



11-18-1971

Marian Wilson Hodge (November 18, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. MARIAN WILSON HODGE

November 18, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Marian Wilson Hodge. The date is November 18, 1971, in Whittier, California, Arena interviewing. Mrs. Hodge, shall we begin by my asking you, if you don't mind, where and when you were born?

HODGE: I was born in Beaver City, Nebraska, on May 30, 1902.

ARENA: When did you come to California and what part of California?

HODGE: My family came to California in 1913 and located in Los Angeles.

ARENA: And your move to Whittier?

HODGE: It was in the fall of 1930.

ARENA: I would like to have you summarize, first, your overall contact with President Nixon and other members of his family with whom you have had direct contact, such as Mrs. Richard Nixon. If you will, begin from the earliest time, and if you don't recall the exact date now, don't worry. Give us about the year, and starting with the President first. You need not worry at this time about describing the contact other than saying something very general, and then as the interview proceeds along we will explore these initial, general points more in detail. This will more or less give both you and me an idea of how the interview will proceed. So, from the very beginning

right up to the present time, and I think you are aware that at this stage we do not go into politics. However, in general, if there was any connection between you and the President other than in a political way, you can mention it generally, but that is not the purpose of this interview. Beginning with President Richard Nixon, would you refresh your mind and go back to the very first time you had direct contact with him?

HODGE: My first recollection of Richard Nixon was when he was a student at Whittier High School and I was a teacher of speech and a coach of the debating team at Excelsior Union High School. My debating team and a student orator were in competition with students in Whittier High School and with other students from other schools in the southern Los Angeles area. The one year--I think this was in 1925 or '26--we had an exceptionally talented young girl whom I thought would win the contest that year because she had won preliminary contests, but when the contest was against Richard Nixon, he won the area contest. This was an oratorical contest sponsored by the Los Angeles Times, and the winner from the entire state, as I recall, had the opportunity to go to Washington, D.C. That was the award toward which the young people were working. The subject of the orations had to do with the Constitution of the United States.

The next memory that I have of Richard Nixon was when I learned that one of our teachers at Whittier High School, Thelma Patricia Ryan, was dating Richard Nixon. They had met at a Community Players group in which they were interested. It was the Whittier Community Players group. This was after I had moved ✓ to Whittier and after Miss Ryan had been hired as a teacher at Whittier High School.

Then my next recollection was when Richard Nixon was campaigning for the House of Representatives in Washington and my husband and I were very much interested in his campaign. We followed him about the county as he made addresses before various political groups.

ARENA: You, therefore, had the opportunity to see and hear the young debater, as well as the mature debater.

HODGE: That is correct. Then my next recollection would be when Mr. Nixon was running for the presidency and I was invited to introduce Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon to a group of Southern California teachers. This was at a reception being held to honor Mrs. Nixon and it was at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California. I recall, in making her presentation that day to the group, that I introduced her as the wife of the next President of the United States. However, that was a little premature. We had to wait a few years.

ARENA: I take it this was the first for President.

HODGE: That's right.

ARENA: Now, these were the areas of direct contact. Could I ask you to recollect the areas of indirect contact with the Nixons? I am thinking, for example, of your possibly attending plays of either the college or high school, or the Community Players. Did you ever attend any of the plays in which either the President or Mrs. Nixon appeared?

HODGE: I'm sure that I attended the plays presented by the Whittier Community Players group, because I attended most of those presentations.

ARENA: But nothing stands out in your mind from the experience, or meeting them after the play?

HODGE: No.

ARENA: Would there be anything in the way of indirect knowledge in the sense you would see his name--this is before he went into politics--in the local paper about these contests, about his going off to law school from Whittier College? Do you recall anything like that, reading about him?

HODGE: No.

ARENA: Do you recall any contact with members of the family--now moving away from the President, personally, to his parents or aunts and uncles, or brothers? I know you are aware of one aunt and uncle at least, and that you have had direct contact with this couple, the [Oscar O.] Marshburns. I was just wondering if you would give a general, overall picture of your contact with not only the Marshburns--and state to the best of your memory the first time you came into contact with the Marshburns--but also any of the other relatives of the President, including his grandparents, especially his Grandmother Almira [Milhous], who lived in the original Franklin Milhous home in, at that time, East Whittier and now just off the Quad, as you know.

HODGE: I never had the opportunity to meet the grandmother. On a number of occasions I met the mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon]. I don't recall that I ever met Mr. [Francis Anthony] Nixon, the father. Mr. Oscar Marshburn was a member of the high school Board of Trustees at Whittier High School, and in serving as an assistant superintendent and later superintendent, I attended board meetings where Mr. Marshburn served. As I recall, he was on the board for about nine years.

ARENA: Do you recall the era, the period when he was on the board and you were connected with the board?

HODGE: I don't recall the exact dates that Mr. Marshburn was serving. I believe it was between 1934 and 1944.

ARENA: It wouldn't have been when Richard was in high school himself?

HODGE: No. Richard graduated in the spring of 1930 and I came here in the fall of 1930. I was invited to come into the board meetings as an assistant from the beginning, as I came here with Mr. [David] Stouffer who was superintendent of the district. I attended all board meetings during that period up until I retired from the superintendency. Mr. Marshburn was on the Board of Trustees when I was appointed superintendent in 1941.

ARENA: It would be roughly in that period between 1930 . . .

HODGE: 1930 and 1948.

ARENA: It would have included the war years, too.

HODGE: Yes.

ARENA: Would you give the full name and spelling of the name of Mr. Stouffer?

HODGE: S T O U F F E R. He was the superintendent at Excelsior High School and then was appointed superintendent at Whittier High School.

ARENA: Do you remember his first name?

HODGE: David.

ARENA: There are several Stouffers in the area, including a Stauffer science building.

HODGE: That's spelled differently, I believe. There is no relationship.

ARENA: Therefore, you certainly have a good firsthand working knowledge and acquaintance with Mr. Oscar Marshburn, the President's uncle.

HODGE: Yes, I do.

ARENA: As you know, through marriage it is his wife, Mrs. [Rose] Olive Marshburn, who is the President's mother's sister. Are there any other relatives like that, including some who are in the education field, I understand? For example, there was a [Charles Wright] C. W. Milhous, who was formerly the president of the Board of Education of the Lowell [School] District, or had something to do with the Board of Education of Lowell. Another Milhous in education was the President's aunt who taught him piano, Mrs. Jane [Milhous] Beeson. She has lived

in Lindsay most of the time, but possibly visited regularly, at least around Christmastime, her sister, Rose Olive Marshburn, on her way to attending an annual Music Teachers' Association meeting. So maybe your paths have crossed. She is still teaching--you might be interested in knowing--and she has some twenty-five students that she tutors, and lives in Lindsay now. Another member of the family in education you might have come into contact with was her brother, Griffith [William] Milhous, who taught music locally.

HODGE: No. I never happened to meet them. I remember Dick's youngest brother in Whittier High School. I don't remember what year he graduated.

ARENA: That would be Edward [Calvert Nixon], and he did not graduate from Whittier High, although he attended for a while.

HODGE: Is that so? I didn't remember.

ARENA: The family moved on to Pennsylvania. He attended the high school in the York [Pennsylvania] area, as I recall. He was born in 1930, so possibly he graduated around '48, I guess.

HODGE: But he did attend Whittier High School. It seems to me I recall that.

ARENA: In his elementary years he attended Lowell [School District] and then Whittier High [School] and then finished and graduated from the Pennsylvania high school. Did you possibly ever meet the President's uncle on his father's side, Dr. Ernest Nixon, who taught agriculture at Penn State, who would visit the family from time to time?

HODGE: No, I never met him.

ARENA: Then, there is the President's other brother, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon]. Possibly you came into contact with him on the high school level.

HODGE: Yes. I remember him and I remember him particularly after he had finished his schooling and had established a business here in the Whittier area, particularly the restaurant that he operated.

ARENA: Are there any other relatives that I haven't mentioned that might have come to mind since we started this search, that you can think of now before we leave that area, your knowledge of the President's immediate family? There was a young lady by the name of Lawrene [Nixon Anfinson] who

graduated from Whittier College who was in teaching. I don't know if you recall her? She is Donald's daughter and the President's niece. You might have heard of her and maybe you attended her marriage.

HODGE: I have heard about her. I remember about her wedding, but I don't recall having met her. I have met the author who now lives in Northern California, Jessamyn West.

ARENA: She is a relative, and a close one at that.

HODGE: I have met her in connection with activities in our Whittier Public Library. She gave the address when we opened our branch library, and during that address gave reference to the early history of Whittier when she lived in East Whittier, and she discussed the family events and happenings of that period and during later years.

ARENA: Do you have any idea if that address was a prepared one and copies might be in existence?

HODGE: I would imagine so. If you would contact her you probably would be able to get a copy. Or the Daily News would probably have covered the address. Whether they included it is its entirety or not, I don't remember.

ARENA: You might be aware--I'm sure you've seen the name but maybe you didn't make the connection--that she has a brother here who is a fairly prominent businessman, Merle West. That is her brother. Was there any contact with him?

HODGE: His firm has cleaned the carpeting in my household. It's a business contact.

ARENA: She does stay with him when she visits the area. I'm sure she has stayed with others, as well. But I know from time to time she visits with him.

HODGE: I think that address would have numbers of interesting items to add to your history, so I hope you will be able to get it.

ARENA: If there isn't anything regarding the relatives and there are no more direct or indirect general points of observation, maybe now we can look a little more closely at some of the points that we raised earlier in a general way. First of all, from your best recollection, how would you describe the President as a debater? You need not stick to one single debate, but draw from as many as you can recollect, and in a way,

maybe, give a more complete picture. But if there is one that stands out and seems to be symbolic of all of them, by all means describe that. When I speak of his debating ability, obviously this would also include his oratorical ability. Here I mean, actually, not only the speaking part of him, but his appearance, his contact with his fellow debaters and opposing debaters, his manners, his attitude, his meeting with the assignment in the sense of whether he came prepared? Did he come on time? All aspects of the man as a youngster here, all aspects of the President that you can recall.

HODGE: I don't recall any particular debate or oratorical contest, but I was always impressed with the very keen intellect, which was in evidence in terms of his ability to think as he spoke. I was impressed with the logic and the type of maturity which he demonstrated for a lad of this age. His rebuttal during the course of the debate, in my opinion, surpassed any that were given by fellow students, either on his own team or the competitive team. He was methodical, logical. You asked the question about whether he was on time. There were never any problems in this regard. He and the other students, too, were on time. This was part of their training, I think. He was always well-groomed. The attitude of the other students toward him was one of perhaps fear and concern that he might excel over them, because he had a reputation of performing in this manner.

ARENA: Concerning his manners with the faculty, with the fellow students, is there anything that comes to mind there? Would there have been an occasion for refreshments, say, before or after the debate, or were these strictly functions where there were no refreshments?

HODGE: No. These functions were held purely for the business of giving the debate, and everybody had to travel a distance and the meetings were held in evening hours. We had to be on our way. I don't recall ever meeting him socially.

ARENA: Do you recall the nature of the audience? Were these mainly students who returned, or their parents, and interested members of the community who were not parents? Were the debates held in just a classroom, or was the audience such that they had to have an auditorium?

HODGE: No. We met in an auditorium, and I remember particularly the auditorium here on the Whittier campus. It now houses the library because the building was destroyed during the 1933 earthquake. It was a large auditorium, and at that particular time there was a great deal of interest on the part of students and parents in the matter of debating, and a great deal of enthusiasm had been created in connection with this oratorical contest the Los Angeles Times was sponsoring. So, I recall these functions were quite well-attended both by students and community people.

ARENA: Do you recall, possibly, some of the subjects of the debates in which the President participated?

HODGE: I remember the world court as one; capital punishment as another. This is going back quite a long ways. I remember our young people working in those subject areas. Of course, the oratorical contest had to do with the United States Constitution and its values, and what it meant to the people of the United States.

ARENA: Do you recall that whether he was debating or participating in an oratorical contest, part of the President's delivery was from written material or written text, not just notes, and in that fashion he delivered a written text? The other was the extemporaneous remarks, usually with the rebuttal section from notes. Do you recall his ability in each category; delivering the speech which was a written one, and then speaking in extemporaneous fashion? The difference which stands out in your mind, his delivery in the different cases?

HODGE: He always showed that he was well-prepared and he did speak from written notes during the course of the debate. Of course, the oration had been prepared, and as I recall, memorized. I can't recall the use of many notes during the process of the oration. Probably there were reference notes. He was more spontaneous, I would say, when it came to the rebuttal in a debate, and perhaps his personality came through a little more vivaciously in the process of a rebuttal than during the fixed arguments in the original presentation.

ARENA: Do you recall the level of his voice? Did he stand out as a loud speaker at that time, or was it a moderate but distinct voice, as between those two? Was he just loud as well as clear, or was he just distinct?

HODGE: I would say moderate and distinct.

ARENA: Did he rush through, in the sense that I know he was clear and logical, he was swift in his use of words? Does that seem to describe him at that time?

HODGE: I don't know whether I am influenced from having listened to him recently, but as I recall, he spoke very much in the same manner as a lad as he does now. I would describe him as a fluent speaker. This always allied to the fact that he's a very quick thinker. He thinks rapidly on his feet and spontaneously, as well as from notes to which he may be referring.

ARENA: Was there ever any occasion where you recall him being at a loss for words during any of his debates, or during any of the oratorical contests? He just seemed to run out of words or run out of points?

HODGE: No.

ARENA: Do you recall that he was ever involved in a very heated situation?

HODGE: I don't recall that.

ARENA: Do you ever recall him losing control of himself?

HODGE: No.

ARENA: If we can move on to another phase in which you had direct contact with him, his courtship with Mrs. Richard Nixon. What would you say about that, to the best of your recollection, the period when she was working at the high school and also appearing in plays part time? At this point I'm not interested so much in what she was like, which we will look at separately, but just that courtship period. Whatever you recall. If you saw them together at any time, whatever comes to mind in that regard?

HODGE: I did not associate with her socially, and what knowledge I had of their association came through fellow teachers, and I don't recall seeing them together, except as they were participating in a community play. Even then I don't have very definite recollections. My contacts with her were primarily at the school in terms of the work that she was contributing in the classroom and in the educational program.

ARENA: You were her superior at that time. I want to phrase this in such a way that it isn't misconstrued, because I realize you were not only her superior then, but you are her friend now. But from the standpoint of history--if you can put yourself in a completely objective situation for a moment--was there any tardiness or absences, or any breakdown in her performance of her duties temporarily due to the courtship period?

HODGE: I don't recall that she ever was remiss in carrying out any of her responsibilities. They were never apparent to me. She was always a very punctual person and took care of all her responsibilities in a very conscientious manner. I was never aware of any problems at all that were presented.

ARENA: Were you aware at the time that the courtship was going on? Were you aware then that her association was with the young Richard whom you had recalled as a debater?

HODGE: No, I wasn't.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you when you first found out? Would it have been around the time of politics when you heard of their marriage?

HODGE: I think it was prior to the marriage. And again, this would have been through some of her fellow teachers who would have casually mentioned this in a conversation about Patricia. And I never had given any thought to Richard as the student debater and Richard as the young lawyer, and of his being a suitor of Patricia. I have not thought about it until you've given reference to it here.

ARENA: Is there anything else regarding this episode, this period, that you would like to mention that I have not brought up?

HODGE: No, I don't think so. I was not well enough acquainted with her, and probably this was true in terms of the fact that she was one of many teachers in a teaching situation during this time. I was serving as an administrator in the school.

I would suggest that you contact Mrs. Carl Brown, a professional associate and close friend of Patricia. Mrs. Brown and her husband attended social functions together with Pat and Dick during their courtship period. I'll give you Mrs. Brown's present address.

ARENA: She was rather new. She came in 1938.

HODGE: That was her first year of teaching.

ARENA: And they were married in 1940, so there is a very brief period there. Finally, let's take the last phase of direct contact with the President. This was regarding politics. And although we are not going into politics as such, it's really your knowledge of the President as a man that is the main thing here, as an individual, when he does enter politics. He was approached in 1945, as you recall, and the campaign was in 1946. What was he like as a young lawyer who just returned from the service? Not looking back so much now, but if you can, what were your thoughts about him at that time?

HODGE: He was so young and enthusiastic and committed toward a cause that one could not help but be interested in following his progress. At that time I was more aware of his personality traits and his capabilities in terms of the period during which I had known him as a student, and of how these same traits appeared when he started his campaign for a government office.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask, in that connection, if there was a similar local youngster whose career you had followed or supported? Was there a similar situation where there was a youngster--and you need not mention the name unless you want to? Obviously, he's the only boy from Whittier who became

President, but at that time he was going into local politics. Were there other youngsters from this area who had run an equal course, who had been a good student in school and been either in debating or in sports or in another area, and who had attracted favorable community appearance and was interested in politics?

HODGE: Robert Blake now in the U.S. Diplomatic Service and Stanley McCaffrey, who worked with President Nixon during one of his campaigns, were both interested in politics. Stanley McCaffrey is now president of the College of the Pacific.

ARENA: Would it be all right to ask you if you became directly interested in politics, more so than ever before, because of your knowledge of this young man? In other words, I'm not sure as to what extent you did support him. I don't know if you rang doorbells, or if you did volunteer work in the local party headquarters. I'm just wondering to what extent you had or had not done something like that around that time?

HODGE: I had always been interested in politics. I was very much interested in it as a beginning teacher. We were participating in debates and so on. We were very much concerned about the League of Nations, what was happening to it back in that early period. So that this interest had always been one of mine. And then my husband was exceedingly interested in him and never wanted to miss hearing him whenever we had a chance to go hear him. I've forgotten what your other question was.

ARENA: The relationship of your interest in politics, to what extent was that heightened by your personal knowledge of Richard as a young lad?

HODGE: Of course it was heightened all the more by knowing someone personally who had set a goal for representing us in government. I can't recall that I have ever known anyone else for as long a period as I have known Richard Nixon, who then went into politics. For example, I knew young Charles Wiggins in another capacity when he was practicing law over in El Monte [California]. He represented a friend of mine in a case in court. I observed him in that kind of situation, but he was not as young, of course, as Richard when he was in high school. We followed him, possibly too, because I had seen him in other situations, following which he then went into politics.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, given your responsibility and your experience, how would you assess Richard as a student--again, it's hard to disassociate his prominent position today--say as of 1937, when he began to practice law? How would you assess him as a student compared to the many, many students

who have come your way over the years?

HODGE: He had outstanding ability. I would rate him in a superior classification.

ARENA: Some have gone to Whittier College, some have gone to other schools, who have received attention. How would you account for the fact that such a small rural community--and was it much smaller and much more rural in the President's youth than it is today, where Los Angeles [California] is so much more accessible--how could you account for this excellence of breadth of education and experience and not being a member of a large cosmopolitan center? What does a rural community offer that could help to account for leadership of a large, obviously overwhelming industrial nation? But the roots and the associations and the very important formative years, right up to law school, have their setting in an overwhelming rural community. Please correct me if I'm emphasizing rural. Would you say that is correct, that Whittier was overwhelmingly a rural community?

HODGE: Yes. It was a rural community, with Whittier being the shopping and marketing center which served that rural community. I always felt that it was the influence of the Quaker settlers who originally founded the community, and who had very high ideals as to the standards that they wanted followed in community life, and the aspirations that they had for the education of their young people.