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Verna M. Hough (February 19, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. VERNA M. HOUGH

February 19, 1972
Prescott, Arizona

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mrs. Verna M. Hough. Mrs. Hough's full name is Verna Mae Hough. Mrs. Hough's husband, now deceased, in 1956, was Dr. Henry Alexander Hough. The address is important. The present street address is 943 Yavapai Drive. Yavapai, the name of an Indian tribe, whose descendants are still in the area outside of Prescott. The [Francis Anthony] Nixons formerly lived in this very house. This, however, is a new street number. The original street number was 225 Yavapai Drive, Prescott, Arizona, Zip 86301. Arena interviewing. Today's date is February 19, 1972. Mrs. Hough, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born and how is it that you find yourself in Prescott, Arizona?

HOUGH: I was born November 8, 1895 in Illinois and my husband and I came to Arizona in 1926 for my husband's health.

ARENA: Would you mind giving a brief resume of your own background, that is where you received your education and if you were a professional woman as well, or just by your husband's side at home all these years?

HOUGH: I received my education in Illinois at a college what was then the Normal Teachers College in Normal, Illinois. And I taught school for approximately five years before I was married.

ARENA: May I ask what level, what age?

HOUGH: The primary.

- ARENA: Did you ever go back to teaching after you came here?
- HOUGH: No, I never did.
- ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief explanation of your husband's own medical background and career?
- HOUGH: Well, he was born in Kansas and he received his elementary education, of course, and high school in Kansas, and he received his medical education in Chicago [Illinois] at the Chicago College of Physicians and Surgeons, the name at that particular time. And he served practically three years in World War I as a young doctor and coming back to Illinois to practice until his health broke, and we had to come to Arizona.
- ARENA: Did that make a difference, in your experience, your husband's moving out here from the standpoint of doing him good?
- HOUGH: Oh, yes. He was several years regaining his health but he did, following an operation he regained his health enough that he practiced ophthalmology in Prescott for thirteen years.
- ARENA: Mrs. Hough, may I ask you to recall to the best of your ability the very first occasion that you met any of the Nixons and the circumstances surrounding the meeting, and which of the Nixons that you did meet?
- HOUGH: Can you tell me what year the Nixons were supposed to have come to Prescott?
- ARENA: I do know that the President was here for sure during the summer of 1930, and Mr. Marshall Clow recalls pretty clearly a period between '28 and '30, on and off, when the President himself was of high school age. He was of high school age between 1926 and he graduated in 1930.
- HOUGH: That's what I wanted to clear up. We were living here on Yavapai Drive down the street aways from where I live now, and my first recollection of them is when they moved in the house approximately across the street from where we were renting at that particular time.
- ARENA: I believe that was in the house that you might have mentioned off the tape before that was owned by a Mr. A. F. Bumpus?
- HOUGH: No, this is the one I pointed out to you where the Sigfersons live now. And I remember, of course, of them moving in and of meeting Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon,

the mother of Richard, and of seeing Harold [Samuel Nixon] on his porch or where he was taking his cure. I saw him practically every day and visited with him. Then my recollection of them is of weekends when Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, the father, and Richard and sometimes Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] would come to Prescott to spend the weekend with Mrs. Nixon and Harold.

ARENA: And were you aware that Mrs. Nixon, thinking of your own personal background, college education, were you aware that she had attended a college, although she did not graduate, but she had attended some years at Whittier College? Do you recall that ever coming up for sure? It might have come up and you don't recall. I was just wondering.

HOUGH: No, frankly I don't remember that angle of it at all.

ARENA: What do you recall though of her personality, of her bearing, of the education that she did display, whether you knew that she had a college education or not?

HOUGH: Well, I always knew that she was an educated lady, and was truly a lady in all senses of the word and was a very hard working lady, too, as in those days we all had to be. We were all caring for some member of our family in all ways.

ARENA: Did you yourself take in persons as did Mrs. Hannah Nixon, do you recall? I understand in addition to her own son, she took in some other cases.

HOUGH: There was a time in their residence here when I can remember of her having two other young men in her home, caring for them and they were health-seekers, also. No, to answer you, I did not take others in. I just cared for Dr. Hough.

ARENA: Was it common or was she unusual in that she did take in other health cases? Do you recall that this was unusual that someone would do that? Well, possibly the [Marshall] Clows who did it on a rather large scale.

HOUGH: Yes, they did it on a larger scale. I was trying to think and I do not remember right now of anyone else in our neighborhood who did take anyone in. However, we all felt that it was a very wonderful thing for her to do to care for these two young men who had no one of their own and were from out of state.

ARENA: Did you ever get the impression from talking with her or any members of the family that they were in rather tight financial circumstances? Did that ever come out in any way?

- HOUGH: Well, yes, I would have had that impression.
- ARENA: The very fact that she took in these other people would be one indication . . .
- HOUGH: That's right.
- ARENA: I am wondering, for example, if she did here what she did in Whittier, which was to bake and sell pies, for example? Do you know if she did anything like that?
- HOUGH: No, she didn't here, not to my knowledge. But if we had thought anything of it, we would have had the impression that she was trying to help their financial condition, of course.
- ARENA: What do you recall of the personality of Mr. Frank Nixon, the husband of Hannah?
- HOUGH: Well, I never knew Mr. Nixon too well, of course. He was a totally different disposition from what Mrs. Nixon was. I would say that I had the impression that he was a bit headstrong, and I suppose that takes care of all I really knew about Mr. Nixon.
- ARENA: Do you recall him exercising discipline towards the boys? And, of course, Mr. Harold Nixon was a young man at the time, he was born in 1909, by the way.
- HOUGH: Harold?
- ARENA: Harold, yes. He was past high school age.
- HOUGH: Well, the only thing I might say there is that I have a recollection of Mr. Nixon being rather displeased with him in that he would not follow instructions, medical instructions, as every one of us knew that he should, better than what he was doing.
- ARENA: Do you recall that there was a doctor who was assigned, or who was the family doctor for all medical cases in the area such as Harold, or were they just on their own pretty well?
- HOUGH: I don't know. I've been thinking about that since you came in. Do you have any name of any doctor who did take care of Harold?
- ARENA: In this area, not at all.

HOUGH: I don't remember who was Harold's doctor. Dr. John Flinn was a nationally known tuberculosis specialist who had a sanitarium here in Prescott and he was a very fine tuberculosis doctor.

ARENA: Would this have been a private sanitarium, by the way?

HOUGH: Yes, it was his private sanitarium, but he had private patients too.

ARENA: Do you recall to what extent the boys could amuse themselves? Do you recall any games that they played, for example, or what other forms of amusement there might have been for someone like Harold, a young man in this case?

HOUGH: No, I don't.

ARENA: Was there a theatre in the town of Prescott?

HOUGH: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall that they attended?

HOUGH: No, I really don't.

ARENA: Do you recall that there was anything in the way of formal instruction that someone like Harold was able to take advantage of? He was out of high school, and did you come across anything like that?

HOUGH: To my knowledge he didn't have anything of that kind, or go into anything of that kind. In those years the pre-dominant treatment for tuberculosis was bed rest
✓ (continuous) and good food. This restriction to bed was very difficult for younger people.

ARENA: How would you describe life in Prescott at that period, bearing in mind, of course, the Prescott of today? I'm particularly interested in if the majority of people seemed to be from out of town and out of the state? Did they seem to come from a particular section of the country--any thoughts along those lines?

HOUGH: Prescott in those days--the life in Prescott I should say--was a very simple one in comparison with the times now. And yes, a great majority of Prescott's population was made up of health-seekers from other sections of the country, and I would lean toward the idea that it was from the central part of the country and, of course, this was following World War I, these years, and the U.S. government hospital is here at Whipple [Arizona] and it was very full.

ARENA: And this was a Federal hospital?

HOUGH: It is still.

ARENA: And it goes back to at least the time when you were here?

HOUGH: Oh, yes.

ARENA: And was it just for TB [tuberculosis] cases?

HOUGH: At that particular time I believe that it was, because I think that was the predominant illness.

ARENA: To what extent are there TB cases in the area today?

HOUGH: Oh, it's MUCH, MUCH lessened, yes, as is true of all sections of our country.

ARENA: Did there become a consideration in your own personal case about your husband being taken care of in a hospital or at home? Did that ever come up?

HOUGH: Yes, he was eligible to have been taken care of in Whipple in the hospital, but he chose to be taken care of at home instead.

ARENA: And you wouldn't happen to know if Harold was in that same position? Mrs. Nixon might have talked to you about the fact that he could have been put in some sanitarium or not. Did that ever come up, I wonder?

HOUGH: It did not come up. However, he would have had to be put in a private sanitarium. You see, he was not of an age where he would be eligible for the government one, no, nor had he been in service.

ARENA: What was the attitude of townspeople regarding the out of town TB cases coming in, from your own personal experience? Do you recall any resentment or fear, the two things combining maybe, that they were endangering the local population, for example?

HOUGH: No, I do not. No, I had never had that feeling at all, and I don't believe that anyone did. It would have been a very remote case, if that was the case.

ARENA: And as a matter of fact, how did you protect yourself and others who were exposed to people with TB, which to a certain extent was contagious, I imagine?

HOUGH: Well, the main thing was being very, very particular of dishes. The dishes that Dr. Hough used were always kept separate and scalded and boiled, one or the other, and extreme cleanliness in the home and in the bedroom and things of that kind would take care of the situation perfectly all right.

ARENA: Did you notice that his health, although it improved, ever came back to completely normal?

HOUGH: Oh, no.

ARENA: He always had to watch himself.

HOUGH: Oh, yes.

ARENA: What would signs of his not being in perfect health be, a tiredness, did his heart give him extra concern because of TB, too?

HOUGH: Not until his very much later years, and whether that is what affected it at that time I wouldn't know. Extreme loss of energy is the signal, I might say, and a running of temperature.

ARENA: Do you recall that youngsters had to be held down, in the main, and the problem was that they felt better than they actually were and maybe that was the case with Harold?

HOUGH: Well, that might have been. I can't speak with authority on that.

ARENA: You have no personal knowledge on that?

HOUGH: No, I don't.

ARENA: How about your husband, do you recall that he gave you a difficult time to any extent, in that he was being more active than he should have been? Do you recall that coming up?

HOUGH: No, he was a wonderful patient.

ARENA: He was his own patient, as well as yours.

HOUGH: No, he was Dr. Flinn's patient.

ARENA: And there was never any concern by Dr. Flinn that his patient was not cooperating?

HOUGH: No.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you what your husband's morale was during this period, especially if you can recall before he came out, the period when he came out where there was a psychological change in moving to a new community and then what happened gradually after that, three more or less periods of change?

HOUGH: Well, as you might know, when you realize that you have a disease of that kind--and in those years it was not accepted like it is now--you felt really sort of a stigma, I believe, when you first realized it. But after he came here and under Dr. Flinn's care, I should say that he was very relaxed and very cooperative in his care and consequently he progressed very well.

ARENA: Did you and Mrs. Hannah Nixon possibly attend any social affairs together? I'm thinking maybe the church had something, or did she belong to a Quaker Church in the community, if there was one?

HOUGH: I don't think there was one to my knowledge, and frankly we women in this neighborhood at about that period of time were far too occupied for the ones we were caring for to have a very active life in church, and we felt that we were doing our church right then. However, our little neighborhood up in here, for some relaxation and a speck of social life, had little afternoon get-togethers and, of course, I remember Mrs. Nixon participated in these and we all have a very pleasant association.

ARENA: If it isn't prying, just what did you do in the afternoon social sessions?

HOUGH: Oh, we usually sewed [laughter], sewed or embroidered or something of that kind. It was just something to get the women together and out of the home for a little while.

ARENA: Was there anything like someone reading; for example, Mrs. Nixon had a poem she had composed and read, or did it never get to that stage?

HOUGH: No, it never did.

ARENA: About how many would you say on the average would appear?

HOUGH: Oh, twelve or fifteen, I expect.

ARENA: And were they on a frequent basis?

HOUGH: They were on an irregular basis, I would say, but oh, maybe once a month. It might have been closer together than that, but from this distance I can't remember for sure.

ARENA: Do you recall that they were in different private homes?

HOUGH: Oh, yes.

ARENA: The different ladies acting as hostesses?

HOUGH: That's right, yes.

ARENA: Was there anything in the way of an interesting national or international or political--of course, I'm looking way ahead now--was there any sign that Mrs. Nixon was interested in political affairs? Did she take over political discussions, I'll say?

HOUGH: Never did to my knowledge. However, along that line I might volunteer this information. She was most ambitious for Richard. Richard was, oh, what shall we say, a very bright young man, and I would believe I would be right in saying that he was beyond some of his age in knowledge at that particular time.

ARENA: May I ask you in making that statement that he was beyond his age in his actions, and in his conduct he was more mature than most young men of his age, was this the impression you got from Mrs. Hannah [Nixon] describing her, or from your own personal observations?

HOUGH: It was from both. Richard used to be in my home several times when he and his dad came over to visit, and naturally in talking you gained that impression from Richard.

ARENA: Was he at this time in high school, do you recall specifically, a graduate of high school, maybe you recall his saying, "I have just graduated from high school" and on his way to college?

HOUGH: As I remember now, that was the period of his life--I can't say exactly because I saw him over a period of years--he must have been in high school and graduating from high school, and going into college when I knew him.

ARENA: Do you recall the mention on anyone's part by any member of the Nixons that he was intending to study for a law career, that he was going to be a pre-law student in college?

HOUGH: I don't remember that. I have wondered about it since, but I don't remember.

ARENA: Do you recall anything to the effect that he appeared to be an intensive-thinking young man who was concentrating and listening intensively to what you were saying--would that be one of the signs of his maturity?

HOUGH: I think so, and his mature actions, yes, and that he was, shall we say, a striving young man. You got the impression that he was striving forward in his education, perhaps more than some might have at that age.

ARENA: Do you recall there coming up in discussions in any way, or did you witness in any way his ability in public speaking? Do you recall his mother mentioning that he was interested in debates and had won a high school oratorical contest or anything like that?

HOUGH: What partly influences my impression of Richard is, as I said before, his mother gave the impression of being very ambitious, very appreciative of Richard's qualities and his education.

ARENA: May I be blunt and ask, did she bring this up to an obnoxious point?

HOUGH: No.

ARENA: As some parents will do, bragging about their children. I would like to get it for the record.

HOUGH: No, I know what you mean.

ARENA: Did you feel that there was any annoyance on your part . . .

HOUGH: No, I never had that feeling at all. It would only be in visiting as we did, about our families and things of that kind that she would bring it out.

ARENA: Do you recall the opposite in that she lamented some of the lack of ambition or lack of superior achievement, academically or with extracurricular activities, such as public speaking; did she lament the lack of achievement, if you can put it that way, and I think you know what I mean, on the part of the other children?

HOUGH: No.

ARENA: She did not tear any of the other boys down?

HOUGH: No, never. She was not that kind of a mother or a woman. She was very reticent, we might say, there too.

ARENA: Was she reticent to the extent that when asked, say, a specific question, would not dwell on the answer or would not give a clear answer? Was she a person who did not seem to be able to communicate well? Was she reticent in that regard?

HOUGH: Oh, no. I meant that she was more or less reticent . . .

ARENA: . . . in starting conversations?

- HOUGH: Yes, or talking. She would never have criticized her family, I don't think at all.
- ARENA: May I ask you again, just for the record, since you did know her personally and you are not a member of the family, did you ever get the impression she was gossipy?
- HOUGH: Oh, no.
- ARENA: She would not tear down her children, but would tear down other people?
- HOUGH: No, she was never that. I always felt that her Quaker religion showed there very plainly in her not belittling other people.
- ARENA: And speaking of her Quaker religion, do you recall if and when that first came up? Do you recall how you discovered that the family was a Quaker family?
- HOUGH: I don't.
- ARENA: But you were aware of that?
- HOUGH: I was aware of it. Somebody, whether she told me or whether some member of the family told me, I don't know, but possibly it was her, because we would have periods of conversations in our time.
- ARENA: Were you aware that she had taught Sunday School? Had that ever come up that she did teach Sunday School?
- HOUGH: I don't remember that she did. No, I don't.
- ARENA: That might have been one of the common subjects between you.
- HOUGH: No, it wasn't.
- ARENA: I have the impression you may have taught or are teaching Sunday School classes.
- HOUGH: Yes, up until the last few years.
- ARENA: Did you know or did it come to your knowledge in any way that teaching a Sunday School class was something the young Richard Nixon did, and that Mr. Frank Nixon did, as well?
- HOUGH: No, I didn't know that.

ARENA: Did that come up in any way at all?

HOUGH: I didn't know it, and if I did I have forgotten it. I usually remember things, but I don't remember that coming up at all.

ARENA: May I ask you if you knew if there were any other Quakers besides the Nixons in the community at that time?

HOUGH: This community?

ARENA: Yes. Especially around the time they were living here in the late 1920's.

HOUGH: I did not know of any.

ARENA: Did you ever go shopping together with Mrs. Nixon, or in addition to having meetings in your home on a social basis, did you step out together in any way, maybe even take in a movie show, for example?

HOUGH: We never did things like that in those years. However, one interesting fact. You speak about going shopping together, back in those years--and it sounds like ancient times, doesn't it--but we didn't have, when I first came here, we did not have mail delivery in our section of town. So we were a very closely knitted community, being brought together by illness of someone in each family, likely. So one person would go to town and get all the neighbors' mail. There were very few cars up here. We were all from a different section of the country and had to come out on the train usually, on account of illness. Our shopping method was very primitive. We would go to town, I can remember myself many, many times--if you drove up this hill you'll know what I'm talking about--I walked from town with a sack of groceries on each hip, so I can't truly remember that Mrs. Nixon and I actually went shopping together. We might have, but it was one of the minor things.

ARENA: Do you recall that the Nixons, especially when Mrs. Hannah was here alone without the husband, that she and Harold had access to a car?

HOUGH: No.

ARENA: That is you don't remember or you're sure she did not.

HOUGH: I'm practically sure she did not.

ARENA: Is there anything in this interview, as it comes to a close now, that I have not brought up that you would like to mention, something that comes to mind since we began?

For example, have you ever had--I think I did mention whether you corresponded with the President after he left here in later years and you did say "No,"--did you ever correspond with Mrs. Nixon?

HOUGH: Yes, I could mention that and was going to. I did correspond with Mrs. Nixon, not with often regularity, but we usually exchanged Christmas greetings and a letter at that time, and maybe one other when Mr. Nixon passed away. I, naturally, wrote her and she wrote me back, not having known that Dr. Hough had passed away. I believe Mr. Nixon passed away about a year after Dr. Hough, is that correct?

ARENA: When did your husband pass away?

HOUGH: 1956.

ARENA: Around the time of the campaign--just before the campaign. The campaign would have been in '58 and your husband died in '56.

HOUGH: That's what I thought. It was just about a year difference, yes. And of course, Donald came to see me and brought his young son [Richard Calvert Nixon] and took him up on what we call Top Rock, back of my house here, where Richard and Donald played; and he wanted his son to see where he had played in the rocks up here.

ARENA: This would have been just a few years ago.

HOUGH: Yes. I have in mind between two and three years. I don't believe it would have been more. Donald's son was attending a summer session at Orme Ranch School. It's between here and Phoenix [Arizona], quite a noted ranch school for movie stars' children.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if Donald's personality had changed from what you recalled him as a youngster, who also visited Harold from time to time, but as you know did not live here. And especially did he seem to in any way--let me be blunt--be puffed up over the fact that he was the President's brother?

HOUGH: Not at all. I remember Donald's visit and was very pleased that he chose to call on me and bring his boy. I remember it was a great pleasure, because as soon as we got adjusted to what the years had done to each of us and recognized ourselves, he was just as though he was coming in my house like he used to do as a young boy, and he was very unassuming, very friendly, very outgoing, for a very fine visit.

ARENA: And do you mind if I ask you, for the sake of history, if you have kept any of these letters between you and the President's mother?

HOUGH: No, I'm sorry to say I haven't. You know how [laughter] those years you can't do it. I wish now I had, but I haven't.

ARENA: But you did give me some idea of the subject matter. Is there anything else in those letters that you do recall that you haven't mentioned. You did mention the discussion about the death of Mr. Frank Nixon. Were there references to the President, who was not President at the time, of course? Mrs. Hannah [Nixon] did not live to see that.

HOUGH: No, there was no--I don't have any recollection of anything of that kind. She might have mentioned in her letter something about what Richard was doing, but it does not make an impression on me.

ARENA: Mrs. Hough, I want to thank you sincerely for extending me the hospitality of your home and above all of granting me this interview for the sake of history. As you know this will be deposited in the Presidential Library upon its completion. Thank you very much.

HOUGH: You're welcome.