



8-4-1971

## **Edith Holt (August 4, 1971, interview two)**

C. Richard Arena

Second Oral History Interview

with

MRS. EDITH HOLT

August 4, 1971  
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Program

ARENA: We are now in the residence of Mrs. Edith Holt of Whittier, California. The date is August 4, 1971. This is the second interview with Mrs. Holt. Now Mrs. Holt, we discussed last time your experiences with Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon and the President, the question of their marriage, their interest in Mexico, and I wonder if I could ask you some questions concerning the President and your knowledge also of the author and the cousin of the President, Miss Jessamyn West. I'll just begin by referring briefly to what we said a moment ago concerning the difference in the personalities of the two persons. In your own words, how would you describe their personalities, their differences?

HOLT: I have only seen Miss West, Mrs. [Jessamyn] McPherson, about three times. I have visited just a little bit with her the first time I saw her; she had talked at the Women's University Club here in Whittier. She was very friendly right away and seemed to be outgoing in her personality, whereas the President, although he's friendly and I feel that I can talk with him easily, he is much more of an ingoing person in his ways and you have to get quite a bit better acquainted with him before talking at ease with him. He has a sense of humor but you don't even see that for some time. In my short visits with Mrs. McPherson, it was apparent that she felt at home with almost anyone, and she didn't seem to be slow in making you feel that way. The President is just a little more serious in his attitudes when he first meets you.

ARENA: You've known the President, of course, going back to days of his marriage, and you have known him now since he has become President; would you say that there has been any

change in that basic personality? Has he, we'll say, loosened up a bit more when you see him even on television, even though you don't see him personally? Would you say there has been any change along those lines?

HOLT: Well, the few times I have seen him since he was President, I would say, yes. As I believe I told you in the other interview when I saw him at his niece's wedding and he saw me, right away he smiled and he said, "Here's my liberal friend." And they all laughed, and I said, "That's why I'm here, Mr. President." He laughed right away. He saw me at a distance, you know. I do think that he has, what shall we say, become a little easier to talk with and he's easier with himself. He seems to give himself forth a lot more than he did before.

ARENA: I think you might know about the fact that the President did win a contest in high school regarding a speech on the Constitution. I don't recall if I asked you if you were present when he did deliver that speech. Do you recall anything about the high school speech that he delivered dealing with the Constitution? I believe that's even in the yearbook. I know it's in the yearbook, because the present principal, Mr. [Jack] Mele, showed it to me. But you don't recall attending that by any chance--the delivery?

HOLT: Well, I don't recall that particular one. I have heard him speak and do some debating when he was in school. But I don't remember that particular one. That's a long time ago and I just can't quite remember that part of it.

ARENA: Do you recall anything about his style of delivery in debating? Of course, he was not the famous President he is now, and that would be one reason why he wouldn't stand out, but do you recall possibly comparing him with other students of his own time--certain things that did make him stand out as a debater--different from some of the other students you might recall?

HOLT: Well, I think he was a very strong debater. In other words, as you listened to him and then listened to the others, you realized or you felt greatly that his arguments were so much more to the point. And you felt that he was extremely dedicated and serious--not just serious--but believed wholeheartedly in what he was saying. He was so quick to point out the things that you hadn't noticed from the other arguments at all. But he saw it and then you said, "Why, of course." So, I always felt with him in debates, even in high school, the few I saw; also, of course, later when he was running for Congress. What debates those were! He seemed so well informed and saw through things completely.

I don't like to supply this right now because it doesn't belong here. What is impressing me now is trying to figure out what he is going to do about China. I'm all for his going there, but I just hope--I'm sure he sees it from all angles. Because I've known him as a speaker and a debater and have talked with him, I

know--as some of us said the other day in talking--we are so blessed to have this kind of a leader at this time in the history of our nation.

ARENA: I certainly believe it does belong here because actually the person of the past is the person of the present. His past actions, of course, make him today, and you know the past firsthand, and that is why your views and comments about the President are so important. I am glad that you volunteered that.

Returning to the past for a moment again, and the President in this sense. I am sure you have heard this expression regarding the President and the adjective the "fighting Quaker." I was wondering what that phrase means to you, especially, do you ever recall that being used about him during any time of his life before he entered politics, including his high school era? Does the phrase come to mind in any way other than since he became involved in politics? Do you recall that being used in the early years?

HOLT: No, I do not recall that the "fighting Quaker" in those days at all, despite the fact that we all knew and believed that he was a man of great religion.

ARENA: You were aware when he was a student that he was a Quaker?

HOLT: That's right. His attitude on so many things made us know that he was a man that was playing the game fairly and working so hard at whatever he did.

ARENA: Let me ask you this for the record, if I may, Mrs. Holt. Do you ever recall him actually being in a fight with other students or any person during that high school period or any time, of course, before he entered the military service?

HOLT: No, I don't remember anything like that.

ARENA: What do you think of this analysis? This is an analysis by one local friend of the President, and I was just wondering about your reaction as to the relevance of the term "fighting Quaker." He feels that in making his debating points and in his approach to arguing a position, he appeared very positive and the term "fighting" could apply to his style of delivery. When you think of other debaters, either at that time or any time, could that be something you might agree with too? That his overall style of debating was that of a fighting pointmaker, if I may use that expression myself.

HOLT: Well, yes. I don't recall that as much in his high school debating as I have later on. I understand now much better what people might have meant by "fighting Quaker," because he was the type that went after it from the very core, but he knew what he was doing and he didn't lose his temper. That is the reason

he so often won in the debates during his race for Congress. The other gentleman would so often lose his temper. The President never did, not once, to my knowledge.

ARENA: You never have seen him lose his temper yourself?

HOLT: No, I haven't. In my experiences with him, I have never known of him to lose his temper. It doesn't mean that I don't know he has one. I'm sure of that because he is the type of man that wouldn't ever stoop to something that to him was very wrong. So that's doubtless why he was an excellent man in the service, too. He's not one that gives up. When you spoke of a "fighting Quaker" I hadn't thought of that. However, now when I think of those debates when he was a candidate for Congress, I can see something of what that means. Of course, I heard him on television once as most people did, when he lost the governorship and he came out on television, saying "I'm through, you can't beat me around again." That was the closest I ever knew him to lose his temper.

ARENA: That was a very famous incident.

HOLT: Yes.

ARENA: And I'm sure many people do recall that. Well, on the question of temper, I'm sure though since you are a member of the community you probably know that his father had a temper--Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon. And would you want to comment on that in any way? For example, did you ever see any example of his temper personally?

HOLT: Personally, I didn't, though I visited him many times and knew him quite well. Always Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon was with him when I saw him, and I just never--oh, he had very definite ideas--saw him what I would call really lose his temper, though I had heard that he could do it.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you when you did first meet Mr. Frank Nixon, the President's father? Was it during the high school period? It would not have been before, I don't imagine. Or excuse me, you did mention the fact that your husband did work on what was known as the Leffingwell Ranch and possibly might have dealt with the store from time to time. Possibly that might have been an occasion when you heard the name if you didn't meet Mr. Frank Nixon.

HOLT: I didn't meet him until after the President was through high school. I guess the President was in high school only one year after my husband was at Leffingwell. He knew the President more when he was in college, from going into the family store. I can't remember when I met Mr. Nixon the first

time. I met him in the store, I think perhaps twice and just said "How do you do." It was after I got to know Mrs. Nixon quite well that I became acquainted with him. Before his last illness, I used to go up to see them. I knew Mrs. Nixon much better than I knew him.

ARENA: When is the first time you met Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

HOLT: I met her the first time when she had a shower for Pat. Apparently Pat or somebody had given her different names that, you know, she might invite. They were out of the store then, and had a home up in Friendly Hills. I can't remember just where. At her shower for Pat, I met her and we became friends. I had such a nice visit with her. She was a very charming woman, and said, "We're so fond of Pat, and we're going to help her feel at home with us." She was so fond of her. That was only a short time--a few months before Pat and Dick were married.

ARENA: Had you ever met possibly Mrs. Hannah Nixon's father or mother, Frank Milhous and Almira Milhous, or were they deceased when you knew the Nixons?

HOLT: No, I never met them. The President, as you know, was so fond of his grandmother and I know Pat spoke to me about her. She said, "You should know that lady. She is a delightful woman." I do know that she was quite a rock in the family.

ARENA: Mrs. Almira Milhous?

HOLT: Yes. I never met her, Almira Milhous.

ARENA: For the record, I would like to ask you the question so it's clear, if you don't mind answering. Was there ever anything in the way of mother-in-law trouble between Pat Nixon and Mrs. Frank Nixon? Did you ever hear Pat in any way complain or in any way say anything about in-law trouble?

HOLT: Never.

ARENA: And as long as we are talking about Mrs. Hannah Nixon, was that true with any of the relatives that were on her husband's side--President Nixon's side? Did she ever have any problems as far as you know with any of her in-laws?

HOLT: Not as far as I know. Of course, Pat is the kind of person that wouldn't talk anyway. But as far as I know, none.

ARENA: Another question I might ask in the way of your contact with the family, I believe you said that Edward Nixon, the President's younger brother was also at Whittier High School for a while while you were there.

HOLT: Oh, yes.

ARENA: I don't recall if you said you were also his teacher.

HOLT: No, I wasn't his teacher and neither was I the President's teacher, though many people think so. But that was not true, especially of the President, because he was taking Latin and I was a Spanish teacher. No, I never had Ed in class, but I knew him quite well in--well as far as freshman and sophomore year. He used to work in the office of the counselors. And, of course, Pat had spoken to me often of him when they were first married or even before. They used to talk about Ed--he was a young boy then--and they were very, very fond of him. He was a brilliant student. His grades were excellent and he was quiet, too, very quiet, just went on his way, but also had a sense of humor.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, Mrs. Holt, if you are a Quaker yourself:

HOLT: No, I am not a Quaker.

ARENA: You are not a Quaker. Because I have in interviewing others had them volunteer this view of this reserved character and this non-spontaneous, outgoing personality of the Nixons. I was just wondering what you would think of this view. You could comment or not, that's up to you. But this is the view of a Quaker and a person who knows the President and the family very well. It is his understanding that because the Quakers in this area as a whole are very reserved and not an outgoing people, and that the President is merely reflecting a characteristic that is common among the Quakers of this area. Since you, not being a Quaker, could be a bit more objective in a way, and you have probably met Quakers as well as non-Quakers, I was just wondering if you would comment on that overall view that it was the Quaker religion that makes the President and Quakers in general from this area, or on the surface appear that way, but they're really not that uncommunicative and unresponsive. I just ask you your own view of that overall analysis.

HOLT: Well, I don't know a great many Quakers, but I do know some. Long before I knew the President, I recall a very, very good friend of mine. Her grandfather was a Quaker. Others that I have met were just the same way--quiet. They were from Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. So I think it's not just in this area. I think a great deal of that is the Quaker background.

ARENA: Another reference to that same overall question about the social makeup of the President's birth and his development--the Quaker makeup--another reference might be that you have read Friendly Persuasion. You know Miss Jessamyn West and you know the Quakers in this area generally. Is it your view that that book or any other books that you have read by Miss West do reflect the

Quakers themselves? If a person is not a Quaker and he has never heard of Jessamyn West, for example, or never heard of Whittier, if he should pick up the book and after reading the book say, "I wonder if the Quakers really are like this," what do you believe would be the answer to that question, knowing all of this background as well as Miss West and as well as some Quakers personally?

HOLT: Well, that is very interesting. This friend that I was telling you about, her mother was a Quaker, but it was her father who lived with them that I was particularly thinking about. I gave her the book Friendly Persuasion, and she said, "That's excellent; it's so much like us." And she is a Quaker. So she could tell you better. My knowledge of them I thought was good, but I don't really know, of course. She is a Quaker. She thought it was very good--very pleased with it. She thought it was very much like them.

ARENA: And you know also that Quakers generally, especially during the President's early youth and up to the time, say, of World War II, the Quaker community was a non-smoking one, a non-drinking one, a non-dancing one and possibly a non-cardplaying one. That was the Quaker world. Would you want to comment on that as a non-Quaker yourself? That's all. I leave that question with you and ask you to comment on living in a community where that was the way of life of the people.

HOLT: Well, of course, it wasn't until several years after I came to Whittier that we could even go to a movie. The theatre was closed on Sunday. It was often closed, but was closed on Sunday definitely. As soon as a moving picture show opened across the street, out of the city, then it was opened. So, just as there are different types of Presbyterians, and different Baptists, Quakers are very different in their attitudes, many of them. I think that overall they are similar, but I think that the modern Quaker and the one in the last number of years--perhaps all of them--have changed, but not to the extent that many people have. I agree with you, old Quaker Whittier was a very different town from today. Of course, in the first place, it was a smaller town and also there were more Quakers than anything else, probably. But as the shows began to come in and more and more people came in from all over--working in Los Angeles [California] and living here--well, this did have a great influence on the town. It's not the same town I knew when I came here.

ARENA: Again, don't answer if you don't want to, but could I be personal to the extent of asking you, were you unhappy or in any way sorry that you lived in a town where that was the way of life--that the Quakers had? Do you recall being unhappy living in the old Whittier, say, the time of the President's years in high school because of that?



HOLT: Not at all. In fact, we have been sorry that so many things have changed. But that's true naturally, every generation has changes. But I can recall even years before I was married a young man from Riverside [California] (I was there visiting) said, "You know what I'm going to do?" This was long before I came to live in Whittier. "I'm going to take you on a little jaunt." Now this was on a Saturday. "We are going to a very interesting town. There are more churches there than any place that we know of around here. I'm going to take you to a tea room which has been there for years, run by a very nice family." We drove into the town and it was Whittier. He said, "Whittier." And I said, "I don't know Whittier." And he said, "Well, you'll know Whittier. It's really quite a well-known town and a very fine town, but very different." When we came into the town, things were quiet, the streets and everything. We did go in for lunch, because it was in the middle of the day. We were going on into Los Angeles. It was a delightful place--clean, quiet. It's apparently been there for years and most knew about it in the surrounding areas. I have always loved it from the time I came here to live. I was glad when I was going to live here from that first experience.

ARENA: You do know that the Quakers use the expression "thee" and "thou" and they have a certain manner of speech. Was that used more frequently in your period, when President Nixon was going to high school? You seldom seem to hear it now, I think you will agree.

HOLT: Well, I seldom heard it then. I have a very good Quaker friend here now that's a pioneer and has lived here many, many years, quite a bit older than I, and a terrific woman. She's very different from the old type of "thee" and "thou" Quaker. I never heard her use it and I've known her for years, but it doesn't mean that she never did, because she and her husband were both Quakers.

ARENA: Do you recall possibly when they were together and possibly not recalling that a non-Quaker was in the midst that that was used? I'm thinking of possibly a brother and sister who were Quakers. Do you recall that ever happening?

HOLT: No, I haven't been in that situation, but I can imagine that could well be true, because fundamentally they are still that way.

ARENA: You might recall, I'm sure you read about the fact that the President while he was in college had something to do with that situation. As a student government leader he attempted to bring dancing onto the campus. I was wondering if you recall anything about that incident. This would be when he was at Whittier College.

HOLT: No, I don't remember that, but I don't think that would necessarily have much to do with the Quaker religion. I think it would have to do with many religions. I don't like to bring this up again but my husband being a Baptist minister's son, also fought to have dances and so forth, so I just have a feeling that it would be the other generation. All had to learn that it had to come. All of us have to learn to change, but they not so much so that they ever lost sight of their training. They always had that background. They did not go overboard.

ARENA: You know, Mrs. Holt, in addition to the Oral History Project centering on the President's life from his birth, 1913, to 1945, the project is also interested in documenting the places and the times of that era. In other words, not just the fact that you knew him personally but the high school he attended. So even though you did not have the President as a student, it will really be a great help to future students of this period of history, maybe ten, maybe one hundred years from now, it will be interesting for them to know what the high school was like that he attended. So, I would like to open up this area of examination if you care to respond by asking you: What do you believe Whittier High School was like during the 1930's, the President having attended, really he graduated in 1930 and attended two academic years before? But we'll say the 1920's and '30's. What was the high school like at that time? Possibly I might begin by making this statement. There was only one high school, which is not the situation today. Were there any other startling differences that you can think of? It doesn't have to be startling, just your recollection of what the routine school life was like when the President attended when you were a teacher.

HOLT: It is difficult in this way, when I began teaching here, I was a very young person in comparison to my age today. It was a small school in a way, not real small, but it was small, the students were similar in some ways to those today but, what shall I say, perhaps not as outgoing, all of them, and of course they were a little more formal. The teachers were a little more formal. Some of my former students I know now, and they laugh. I said to one, "Yes, I remember your sitting way back there and I had to watch you every minute or you would go out in the hallway." And he'd laugh and say, "That's right. How do you remember that?" Of course he was a real nice boy, too. Now he's a teacher and that's why we laugh about it. He's one of the teachers at Whittier High. Some I still know there. Sometimes I go to substitute and realize it's a very different school in some ways. That is just because the world is so different. The generations are so different.

I recently told some students in class, "You have so much to teach me and I have so much to teach you. If we'll just be patient with each other and be a little more conscious of these things, we'll all be happier and we'll all learn a lot more." It doesn't

mean they're any more terrible, they're just different. Of course, the school is extremely large now in comparison to what it was then. And also we have to recall that the whole community has changed. For instance in Whittier High, their background as far as families and everything are so different from what it was years ago. And so you can hardly compare the school now with then. But they were maybe not quite as rambunctious and still you learn so much from them. They are so knowledgeable in many things.

ARENA: Could you give us a specific example of that idea that you learn from students? Frankly I have heard very famous educators make that comment recently. I was just wondering if you had any particular example in mind.

HOLT: Well, I sometimes tell them this one. I had a class that was very difficult. Of course, in most of my classes their mentality was very quick and right up to the point. I had this one class that was quite large, probably as many boys as girls in it. I was so enthusiastic about the language itself, and so anxious for them to learn that sometimes I was quite impatient. I would give them an assignment that wouldn't be just the same as the others maybe, but was quite an assignment.

ARENA: Excuse me, to make sure we are talking about the right period was this during President Nixon's time, or recently?

HOLT: Some time after. Oh, no, not recently. This was some time ago. I often was very impatient with them and didn't think they were studying. I thought, what am I going to do? One day after school, about a month after school started, one of the boys came in from the class, just a freshman, and he said, "Mrs. Holt, I want to tell you something. I think you think we know a lot more than we do. I've been with these kids from elementary school, most of them, and we aren't so good as you think we are. You give us such assignments that we just can't do them." And I said, "Well, now that is interesting. What suggestions do you have?" So he gave me two or three and I said, "All right, I'm going to follow that. Not so much writing and not so much vocabulary and a little less of this and a little less of that, and see how we get along. I'm very glad you came in because I have been very discouraged." He left. I did what he suggested and did get along better with that class, and they learned more. But imagine a boy, just a freshman! I often tell classes that is what we want. But it takes courage for a student to do that. That boy came in to me for some reason, as impatient as I was. He thought I would throw him out, I guess.

ARENA: If you don't mind my saying, recently in discussing teaching methods with a teacher who belonged to that period, who taught the President, only he taught on a college level, he made the observation that when he first began teaching and he was closer in age to the student, he found he seemed to have more

rapport with them and that was an advantage. As he grew older and older, he knew the subject better, but he lost out with the advantage of having the close age contact, and one more or less balanced the other. I was just wondering what you think of that observation, especially do you think possibly that boy did go up to you because he saw you were a person he could talk to and possibly went over as he evidently did; but if you had been a lot older, he might not have. That's just a guess on my part and I was wondering how you would view that.

HOLT: Oh, probably it's true. The students that come up to me now at my age when I'm a substitute, so many times, nearly always they'll stop and they are children of students I've had. And they will say, "You were my mother's teacher." And I say, "Oh, what was the name?" So they are the ones that get closer to me, from this; the rest of them may be a little more understanding of me. I think I get a little more patient than impatient, as I grow older.

ARENA: Do you think there is also an advantage or disadvantage in the fact that the teacher is a member of the community where he or she teaches? The fact that you lived in Whittier when you taught in the high school, and you still do, makes any appreciable difference in your rapport with students, in your teachability, shall we say?

HOLT: In my rapport with students I'm sure it does, because somebody knows you from here and somebody knows you from there, and I think that doubtless does have something to do with my student association even today. They know about you from this or from that, etc. Of course, naturally they say, "My goodness, were you teaching at Whittier when the President was there?" And I say, "Yes, I was." "WOW!" And then somebody says, "My, somebody tells me you know the President." So I do believe that the fact I have lived here all these years has something to do also with my feeling toward them. Because I know their parents; sometimes their grandparents.

ARENA: Do you find that this recognition on the part of the students that you were here when the President was here and that you know him is an asset in your establishing rapport with the students and with the class overall?

HOLT: Overall, I think it is. Now, of course, people can't be 100 percent for the President, but I would say overall it is a help to me.

ARENA: I wonder if I could ask you this question from the standpoint again of future students of history wanting to know the name, the type of person who taught in Whittier High School at the time the President was there. What made you want to teach Spanish?

HOLT: That is another interesting thing about education. I had taken in high school German and Latin, and my grandparents had some German background. I used to write a German letter to my grandmother when I was away from her. But when I went to college, the University of Washington, I had a friend and we were talking; we hadn't registered yet. I said, "What you going to take?" And she said, "Oh, I don't know. I think maybe I'll take some Spanish, how about you?" Well, I said, "I guess I will too, then." I liked languages. That was all. I knew nothing about Spanish. Now this was up in the northwest; where there wasn't so much Spanish. I was very fortunate to have an American woman, an older woman, perhaps almost as old as I am now, who loved her Spanish and who had lived in Spain and had some excellent background for it. She just inspired me. I was fortunate to have a teacher like that from the beginning.

ARENA: Did she demand a lot of homework, if I may ask, or was it so intermingled with the enjoyment that you don't recall whether you had a lot of homework assignments or not?

HOLT: Well, we had the homework and I did it because she was so interesting in class. And she wasn't the type that was too demanding. Still we knew we were supposed to do our work, but we knew as we did it that we learned so much more from her, because it would bring something into her mind and she would interest us about experiences she had had and why the Spanish was like this, and how the Spanish people were this way. The class just became very interested in the people.

ARENA: In other words, she dwelt not only on grammar and vocabulary, but on the culture and the nature and her observations of the Spanish civilization itself?

HOLT: Right, but always with the other, because she felt that that background was tremendously important in order to continue with that feeling.

ARENA: Without mentioning any names, would you say that that was a rare case, that most of the language teachers you had do not have that approach or maybe is fifty-fifty, or it just isn't a fair question at all? I was just wondering if she was exceptional because she did that sort of thing--she tied in the language with the people, and that most language teachers that you have had had not done so.

HOLT: At the University of Washington they were very fortunate at that time. They had a very fine Spanish Department--excellent. One of the men was from Chile, another was a Chilean Counsel. Then there was this woman from Spain who had been there so long, although she was an American, and these others were Chilean.

And, oh, they were more fun. And still, they not only gave you that background. One--we laughed at him more--would make us repeat and repeat, "I always remember the absent, especially when they are girls." Of course, in Spanish, and each one in the class had to say and learn that. The other Chilean professor would use his English sometimes. He was a brilliant man, but would get his English mixed up sometimes. One time we were just shocked because he was such a gentleman and he came right out with the English words, "My God." He was angry at something. The next day he came in and said, "Apparently I made a great mistake yesterday and I am very sorry. I learned I did something wrong. I talked to a couple of the professors about it. You know, we get a little confused with our English at times. We translate it word by word." He was showing the class all kinds of pictures that came from Santiago [Chile], and he would tell us where they were, etc. One of them didn't look too beautiful, and one of the boys said something that wasn't too pleasant about it. He didn't make fun of it, but in a way he did. Consequently the professor's remark "My God!"