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William H. Harrison (April 18, 1972, interview one)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. WILLIAM H. HARRISON

April 18, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. William H. Harrison. H. stands for Henry, Whittier, California, April 18, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Harrison, if you don't mind, you may call me Dick and with your permission I'd like to call you what I always call you Bill, among friends. May I ask you where and when you were born?

HARRISON: I was born in Richmond, Indiana, January 2, 1897.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief sketch of your educational background, and your professional career as of this moment?

HARRISON: I graduated from Shortridge High School in Indianapolis [Indiana] and then I graduated from Cornell University, College of Architecture, in 1921. I was in the Army in 1918 for six months and interrupted my college career to that extent. I enlisted in the engineers, ended up at Camp Lee in the Officers' Training School, Machine Gun and Infantry, inadvertently because that was the first Officers' Training Camp that was open to us. Then after graduating from Cornell, I was awarded the graduate fellowship in design, which I didn't take, which would have given me my graduate year in Cornell. I had won a couple of medals and subsequently went to New York and worked for Starrett and Van Vleck Architects. They were architects for many of the department stores, such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Lord & Taylor's

in New York. I worked on a department store in Birmingham, Alabama. The latest project was a forty-two story hotel, the Commonwealth Hotel, which has 2500 rooms and was to have been the largest hotel in the world at that time.

ARENA: About what year was that, Bill?

HARRISON: 1921, right after I graduated from Cornell. But while I was there I was offered the position of teaching at the University of Illinois. And my boss, Van Vleck, said, "Oh, don't go out there in the sticks and get cut off from active practice." So I didn't take it. In the meantime, I had been engaged for a number of years to Josephine Amelia Lewis. Her father was County Superintendent of Schools in Wabash County, Indiana, and we met in a Christian Endeavor situation. Anyway, we had been engaged since I entered the Army in 1918. So I went back to Indianapolis and there worked for Herbert L. Bass. He was an architect who was a boyhood friend of the founders of Miami Beach, Florida, Allison and Fisher. Allison and Fisher also started the Indianapolis Motor Speedway--James Allison and Carl Fisher.

ARENA: Do you know about when that Indianapolis Speedway was begun, Bill?

HARRISON: I was there at the first race in 1911, I believe it was, and Ray Haroun won it.

ARENA: Bill, I do know that you have designed several buildings in the area of Whittier, including buildings that were intimately associated with President Nixon. I'm thinking, for example, of certain buildings--Whittier Union High School, Whittier College, and several others, such as the Lou Henry Hoover Elementary School, which he did not attend but which is, of course, a part of Whittier. Would you mind giving a list, from the best of your knowledge, of the buildings in the area where you have had some role in the way of designing either all or part of them, or where your own firm has been associated. And would you give the complete name of your firm?

HARRISON: My firm has been William H. Harrison, F.A.I.A., Architect, in recent years, since 1957.

ARENA: For the sake of our typist, would you also indicate what the letters F.A.I.A. stand for?

HARRISON: Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. There are about six hundred Fellows in the country out of twenty-three thousand architects, and about three hundred of them in design, into which category I was elevated. Our practice has extended over forty years, entailing a hundred million, of which seventy-five million has been in educational plants, and some five million in today's dollars would be on the Whittier College campus. We have done all of the work for the Whittier Union High School District, except for one school, since 1936. We designed the auditorium where the Hall of Fame is, where Richard Nixon's and Pat's [Patricia Ryan Nixon] pictures are hanging, and where Pat taught school and where Richard had been a student.

ARENA: Would you mind giving some idea of the nature of that Hall of Fame? Whatever you do know about its origins and its purpose.

HARRISON: The inspiration came when Patricia Hitt spoke in Whittier. It was afterward voted at the high school to have the Hall of Fame established with the pictures of the President and his wife, Pat, and General James Ferguson and Admiral Paul Pugh, Robert Blake and Patricia Reilly Hitt as the six who would be honored in this capacity.

ARENA: If I'm not mistaken, wouldn't James Ferguson be a brother of D. W., or Douglas W. Ferguson?

HARRISON: Yes, he's a brother. There are five boys.

ARENA: We've had the pleasure of interviewing Mr. Douglas Ferguson already.

HARRISON: We designed the City Hall of Whittier, at which time we had the honor of having the Vice President at that time, by telephone, dedicating it.

ARENA: And at that time it would have been Richard Nixon?

HARRISON: Richard Nixon. Of course, the Lou Henry Hoover School is named after Lou Henry Hoover. She was not connected with the Nixon family, but was the wife of the President Herbert Hoover. It was designed in 1938 and was published in the Christian Science Monitor in Boston [Massachusetts] when it came out.

ARENA: I believe you said 1938.

HARRISON: Yes.

ARENA: Which is rather interesting, in the sense that President Hoover was elected in 1928 and, of course, sworn in in 1929. Would you happen to know, Bill, if Mrs. Hoover, and maybe even her husband, ever came during that period to visit the school or visit Whittier, where she may have been a public speaker, where even the President or any person from Whittier may have heard her or seen her?

HARRISON: Well, of course, she was a trustee of Whittier College for a while. We also designed the Lou Henry Hoover Memorial Hall--I mean the Lou Henry Hoover classroom building on the campus.

ARENA: . . . of Whittier College.

HARRISON: . . . of Whittier College, which was done in her honor. I don't know of any time they came to Whittier during the time the building was being built, but I did send a brochure of the school, Lou Henry Hoover School, to Herbert Hoover on his eightieth birthday, and I have a letter from him framed at the office, saying that he appreciated getting it and that it would go into the Herbert Hoover archives of Stanford University.

ARENA: Bill, from the standpoint of your knowledge of the Whittier school system in the period before World War II, because your associations definitely go back to that period, and knowing other school districts and school systems throughout the country and other countries, how would you evaluate the school system from the standpoint of its architectural aims, of its commitment to building schools and, by the way, we're speaking about a public school system throughout--how would you assess the commitment of the people of Whittier from your standpoint and your personal experience to the building needs of its people?

HARRISON: We moved to Whittier in 1936, and our first work was on Whittier High School. That was the only high school in the area, and it had been designed originally by one of the best architects in Southern California, Myron Hunt, so that the attitude of the officials of the school was to get the

best, because at that time Whittier had the highest income per person in the state on account of the money from Santa Fe Springs, California, oil. So, when they decided to build high schools in connection with the anticipated growth of the community, they called in experts who analyzed the situation and recommended that eight or nine high schools would be placed here eventually, that they anticipated that much of a growth. And so they were very energetic in going out and acquiring properties.

For instance, they acquired the property for California High School at two thousand dollars an acre for it, and they got eighty-three acres, of which they only really needed forty, and they subsequently sold ten acres of it for, I believe it was thirty thousand dollars an acre. Now I may be mistaken about that exact figure. Anyway it was a tremendous increase.

The El Rancho School was designed, and was one of six high schools in the United States given an award at Atlantic City [New Jersey] by the National School Administrators and American Institute of Architects jury.

ARENA: Do you recall about what year that took place?

HARRISON: Well, let's see, that was built in 1950. The Sierra High School had a science lab that was exhibited in Switzerland, exemplifying the best in American high school science labs. Some of the schools have been published in journals throughout the country. El Rancho High School was published in a Mexican journal, all in Spanish; so that the schools of this area have been exhibited all over the United States and some in Japan, as well as in Europe and Mexico.

ARENA: Has it been your experience that the quality, from the standpoint of education, has equaled the quality from the standpoint of the building itself? Had you noted that the community was, say, a good-paying community from the standpoint of teachers' salaries, that they attempted to take advantage of the latest methods and thinking on curricula and so forth?

HARRISON: Yes, I think it had been very progressive that way. Of course, of late they haven't had the money to do the things that they originally were trying to do. I think the proportion now of graduates going to college is less than it was for some time. About fifty percent of them go to college now. But I think that that's maybe a national trend.

ARENA: I wonder if I could backtrack for one moment on one of the points you raised about your own background. You mentioned that you were a member of the armed forces, very definitely had a combatant part in the Machine Gun and Infantry. Did this pose any problems for you? I may be recalling in error, but were you a Quaker at that time?

HARRISON: Yes. Well, as a matter of assumption, I think. One of my Harrison ancestors married the daughter of Margaret Fell. The widowed Margaret Fell had married George Fox, the founder of Quakerism in England. So that my folks have been Quakers all down through the years.

ARENA: As you know, from Indiana comes the President's own family on his mother's side, Hannah Milhous, and of course her own father; and as you know, they came here in 1897. The question is, in addition to the President's own family, there are many other people who have had an influence in his life from this area. I'm thinking, for example, of Dr. Paul Smith, who not only was the President's history teacher but also the president of Whittier College, and when the President served on the Board of Trustees also. Is there any relationship, either by marriage or by blood, between you and the family of the President on any side, his father's or mother's side?

HARRISON: Well, getting back to the connection with Paul Smith, he was also born in Richmond, Indiana, and I think he's about the same age.

ARENA: If I'm not mistaken, he also was a graduate of Earlham College.

HARRISON: Not also; I wasn't. I graduated from Cornell University. But my mother and father both graduated from Earlham. But my connection with the President's family dates back to about 1917 or so when his aunt, Jane Beeson, came back to Indianapolis and visited, and visited our church at 13th and Alabama, the Friends Church there. And then Oscar and [Rose] Olive Marshburn were back. They had both gone to Earlham College and stopped to visit us in Indianapolis.

ARENA: Excuse me. When you say they stopped to visit you, was it merely because you were members of that congregation?

HARRISON: No. I should say that my brother, Russell [E. Harrison] came to California when he was fourteen years old.

There were ten children, so our Aunt Susan and Uncle Clifford Johnson who lived in Whittier had wanted to adopt me (and mother wouldn't let me go) because they thought I was a good student. I read a lot of books. They didn't know that I was reading about the Civil and Revolutionary Wars most of the time. So then, when I graduated from college, Aunt Susan sent me a letter suggesting that I open my office on the West Coast. So we came. He was on the college board, a trustee for forty years. She taught Greek and Latin in the early years of Whittier College. Russell Harrison, Sr., came to California in 1907, let's see, when he was fourteen years old. And he was married in 1912 when he was nineteen years old, to Elizabeth Milhous, aunt of the President, who died of cancer.

ARENA: I'm sorry, you mentioned it on the tape, but for my own purposes, what year do you think they were married?

HARRISON: 1912. He was living with the Johnsons at that time.

ARENA: And about when did you say she died of cancer?

HARRISON: Oh, let's see. It must have been around 1932, somewhere along in there.

ARENA: Correct me if I'm wrong. Did they both not live in Yorba Linda [California] for a while, where the President was born in 1913?

HARRISON: Yes, that's where they took up housekeeping, in Yorba Linda. That's the first place that they lived. They were visiting us back in Indianapolis when they put their acreage up for sale and it was sold, and they found out afterwards that three weeks later they discovered Richfield oil near there. So they moved to Whittier, and they lived on Whittier Boulevard where the Big Boy Restaurant is now.

ARENA: What would the intersection of streets be, as far as you recollect?

HARRISON: Oh, I don't remember that.

ARENA: It would be on Whittier Boulevard.

HARRISON: It's on Whittier Boulevard, about Calmada Avenue, in there.

ARENA: Thank you. Would you happen to know to what extent President Nixon and your brother were in actual contact? For example, in Yorba Linda, were they frequent visitors back and forth?

HARRISON: No, you see, he was married before Richard Nixon was born. He was born in '13; they were married in '12. They knew about him when he was a baby. Getting back to this question of being a Quaker and going in the Army, I used to take Mother to the Friends Church prayer meeting night. We lived seven miles from the church. In the spring of 1918, they had maps on the wall showing the American Friends Service ambulance locations, so they were following the course of the war very closely on that account. So when the Germans broke through on the Western Front, I was there that night, and the old ladies--I thought they were old at that time but they weren't so old--said, "Well, the Lord must have intended for the Germans to rule the world." And I thought to myself, the heck He did! And the next morning I joined the engineers and I was sent to Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, Missouri.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, and since as you know the President himself entered combat service in World War II, from the standpoint of another Quaker who was fairly close to the life of the President, were there any complications with, say, your parents or your pastor as a result of that decision?

HARRISON: Of course, Mother was quite crushed by my going, but I was going in the engineers, a non-combatant. That was the first stage, because I had had two years at Cornell in architecture and I was somewhat conversant with engineering. But the way that things were going, most of us were anxious to get to France, I, because I wanted to study architecture there. I wasn't thinking about the war, you know. I was thinking, well, that'd be over with soon. But we couldn't get into Officers' training camp because we didn't have enough military training.

So the first one that came along was this Machine Gun and Infantry at Camp Lee, Virginia, and within, oh, a few weeks after we were there, twenty-five of us were called up to the Commanding Officer's quarters and were offered commissions immediately to go to Bordeaux, France. We found out it was to command stevedores unloading the ships there. We then were in the South, so we knew

what that would be, so all twenty-five of us marched back and didn't take the commissions. The war was over when I was commissioned in the reserve as a lieutenant. During the war I just felt as if there was a gray wall up there ahead of me. I didn't know what was beyond that gray wall--just from minute to minute you might say.

ARENA: From your firsthand knowledge of the two wars, would you say that from the standpoint of the Quakers, there was more of a tendency for Quakers to join up for military service, actual military service, combatant service, in World War II than World War I? Would that be a correct generalization, from your own experience?

HARRISON: I would think so, yes. In World War I it was strictly ambulance service and that sort of thing.

ARENA: Would you mind giving the name and spelling it also of your father and mother and your mother's maiden name?

HARRISON: My father--I was partly named after his name. He was Thomas Henry Harrison, and I had an uncle, William Morgan, so my William Henry Harrison comes down through that way. My father's name was Thomas Henry Harrison. His father, Timothy, was born in Yorkshire, England, and crossed the ocean thirteen times. He could speak seven different languages, was an importer.

ARENA: Your father or your father's father?

HARRISON: My father's father. My father was a general contractor. He traveled all over the United States.

ARENA: How much formal education had your father had?

HARRISON: Both were graduated from Earlham College, my mother and father, both. Mother was a Barrett. Her father was one of the Ohio State Senators. He was a pork packer and owned a flour mill. Mother was one of the brightest ones they'd had at Earlham College, I've been told.

ARENA: Were both Quakers, Bill?

HARRISON: Both Quakers, yes.

ARENA: Did you grow up in a household where the "thee" and "thou" form of English was used?

HARRISON: Not in the family. It would be used with older folks in the church, but not in our house.

ARENA: Did it more or less change during your lifetime; when it began to not be used so commonly among the family? Can you recall, say, as a very small youngster that it was used commonly?

HARRISON: Not in our family.

ARENA: Not at all, in other words?

HARRISON: No. Mother was a very religious person. Her name was Claribel Barrett Harrison.

ARENA: As you know, the President's grandfather [Franklin Milhous], the one who started the Milhous line here in California, did come from Indiana--North Vernon-- in that area. Had there been any contact between your families? Did you recall having any contact, other than the contact you mentioned around 1917 with Mrs. [Jane] Beeson coming? Had there, for example, been any contact churchwise, visits to the church or Yearly Meetings . . .

HARRISON: No.

ARENA: . . . where possibly all the Quakers of that area got together and so forth?

HARRISON: No, I don't know of any.

ARENA: You don't know of any.

HARRISON: No.

ARENA: Bill, when is the very first occasion that you met President Nixon personally, that you recall meeting him in your life?

HARRISON: Well, we came to California in 1927, and we were entertained at the Milhouses at Christmastime. I don't recall the exact date, and also when Oscar Marshburn and Olive Marshburn were there, and Oscar was just ready to go on a . . . I think they were going to Europe, feeding the war sufferers. At that time Dick played the piano.

ARENA: On this occasion that you mention when you first came to California in 1927, by the Milhouses, would this be the home of Franklin Milhous?

HARRISON: That's right.

ARENA: Although, was he deceased himself by that time, possibly?

HARRISON: I think so. I don't remember him.

ARENA: You don't. But certainly his wife--widow--Mrs. Almira Milhous was still living?

HARRISON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: On this occasion, where you met with the Milhouses, how is it that you did come into direct contact with them? Would it have been through your brother's relationship as a member of the family through marriage?

HARRISON: Yes, through marriage.

ARENA: I see. And then, did your contact with other relatives such as Oscar Marshburn--who, as we know, married the President's aunt, Rose Olive--did your contact with him and other members of the President's family remain steady, let's say, from that time on? Was it more or less a day-to-day acquaintanceship?

HARRISON: Yes.

ARENA: So that you ran into the President, himself, maybe directly and indirectly, ever since that time, 1927 on?

HARRISON: Well, actually, the connection we had with him was when our wills were made out when he was Assistant City Attorney. He was named as the administrator of our

wills, whether he knew it or not. My wife, Josephine Harrison, says he did. [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley was the attorney writing up the wills.

ARENA: In a way, then, you might say you also went to him for professional services, the President?

HARRISON: That's right.

ARENA: Would it have been only on that occasion? Were there any other contacts with President Nixon on a legal basis, besides that of the wills, as you recall?

HARRISON: No. Of course, I visited him as Vice President in Washington later. He was at ceremonies at Whittier College in dedicating the ground for what was later the Johnson Dormitory at the college.

ARENA: And that would have been the Johnson that you mentioned, Clifford Johnson?

HARRISON: Yes. It was named after Susan and Clifford Johnson; it's on the plaque.

ARENA: I believe you touched on Mr. Johnson. Would you give a little more information about him, in view of the fact that he belongs to this pioneer period, if I'm not mistaken?

HARRISON: Well, he was the cofounder of what was the Whittier National Trust and Savings Bank in 1905, with his father.

ARENA: Along with his father. And his father's name?

HARRISON: His father was Howard Johnson. They were from Iowa. Uncle Cliff was a trustee of Penn College in Oskaloosa, Iowa, when my Aunt Susan, who had graduated from Bryn Mawr received her master's at the [University of] Michigan, and came to teach at Penn College. After they were married, he contracted tuberculosis, so they went to Arizona for a while and then came to Whittier. He served as a pullman conductor on the Owl [railroad line] going back and forth to San Francisco, California for some years. He then founded this bank and was cashier of it. In 1907 when they had the panic--I've got some five dollar bills

signed by him as cashier of the bank--he traveled to Farmers' and Merchants' Bank in Los Angeles [California] to bring gold back on his bicycle to avoid a run on the bank. I guess it was 1907 during the panic. He was on the college board for forty years.

ARENA: As far as you know, there was most likely some contact between Franklin Milhous--especially as you mention 1905 and he was still alive then--some contact between the Milhouses and this uncle, Clifford Johnson. Would you happen to know if there are any papers or correspondence which he had and where they may be now? Who would be the heir from the standpoint of the papers that he may have collected over the years? Would you, by any chance, Bill?

HARRISON: I expect we have more of them than anybody else.

ARENA: Have you ever made a study, from the standpoint of contact between him and the Milhouses, the President's family in particular?

HARRISON: No.

ARENA: You haven't made the study or there is no contact?

HARRISON: I haven't studied about it to determine that.

ARENA: Would you mind going back for a moment. I believe you were stating that you had seen the President at one of the get-togethers of the Milhouses and playing the piano. Do you recall the first time you witnessed that?

HARRISON: Yes, that was the first time we had seen him.

ARENA: Oh, as early as that period of 1927?

HARRISON: Yes, about in there or shortly after.

ARENA: How vivid is your recollection of the young Richard Nixon playing the piano then?

HARRISON: Not very vivid, just one of the group, you know, all displaying their talents.

ARENA: What do you recall, as a kind of outsider-insider, so to speak, not a member of the family by blood, but certainly close to the family, what do you recall about

the Milhouses, the atmosphere in which the President grew up as a young man, and the influence of the grandparents on him? You might make that an overall evaluation, bringing it up to even the period when the grandmother attended, I understand, his graduation ceremony at Duke Law School in 1937. So whatever you can say regarding the contact between the President and the atmosphere that they must have provided for him.

HARRISON: Well, I wouldn't know too much about his early years there, but Hannah Nixon was a very conscientious person, a very gentle person. She was always considerate of others. Frank Nixon was more explosive, more political-minded than Hannah Nixon. So that I think that the combination of those two are exemplified in the President today.

ARENA: Would you say that Mrs. Hannah Milhous Nixon, while not being outgoing in politics to the extent that her husband was, had some knowledge of the workings of, say, not political organizations, but groups where constitutions were involved? I'm thinking, for example, of groups like the East Whittier Women's Club, and you may or may not know, she was one of the founders of the Woman's Club of Yorba Linda in 1912. Would you have any direct knowledge of her role in such situations?

HARRISON: No. No, we wouldn't know about that.

ARENA: How about the Yearly Meetings of the Friends? Did you ever have any contact with her or see her in that capacity?

HARRISON: Not particularly.

ARENA: Finally, Bill, the President has stated in the book he wrote, Six Crises, maybe in the campaign speech which is also in that book, accepting the nomination for a candidate as president for the Republican party, that his mother had hoped that he would be a missionary in Central America when he was a youngster. Did that ever come up in your experience?

HARRISON: I think that that is the hope of a lot of Friends. For instance, my mother pledged herself to become a missionary when she graduated from Earlham College. But my father persuaded her to marry him instead and raise missionaries. They had ten children, and their youngest son, my youngest brother, was slated to go to China as a missionary for the Baptist Church

just before the Communists came in. But they had five children and they thought it would be too dangerous so he didn't go. So this missionary zeal dates way back among the Quakers.

ARENA: Now, I believe you stated also, off the tape, and I'd like to get back to it on the tape, you and your wife have had direct contact with other immediate relatives of the President--his brothers, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] and Edward, [Calvert Nixon] and, of course, his parents. Would you mind giving your recollections of the contacts first with the older brother, Donald--how you and your wife had contact with him?

HARRISON: Of course, Donald was connected with the meat department section of the grocery store, so that we knew him in that capacity, and later as a trustee of the East Whittier School District. Now Eddie, being seventeen years younger than the President, was about the age of my son, Bill, William Lewis Harrison, and they were buddies together. In fact they were in the chicken business together.