



4-24-1972

Ormond K. Flood (April 24,1972)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. ORMOND K. FLOOD

April 24, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Ormond Kenneth Flood in Whittier, California, April 24, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Flood, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born:

FLOOD: I was born in San Francisco, September 15, 1899.

ARENA: And would you mind giving the background of your coming to the Whittier area, especially indicating how it is that you first came into contact with President Nixon?

FLOOD: I came to Whittier in the fall of 1928 and was sent here as manager of the Automobile Club of Southern California office.

ARENA: And did you meet him in that year?

FLOOD: It is difficult for me to tell you when I met President Nixon, because he emerged from the background of other students among Whittier College, as they were known by a businessman, a few years older, who was a member of the Rotary Club and of whom they were guests, as a man who attended the Whittier College football games for a number of years, following them from place to place, and as a group of young men who belonged to the 20-30 Club, which I visited frequently. I don't know whether Mr. Nixon ever belonged to it or not.

ARENA: Actually, he was a member.

FLOOD: Many of his friends did, and I would have seen him there. He emerged from the background.

ARENA: You definitely recall him though as a student of that era. Now when, if I may ask, would be the first very clear recollection, where he just definitely stands out in your mind as Richard Nixon.

FLOOD: Well, I can give you the date. It was May 5, 1933. A number of members of Whittier College came to the Rotary Club where we were meeting at the William Penn Hotel, and took the meeting over. And I'm not sure whether it was Chief [Wallace] Newman with his football team, or whether they were all seniors or not, but among those present, I recall very distinctly, was Herschel Daugherty, who later became a very famous movie director--did extraordinarily well--and Richard Nixon, who gave the talk of the day. And the subject was, "What Does the College Graduate of the Year 1933 Have to Look Forward To?" And it was a very leading subject because frankly, Dr. Arena, they had practically NOTHING to look forward to in 1933 and 1934.

ARENA: What do you recall about his style of delivery, his comments, anything that comes to mind about that entire experience?

FLOOD: Nothing, except he was there and he gave a very good talk, and he was a handsome young man. They were the leading seniors, the leading college men who came, or they wouldn't have been there.

ARENA: Do you recall meeting him on subsequent occasions . . .

FLOOD: Oh, yes.

ARENA: . . . during the college years, by any chance?

FLOOD: I was aware of him because I knew him by sight. I knew where his father's family store was, and I knew many of the men at that time, because some of them came to work for me in the Automobile Club--Shorty Long and [Clinton O.] Clint Harris did, and a number of others, and many of the members of the 20-30 Club did, some that didn't even go to Whittier College, so that I knew almost all of the members of the 20-30 Club at that time. I went in the Army in November of 1943. I had just finished being president of the Rotary Club, and I was in the Army three years, and when I came back--I lost my arm in Germany--I was rehabilitated, and I went back with the Auto Club, and the members of the American Legion--I had been a member of the Legion because I was in World War I as well at the tail end of it--were very anxious to have me go through the chairs. And they got me to accept the job of Second Vice Commander, and they wanted a speaker's program, and one of them said, "Well, I wonder if we couldn't get Dick Nixon to come." He had, at that time, made up his mind to run for Congress

so they asked in the meeting if anybody knew him. And I said, "Yes, I have known him for years." Now, he had been in the background as the young man, but he was beginning to come into prominence. And none of us there knew much about him, except he was one of a number of candidates who had tossed their hats in the arena.

So I called him up. He must have been here with [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley at that time, and I knew Tom Bewley well all during those years, so I was aware when Nixon came into his office. So I called him up and asked if he would be willing to come to the Legion and give the address of the evening. He said he'd be delighted. So I picked him up at his home and took him, and he made the talk. And the thing that was so tremendously interesting to me was, he talked on his war experiences in the Navy. And on the way home when he said, "Okay. How do you think I did?" And I said, "Oh, Dick, you did just wonderfully." And he said, "You know, I realize that I was an officer, and that I was speaking largely to a group of enlisted men, and there IS a difference, and the enlisted men feel it, especially when they're fresh out of the service." He said, "I was wondering if you felt that THEY felt that I was placing myself in a different or superior position." I said, "Dick, I think you reached all of them."

ARENA: Do you recall that he had his uniform on?

FLOOD: No, he did not have his uniform on. He would not have worn his uniform. He had too good judgment.

ARENA: Did he become a member of that particular Legion branch?

FLOOD: I think he must be. He's an honorary member of the Rotary Club.

ARENA: Do you recall the subject coming up in any way . . .

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: . . . either in his talk . . .

FLOOD: No, it didn't. He just gave us a talk on his experiences and he was accepted as a veteran of World War II, as I was.

ARENA: Let me ask this question: Do you remember a topic coming up in any way, either where it was formally during the talk or informally between you and him, regarding the fact that he was of Quaker background?

FLOOD: No, it didn't. We were just a couple of men, both of us ex-officers in World War II, who had had an acquaintanceship of a number of years, and it was a pleasant evening and I enjoyed it immensely.

ARENA: Was his wife with him on the occasion?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Did you ever meet Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon?

FLOOD: Later, but I hadn't met her at that time. He would have been married several years then, wouldn't he?

ARENA: He was married in 1940 at the Mission Inn, before the war.

FLOOD: Yes, he would have been married by that time.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did you know her . . .

FLOOD: No, I never knew her . . .

ARENA: . . . through her high school teaching years?

FLOOD: No, I never did.

ARENA: Do you recall fairly clearly his parents, through direct association with him or just indirect association?

FLOOD: No, I only knew they were members of the Friends church and an old family, and I knew his aunt, who lived on East Philadelphia Street, quite well. It was a small town in those days. There weren't nearly as many people.

ARENA: Coming as you did, in 1928, what was the situation for-- correct me if I'm wrong--a town that was still overwhelmingly rural, where the agriculture industry plus oil, but agriculture was the main livelihood? What did this mean from the standpoint of the coming of the automobile; and in particular, if you recall, the President and his family and brothers, and their association with the automobile? Did he drive that evening to the American Legion with you?

FLOOD: No, I went and got him. Whittier Boulevard was little more than a country road. Herman Perry, you know, his very close friend, was the one that got Whittier Boulevard widened, at a TERRIFIC cost--the last few years of his life, cost to him--in sacrifice of time and energy. He made trip after trip to Sacramento [California] and was right down there in the front row at the Highway Commission meetings. I was very closely associated with Herman Perry during the latter part of his life, because I was on the Highway Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, and we were co-chairmen for quite a time. And Herman Perry was almost like Rome was when they said, "Delenda est Carthago," that "Whittier

Boulevard MUST be widened." And they got so tired of seeing Herman Perry and his delegation there that they finally widened it.

ARENA: Did you possibly have any contact with Mr. Perry when he was about to promote and endorse the political future of Mr. Richard Nixon?

FLOOD: I was a member of that group.

ARENA: Would you mind--not from the standpoint of politics, but from the standpoint of personalities--

FLOOD: Yes, we were just friends. We didn't have much money, but we could put in ten or twenty-five or fifty dollars, maybe, the better-off of us. Walter Dow was one of them. And I remember we met here in the Bank of America one time when Dick decided to run for the Senate. He was considering it, after he was in the Legislature. And he asked this group what they thought he should do, and Herman called us all together to get our opinions on it.

ARENA: I'm sure that your past association with Mr. Nixon came up with Mr. [Herman] Perry. Do you recall what your conversations were in substance, in essence, even though not the exact words? What good things--what things at all--did Mr. Perry have to say about Mr. Nixon?

FLOOD: There was never anything but good. We all practically worshipped him. And even in those days, Herman Perry said when he was elected to the Senate, he said, "Some day that man will be President of the United States." And to me it was a tragedy when Herman Perry died too soon. There wasn't ANYTHING he wouldn't have done for Richard Nixon.

ARENA: From your own personal experience and knowledge, did Mr. Perry ever back any other individual as much as Mr. Nixon?

FLOOD: Never.

ARENA: Can you account for that in any particular way? Did that ever come up as to why he did admire the young man so much?

FLOOD: No, he just admired him because he felt he had sterling qualities of character. He worked and he was thrifty and he was the type of person Herman Perry admired, and he was the type of person that we, of that generation, in Whittier admired.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, to tie this up with some other interviews and a particular subject involving the President that of helping the handicapped, you may know a Mr. Ralph Veady.

FLOOD: Yes, I do.

ARENA: And you may know a Mr. [Lowell L.] Skaggs. Now, in the case of Mr. Skaggs, I know that the President, while in Congress--a Senator at that time I believe--did promote the Federal assistance to the handicapped, cooperating with the State. The source of that information was not only Mr. Skaggs himself but Professor J. Gustav White.

FLOOD: Yes.

ARENA: In view of your situation, I'm wondering if you had any direct contact with that subject in any way?

FLOOD: No, I did not.

ARENA: Can you recall any other personal experiences with the President that come to mind, that I have not brought up?

FLOOD: Many. Oh, many.

ARENA: Going back to the earliest ones, and take as much time as you need to recount them.

FLOOD: Whenever he and Pat would come to Whittier a dinner was given for him, and Mrs. [Ruth] Flood and I always were there. We wouldn't have missed one of them for anything. We followed him all through his political career. I remember when he went back to Washington when he was running. His father was a locomotive engineer. He ran a train, a special train that left Whittier and went over to the San Gabriel Valley, and we all waved him off and Pat stood on the back platform, and it was a most dramatic affair. We were all so excited.

ARENA: Knowing Mrs. Pat Nixon in this early period of political life and knowing her today--without going into politics per se, but the personality--how would you describe the change, if any?

FLOOD: She was a beautiful and delightful and charming person, and she was always at Dick's side, and she was pleasant to everybody. It didn't matter who they were. If they were there, they were friends of herself and Richard Nixon; always smiling and always gracious.

ARENA: Can you think of any emergency situation where possibly some plans had to be changed at the last minute, and how the President and Mrs. Nixon reacted under such circumstances? I'm trying to get some firsthand experiences of his action under emergencies, or anything like that.

FLOOD: I didn't see any of them at all.

ARENA: Even when you met them when they came, there was never anything unusual?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Did you ever have any direct contact with the President's brothers, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] and Edward [Calvert Nixon]?

FLOOD: No. I knew Don from being in Whittier. I used to see him at Chamber of Commerce meetings and other gatherings. I was president of the Chamber of Commerce one year after the war, and you know everybody that's active in it.

ARENA: Did he possibly ever serve as a guest speaker himself-- Donald?

FLOOD: I don't believe he did.

ARENA: How would you describe him from the standpoint of being a social mixer, Mr. Donald Nixon, the President's brother?

FLOOD: Well, Dick eclipsed everybody. He was so outstanding that nobody was a close second to him. Ed was too much younger and I understand, he is very brilliant and very personable. I don't recall ever meeting Ed, because he was so much younger that he was not among the group that I would have known at the time.

ARENA: Off the top of your head, so to speak, informally, thinking about all the times you've met the President personally and seen him on TV, but especially your personal recollections, how would you describe his personality, as he appears to you at this moment?

FLOOD: He was always gracious and friendly. And I saw him under two circumstances: One was the first, he had lost the election and he came to Whittier. Clint Harris, as you know, furnished him new cars at a very reasonable cost. The Oldsmobile factory was responsible for helping on some of it, because they liked him to drive Oldsmobiles. And he'd lost the election and Clint said, "Okay, Dick's going to be in town tomorrow morning about 10 o'clock. Take a new car, and would you like to come to see him?" And so a few of us went down and met him. And he was out of

office at that time, and it was sad. But he was happy to see his friends. And then Mrs. Flood and I went to see him one time when he and Pat arrived by plane. When he was on the crest and there were thousands there to meet him.

Then we went in one night to Los Angeles [California] after he was out and there was just a handful there. And we were asked--I guess it was probably Herman Perry or Clint Harris I think--to meet them at the airport. And I said, "It's a time when Dick Nixon's friends should go in." And there were just a few of us there that night. And it made me sad, because we had seen him at the top and then the bottom.

You know, Dr. Arena, we look at other people's lives and we think they're like a graph, with this climb that starts at the lower part of the page and goes straight up and it ends at the top on the right. And people's lives aren't like that. Nobody's life [is like that]. They go up and down. And it's what makes people have lives that are worthwhile, and makes THEM worthwhile. It builds their characters.

I think the most dramatic time, and the last time, that Mrs. Flood and I ever saw Dick and Pat was at Mr. [John Bernard] Reilly's house. Paul Smith was anxious to raise some money for Whittier College and he went around to see a few friends of Whittier College, including Mrs. Flood and myself, and he said, "O. K. and Ruth [Flood] I want to get some donations, and I won't take less than a thousand dollars." And I said, "Well, we're very much flattered to have you come to see us for such a sum." I was teasing him. And he said, "Well, we're going to have a plaque." They were friends of Richard Nixon. And he said, "There will be either a luncheon or some kind of arrangement where Dick will meet everybody, these friends and greet them." And we said, "Well, we didn't want our name on the plaque, and if we just gave nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars, could it be left off the plaque? But we would be happy to see Richard Nixon."

Well, it ended up that there was no plaque. I can't remember how many were there, but it was at the Reilly's beautiful house, and it was catered by Perino's, and you probably have the details on it from other people. Perino's of Los Angeles, the most outstanding cafe in Los Angeles [California] for many years. And it was a beautiful luncheon, with all their beautiful china and silver, and when we get off the record I'll tell you something that is more or less humorous that I don't want injected into this. They didn't need to have the Secret Service because Mr. Reilly had electric gates, and they come up in the night when the sun sets and in the morning they went down. He can regulate them from his house, so we could all go in in our cars and--well, I'll just throw it in now. Mrs. Flood and I had a Bentley at the time and Paul [Smith] said, "Oh, I do hope you and Ruth bring the Bentley." So after everybody was in, they locked the gate, so they didn't have to have any Secret Service men. Mr. John Reilly will fill you in on it. It was the most beautiful luncheon that Mrs. Flood and I ever attended.

ARENA: Do you recall the year that took place?

FLOOD: No, but he was Vice President. And after the luncheon, Dick walked around and he greeted everybody in that assembly by name, every person. He stopped beside them, and we stood up and had a visit with him.

ARENA: Recalling his appearance at the American Legion affair, when you brought him--relatively speaking a nobody on the national level at that time--how would you compare his personality, if you can see the two experiences?

FLOOD: I can. I can, and I have to think a minute. He had the self-confidence that success brings. He spelled success.

ARENA: He was a hopeful, back in the days of the American Legion . . .

FLOOD: He was a hopeful, and he was an achiever. He had tasted the victory. And I think those of us who were there then all felt that he had further to go. We all felt he would be President.

ARENA: When you saw him in his down-and-out days after losing the election--and I'm assuming you're talking about the Presidential one with [John F.] Kennedy.

FLOOD: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall, though, that there was evidence that he was going to try again, not from the standpoint of politics now, but from the standpoint of his personality?

FLOOD: No, I don't. We didn't know and he didn't know. I don't think he knew then what he was going to do. I think if he had he probably would have told Clint Harris, and if he had, I would have known from Clint, because we were very close friends.

ARENA: Do you recall any contact with him during the time that he served as under deputy or assistant to Mr. Bewley, who was the City Attorney, by any chance?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Or did you ever have any contact with him in a legal way, in any way?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: You never saw him in court?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Knowing that you do know so many people, and have known so many people, in view of the fact that we're still interviewing some people in the future about whom little is known as far as the Whittier connection, I'd like to mention a name and would appreciate whatever information you may supply me. The person is well known, Adela Rogers St. Johns.

FLOOD: St. Johns.

ARENA: I was just wondering if you knew of her living in Whittier?

FLOOD: I met her because she bought the house that the Alexanders bought later. She moved over here, bought their house, and the Alexander family--that was Emma Alexander, an extraordinarily wealthy family--and she moved over to Beverly Hills [California], and she didn't like Beverly Hills and Adela Rogers St. Johns didn't like Whittier. Adela Rogers St. Johns built that beautiful brick mansion out on Mission Mill Road.

ARENA: That's the one you're referring to.

FLOOD: Yeah. Emma Alexander and Adela Rogers St. Johns swapped houses and Emma Alexander came back to Whittier. And I only met Adela Rogers St. Johns once.

ARENA: She does refer to her acquaintanceship with the President.

FLOOD: I was not aware of it.

ARENA: She has done this on TV from time to time, and what is pertinent to our interviewing, of course, is that while he was a resident and she was a resident of Whittier, but you never saw the two together.

FLOOD: This would have all happened in 1929 or 1930, and Dick Nixon would have been very young then, so this would have pre-dated all that period.

ARENA: Right. However, her recollection of him, and you may have the same recollection, was as a delivery boy.

FLOOD: I never knew him as a delivery boy.

ARENA: Either for his father's grocery store or for someone else?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: You don't recall going into the grocery store and seeing him working there either?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Another, of course, well known acquaintance would be-- and also an authoress--would be the President's cousin, Jessamyn West.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Have you any recollection of the President's cousin who is also a famous writer, of course, Jessamyn West?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: How about other members of her family such as Mr. Merle West . . .

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: . . . who does own the rug cleaning business here in Whittier?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Would there be any comment you wish to make concerning one of the most influential institutions--ONE of them, of course--on the President's upbringing, namely, Whittier College, which was attended by his mother as well as by himself, and which his father helped to build financially, being one of the early donors? Knowing Whittier College yourself--I've seen you in one of the classrooms there--and knowing Whittier as you do, how would you assess, as an outsider in a way, not being a member of the Nixon family, how would you assess the influence of Whittier College on President Nixon?

FLOOD: Whittier College has been, always, an institution that stressed the humanities. Nixon was a debater. He was a better debater than he was a football player. And his debating skill and expertise has served him in much better capacity than his football playing would have served him, EVEN if he had been the best football player that ever lived. I feel that Whittier College in those days, and for many years since, has served to bring out qualities of character and the study of history and the arts and the humanities, which I feel may not contribute so much to a person's earning power as they do to a person's ability to enjoy life, and to live according to certain ideals.

ARENA: You may or may not recall that the President has mentioned Whittier College in some of his speeches. One was his

acceptance speech in Miami [Florida] for the last Presidential election. You may recall that he did speak at that time on the fact that he had had no political science. That's one difference between Whittier College then and Whittier College of today. You know it has a very good Political Science Department. What other general comparisons, from your firsthand knowledge of the Whittier College of the thirties, when the President attended, and the Whittier College of today, which you have attended? And may I ask, by the way, did you ever sit in on any courses back in the thirties when you knew the President and he was a student . . .

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: . . . as you are today?

FLOOD: No, but I knew his instructors. They had two jewels in those days. One of them was Dr. Herbert Harris, who was a very close friend of mine. He was a Shakespearean scholar, and one of the most truly delightful persons that I've ever known in my entire life; a rigid Quaker, very correct in his habits, a teetotaler and a church-attender and a man of such high ideals, and Dick took many courses under him. He has been dead a number of years. I feel that Herbert Harris and Dr. Paul Smith, who taught him history, were two tremendously strong influences in his life. And Dr. Harris was an inspiration to me from the time I was twenty-nine years old. We exchanged books and we attended many things together. I feel that those two men contributed a great deal to him.

ARENA: Do any other men, not only those who became president, but can you think of any other men who have benefited from Whittier College's education? In other words, was the President an exception in your view, or from knowing other graduates over the years, was the college able to turn out men of equally high calibre?

FLOOD: I think a man of equally wonderful calibre in every respect but not in political life is Clinton O. Harris.

ARENA: Knowing Clinton Harris as you do and knowing Chief Wallace Newman as you do, how would you assess these two gentlemen as being: one, symbolic of the President's friends; and two, as being an influence on his life, knowing all three as you do.

FLOOD: Chief Newman would have been an influence on his life from the angle of his athletics, and the fact that he was not the best of football players, but he did his best. Chief Newman is a builder of men and he helped build Nixon. And I think the three greatest contributors that I knew personally for years were Dr. Harris, Newman and Dr. Paul Smith.

ARENA: You did mention Dr. Harris in connection with a subject that I would like to go into, if anything comes to mind--the field of acting. You may know the President enjoyed appearing in plays, including the Community Players of Whittier. Did you ever see him in any play?

FLOOD: No, I never did. I went to them, but I didn't happen to see any that Dick was in, and I believe Pat was in some of them with him too.

ARENA: Are you interested in acting and plays yourself?

FLOOD: I'm interested in plays, yes. Dr. Harris used to put a play or two on, some with Rotarians taking parts in them for the Rotary Club.

ARENA: How would you assess the importance, if any, of the President's interest in acting, in the formation of his personality and maybe character?

FLOOD: We're all actors, and I think it was helpful to him. But still, he had to have the character to go beyond it, or it would have been a sham.

ARENA: Finally, touching on another aspect of the man's life which you have alluded to, but which we did not go into--his religious interest. Do you mind, if it isn't too personal, if I ask you if you are a Quaker yourself?

FLOOD: No, I am not.

ARENA: Have you ever heard the President speak on a religious subject, maybe as a guest at a Quaker meeting?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Nothing like that. Have you ever come into contact with anyone who sat in his adult religious classes?

FLOOD: No--yes--yes--Dr. Randolph Pyle.

ARENA: Would you comment on that?

FLOOD: You should interview Dr. Pyle.

ARENA: We are making arrangements to do so.

FLOOD: That's good. And I think possibly Mrs. Pyle.

ARENA: What is the connection, as you know, between the Pyles and President Nixon?

FLOOD: Well, they are both members of the Friends church, but not the same church, because the Nixons belong to the East Whittier Church. But Dr. Pyle has been a mathematics instructor for many years at Whittier College, and he would have had contact with Nixon.

ARENA: As a non-Quaker, and if you wouldn't mind, how would you assess the influence of the Quakers on Whittier over the years?

FLOOD: Very beneficial to the community as a whole.

ARENA: Have you as a non-Quaker, ever felt at a disadvantage . . .

FLOOD: No, no.

ARENA: . . . not from the religious standpoint . . .

FLOOD: No, no. They never excluded anybody.

ARENA: If you were to name, say, A single Quaker in the community who from YOUR experience stands out above all others, we'll say, in integrity and character, and whom you admire, is there one name that stands out, or more than one, that you have known over the years? And have these had any contact with President Nixon from your knowledge?

FLOOD: Dr. Herbert Harris and Dr. Randolph Pyle.

ARENA: As this interview is coming to an end, Mr. Flood, may I conclude with this question: Is there anything that I have not brought up, any subject or topic that you would like to bring up at this time yourself?

FLOOD: No.

ARENA: Then let me thank you very sincerely for your kindness in being so generous with your time and answers.

FLOOD: I loved it all. Bye-bye and thanks, and I do hope I have been helpful.

ARENA: You have been.