



9-17-1972

## Richard M. Hofmann (September 17, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. RICHARD M. HOFMANN

September 17, 1972  
Ottumwa, Iowa

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Richard M. Hofmann, (M stands for Matson) of Ottumwa, Iowa. Today's date is September 17, 1972, Arena interviewing. Dick, would you mind, in the way of giving some idea of your own background, stating where and when you were born?

HOFMANN: Well, Dick, I was born here in Ottumwa, Iowa, in 1916, November 28 to be specific.

ARENA: And would you give an idea of your educational background?

HOFMANN: I graduated from the local high school and went one year to St. John's Military Academy and then four years to the University of Wisconsin with a degree of B.S. in pharmacy.

ARENA: May I ask where the St. John's Military Academy is located?

HOFMANN: That's located in Delafield, Wisconsin.

ARENA: What was your major in undergraduate school?

HOFMANN: Pharmacy.

ARENA: In other words, there is such a thing as a major in pharmacy. It wasn't a question of majoring in specific sciences?

HOFMANN: Well, I had a basic, I suppose you would say, science background.

ARENA: And would you give a resume of your career to date, that is after your formal education was completed.

HOFMANN: I came back here and went in the drug store with my dad, that was 1938, and have been here ever since, still in the drug business. I have been active in various community affairs. I have been president of the Iowa Pharmaceutical Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Community Chest, and active in various church organizations, including the diocesan council. I have been on the vestry of the church.

ARENA: May I ask which church?

HOFMANN: Trinity Episcopal [Church]. And I served one term as Mayor of the city.

ARENA: May I ask what period, what year?

HOFMANN: 1968-69. I am the Calvin Coolidge of Ottumwa. I did not choose to run again.

ARENA: What is the period of office for Mayor here?

HOFMANN: A two-year term.

ARENA: And I might as well complete that political picture by asking you what party, if you want to divulge same.

HOFMANN: Well, in local politics here, it is not on a party basis. It's strictly independent, I guess you would call it. There are no party labels in city elections.

ARENA: And by here you mean Ottumwa. That isn't Iowa as a whole?

HOFMANN: That's right. That's Ottumwa. This is true in most of the cities and towns in Iowa with one exception, Davenport, where the candidates do run on party platforms. But all of the other cities and towns are non-partisan.

ARENA: That's very interesting. You mention, by the way, that your father was also a druggist. May I ask you, if you remember, where and when he was born and where his drug store was located?

HOFMANN: He was born in 1876. He graduated from Northwestern University in pharmacy.

ARENA: Born in Iowa as well?

HOFMANN: Yes, born in Ottumwa, and his father was a brewer, came to this country from Germany as a brewer.

ARENA: Any idea what part of Germany?

HOFMANN: Heinsheim, and they came to Ottumwa and at different times they operated two breweries of his own and when the state went dry, he went into real estate. If it hadn't been for that, it might have been the Anheiser Busch of Ottumwa.

ARENA: On that question and this, jumping ahead but while it is still fresh in our minds, I don't know to what extent you got to know the President and Mrs. Nixon--we will go into that later--but I was just wondering, were you aware that he had been brought up as a non-drinking Quaker. The Quakers definitely forbade drinking and smoking and dancing and gambling in Whittier and there were other places as well where that is the way of life. I am just wondering if you were aware of that when you knew the Nixons in Ottumwa?

HOFMANN: No, I was not.

ARENA: I believe I cut you off a moment ago when you were about to say something about yourself.

HOFMANN: Well, you asked where the drug store was. It's been located on the same corner since 1902.

ARENA: This is your father's and the one that you took over and still have?

HOFMANN: Right.

ARENA: Thank you. On what occasion, if you remember, did you first see either Mrs. or President Nixon in your life?

HOFMANN: Well, it would be very difficult to pinpoint because I am quite sure that I saw them at various times without really knowing who they were. The President at that time was stationed at the Navy Base and his wife worked in the Union Bank and Trust Company.

ARENA: Did you possibly deal with that bank yourself?

HOFMANN: Yes, yes, this is our regular bank. And she frequently came in the store to eat lunch with other girls from the bank, but I really have no positive recollection as of this time of her at that time.

ARENA: I realize you did not serve the food to her directly, but I am wondering--and it would be most unusual if you did--but did you notice anything about her food ordering habits and anything about her in particular when she did come in with the other girls for lunch?

HOFMANN: Well, she has on two separate occasions been in Iowa and been interviewed as to her life in Ottumwa, and on one occasion she commented on the fact that she frequently or usually ate lunch in our drug store and that one of her favorites was the bean soup. And on another occasion . . .

ARENA: That's how you found out?

HOFMANN: That's how I found out, right. [Laughter] And we had a pastry cook for twenty-five years who was just fabulous, just fabulous.

ARENA: You say was, is he deceased now?

HOFMANN: Yes, she is deceased. And her specialty was graham cracker pie and this was a beautiful creation of custard and graham cracker all over it and everything, and Mrs. Nixon has referred also to that particular delicacy. Now on her most recent visit and interview here in Iowa she was interviewed by the local woman's page editor of the paper, and she made this comment . . .

ARENA: Would you give the name of that paper, please?

HOFMANN: The Ottumwa Daily Courier. And the woman editor is Loree Roach. And she told Mrs. Roach that she used to like to eat this pie. The daughter of the cook at that time now lives in North Carolina, I believe it is. One of her relatives sent a copy of this interview in the newspaper to the daughter and the daughter on the spur of the moment sat down and wrote Mrs. Nixon and told her that her mother was the one who used to bake the pies that she had commented about eating in Hofmann's drug store, and she got a very, very nice letter back from Pat.

ARENA: As far as you know, or if you know, was that a kind of private recipe or her individual recipes with the pies and all of her pastries as a matter of fact?

HOFMANN: Yes, I would say so.

ARENA: From the standpoint of recalling Mrs. Nixon in the bank, what comes to mind? Did you have any occasion to deal with her directly?

HOFMANN: Not that I know of. I am not sure about this, but I think that she was involved more in the bookkeeping end of the bank operation rather than a teller.

ARENA: From the standpoint of setting the scene, conditions in Ottumwa when the President and his wife were living here, would you want to comment on the relations between the

Navy Base and the community of Ottumwa, given your own interest in social and civic affairs, what was possible in the way, we'll say, of joint effort? Were the officers members of some of the service clubs, for example, Kiwanis? Were they guests of the club and other such groups and vice versa? Did the base invite the citizens, the townspeople, to any functions that were held on the base itself?

HOFMANN: Ottumwa was extremely fortunate in my opinion in that the air base was of a size that it did not overwhelm the town. There were approximately 5000 men stationed at the air base and the town of 30,000 was able to absorb them, you might say. It's not like some of these places like in Louisiana where they would have a camp of 100,000 men in a town of 2000, which creates some real problems. Because of this fact, there was a very close relationship between the people at the base and the local folks. I know that my mother and father practically every week or every two weeks would have a party at their house and invite these people from the base in. My mother was a very accomplished musician and she would play the piano and they would all stand around and sing and have a great time. This was true in many other places in town, and by the same token the base people reciprocated by inviting the civilians out to the base and having lunch or dinner at the Officers Club. And on one occasion the entire Rotary Club and their wives were invited and held their ladies' night meeting at the base.

ARENA: You may have heard or read that the President was an amateur actor. He appeared in community plays in Whittier, the college plays. I am wondering if there was such a group and if anything along those lines comes to mind--that the Nixons may have in any way tried their amateur acting, because Mrs. Nixon and he actually met in an amateur play situation like that in Whittier.

HOFMANN: Is that right. That's interesting. No, I don't think there was any amateur dramatics going on particularly at that time. There have been before in the past and there is a very strong community players group here now, but because of the war situation I don't recall anything going.

ARENA: Do you recall as a matter of fact ever seeing the two Nixons together, the President and Mrs. Nixon, in your store or on any occasion--on the camp, in the community in the bank, actually see them together?

HOFMANN: Well, let's put it this way, if I did, I didn't know it was the Nixons. Of course, frequently the officers and their wives would come in the store either at the fountain or otherwise, particularly on Sunday afternoons and evenings. But I would not have been aware that they were the Nixons.

ARENA: The President has always been interested in sports. He participated in football in college in particular, and I was fortunate to see some of the newspaper articles of that period showing photographs of the Navy football team. I am just wondering to what extent that was a subject of interest to the town and the base? Were these games well attended, do you know? Could the Nixons have been members of such an audience and where were they played?

HOFMANN: Well, the local base had a very good team. They had some players of All-American status. One man had been a little college All-American end. The wrestling coach from the University of Wisconsin was stationed here. He played on the base team. They played in the high school football field which accommodates four or five thousand people and they would fill the stands every time. They played Iowa State College, which is now Iowa State University. I get this all loused up now, but we used to call it Ames, you know, in Iowa State College. We now have the State University of Iowa and Iowa State University and it is quite a mixup. But at any rate, that's who the base played. They played pre-flight school at Iowa City and they played the one at Bunker Hill, Indiana, and different schedules like that.

ARENA: I notice that at least on one occasion they played a certain prison. Was that a standard? Did you ever hear of such a schedule which included playing prisoners? I am not sure at this point whether it was federal or state, but those men who were in prison at the time.

HOFMANN: Yes, they played prison teams. There were two of them. They had Anamosa [Iowa] and Fort Madison [Iowa].

ARENA: Where is that located?

HOFMANN: That's about one hundred twenty-five miles from here.

ARENA: Is that the prison's name or the community's name or both?

HOFMANN: It's both, yes. And then Fort Madison is the state penitentiary. Actually Anamosa is the men's reformatory. However, they always played home games.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if that practice is still continued?

HOFMANN: Yes.

ARENA: What teams from here might play there now, I wonder?

HOFMANN: They had a semi-pro team here two or three years ago and they used to play there. That team is no longer active however.

ARENA: Getting back to the question of the luncheons served in your pharmacy, was it just luncheon or could one have breakfast or supper there as well?

HOFMANN: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Would you mind describing the physical layout? I am just wondering was it as you find in many pharmacies, a counter with counter chairs attached, or was it a seating arrangement with tables and chairs which could be moved at that point, which was 1942-43?

HOFMANN: We owned a four-story office building with the drug store on the main floor. That building was destroyed by fire in 1940. We rebuilt with a six-story building which was opened in June of 1941. So the drug store at that time was completely new. We had a tea room in the basement of the store which would seat 125 people. We had a fountain which ran along one wall, which seated approximately thirty people. Then it came into a horseshoe offshoot which came off of the fountain which seated another ten or fifteen people, and then we had a room with booths around it and tables in the center which would seat another forty or fifty, I believe.

ARENA: I wasn't following you that closely, would you give an overall figure of the number you could accommodate around that time for lunch?

HOFMANN: Oh, 200.

ARENA: Which would also explain why it would be difficult to remember individual faces coming and going. It's by no means a one counter setup. I had no idea. To what extent were your prices fixed? I have some vague recollection of rationing and other government restrictions at that time. Was that a problem, do you recall?

HOFMANN: Yes, it was a very great problem because of the rationing, and because of getting caught on low ceiling prices, we had to close the tea room. And there were some great problems that did arise from that. For example, in that tea room, we would on Sunday serve a complete Sunday dinner including an opener like tomato juice or fruit juice or something of this nature, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, the whole works, and finish off with a piece of pie for 75 cents, which is a little different than it is today.



ARENA: I should say. To what extent do you recall that the Officers Club was any sort of competition in the sense that the officers after all could have eaten there, or could they eat in town?

HOFMANN: Well, basically there were two officers clubs. There was one on the base which was called the BOQ, Bachelors Officers Quarters, which had a dining room and bar. And then there was another one that was located right on the edge of town, which was converted into an officers club and they served meals there. Basically, it would not have been too competitive because while it is true that it was patronized by the officers, why, the wives would be downtown, and the normal sailor personnel would be downtown and they would not go to the officers clubs.

ARENA: Just to be sure, you mentioned a moment ago, I believe, something about meals being served on Sunday. Were you open seven days a week? Was the cafeteria part, meal-serving part, open seven days a week too?

HOFMANN: Yes, it was. As a matter of fact Sunday was frequently one of our big days, biggest days, because the cadets were given the day off on Sunday and they'd come into town in droves.

ARENA: Just for the record, given your own personal interest in politics, how would you describe the politics of Ottumwa at that time, from the standpoint of its effect on those people who were there because of the Navy situation? In other words, someone like Richard Nixon would find what type of a political atmosphere in Ottumwa?

HOFMANN: Well . . .

ARENA: If that is difficult, I admit it is, but as I say, I am not interested in the political situation per se but the historical setup per se.

HOFMANN: Well, Ottumwa has a commission form of government and there were three commissioners--the Mayor, the man in charge of finance and public safety and the other one was in charge of parks and streets. They are elected every two years for a two-year term. The commission form is a little bit different from other types of municipal government, in that each of these men is full time and he is responsible for and operates a department--in this case sometimes two departments, that is public safety and finance. So this is the basic background. I don't think, however, that there would be enough heat in the local politics that it would create too much of a stir at the air base.

ARENA: The only basis that I can see of a tie-in between the government of Ottumwa--the government in the sense of all of the governing functions, whether it is the police or the tax collector--and the base would be maybe where you need law enforcement for whatever situations, quieting some boisterous sailors. And as a matter of fact how often, if at all, did problems like that arise? The image of sailors, the image of the Navy, true or false, is one frequently of big donnybrooks in town saloons and spilling out into the street and the city police coming. Was there anything like that?

HOFMANN: Basically, no. There really wasn't. Once in a while somebody would get a little over exuberant, but the Shore Patrol maintained a corps downtown all the time and maybe occasionally there would be a little problem with two or three, but basically, no. You didn't see it.

ARENA: As you may or may not recall, the President himself had been a lawyer, legally trained at Duke [Law School], as a matter of fact, and had been a practicing lawyer before he came here. Was there any connection between the legal arm of the Navy, we'll say, the legal officers of the base and the community? Would he have had any regular or maybe some cooperative meetings. In this sense I am trying to think of possible future research leads, where those who may have been with the community may have had some contact with the legal division of the Navy which, therefore, would have meant Richard Nixon.

HOFMANN: I really don't think he would have, no.

ARENA: As you know, I am intending to see a Mr. Jerry Woods who is a resident of Ottumwa and at that time was in charge of security or connected with security in the area and, of course, he may throw some light on this. As this interview does come to a close, is there any point or question or subject that I have not raised that comes to mind? Anything that you care to say yourself regarding your association either directly or indirectly with President Nixon and his family, his wife, during this time?

HOFMANN: No, Dick, I think we have pretty well covered the situation, so far as my involvement may or may not have been with the Nixons.

ARENA: One thing that does come to mind and bearing in mind whatever you do recall of your associations, your contacts with the Nixons in Ottumwa, bearing in mind their present day personality and traits, would you care to comment on what changes and lack of changes and in what sense would you say they have not changed from that time when you may have had some contact with them in Ottumwa?

HOFMANN: Well, [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon was generally characterized as being somewhat on the shy side. Certainly the performance she has as First Lady of the United States in her trips to China and to Russia and this type of thing, I think that she has developed into an extremely well-poised person and one who reflects the very best of American womanhood.

ARENA: Finally, one question that comes to mind, given your own personal roots in the Ottumwa area and bearing in mind the President's Quaker roots, where would he, if he wished to visit his own kind, so to speak, some good Friends, where would a young Friend go to see fellow Quakers? Specifically, do you know if there is a Quaker church in Ottumwa itself?

HOFMANN: No, there is not. There is not a Friends church here. I think the closest one I know of was in Iowa City [Iowa]. Of course, with gas rationing during the war, it might not have been too convenient to go there.

ARENA: Mr. Hofmann, I want to thank you for granting me this time on your weekend and for answering all of my questions so frankly and fully, and I know my fellow historians will join me in extending this thanks.

HOFMANN: May I say it has been my privilege.

ARENA: Thank you.