California. And I remember I remarked to Phil Efromson at the time, I said, "This guy, Dick Nixon, is a brilliant speaker and has a brilliant mind and some day we're really going to hear from him." And Phil and I discussed it later, and he agreed with my appraisal of Dick.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if Mr. Strahl might still be living and in the area? Do you know anything about him now?

FLEISCHMAN: Here is what I know about Don Strahl. The telephone company moved their headquarters from Whittier to Santa Monica [California], and Don went over there with them and worked for them there and then he left the General Telephone Company--it wasn't called the General Telephone Company at that time. It was a locally owned company. I think Orrin Gallup was the manager of it and one of the owners. And Aubrey Wardman was also a heavy stockholder in the telephone company. But anyway, the last I heard of Don Strahl was that he retired from the telephone company in Santa Monica and with some other people went up into Bakersfield [California] or San Joaquin Valley area, and bought out a local telephone company up there and the last I knew of him, he was helping to run that. I don't know if he is still there or not. Somebody would probably be able to locate him here in Whittier.

ARENA: Thank you. Any other incidents along those lines? Anything that comes to mind such as social events that were held in which you recall the President participating, playing the piano, whatever comes to mind.

FLEISCHMAN: Oh, yes, at almost all of the gatherings he would sit down and play a little bit on the piano and they'd sing. And Dick used to have a good time. I think that he never was very intimate with anybody, that is, I don't think he became close personal friends with anybody, but he was friendly with everybody.

ARENA: On that point, let me ask you if you recall--you as a newcomer, so to speak, as an outsider at first--did President Nixon seem to stick to maybe regular residents or the natives, so to speak, at these meetings, or did he not seem to stick to any particular person, as you said earlier? Was it the fact that you were a newcomer that makes you say that he did not seem to mingle closely? Was there anything like that? Did he just seem to stay mainly with the old timers?

FLEISCHMAN: No, Dick was a good mixer. I think he knew everybody in the club by their first name and always spoke to them.

ARENA: Did that include you?

FLEISCHMAN: Oh, yes.

ARENA: He addressed you by your first name?

FLEISCHMAN: Well, I had another different relationship with Nixon and his family in this, that I was out here by myself from 1937 until probably February of 1938. And my brother, F. G. Fleischman, Forrest Fleischman, and his wife came out here from Colorado. He was a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines and, as you know, this was the tail end of the depression. There was not much work available.

But Forrest, Frosty we called him, was a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines and he had been out of work in Colorado. He had been working in a mine and the mine wasn't paying. So I sent for him and he and his wife came out here. And we rented a home on East Whittier Boulevard from Frank Nixon, and we lived in this house across from East Whittier School that was owned by Frank Nixon.

And Frank Nixon was starting to build a house on an adjacent lot on Whittier Boulevard there for rental purposes. And my brother went to work for him and helped him build that house. And Frank thought very highly of my brother. I remember one time Frank told me, "I like your brother because he doesn't argue with me." Frank, himself, was kind of a crochety fellow but I liked him very much, but he was quite blunt and outspoken, and he was opinionated in his own way.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, did you have the same attitude as your brother in not arguing with Mr. Frank Nixon, or did you and he have words?

FLEISCHMAN: Oh, no, I didn't talk to him that much. No, every time I talked to him I enjoyed talking to him because I liked him, and I particularly liked Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon, Dick's mother. She was a very lovely Christian woman. She expressed a great amount of love to everybody she talked to, and I think everybody had a good feeling after they had visited with Mrs. Nixon. And she was very patient and understanding with Frank.

ARENA: While we're on the subject of the family, did you meet any of the President's other family members, I'm thinking of his brothers, Don [Francis Donald Nixon] and Edward [Calvert Nixon]?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, I knew Don quite well, because we used to trade out at the Nixon store. I used to talk with Don a lot. Eddie in those days was just a little young boy, and he was probably in grammar school about that time.

ARENA: He was born in 1930. He was the youngest.

FLEISCHMAN: Quite young. Yes, he would have been seven or eight years old at that time. And so I had seen him around, but I didn't have anything particular to do with him; he was just a young kid.

ARENA: Knowing all of the members of the family as you did intimately, what would you say from the standpoint of general observations about the young Nixon at that

time, a young lawyer, growing up in such a family with such parents? That is, how would you describe the family as a whole? How would you describe the influence of the family, say, on President Nixon and vice versa? Was he, from your recollection, carrying weight, influencing anything in the family so far as your observations? Did you see him, for example, arguing or being consulted with members of the family on any occasion, including possibly the building of that home? Maybe he did the legal work or had some connection? Anything along those lines?

FLEISCHMAN: No, I don't think so because Frank Nixon was his own boss and Frank Nixon did things Frank Nixon's way, so I think Frank Nixon did the running of the house. I recall one time I was out at Nixon's store and Dick was out there. I think he was deep in thought. Maybe he had some lawsuit, but he was pacing up and down out there. He had nothing to do with the store any longer. I understand in days past when he was in school he used to take care of the vegetables there. But at this time Don was running the store strictly and, of course, they had connected with it Grau's Bakery, and they're still in business there in Whittwood. It's a very fine bakery and we used to patronize them a lot. And this one day I was out there and Dick was there, and he and Don had some brotherly words. I think Don was wanting Dick to help him and Dick refused to do it because he was busy with his own-- he conveyed the idea across that he no longer had anything to do with the store and he was busy with his own stuff. So . . .

ARENA: Did you possibly see the future Mrs. Richard Nixon, [Patricia] Pat Ryan, at that time in the area?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, yes.

ARENA: Whatever your mind recalls there.

FLEISCHMAN: Well, I'll tell you how I met Pat Nixon. I took a part in the Whittier Community Players. The play was "Lightnin'" which had been previously filmed starring Will Rogers. Well, the title of the play was "Lightnin'" and it was the name that was assigned to this character that the play was written around, and the first time I saw it, it was played by Will Rogers in a movie. And we put it on here at the Whittier Community Players under the direction of Mrs. [Louise] Baldwin. And Pat Nixon had a part in the play and that's where I met her; and that was before she had met Dick Nixon. But she was a pretty young

school teacher and attracted a lot of attention. I didn't get to know her very well, but I knew her and she was a very pretty young lady.

ARENA: Would you mind, if you recall, going over your role in the play and her role in the play? If it isn't too personal, did you have a leading role?

FLEISCHMAN: No.

ARENA: And what role did she play?

FLEISCHMAN: Both of us had minor roles. I don't recall just what her role was and mine was a man who was in. . . . The play took place there in Nevada on the line between California and Nevada, and as I recall the hotel in which we were staying was built right over the California-Nevada line. And people were going there just for the purpose of getting a divorce. Lightnin' and his wife were there for that purpose, to get a divorce too. No, I believe they ran this hotel. But mine was a minor part, but I enjoyed it. It was another way of getting acquainted in the town. But it was the very next play that was put on by the Whittier Community Players where Dick met Pat.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: We have been discussing the Whittier Community Players and I believe you were saying, Mr. Fleischman, that you recall that it was the play after that in which Mr. and Mrs. Richard Nixon got together.

FLEISCHMAN: I think it was the very next play. That's where he met her and, of course, you know the history of that. They got married.

ARENA: I would appreciate though your recollection of that history, whatever comes to mind, if you were in the play.

FLEISCHMAN: No, I wasn't in the next play, although I did attend some of the practice sessions. And I remember one of the early practice sessions where Dick was reciting the lines that he had, and he did a superb job of it. He knew his lines already and this was in the early development of the play,

and he did such a good job in the rehearsal of it that he got spontaneous applause from the handful of people that were there in the audience. That's about all I remember about it.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you your own observations, in addition to what you said about him as an actor and Pat Nixon as an actress?

FLEISCHMAN: Well, of course, Dick was a superb actor, because whatever he did he did well. He made it a point to do that. And, of course, Pat was such a pretty girl she immediately attracted attention, and she did her work well. Whatever her assignment was, I know she did it well. She was a very lovely young woman.

ARENA: How about relations with the cast? Was there anything in the way of, we'll say, actors and actresses temperament involved here? Was the President on edge, or from your observation nervous before going on stage or anything like that, or while he was on stage?

FLEISCHMAN: No, all I know is that he did a superb job of it. He was completely in command of his part of it, and he set a very high standard for the other actors.

ARENA: Knowing him as you have intimately, Mr. Fleischman, say, recalling his speeches in those days, off the cuff, which I'm sure he must have made then, as well as speeches as the President, without going into politics as such. . . . As you know this project deals with the man not as a politician but his pre-political years, but from the standpoint of comparing and noting the change in the individual, what similarities from the standpoint of a public speaker, extemporaneous, or as a prepared, giving a prepared speech as he did last night, what changes and what similarities would you say you recall and could make along these lines?

FLEISCHMAN: Well, I have considered Dick, from the time I've ever heard him, as the finest speaker I've ever known, either extemporaneously or prepared. I just thoroughly enjoyed hearing him speak whenever he did. I remember there was a fellow there who was somewhat timid in the club and he was trying to overcome his timidity and Dick gave him some coaching on what to do. I remember he advised this fellow to go out and take a course in public speaking to help him. And he did, and it did help him.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did you and the President ever discuss public speaking?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes.

ARENA: And what do you recall were some of his hints to you in addition, if he said it to you, to go and take a course, but do you recall some of his own observations on what it takes to be successful as a public speaker?

FLEISCHMAN: No, he didn't tell me anything on public speaking. However, we used to discuss the state of the nation and the economy in general. There were five of us: Dick Nixon, Phil Efromson, Don Strahl, [Philip] Phil Blue and myself. And we used to get together every Friday night around a round table and discuss the future of America and what we could do to help, and what would be an ideal program for it. And we met quite a long time that one winter. It must have been during the winter of 1939, although I don't recall exactly when it was.

ARENA: Excuse me. In the summer of '39, as you may recall, war broke out in Europe. Do you think that may have prompted it? Do you recall that this happened maybe as a result of thinking more seriously about the problems of the country and the world, that the war had broken out in Europe in the summer of '39?

FLEISCHMAN: I am sure it had something to do with it. We were particularly interested, I think, in the function of government, the role of government and economics and so forth, and we had very very serious discussions on this as what we could do.

ARENA: From the standpoint of history, if you don't mind-- and I am talking about the professional historian who is always doing research--do you think any minutes were kept of those discussions and meetings or was it strictly off the record and off the cuff, where you just met together and no records were kept in any way?

FLEISCHMAN: I think probably there were no records kept, although I recall we all had a paper in front of us, but I think everyone of us got busy and drifted away from Whittier.

ARENA: Just to be sure, you don't have any records yourself as far as you know of those discussions?

FLEISCHMAN: No, I don't have anything of it. But I do have some correspondence that I have had with Dick over the years, because when he first became a congressman, I would write on occasion to give him the benefit of my ideas and . . .

ARENA: Did he answer?

FLEISCHMAN: Oh, yes.

ARENA: You kept in touch?

FLEISCHMAN: Yes. The last letter I received from him was before the 1968 campaign, before he had decided definitely to run or had announced that he was to run. I wrote him a letter urging him to run and telling him some things I thought he ought to read. And I told him I thought the country needed what he had to give and for him to consider running because, as you recall, this is after his defeat for the Governor of California, and a lot of people had written him off. Well, I hadn't, because I knew that Dick had a lot more to him than to accept any defeat like that. And so I wrote him this letter and I received a very nice reply thanking me for supporting him that way. And I think this was probably the last letter I received back from him, because I have written some to him while he has been in the White House, because I don't agree with everything he's done. But I can appreciate that he doesn't have time to answer every individual letter, and so the thing that I have received back is some secretary from the White House thanking me for my interest, and that's about all.

ARENA: On the question of your observations of him as a speaker and as a thinker, how would you assess him from the standpoint, say, of an individual thinking on his feet? One, do you recall ever attending any formal debates and how he handled them; and two, whether they were formal debates or just his maybe running for the office of president of the 20-30 Club? How would you describe him as keeping his cool, his maturity, his maintaining the respect of the audience, whether they agreed with him or disagreed with him, going back to this period when you knew him as a young lawyer?

FLEISCHMAN: I have always considered Dick Nixon's mind to be the sharpest of anybody I have ever known, and he was the most articulate and able to express ideas of anyone I have ever known. I have never heard a formal debate in which he participated, although I heard him speak several times when he was running for Congress and also at 20-30 conventions he usually spoke. We went to another convention in San Francisco [California] one time and I was in his room at various times, but I was staying with. . . . There was a young man raised here in Whittier who was killed very tragically in an auto accident. His name was Hayden Almendinger. His father was in the postoffice over here, I think.

ARENA: Any idea of the spelling to the best of your knowledge?

FLEISCHMAN: H A Y D E N A L M E N D I N G E R. But he came into 20-30 probably in 1939, and he had studied acting, I think, at the Pasadena Playhouse, and that was his major activity. He had a very deep resonant voice and was quite an outgoing man. [Interruption]

ARENA: And as you were saying, you were recalling this incident of the President and some friends were together and you were there on the occasion.

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, it was the 20-30 Club ladies' night and we had a party. I think we had it over in Downey [California] at the Trianon Ballroom or something like that. It was a place where they served dinner and had dancing, and we used to have one of these ladies' nights probably every quarter, in which we would take our dates or wives and go and have a good time. And there was a little drinking going on. I didn't see anybody over-drink at that period, but we had fun. And I remember this one party we went to, and I don't recall whether this girl was the date of Dick's or of Hayden Almendinger or even someone else. It might have been a third party. But she was a very pretty girl, a redhead, and Dick was making a play for her and trying to get her attention and I remember Almendinger was too, and he won out. Almendinger took her away from Dick.

ARENA: Do you recall that the President danced with this girl? Do you recall anything about his liking or not liking to dance, by the way?

FLEISCHMAN: Not particularly. As I recall, he might have seemed to be a little uncomfortable dancing. But other than that, I don't remember too much about it, but I do remember that incident of Almendinger winning this girl away from him and, of course, I don't even remember the girl's name.

ARENA: Do you recall possibly if you were a fellow member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce of which he was a member around that time too?

FLEISCHMAN: I did not join the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

ARENA: One of the purposes of the Junior Chamber was to discuss local workings of the government and find out more about it. Just to be sure, during this period when you recall the President saying he was going to be governor of California some day, during these sessions where there was a small group discussing local and national problems, was there ever any inkling, as you look back, that the President would try for a political career, because remember technically his political life begins around 1945, after World War II. But was there any inkling, or was this just your own hunch or feeling? Did he make any formal statement or any formal announcement as to being interested in a political career some day?

FLEISCHMAN: No. He was very busy with his law practice. I do recall one time he had a lawsuit going on, and it was one of his very first lawsuits, and he was very excited about the outcome of it. He and [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley, they won the suit and Dick was very elated about the fact that he won. He was visibly excited and pleased that they had won it, and I remember he remarked, he said, "Well, I've done this before in school, but this is the real thing, and it makes a big difference."

ARENA: That would be an indication in your own mind that he enjoyed the practice of law.

FLEISCHMAN: Yes, and I'm sure he was a good one, too.

ARENA: Did you possibly ever see him in court in action so to speak?

FLEISCHMAN: No, because I was a busy engineer myself and I worked during the day and, of course, lawsuits were carried on during the day.

ARENA: As this interview comes to a close, I want to express my sincere appreciation for your taking the time and the trouble to grant me this interview, and I know that history will be equally grateful for your answering all these questions so fully and so frankly. Thank you very much.