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Paul H. Gardner (August 8, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. PAUL H. GARDNER

August 8, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Paul H. Gardner. H, middle initial, stands for Harold. Today's date is August 8, 1972, Arena interviewing, in Whittier, California. Paul, may I begin by asking you to give a brief account of your own background and setting so it will be in proper perspective with the President's own life. He was born in 1913 in Yorba Linda. May I ask you where and when you were born and then would you give a brief resume of your educational background and your career to date?

GARDNER: I was born in Los Angeles, September 6, 1915, and at the age of four years came to Whittier to live, and attended Lincoln [Elementary] School and then Bailey [Elementary] School and John Muir [Junior High School], seventh and eighth grade, and then went to Whittier High School, graduating in 1933. Then I attended Whittier College for four years, graduating in 1937. Then I taught school for five years in El Monte, California.

ARENA: May I ask what subjects, by the way?

GARDNER: Seventh and eighth grades general elementary credential I had, so I taught just basic courses and some art, because I have always been interested in art and music.

And then I was in the Navy for three years as a pharmacists's mate, and then returned to Whittier in September 1945 to teach in the sixth grade in the Bailey School where I had attended as a student myself.

ARENA: Excuse me. By this time was this still the same building or another physical building?

GARDNER: The same building. And then I was teaching some night school classes in jewelry making, and the night school adult principal asked me if I would be interested in teaching in the day school. So I was interviewed by Mrs. Hodge.

ARENA: Excuse me. This would be Mrs. Marian Wilson Hodge.

GARDNER: So then I went to teaching in Whittier High School, which was then Whittier Union High School in 1947, and there I taught a basic course, an English-history combination, two sections of that and then had the annual staff. I taught there for five years and then I went to El Rancho when it opened up. I had the annual there and taught basic courses there and also taught EMR students--Educable Mentally Retarded students--and got my counseling credential. Then I was a part-time counselor there and got my school psychologist credential through USC [University of Southern California], where I had also gotten my master's and my general secondary credential.

ARENA: How many years are you away from official retirement?

GARDNER: Three years. I could go eight years but I'm not going to.

ARENA: On the question of your attending high school, was the President a student during the time you were there? Had you started your freshman year in the high school too?

GARDNER: He was a senior the year I was a freshman, and he was a senior the year I was a freshman in college, and that was the year he was student body president at Whittier College.

ARENA: And just to be sure, we mentioned off the tape that one of his uncles, a Griffith Milhous, taught at John Muir

Junior High. Were you there or do you recall him yourself in any way? He was there I believe a brief time, but taught music privately over the years.

GARDNER: I'm not sure, but there was, I am pretty sure, an older man named Mr. Milhous who had the orchestra. But I wasn't in it. And it's just a vague memory. I am not real sure about Mr. Milhous. Then after six years at El Rancho I became school psychologist for the district and have been doing that ever since, fourteen years now.

ARENA: And also just for the record, did your path in the Navy ever happen to cross that of President Nixon's, who was also in the Navy?

GARDNER: Not to my knowledge, no. Mine was at Farragut, Idaho, a training center, for a year and a half, and then I was with amphibious forces on the Atlantic first and then came around to the Pacific, and by that time the war was over.

ARENA: And if it isn't too personal, do you mind if I ask you what your religious preference is?

GARDNER: I am Episcopalian.

ARENA: As you know, the President is a Quaker and I was just wondering about the military aspect. He obviously was not a conscientious objector. Do you recall any discussion about that yourself in any way, or do you recall at that time that question coming up or even wondering about it, the fact that obviously not only President Nixon but other Quakers in this area engaged in the combatant services during World War II?

GARDNER: Well, I always assumed that some of them were, shall we say, more devout than others and followed the Quaker philosophy; some of them were more imbued with the philosophy. Most of them are called birthright Quakers and, therefore, had always been a member of the church. But I always assumed like in any other church group, there would be some people who followed the philosophy and the tenets of their religion to a closer degree than others. For instance, in the Episcopal there is high and low church, and some are much more concerned about their religious beliefs than others, and yet in his group they could all call themselves Quakers or Friends and others would be more of a nominal religious affiliation.

ARENA: From the standpoint of understanding the community in which the President grew up, do you mind if I ask you to what extent was your being a member of the Episcopalian Church ever a disadvantage in a town founded by Quakers and where they obviously had a certain amount of influence and still do? To be blunt, did you ever suffer from anything like prejudice along the way, either as a student or as a member of the teaching profession?

GARDNER: No, I've never experienced anything that way because I have had good friends who were Quakers, and still do at the present time. One person who influenced my life a great deal was a strong member of the First Friends Church, my music teacher, Mrs. [Mable Greene] Roberts, who is still alive. Greene was her stepfather. I don't know whether she carried that name. Her husband's name was J. Clifford Roberts who was a history teacher at Whittier High School. But she was my music teacher for seven years. She is still living up on the corner of Alta [Street] and Painter Avenue. For a long time my aunt was housekeeper for a Quaker lady, and I got to know a lot about Quaker people through this Miss [Isabel] Moore, and yet I never felt any kind of prejudice in the city and I don't think anybody's ever felt that. Miss Moore is no longer alive. Her mother was Washington Hadley's third wife.

ARENA: I would like to establish now a kind of overall summary of your direct contact first with President Nixon over the years. You have mentioned, of course, the idea of high school and college, whether you knew and talked to him personally or not, but the fact that you were in the same school. I would like to establish this direct contact with him over the years, if there was any, through service clubs or attending some functions together that you may have had. For example, he appeared in some Whittier Community Player productions. Maybe you were a member of the audience. I would like to go into that and then, secondarily, any direct contact with other immediate members of his family.

And here I mean not only his wife, Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon, but his parents, his brothers, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] and Edward [Calvert Nixon], much younger, and then his uncles and aunts, especially those who lived in this area, those names we mentioned off the tape like the Marshburns [Oscar and Rose Olive], Mrs. [Martha Milhous] Gibbons, who was an aunt who had been a nurse. We did touch on Griffith Milhous and the children, his first cousins. These would include the children of the Marshburns, the children of Mrs. Gibbons and so forth.

So would you give a resume of these contacts, beginning with the President first without going into detail at this point, and then we will go into detail after you have made your general summary.

GARDNER: Well, I would like to go into one detail that sort of introduces my acquaintanceship, a very minor acquaintanceship with President Richard Nixon. My father was in the insurance business and he did business with Richard Nixon's father.

ARENA: Excuse me. May I ask you to give your father's full name?

GARDNER: Harold Irving Gardner.

ARENA: And may I ask you if he is still living?

GARDNER: No. He died in '33. But he was the Equitable Life Assurance agent in Whittier and did quite a lot of business with various people in town. One of them was he sold life insurance to Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, and I'm not sure whether he took out policies on the boys or not, but I do know that my father did quite a little business with him.

ARENA: From the standpoint of historiography, do you happen to know if any of these insurance policies or records may still be around, either in the office--or maybe your father left his papers with you--or any written correspondence between your father and the President's family in this regard?

GARDNER: No, I don't think there's any kind of records.

ARENA: I don't mean to be a pest about this, but have you looked yourself? In other words, old family trunks may still be around your attic. Have you ever made a concerted search for such papers?

GARDNER: I've not made a search for them but there are very few papers of my father's in existence that I know of. The nearest to any kind of record of the insurance policies Burt Parminter might have.

ARENA: B U R T P A R M I N T E R ?

GARDNER: E. Burt Parminter, although Burt didn't take over the agency but he's had it through the years, and they might have the continuation of those policies. But the records that my father and mother had have all been destroyed, the business records. And it was through this acquaintanceship that my father had with Richard's father that he suggested one time that I come out one time on a Saturday, and Dick and Don Nixon and I went on a hike up in what's now Friendly Hills, back off of Santa Gertrudes [Avenue] and West Road, just roamed all around the hills up there in the orange groves.

ARENA: I was just wondering when you think that took place, yearwise?

GARDNER: That would be around '28 or '29, sometime like that. And my impression which I have always carried was that Dick was a very energetic and talkative, bright, friendly fellow.

ARENA: Which, of course, is Richard.

GARDNER: Richard, yes, and his kind of jolly, plump younger brother, Donald. And we had just a nice tramp or hike up in the lower hills. And that's as I say, the impression I always carried of Richard. And the other one is when he was student body president at Whittier College, we used to go to chapel which was compulsory in those days. About every other meeting Dick would conduct it, and often times there was school business or student body government business, and again I was impressed by his spontaneity and his ability to think and talk with no notes, and yet excellently paraphrase with correct grammar and a clear flow of verbal ideas.

ARENA: While we are on this subject of these chapel meetings, do you recall that they were specifically concerned with religious themes or religious social themes, or what?

GARDNER: If my memory is right, they alternated between a devotional-type meeting and more of a business or student body, some of them more like a pep rally or an assembly, and others were much more devotional. Sometimes the students put those on and sometimes the president of the college or faculty members put on more like a meditation-type chapel assembly.

ARENA: Paul, where were they held at that time?

- GARDNER: In the old auditorium that's now burned down, the second floor of Founders Hall.
- ARENA: This would have been during his senior year, your freshman year, which would have been '33-'34.
- GARDNER: '33-'34. And the president that year I guess was the acting president, Dr. [Herbert E.] Harris because [Walter F.] Dexter had left and Harris had the interim and then Dr. [W. Orville] Mendenhall came out from the East. And if I'm not mistaken, Herbert Harris was the acting president of the college and he had several, as I remember, of these chapels which were religious meditation type. Sometimes the music department would give a brief concert and other times hymns were sung, and then sometimes it was a meeting more like student body meetings and student body programs, some of them even very light in context and just kind of for fun.
- ARENA: Maybe you did mention it, but just to be sure, how often were they held?
- GARDNER: I think every other week. I don't think they were weekly. I think they were every other week but you had assigned seats and they took the roll, until I think our senior year.
- ARENA: Do you recall any of the specific subjects that President Nixon touched upon, by any chance? Of course, you didn't realize the importance of remembering at the time, but I was just wondering if anything comes to mind about what he said.
- GARDNER: I'm trying to think.
- ARENA: It might come to your mind while we're talking. To keep to the same general subject, do you recall anything in the way of general impressions? For example, could you say flatly that he was or was not proselytizing? Did he give an obvious Quaker bent to what he was saying, so much so that it remains in your mind now, or did he seem to be really ecumenical and not seem to touch on any particular religious faith's dogma, including his own Quaker Church? Does that stand out in any way?
- GARDNER: No, I think of him talking more on national issues and government policies, not political but, you know, it's

just an impression, more on how the State Department is operating or how the government operates, but certainly not anything partywise or political in that sense, and always of a serious nature, if I remember right. And the devotional, again I felt no proselytizing, but just a general--I was going to say innocuous--type of meditation. And I really haven't thought about these chapel services.

ARENA: Do you recall that any of the other faiths and churches in the community, including your own--which must have been aware of this, realizing that some of their own parishioners were attending the college--brought it up in any way? Was there ever any criticism or any comment in a positive way concerning the conducting of these religious services? I am thinking also of the Catholic Church in the community, for example. Then, much more than now, the church had some pretty strict rules about Catholics attending non-Catholic services. Even back East that was quite common. I am just wondering if anything like that came up from your experience?

GARDNER: No, I think everyone that came to Whittier College realized it was a religiously-oriented school, and it was more the feeling that it was a background of the Quaker religion with all of its positive aspects providing a Christian background, Christian culture. In fact that's the name on the seal of Whittier College, Christian culture, and I think people looked at the fact that no one was proselytizing you to become a Quaker, and religious services there were free of any ritual-type thing, such as the Episcopal or the Roman Catholic Church would have. And I knew the Roman Catholics who came to Whittier College, and I don't think they felt the chapel service there was infringing on their own personal beliefs. You knew that a large number of the faculty were Quaker, Dr. [David E.] Henley and Dr. [J. Herschel] Coffin and other people there at the college and, of course, Dr. Harris and Dr. Mendenhall later. But I think our parents all felt comfortable that we were going to a Christian college, and I don't think we thought about denominationalism at all.

ARENA: Given your interest and training in psychology, given the fact that there has already appeared a book--I am sure there will be more than one--and many articles dealing with you might say the psycho-history theme, could I ask you to comment from a psychological point of view--as you see it, of course--on the makeup of Whittier during this precise period when the President and you were attending the high school or attending the college?

I am thinking, for example, to what extent was formal psychology a part of the formal makeup of either the high school or the college in the sense of testing? As you know, it is so common now for all students to go through orientation programs. To what extent was there psychological counseling, maybe from the educational point of view and career-choosing point of view? To what extent was there any recognition of psychology by the educators when you were a student both at the high school and college and, of course, that means when the President himself was a student?

GARDNER: Well, I think there was no evidence of any psychology factor at the high school level at all. There was a Dr. Jones who had been at the college and for financial reasons left the college and came down to the high school to teach, and he did try to do some vocational counseling.

ARENA: Excuse me, would this be Dr. Louis T. Jones?

GARDNER: Louis T. Jones.

ARENA: Who taught history at the college, among other things. I know he did teach history. He had the President as a student.

GARDNER: Yes. And then he came down to the high school and was what you might call the first vocational guidance counselor that the high school had. He did call in all the seniors and talked to each one individually about what they were going to do after they graduated from high school. And, of course, this was depression times and he tried to give suggestions. If you were going to college, he was glad to know that, and that was sort of the extent of his interview with you.

ARENA: But there were no psychology tests, so to speak, for either educational or vocational-determining purposes?

GARDNER: There were achievement tests in high school. We all took English achievement tests and group intelligence tests and carried those on from elementary, just a group IQ test and a group achievement test in English and math and some literature I believe. And at the high school level there was a math achievement test given, and in my case a Latin achievement test because I took two years of Latin. At the college Dr. Herschel Coffin was the psychologist and the head of the psychology department, and I can't remember anybody with him except Dr. Onias B. Baldwin, who had more educational psychology.

ARENA: And you took courses in psychology under Dr. Herschel Coffin?

GARDNER: Yes. Psychology was my minor in those days, along with English. As an aside, Dr. Cooper's book doesn't like to talk about the fact that it was an education school, but almost all of us there were education majors and education was our major.

ARENA: Excuse me, but to get that aside clearly on the record, this would be Dr. Charles Cooper and the book is The History of Whittier College.

GARDNER: Yes. At least my impression on reading the book was that the Whittier College authorities did not want their school to be known as a teacher-training institution. However, it was a very fine one with great pioneers, among them Dr. Dorothy Baruch. She was one of the leaders in developmental reading. She had little children tell her what they were doing, what things they were playing with, and she recorded those--in those days it was in shorthand--and wrote those up in some children's readers.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: What do you recall about Dr. J. Jerschel Coffin, since he was also a teacher of President Nixon?

GARDNER: Well, if I'm not mistaken, he was brought out by Walter Fryer Dexter, the president of Whittier College, and my main recollection of him is that he gave dignity to the college scene. He appeared in those days to be what I think most people think of as the college professor, a very calm demeanor, and he had a very brilliant mind but never patronizing to his students, never trying to put them down in any way, just a very warm, fine person. I had several psychology classes from him. It is just one of those things, a very fine impression of a very fine gentleman.

ARENA: Do you recall what his specific training in psychology was, given the newness of the field so to speak at that time and its much more common universal acceptance today? I'm wondering, for example, how formally trained he was from your own personal recollections?

GARDNER: No, I'd have to look up what his training was. I want to say Swarthmore College was his alma mater, I believe, and it was either--I could be all wrong--Columbia University or New York University. It was one of the Eastern universities for his degree. I believe he had two doctorates. I'm not sure, but I never felt in any way that he wasn't a well trained person. I would say he was probably of the behaviorist school, which was current at that time and for that time was recognized as the leading psychological theory of the time.

ARENA: On the question of psychological theory and schools of thought, were these still something that the average student did not look into when you were attending Whittier College, which would be about the same time as the President himself?

GARDNER: Well, it was more on the behavioristic, humanistic approach, although [Sigmund] Freud was certainly studied and was part of our textbook curriculum, as were [Carl Gustav] Jung and [Alfred] Adler. You had a feeling more that Dr. Coffin was dealing to some extent in educational psychology, the learning process, and again child development and child behavior, and--at least my impression was--it was all directed toward the growth and development of the child, although it was not in the education department. That came later, and I'm not sure who taught the growth and development course that I took. It could have been Dr. Coffin but I would have to look at my transcript.

ARENA: May I ask you this general question, in view of your subsequent concentration on educational psychology? Did you find yourself well prepared to handle the graduate courses and the new problems of learning in your own case as you went on to study psychology? Did you find your Whittier College background put you in good stead?

GARDNER: Well, I think my Whittier College background served me a great deal because, as I say, I had Dr. Baruch, although she was no longer on the campus, and Nila Banton Smith, the great reading teacher, who is still an emeritus, I guess, at Tucson [Arizona].

ARENA: Would you spell her name?

GARDNER: N I L A B A N T O N S M I T H, one of the national authorities in the teaching of reading. I also had Mabel Rice. She came here to teach children's literature and story telling and continued on the Whittier College campus for years. She carried on the traditions of Nila B. Smith and Dorothy Baruch when the college began to try to de-emphasize their teacher training program. Whittier College also in those days was strong on the progressive education with its best connotations, using child-centered interests, using present-day problems and situations for children to attack, certainly using a great deal of knowledge about child growth and development in the approach to teaching school, so that I felt I was very well prepared when I went out teaching school, and the psychology training I had at Whittier College fitted into my own teaching and studying of psychology to be a school psychologist, which does not concern itself a great deal with clinical psychology but more in educational testing, in improving teaching methods and improving teacher-pupil relationship; so I feel the background I got at Whittier College was very good to me as I also feel my teaching elementary school was a big background facet of my work in high school counseling and school psychology.

ARENA: On this question of the tie-up between Whittier College and the Quaker Church, do you recall any particular problems that came up over theoretical differences among the Quakers themselves that might have reached down into your own world? I am thinking of dancing being allowed on the campus. Were there other problems similar to that which took place while you were a student?

GARDNER: I was never aware of any of that kind of pressure because, first of all, when I went to Whittier High School, dancing was not allowed on the Whittier High School campus, and ballroom dancing just became popular in this area when I was in high school, and the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] stepped into the breach and we had dances at the Women's Club. It was off campus and yet we were all high school kids there and various parents of the community were the sponsors and the chaperons--the bouncers. And so when I went on to Whittier College, the fact that we couldn't dance on campus didn't bother me. There was no smoking or drinking on campus allowed in those days and I think most people knew that and just accepted it. I was never aware of any pressures from the Friends Church and the board, except I did know on my own that Walter Dexter had had pressures applied on him, but I always felt those were partly because he was very dynamic and a very forward looking person. Witness

the fact that he became Superintendent of Public Instruction in California, and that certain members of the college board of trustees who were very conservative used any religious or moral implication to make life hard for Dr. Dexter, in using these and other things. The real reasons were never brought out. Dancing on campus was a camouflage over feeling that he was too progressive, and yet it was not necessarily in education, I felt. He did a great deal to raise money for the college, with his money-making dinners and what not. I guess I have always been prejudiced anyway. My father and he were very good friends, and we always heard the Dexter side in our home and not the other side of the story.

ARENA: Would I be correct in assuming that President Dexter or Dr. Dexter was a Quaker himself?

GARDNER: Yes.

ARENA: Well, Mr. Gardner, I want to thank you very much for taking the time and the trouble to grant me this interview and my fellow historians will be equally grateful for all of your frank and full answers to my questions. Thank you very much.