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Ferris H. Gregory (February 3, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. H. FERRIS GREGORY

February 3, 1972
Altadena, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

- ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. H. Ferris Gregory of Altadena, California, February 3, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Gregory, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?
- GREGORY: Would you like the exact date?
- ARENA: Year is good enough. As a matter of fact, when it comes to remembering years or anything like that, if you are not sure, you could say about; that's fine.
- GREGORY: I was born in Redlands, California, in 1908.
- ARENA: And when did you move to the Whittier area?
- GREGORY: As near as I can remember, it would be in the fall of 1938, about September, 1938.
- ARENA: And do you recall the very first occasion, and again the year, when you met President Nixon?
- GREGORY: Well, it would have been probably around October or November of 1938 when I transferred my membership from the Hemet, California, 20-30 Club to the Whittier, California, 20-30 Club.
- ARENA: And may I ask your occupation around the time you were living in Whittier?

GREGORY: I was associated with [Donald E.] Don Fantz in operating an appliance store.

ARENA: I notice you have in front of you the small publication that was put out by the 20-30 Club, and it is entitled "The Green Leaf." Would it be permissible to make xeroxed copies of this, and return the original to you, for the purpose of depositing a copy in the Nixon Presidential Library?

GREGORY: Yes, I would be glad to loan this copy of "The Green Leaf" which is dated Tuesday, April 18, 1939.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how you obtained that particular issue?

GREGORY: Well, perhaps the reason I obtained this issue is because I was requested to write an article for this particular issue and that's why I kept it down through these years.

ARENA: I notice that your article is on Page 3, and it is entitled "Greg" Gregory.

GREGORY: Yes, that was my nickname and it still is.

ARENA: I notice also there is an article to the right of it with the name and the caption "Mel Rich."

GREGORY: Yes, each week when this was published, different members of the club would be requested to write an article or put something in regarding what they were interested in as far as benefiting the club. I notice Mel has an article relative to the financial aspects, or the financial status of the 20-30 Club in Whittier at that time.

ARENA: I also notice that the masthead on page two says, "The Green Leaf, published the first of each week by 20-30 Club of Whittier." The editor at that time was a Mike Mayberry. I notice also that this particular issue gives the names of the different officers, as well as a complete roster.

GREGORY: Yes, that is true.

ARENA: And I believe it is on page one where there is reference to President Nixon's name, and it lists him under "Executive Committee", and he is in charge of Coordination. And I believe his name is also listed on the first page as one member of the board of directors. Other board of director members were: Merle Mashburn. And your name is listed also as holding a particular post, as

belonging under the program committees, and you are in charge of music there. And would you mind indicating the address that is given for President Nixon in this particular issue?

GREGORY: Dick Nixon's address as of this publication was 2706 East Whittier Boulevard in Whittier.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you concerning your recollections of the President, to just speak your mind? In other words, whatever comes to mind from the standpoint of his serving on these committees, from the standpoint of his personality, as you recall; if there was any social occasion where you had contact with him, anything that comes to mind.

GREGORY: Well, being on the music committee, it was my assignment to primarily lead them in singing on meeting nights, and Dick would from time to time accompany the group, playing the piano. He did not play with a great deal of gusto but played well, I thought, as an accompanist to the group in their singing. As any club would have in those days, and perhaps now too of that age group, we had dances and various social affairs. Dick would attend some of them. He was not always the enthusiastic dancer, as I remember.

ARENA: Do you recall that he danced at all?

GREGORY: Yes, I can remember. He would dance, but it would be a very simple step, nothing flamboyant, as some of the steps were in those days; but, of course, nothing compared to what they are now. He always appeared to me to be of a very serious nature. I was associated with Don Fantz in this appliance store, and at the rear of the store we had an old, used cane settee, I guess you would call it that, which we had at the back of the store, and from time to time various members of the 20-30 Club would come in during the day and sit down and talk. And I can remember Dick coming in occasionally, carrying his briefcase, and always looking very serious and asking how business was and how we were getting along. Not that he didn't laugh, and you could have a joke with him, but he always appeared to be, we all thought, rather serious and reserved. Of course, those were his early days in law, having I believe just been assigned to this law firm in Whittier.

ARENA: Do you recall that he was particularly dressed or that he had any particular style, we'll say, casual, or was he always with jacket? Do you recall him wearing a suit, we'll say?

GREGORY: Yes, I can always recall him wearing a suit, what we would call a conservative dresser, always with

not necessarily a serious expression but one that would indicate that maybe he had something on his mind, or had come from a case perhaps which had caused him to be in a frame of mind that was not particularly jovial.

ARENA: As I recall, the 20-30 Club was made up of people from various walks of life. Whereas he was a lawyer, you were a businessman and not everyone had a college education. Do you recall that he had difficulty or that other members had difficulty in communicating with him? Did he seem to be, in a way, above the members? Was there a tendency of people in any way to shy away from him because of that education difference?

GREGORY: No, I don't believe so, in our social contacts, but he had a certain reserve; there's no doubt about that. He wasn't one to go way out at a party or a social affair. There was always a certain reserve. Not that he wasn't enjoying himself, I'm sure, but it just wasn't his nature, that's all.

ARENA: Do you recall during the social affairs where there was dancing that the fellows came stag or they came with dates or both ways, and how he came, in particular?

GREGORY: I believe that in most cases they brought their wives or dates. Most of them were married. At that time, Dick wasn't married. I never have met his wife, because he met his wife after I left Whittier.

ARENA: 1940.

GREGORY: But I can remember him being at affairs. I can't remember who he was with, but he usually was in attendance at our social affairs, dances and parties.

ARENA: Do you recollect that he--as a matter of fact it would indicate here--he was not president at that particular time but he did become president later on. According to "The Green Leaf", and as we noted, it's dated Tuesday, April 18, 1939, the president then was Dick Thomson.. And we have noted that one of the board of directors members listed is Dick Nixon. Do you recall while you were a member that an election did take place? For example, had Dick Thomson won out against President Nixon, do you recall?

GREGORY: I cannot recall that. I left Whittier about January of 1940 and I cannot recall the election and who succeeded Dick Thomson as president. My guess

would be probably the vice president at that time may have moved up, but I am not sure who followed Dick Thomson as president.

ARENA: In the brief time you were there, do you recall that President Nixon in any way seemed outstanding at that point? He was a young lawyer. He was just coming into his practice, as you know. Actually he started in 1937. But thinking back to that time and trying to forget for a moment how famous he is today, did he stand out at all, to a person like you who just came into the community and then left shortly afterwards? Did he stand out in your mind?

GREGORY: No, not particularly. He would be as near as I can remember like you would expect any young attorney, just getting under way with an established firm. Nothing particularly outstanding about it except that he was very serious. I believe he was assigned cases, some divorce cases, I believe. It seems that I've heard that he would attempt reconciliations in these cases, probably because of his Quaker beliefs; I don't know.

ARENA: You are separating what you hear, as you're saying now, from what you knew firsthand.

GREGORY: That's right.

ARENA: You never met any person who was involved in any of his cases?

GREGORY: No.

ARENA: So all of this would be hearsay.

GREGORY: That's right.

ARENA: Had you any direct contact with him religionwise? Did he ever deliver, I won't say a sermon, but were there some joint religious services, or do you recall his giving grace during any meeting or special invocation? Do you have any recollection of him in any religious capacity at all?

GREGORY: No, I cannot recollect that. He may have said grace at some of our dinner meetings, but it was various ones in those days.

ARENA: He would have just been one of that group?

GREGORY: They were chosen at random, that's right.

ARENA: Do you recall when you did know him of the fact that he belonged to one of the older families, in the sense that his grandfather had settled here in 1897? Had that been brought to your attention in any way?

GREGORY: No, it had not.

ARENA: Do you recall working with him in preparation of music? You mentioned how you did collaborate. I was just wondering, would there be some homework where you had to meet with him outside of the club proper?

GREGORY: No, I do not recollect that at all.

ARENA: That is where the combination of music would come in. This would be something that would be determined more or less on the spot, and there wasn't any practice sessions or anything like that?

GREGORY: That's right.

ARENA: Was there ever anything like a musical program while you were there that was presented?

GREGORY: No, not as I remember such. We would from time to time, maybe have a guest artist sing, or something like that, but it would be part of the program-- I mean, the major feature of the program that evening.

ARENA: I see. Do you recall that his tie-up with music was only with the piano; there was no singing, or he did not belong, if there was, to a choir that performed in a regular way?

GREGORY: There may have been, but I don't know.

ARENA: You do recall definitely the piano playing?

GREGORY: That is right.

ARENA: And that is all.

GREGORY: That is right.

ARENA: Did he seem to be particularly close with any of the members of the 20-30 Club at that time?

GREGORY: Not that I can remember. He was always friendly and very gracious, but to the best of my knowledge, I don't believe he had a particularly close affiliation with any one member or group of members, as I remember.

ARENA: Were you aware, or did he indicate in any way, without getting into politics as such, that he belonged to a particular political party? Do you recall, for example, that he was trying to promote a particular candidate? It isn't necessary to mention the name, but was there any political role that he seemed to play at that time when you knew him?

GREGORY: Not at that time.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, do you mind if I ask, did the club invite people especially, we'll say, during campaign years from different political parties?

GREGORY: Not that I can remember. I believe the club in those days, long before I was affiliated with it, sponsored each year an evening in Whittier which they called Law Day, in which they honored attorneys. And they usually tried to get a prominent attorney or perhaps a government personality to speak. If I recall correctly, this was given at the Women's Club, and it was an evening meeting to which all the attorneys as well as other prominent people in Whittier were invited. I have a vivid memory of this.

ARENA: But it would be a type of person such as that?

GREGORY: That's right.

ARENA: Who would be invited for the Law Day affair?

GREGORY: That's right, a well-known person. Or the Law Evening, I guess you'd call it.

ARENA: And it would have been a banquet.

GREGORY: That's right.

ARENA: Do you recall ever bumping into President Nixon on the street and his recalling or not recalling you?

GREGORY: Oh, yes. I would see him quite often on the street.

ARENA: Maybe you could have observed this, even though you weren't looking for it necessarily, but did you notice that he seemed to know all the members, know them by name and know them to talk to outside of the club?

GREGORY: Oh, yes. He was friendly with all the fellows and he knew them all, I'm quite sure, by name. I know

he knew me, and I would see him from time to time on the streets of Whittier.

ARENA: Did you ever come into contact with any of the members of his family? I believe you said you did not meet his future wife, but did you meet with his parents or brothers or any uncles or cousins?

GREGORY: No, I never did.

ARENA: Do you recall that he had a car and the type of car it was?

GREGORY: I am quite sure he had one, but I can't remember seeing him or knowing that he owned a car or was driving one. Most of the time I saw him he was walking, usually. But I cannot associate him with an automobile as such.

ARENA: Do you recall him as a public speaker at all, either at the 20-30 Club or on any other occasion? If you do, please describe whatever comes to mind about the President as a speaker when you knew him.

GREGORY: Well, he was very fluent as a speaker. From time to time in the club at the meeting, various members would get up, and as you may know in a service club, it's always a time to try to put someone on the spot, another member, something you may have heard or seen them do, and collect a fine, because the 20-30 Club operated very much as senior service clubs, and Dick would get up from time to time to speak. He was always very fluent, I remember that. And I learned later that he had been very good in debating at Whittier College, so that was one reason why he was very fluent on his feet.

ARENA: You don't recall, or do you, that he did or did not use notes when he spoke?

GREGORY: I've never seen him use notes, because these talks would have been extemporaneous. He may be called upon to say something, or he may get on his feet of his own will, to express an opinion or to just make a talk about some other person in the club, what he had seen them doing, because that was quite the thing to do in those days in any service club, to get on your feet and see if you could pin somebody down on something you had seen, or maybe get a fine levied against them for some reason or other, always in a very jovial atmosphere, of course.

ARENA: Can you think of any reason why you in particular, or any of the other members, would have joined a

club like that, rather than something like Lions [Club] or Rotary [Club] or Kiwanis [Club]?

GREGORY: Well, my reason for being in the Whittier 20-30 Club was that I originally joined the 20-30 Club in San Bernardino, California, and when I was in the San Bernardino club, which was for about three years, I was secretary of the club, and I had to leave and was transferred to the town of Hemet, California. Hemet had a small 20-30 Club which I transferred to, and I was in that club for about two years, and then I left the Southern California Gas Company, which was my employer. I was office manager in Hemet, which handled the Hemet-San Jacinto Valley area, and I resigned from there and went to Whittier and joined Don Fantz in opening his appliance store. So I transferred from the Hemet club to the Whittier club, and that is why I became affiliated. The 20-30 Club age limit is from twenty to your thirty-first birthday, and when you attain that you become what they call a past active member, and that is the reason I happened to be affiliated with the Whittier club.

ARENA: Did you find that the Whittier club in the overall composition of its members, in the overall activities, differed from the one at Hemet? Was the Whittier 20-30 Club distinctive, and I don't mean distinctive in the sense of better but just different, and in what ways?

GREGORY: Well, each club is different in the cities in which they operate. The San Bernardino club, for example, was a large club. I think it was the third club established in 20-30. They had from sixty to seventy members. The Hemet club was a small club of around thirty-some-odd members. Whittier had around forty-five. Now in the Whittier club were a very strong active group, and it represented a good cross section of the commercial and business life of the city.

ARENA: Would you say more so from your own recollection than the Hemet one, than the San Bernardino one?

GREGORY: They were stronger and probably represented more of the commercial life of the city and business life of the city than the Hemet club, but the San Bernardino club, by virtue of being an older club, was a very strong club and represented a very strong cross section of the city in young men twenty to thirty years of age, men who were just getting under way, you might say, in their business life. I would say that the Whittier club had a very fine club and a very strong club for its size and was very representative of the young men in the business and commercial life of the city.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if the 20-30 Club was something that was founded in California?

GREGORY: Yes, it was.

ARENA: And about when?

GREGORY: If I remember correctly, the 20-30 Club was founded in the San Francisco Bay area, or in Sacramento.

ARENA: Is it your understanding that it no longer exists in the state or anywhere in the country?

GREGORY: As far as I know now, I do not believe that a chapter or a club still exists. Pasadena [California] had a club up to recent years, but I believe it is no longer in existence. When I moved to this area, I noticed that from time to time I would read excerpts in the paper about the 20-30 Club of Pasadena meeting, but I do not believe that the organization is still in existence, and I read in the paper last year that one of the founders of the 20-30 Club in Oakland--I believe it was Oakland--passed away. But I do not believe it is still in existence. It may be, but I'm not sure of that.

ARENA: To get the age bracket correct, does that mean those between twenty and thirty?

GREGORY: Twenty through to the thirty-first birthday.

ARENA: It's a ten-year period, I see. Could the disappearance of the club be due to the fact that, unlike your period possibly, so many young men continue on in school, and this was mainly for young businessmen starting out in their twenties?

GREGORY: I do not believe there is the same interest now by men in that age bracket in a service club. I believe the 20-30 Club was founded really as a training organization, you might say, for men who would later go into the so-called senior service clubs--Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Exchange and others.

ARENA: Did these clubs look upon it that way, in the sense that they did not look upon the 20-30 Club as competition but as training ground for future members, and did that actually happen?

GREGORY: I think it did; that's why I believe a great many men who belonged to the 20-30 Club later would go into the senior service clubs. In fact, if I remember the history of 20-30 correctly, it was sponsored by a Rotary Club in the Bay Area for young men who at that time were ^{not} eligible businesswise to go into a senior service club. I think now the Junior Chamber of Commerce may have replaced

the 20-30 Club for men in that age group by giving challenging opportunities for these men to work for the service of their communities.

ARENA: Do you recall, especially when President Nixon was a member of the club, what the dues were, and what the other particular stipulations were about membership and about fulfilling any other responsibilities, and anything in the way of a special initiation; in other words, the more or less hard and fast regulations of the club?

GREGORY: I cannot remember what the dues were at all, nor can I remember what the initiation fee was. I was a transfer into that club, but I have no recollection of what the dues were.

ARENA: You don't recall that they were a particular hardship. After all, the depression was still on, and you don't recall that this was a great sacrifice?

GREGORY: No, not particularly. The dues certainly weren't that high, but I just cannot remember exactly what the dues were.

ARENA: You did mention the idea that it was fundamentally a service club. What services did you perform, especially when the President was a member?

GREGORY: Well, we had charitable projects, but I cannot remember distinctly the exact projects that benefited from the work of the 20-30 Club.

ARENA: Would it have been such things as supporting the Red Cross, supporting some of the main service organizations of the world or the United States and fulfilling their obligations, as happens to a certain extent today, where Red Cross asks for aid and Kiwanis and maybe the Rotary will sponsor the Boy Scouts? Do you think it might have been more that type of thing, or individual service projects?

GREGORY: No, I think it might have been more supporting organizations such as the Red Cross. I believe from time to time we contributed money to the Murphy Memorial Hospital and for certain funds in Whittier. I cannot recall whether we sponsored a Boy Scout troop or not. I just cannot remember, because you cannot recall things definitely that far back.

ARENA: Where there were occasions that the President spoke publicly at that time, do you recall if there was a particular formal address that he made that you

attended? You did mention the informal type of thinking on his feet, where it might be this friendly poking of fun, but do you recall a particular serious address that he made, either to the club or to any other group where you were a witness?

GREGORY: I cannot recall distinctly any one occasion when I heard him give a formal address or speech, because I left the club in 1940. I moved out of town and came into the Pasadena area in January of 1941, so I left Whittier in 1940, I think around the summer of 1940.

ARENA: Was there ever any indication that there was a friction between your club and its policy of holding dances and that of the Quaker community itself? Even when the President was a student at Whittier College, such things as smoking, drinking and dancing were not allowed on the campus. Of course, in 1930 drinking wasn't allowed in the country, period. That's not just picking on Whittier or anything else, but there was this fairly strict Quaker community opposition to that sort of thing. Did you ever detect anything in the way of friction between your club and the Quaker community in either a formal way, say church members saying something to your club, or by individuals saying something about your tendency to hold dances?

GREGORY: Not to my knowledge.

ARENA: And where President Nixon in particular was concerned, did you ever hear him, either to you personally or in an open way to the club, take a stand against the club having dances, or if the club did allow drinking, having drinks at its social affairs, or allowing smoking?

GREGORY: No, I never heard any expression on his part.

ARENA: Do you recall that men did smoke at the meetings? Were your social affairs as well as the regular affairs places where a drink could be had, for social purposes? Let's say for example, that May Day special banquet. Do you recall that there might have been alcoholic beverages served at that?

GREGORY: Our meetings were held at the William Penn Hotel, and as you may know or have heard, in those days you could not buy a drink in the city of Whittier.

ARENA: Now when you say those days, this was particularly that time when you were a member?

GREGORY: That's right.

ARENA: And particularly that date for that issue, which was 1939.

GREGORY: That's right. Yes, smoking at the meeting; a number of the men would smoke, no problem; but you couldn't buy a drink in the city of Whittier. There were no bars at that time in the city of Whittier. The nearest bar would be down on Whittier Boulevard in county territory.

ARENA: Do you recall that that was ever an issue or ever a dispute, either among some of the members privately, or openly about that situation, where some of the members wanted to have drinks and some did not?

GREGORY: I do not recall that at all.

ARENA: Finally, as the interview is coming to an end, do you mind if I ask you to give your overall recollection of President Nixon? Maybe certain things come to mind to you that I haven't brought up at all. Whatever you might want to say would be appreciated.

GREGORY: Well, as I have stated before in this interview, my impression of President Nixon at that time was of a serious individual, not that he couldn't enjoy being with other men of his age in the club or at a social function, but somewhat reserved. My thinking at that time was that he was probably a dedicated person to whatever he believed in, whatever his thinking was. And I never was close with him as such. That is just the impression I got. He was very friendly.

ARENA: Thank you very much, Mr. Gregory, for allowing me the privilege of holding this interview with you.

PAMPHLET APPENDED.