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L. O. Hofstetter (July 14, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. L. O. HOFSTETTER

July 14, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. L. O. Hofstetter (Leonard Orin), in Whittier, California. Today's date is July 14, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Hofstetter, may I begin by asking you where and when you were born?

HOFSTETTER: Yes. According to the records, I was born in Woodburn, Indiana, which is a small town a few miles southeast of Fort Wayne [Indiana], on June 2, 1901.

ARENA: How long have you been in this immediate area of Whittier?

HOFSTETTER: My father and mother, incidentally, are both of pure Swiss extraction. Their grandparents migrated from Switzerland to Ohio in 1821, and they lived in a little Swiss community in Ohio. For some reason, they decided to move up to Indiana, but they lived there only a fairly short time, I think a year or two, and then moved back to the Sonnenberg settlement in central Ohio, where the Swiss people were located and are still concentrated, spelled exactly the same as Sonnenberg in Switzerland. In fact, that's where it got its name, from the area in the Swiss Alps known as Sonnenberg. It's a Mennonite group.

ARENA: Would I be correct in assuming that would be the German section of Switzerland, too?

HOFSTETTER: Yes. It's in the Bernese Jura, which is in the northwest part of Switzerland. Incidentally, in passing I might comment that, while Hofstetter is a fairly unusual name, in this area I found that there were three pages of Hofstetters in the Bern, Switzerland, telephone book. In other words, it's a very common name there.

ARENA: Any idea what the word itself means?

HOFSTETTER: Yes. I have been told that it has to do with the state house. It's of Germanic origin, as you indicated. But my wife and I were in Switzerland for three months a couple of years ago, and we found a lot of Hofstetters. In fact, there was a small town there of that name. But it's been difficult; in fact, impossible, to establish any relationship with my people, because it's been so many years since they left, and they have a habit of taking up the gravestones if nobody pays the rent after fifty years, which makes the geneology more difficult to trace.

To go on with the answer to your question, my father was one of the more adventuresome ones, and in about 19__ Oh, golly, I must have been four or five years old, so that would have been 1905 or '06 when we went to central Missouri, a little town which was pronounced "Versails", spelled exactly the same as the one in France, but it was Americanized to Versailles. My mother's people lived in a Swiss community there, not far from the town of Tipton [Missouri]. And by the way, I have recently noticed that it was the eastern terminus of the Butterfield Stage Route. Just a little town, of course.

We lived in the country, and going to the town to the store was a whole day with horses and wagon, and we made the trip about once a month. It was a great treat, and we'd plan that for days, and get up early and go to town and get back that same evening. It was, I think, probably ten miles one way, which was a big deal. Then in later years, my father moved the family to Colorado. I have one older brother, two years older than I, and I have two sisters who are four and six years younger than I am, respectively, and one brother who is ten years younger than I. We all went to grammar school and high school (well, my younger brother didn't go to high school there) in Colorado. And then my oldest brother and I went to college from there, to a church school in [Monmouth] Illinois called Monmouth College. It was at that time under the jurisdiction of the United Presbyterian Church, a small school of about seven or eight hundred student body. We went to college there. And while we were in school, my father and mother moved to California. When my brother and I graduated from college in 1923, we came to California and spent the summer. I went back to Chicago [Illinois] that fall and went to work for a company, Stewart-Warner, the speedometer manufacturers. My brother entered the ministry, went back to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I worked in Chicago for several years, and in 1925 I was married to my college sweetheart, whose name at that time was Helen Culbertson, whose home was in Indianapolis, Indiana. We came to California to see my parents on our honeymoon. This was in the fall of 1923. We were married on August 15, 1925, by the way. (I said '23.) We went back to Chicago, and in the middle of the Chicago winter, we decided that the people in California seemed to be eating regularly, and we didn't think they looked any smarter than we thought we were, so I quit my job and we packed up and moved to California in the spring of 1926, left there on March 1. If you've ever been in Chicago in the middle of winter, you know how horrible it is. My wife's father and mother decided to make the move with us, and we drove through from Indianapolis to Glendale [California], and it took us exactly two weeks, in a Model T Ford, and had a very interesting trip. But that was how we happened to move to California. We landed here--I think I had fifty dollars in cash and no job, but the courage of youth is wonderful. And everything has worked out. I think it's the best move we ever made. Now I'm giving you mainly a biography of myself, but our three daughters--and I think you probably know two of them. . . . Patricia [Hofstetter] is a local Municipal Court judge, and Marilyn [Hofstetter] has just recently retired from the city council. As you know, she served for twelve years on the council, two years as mayor, and has just retired from that. They all graduated from Monmouth [College]. Patricia and Marilyn went to Berkeley [University of California] to law school and became attorneys. Helen Louise [Hofstetter Morris] went to UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles], taking science and teaching, and taught in Riverside [California] for a couple of years, and then went to Brazil for USIS [United States Information Service] on a teaching assignment down there.

ARENA: This is Helen Louise. She is still a Hofstetter?

HOFSTETTER: No. She returned and went to work for North American as a computer analyst, and then went back to Brazil [South America] a second time, for the State Department, USIS, and there met a young man from Louisiana who was down there building a carbon black plant.

ARENA: What kind of a plant?

HOFSTETTER: Carbon black. It's derived from oil, and it's one of the main ingredients in the production of rubber tires. It's a great industry in Louisiana and Brazil was trying to start a carbon black industry because they were starting a rubber industry, and he was building that. They came back to Whittier [California] and were married in 1958, and have lived in Louisiana ever since. Helen Louise is the one who had Mrs. Patricia [Ryan] Nixon as a typing teacher when she was in Whittier High School, about 1942 or '43.

ARENA: And her husband's name?

HOFSTETTER: Her husband's name is Raphael Morris. They have two children: Rose Anne, who was born in 1959, and John Leonard, who was born in 1961, and they now live in New Iberia, Louisiana.

ARENA: How often does she get into this area, in the sense of my possibly interviewing her some day, about her firsthand recollections of Mrs. Pat Nixon?

HOFSTETTER: They get here about every two years. They were here last summer, but they are going to Washington, D.C. this year on their vacation, but I wouldn't be surprised if they might make it again next year.

ARENA: Speaking of firsthand contact with one of the Nixons, may I ask you to give a summary--and you're doing a beautiful job of summarizing this in a few words--may I ask you to give a summary, and then we could go into more detail once we have the overall picture, of your direct contact over the years that you've been here in Whittier, or any other place, and you've come into contact with the Nixons, thinking not only of the President directly--of course, he is our chief and direct interest--but also members of his immediate family, such as Mrs. Pat Nixon, his parents, both of whom are deceased, his two living brothers, [Francis Donald Nixon] Donald and Edward [Calvert Nixon]. Maybe you have met one of the deceased brothers who lived here for awhile, Harold [Samuel Nixon] and another deceased brother, Arthur [Burdg Nixon].

HOFSTETTER: Well, actually, my contact with the Nixon group has been very limited. I have given you the fact that Pat Nixon was Helen Louise's typing teacher at Whittier High School, and incidentally, gave her a B. Helen has never got over that.

ARENA: Along those lines, did you possibly, through a PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] meeting, meet the teacher, Mrs. Pat Nixon?

HOFSTETTER: No, I never did.

ARENA: Including the possibility of seeing her and her husband in some of the plays in which they appeared with the Whittier Community Players?

HOFSTETTER: Well, I didn't. I talked to Helen Louise on the telephone the other day, and she said that Dick had made an address at one of the functions while she was in high school, and he had on his uniform, a very dashing young officer.

ARENA: Was this while he was still in uniform and his wife was still teaching at Whittier High School?

HOFSTETTER: Yes.

ARENA: And he was still in the Navy?

HOFSTETTER: Yes.

ARENA: I see. And your daughter, during those war years, did have Mrs. Pat Nixon as a teacher?

HOFSTETTER: She graduated from Whittier High School in 1943.

ARENA: I see.

HOFSTETTER: So this would probably have been about 1941 or '42. I don't recall what years he was in the Navy.

ARENA: He left Whittier to go to Washington, first with the OPA [Office of Price Administration] in the beginning of 1942, and by the end of 1942 was in the Navy. So before 1942 he would have been around Whittier.

HOFSTETTER: But if he was in his uniform, it would have had to be '42 or '43, wouldn't it?

ARENA: Right.

HOFSTETTER: It may have been the commencement address or something. I don't know what it was, but Helen Louise could tell you.

ARENA: Fine.

HOFSTETTER: Well, that gets us to California and accounts for our three children. We lived in various towns in California. In 1928 we moved to Long Beach, and then a couple of years later we moved to Artesia [California], which is a town about ten miles or so, maybe fifteen miles south of Whittier, almost due south, and we lived there until 1938, when we moved to Whittier. It was while we were living in Artesia--our address at that time was 1919 Beck Street, which was about a mile out in the country, to the east of Artesia. . . . That street has now been changed to Bechard. That was done several years ago. At that time, Mrs. Hofstetter and I occasionally went out in the evening, and among others we had a baby sitter who lived down the road about a quarter of a mile west of us on Orangethorpe Avenue, named Thelma Ryan. I haven't too much recollection of Thelma Ryan as such at that time. As I say, she was one of a number of baby sitters.

ARENA: And of course, Thelma Ryan is now Mrs. Pat Nixon.

HOFSTETTER: Oh, of course. But at that time it was strictly the other name. I don't recall, even, exactly what year this was. It had to be somewhere between '32 and '37, I would say. I think it was about '35. I believe she was either in Excelsior High School [Artesia, California] at that time, or she may have been going to SC [University of Southern California]. My only accurate recollections of the thing are that she sat for us with the three girls on two different occasions. Both times she walked down from her place to our house to start the sitting job, and when we came home I would always take her home and pay her her 50 cents.

ARENA: The rate at that time was 50 cents an hour?

HOFSTETTER: No, 50 cents for the evening, up until midnight. If you got home between midnight and 1 o'clock it was 75 cents, and if you got home after 1 o'clock you had to pay a dollar. That was the custom in the community. We rarely stayed out that late, and as I said, I remember paying her the 50 cents. She was very happy to get it, of course, and we were happy to have her.

ARENA: Do you recall how you came into contact with her in the first place? Was she recommended by someone, or how you met her?

HOFSTETTER: I haven't the slightest idea. Mrs. Hofstetter made all those arrangements, of course, and Mrs. Hofstetter passed away in 1966. It's unfortunate, because she could tell you a good deal more about those details than I could.

ARENA: What do you recall of Mrs. Nixon's appearance, from your own recollections now?

HOFSTETTER: Oh, she was just a nice-looking high school girl. I thought of her as a high school girl. She may have been in SC at that time. She had honey-blond hair, a very nice-looking girl.

ARENA: How about her personality and any special characteristics, from the standpoint of poise, self-confidence, maturity--any of those qualities seem evident?

HOFSTETTER: Nothing that I would notice. I would say that she was certainly adequate in all respects, or it would have been noticeable, in other words.

ARENA: How about dress? Was she very informal, or wearing regular clothes for a girl of that time?

HOFSTETTER: Just ordinary. In other words, we knew that in the Ryan family the mother was dead and the father had one or two boys and this girl, and she had a lot of responsibilities, and we admired her for being willing to come out and baby-sit for us and pick up an extra 50 cents.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, thinking back, HOW you were aware? Was this through her telling you so, through others, or . . .

HOFSTETTER: No, it was just the neighborhood, you know. There were probably three or four people lived along that street. We knew some of them fairly well, and you discuss the people who live in the big house, the place around the corner, and all that sort of thing. It was pure hearsay, but there was certainly never any. . . . They seemed to be very well-thought-of. They seemed to mind their own business. Everybody thought about them being Catholics. I think it was primarily because their name was Ryan. I don't have any idea whether they were or not. It doesn't matter.

ARENA: Do you recall if there were ever any, during the baby-sitting period, emergencies that came up, where she may have had to call you, or anything unusual along the baby-sitting . . .

HOFSTETTER: No, nothing at all. There is one interesting sidelight, though, that we found interesting in later years. Our second daughter's name is Patricia. Her older sister couldn't say Patricia, so she called her Tricia. And Thelma told Mrs. Hofstetter one evening, "If I ever have a daughter, I'm going to call her Tricia, because it's such a pretty name. Of course, her own name was Patricia, also, but we didn't know that. We knew her as Thelma. So that's where the Tricia for their daughter came from. Of course, after Pat got into high school, she decided to change her name from Tricia to Pat. That's our daughter. She didn't want to go as Tricia, and she's been Pat ever since.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you have ever since come into direct contact with either the President or Mrs. Pat Nixon yourself, or your wife, on some occasions, and how you were treated?

HOFSTETTER: No, neither of us has, but when our oldest daughter, Helen Louise, was in Washington for a briefing, training period before she went to Brazil in 1956 or '57, '57 I think it was--at that time he was Vice President--she attended a reception at which Mrs. Nixon was an honored guest, and she remembered Helen Louise very well. In fact, they had a very nice chat. That's the only contact any member of our family, so far as I know, has had with that family.

ARENA: How about other members of the family? I'm thinking when you did live in Whittier, did either your parents or yourself, have any direct contact with the Nixon grocery store out there in East Whittier?

HOFSTETTER: No, we had no contact with that whatever. We lived a couple of doors off Beverly [Boulevard] on Bright [Avenue]. Well, the first year we lived in a small rental house until we found a place to buy, and then we lived there; that was until '45. And then in '45 we moved up on Rideout Heights. We bought the old Rideout place on Circle Drive and moved up there, so our residence has always been in the west end of Whittier, so to speak. My work was in Huntington Park [California], so I had very little contact, really, in Whittier. Mrs. Hofstetter was very active in quite a number of organizations in Whittier--the [Whittier] Women's Club, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the American Association of University Women, church work, and she was very active in a great many organizations and made a lot of friends that way.

ARENA: She MAY have had direct contact with Mrs. Hannah Nixon, who belonged to some of these organizations.

HOFSTETTER: She may have. It's entirely possible, but I know nothing of it.

ARENA: While you were living on Bright Avenue and not too far from the First Friends Church, did you have any contact with other close relatives, aunts and uncles of the President? I'm thinking in particular of his grandfather. Well, no. By this time--1925--he was deceased. This would have been Franklin Milhous, who owned the Milhous ranch at the dead end of Painter [Avenue], which went into, maybe at that time called the County Road, or now Whittier Boulevard. At any rate his wife, though, the President's grandmother, lived on quite a few years. This would have been Mrs. Almira Milhous. Any contact with her? Do you recall seeing that ranch?

HOFSTETTER: No, nothing at all along those lines.

ARENA: Just to be sure, how about the Marshburns?

HOFSTETTER: Yes, I . . .

ARENA: Excuse me, now. The relationship is that Mrs. Marshburn is the President's aunt, his mother's sister, Rose Olive [Milhous Marshburn]; and of course, Mrs. Marshburn is the husband.

HOFSTETTER: That's Oscar. Well, I met Oscar quite a number

of years ago. I don't even remember when or how we met, but I know I admired him very much, and have since felt that he's an extremely fine chap. We never got to know each other well. When we meet on the street we speak, but I'm not sure he remembers me. He remembers he met me somewhere.

ARENA: Mr. Hofstetter, let me thank you very much for taking the trouble to let me interview you, and for answering all of my questions so frankly and fully. Thank you very much.