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Edwin B. Bronner (June 2, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

DR. EDWIN B. BRONNER

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Haverford, Pennsylvania

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Dr. Edwin B. Bronner, (B stands for Blaine), librarian of the library of Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania. This interview is in his office. The date is June 2, 1972, Arena interviewing. May we begin, Ed, by my asking you where and when you were born and then to give a brief biographical sketch of yourself, including your formal education and your career to date?

BRONNER: I was born in Yorba Linda, California, in September 1920. My uncle was the pastor of the Friends church there and my mother went there to be with her sister at the time that I was born. My father was a Friends minister in California and so we traveled up and down the state when I was a kid, and we were up in Oregon for a couple of years too. I graduated from Denair High School, which is near Modesto, California, and then attended Modesto Junior College and graduated there, and went to Whittier [College] as a junior in 1939 and graduated from Whittier [College] in 1941, with a major in history. I spent the next year as the Director of Publicity at Whittier College and took some courses on the side in secondary education and the social science field.

Then World War II had started and I was a conscientious objector and spent three and a half years in civilian public service with the American Friends Service Committee, part of that was in forestry camps, part of it was as an attendant in a school for mentally deficient boys, a period as a guinea pig in an infectious hepatitis experiment, and finally was released in the spring of 1946, or actually the end of May of 1946, and came back East to study.

I took a master's degree at Haverford College in 1947 and began teaching at Temple University before I finished the master's degree and taught at Temple for fifteen years until 1962, I received

a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania in 1952 and in the next ten years reached the rank of Associate Professor at Temple [University]. Then in 1962 I came to Haverford as a professor of history and Curator of the Quaker Collection, which is a very large collection of Quaker materials, both published and manuscript. In 1968 I became the librarian of Haverford as well as Curator of the Quaker Collection and teach one course a semester usually along with that.

ARENA: From the standpoint of historiography, may I ask you to what extent there exists a reliable collection of material on the history of Whittier to date and what exists at all for one who would like to know about the city in which the President grew up. I recall you mentioned a master's thesis, for example.

BRONNER: Well, of course, Charles Cooper has published the really first great history of Whittier College recently, which includes a fair amount of material on Whittier itself and Herbert Harris did a book earlier. And there are some others who have done some things. I mentioned earlier the master's thesis by T. Eugene Coffin, which is more about California Friends as a whole than on Whittier as such. There is some other wild fictionalized descriptions too. There is a book called Water of Gall, written by a newspaper woman, who was working in Whittier for a while that is rather interesting--a fictionalized picture of everything.

ARENA: You don't recall her name by any chance?

BRONNER: No, I don't. We could look it up. We have the book here in the Quaker Collection.

ARENA: You do know that the President was born in Yorba Linda [California], and his father, you may or may not know, helped to build, I believe, the first Friends church that was ever built at Yorba Linda. And that church is still standing on a Baptist parking lot. I don't know if that was the one in which your uncle was a minister. Would that be the same one?

BRONNER: The old one--I think there have been two newer churches since that one. There is a brand new one that has just been finished, I think.

ARENA: And when you say two newer ones. The original one is still there. Did this second new one replace the original new one?

BRONNER: Yes.

ARENA: I see. So there's still just two, and I wanted to ask you about the original church. To what extent did your own personal life come into contact with the President's

directly or, we'll say, his immediate family. And here I'm including his aunts and their families through marriage. I am thinking of one particular family. I know you know the [Oscar O.] Marshburns. I wonder if you also knew his children and had direct contact with them?

BRONNER: I was in college with one of the Marshburn boys.

ARENA: There is a Theodore [Marshburn] and there is a Hadley [Marshburn].

BRONNER: Hadley was a year behind me at Whittier [College]. He was, as I remember, a science major, and so we didn't have a whole lot in common actually. I never knew Dick Nixon particularly well. I can remember once when my father preached at East Whittier that we went to Nixons for dinner afterwards. Interesting that I remember that one of the Nixon boys was dying at that particular time.

ARENA: Possibly Harold [Samuel Nixon]?

BRONNER: I just don't remember the name.

ARENA: Do you remember the year when that dinner took place?

BRONNER: I would have said it was around 1930.

ARENA: That would have been Harold, who was the oldest boy who had tuberculosis.

BRONNER: I don't remember much of the family except that one of the family was dying at that time, which did make an impression on me as a kid. I heard a bit about him, I suppose, during the time that I was growing up and was at Whittier and so on.

The next time I really saw him [Dick] was after he came back to practice law and it was in 1941. My mother had been run into by a man and almost killed and [Thomas William] Tom Bewley had agreed to represent my father in dealing with the insurance company about the case. And as it turned out, it was really Dick Nixon who was handling it, and I went with my father to one of the conferences and we had a discussion about the whole matter. And I might just say, parenthetically, that it seemed to me that the settlement was a very small settlement even by 1941 standards, but I guess that is all the insurance company would pay without going to court, and my father didn't want to go to court, I guess in part because of his Quaker beliefs.

The next time I saw Dick Nixon was in Washington [D.C.] in 1947 during his first term in Congress. I had lunch with him once, in the spring of '47. We talked about his work on the Taft-Hartley

law and the effort he was making at that point to get labor union leaders to come and testify and to make a contribution to the consideration of the whole revision of the Wagner Act and the fact that they wouldn't respond. That they just insisted there couldn't be a revision of the Wagner Act, and he thought this contributed to the way in which the Taft-Hartley Act developed. I corresponded with him a little bit after that about one or two things, but I haven't had any contact with him directly since 1949 or '50.

ARENA: Given your long and direct involvement in education and really on a national scale--knowing a small school such as Whittier [College] and a large school such as a university, would you want to reflect for a moment on the idea of a small rural-based boy becoming the head of a great industrial nation? Does this speak very well for local rural education--exceptionally well or what, among other things?

BRONNER: Well, I suppose one would say that Whittier was still predominantly rural. Mr. Nixon graduated from high school in '30. Whittier [College] in the early thirties, I don't know as well as in the end of the thirties, except that in the end of the thirties, Whittier was not a rural school. Quite a number of the students were city people. I came down from the San Joaquin Valley [California]. We lived in rural communities all my life. I was a rural person but Whittier College was more sophisticated than I, certainly at the time, and I would have thought even in the thirties Whittier was not quite a rural college. This is just my own feeling. One of the things that I have thought about is that the president of Whittier [College] when Nixon was a student was Walter Dexter. Walter Dexter was a very successful political figure and he went on to the State Superintendent of Education in California. I have thought about the fact that when I was a student there the president of the college was a very dedicated, concerned Quaker named William Orville Mendenhall, and I have sometimes wondered if Dexter as a political figure didn't have an influence on Nixon, quite different from the influence that Mendenhall had on my generation of students half a dozen years later.

ARENA: When you were at Whittier, were you also in contact with the coach, Chief [Wallace J.] Newman, whom the President has acknowledged as a "remarkable coach" in his acceptance speech in Miami [Florida].

BRONNER: Yes, I knew Chief Newman reasonably well, considering I wasn't an athlete. I went to a little high school that didn't have enough students for a football team and so I wasn't in athletics. But I did know Newman, and actually I knew his predecessor, Esek Perry, better I suppose, because I was very friendly with the Perrys and so I did know him, and Newman really was a fine man. He was a successful coach and a fine man in my

estimation. I've been back to Whittier and I know Chief Newman has talked to me about the Indian question and what Quakers are doing to try to help the Indians. He indicated a concern about things which I guess I hadn't really recognized when I was a student.

ARENA: To what extent do you recall the presence of the blacks in your day as a student at Whittier College? As you know, the President had a black, at least one I can think of and possibly more, as a fraternity brother and the question of black studies, of course, is prominent all over the country. I am just wondering if in Whittier then maybe they were a little harder to find.

BRONNER: There were a handful of blacks and what we call Chicanos nowadays in the college when I was there. There was a YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] training program, and I can remember black students who were there to study in that program, but there weren't very many I would say. The college was ahead of some other schools in the question of pacifism because of the Quaker influence, but I'm afraid it wasn't very much ahead of other colleges on the race question.

ARENA: I don't know if you've read the book or you may have heard of it or you may have read some articles that were contained in the New Yorker. The book is Among Friends by M. F. K. [Mary Frances Kennedy] Fisher, but she was the daughter of the editor, W. Rex Kennedy, of the local newspaper in Whittier, and she hits Whittier pretty hard, and she hits the Quakers in particular of Whittier pretty hard as being intolerant, not allowing non-Quakers in their homes. Would you want to make any comment on that--if you haven't read the book on that idea, at any rate?

BRONNER: Well, there were at least two different kinds of Quakers in Whittier. There were some Quakers who were quite liberal and ahead of the average person around them. And there were other Quakers who were very conventional, middle class Protestants. And it's hard to describe Whittier. One of the points that I often make with people is that there is a difference between East Whittier and Whittier. The Whittier Monthly Meeting included people with close ties with Eastern Friends. They sent their children back to Westtown in the Philadelphia area. They were active in the American Friends Service Committee in getting a regional office started in the Pasadena [California] area. East Whittier had very little of this kind of what I would think of as a liberal leavening edge in it. There were the Otises, Ashton Otis and his wife Marie and then their daughter, Charlotte.

ARENA: Mrs. Charlotte [Otis] Craig?

BRONNER: Yes. But there weren't really many in East Whittier. It was a different group, and the fact that there could be two strong churches only three miles apart suggested

this. Certainly the college influence--people like the [H. Randolph] Pyles and the [W. Orville] Mendenhalls and the [David E.] Henleys, who were there then, had an influence, and the [Oscar O.] Marshburns. The Marshburns sent some of their children back East to school as did the [Harold] Marshalls and the [William A.] Bruffs and the [J. Herschel] Coffins. And certainly these families did entertain not only non-Quakers but international visitors. One of my first cousins, who went through school with Nixon, her family had friends of Chinese background, they entertained and helped to educate. I think this is a generalization that ought to be examined.

ARENA: Still in the realm of generalization, would you try to fit the Nixon family into these groupings?

BRONNER: Well, the Marshburns certainly were in this liberal group that I referred to. Oscar Marshburn has done a great many things with the American Friends Service Committee and the Friends World Committee, and I don't really know the [Francis Anthony] Frank-Hannah Nixon family well enough to say anything. I will say this that when World War II came, there must have been twenty or more of us in the Whittier meeting who were pacifists. I don't know of any member of East Whittier meeting that was pacifist. Nixons were part of a Friends meeting where pacifism was NOT important. Whereas Whittier, three miles away, was a meeting where pacifism was quite important.

ARENA: Does that, in a way, help to answer one of the questions we were discussing on the other tape--the social and cultural roots that helped motivate the President's later decisions and say later personality?

BRONNER: I think this . . .

ARENA: It would be an oversimplification, but if he was a child of Oscar Marshburn rather than Frank Nixon . . .

BRONNER: And if he had been in the Whittier meeting and Sunday School classes with Dr. [William] Bruff, a medical doctor, whose sons were pacifists--he was a pacifist himself--if he had been a member of the meeting of Willard Trueblood and Herschel Folger, the two pastors of Whittier in that period, rather than George Deschler and Harley Moore and others, I think it might have made a difference.

ARENA: One Whittier resident and a long time one and a close contact with the Nixon family and the President in particular, who will go nameless for obvious reasons, but the main point is, I would like to have you reflect a moment on his interesting comment as to the frequently made remark that the President was a loner, an introvert, not gregarious. The comment by this

long-time resident and birthright Quaker is that that's a part of his Quakerism--that is that the Quakers of Whittier were reserved, were not the outgoing type and that that was normal, and to be otherwise would not be reflective of his own upbringing and of his own community.

BRONNER: Oh, I wouldn't agree with that. One of the fundamental tenets of Quakerism is that while on the one hand you talk about individualism, you talk about the emphasis on the individual--which is what I think this person probably was thinking about. There was a realization from the very beginning that the individual needed to measure his own position against the group. We had a man named James Naylor, who in 1650 was on his own and was a loner, and he let some hysterical women persuade him that he was Jesus Christ. And it was clear that Friends had to develop some way to balance the emphasis on the individual with the group and the fact that in our business meetings we don't vote. We work through until we reach a sense of the meeting, and we measure one another's ideas. We listen to one another's interpretations and we finally reach an agreement that is acceptable all around. This is sort of the revival of the real democratic way of doing things, which was in the early generations, which got lost for a while in the nineteenth century and has been resurrected more fully now. I don't think it's at all true that Whittier or East Whittier Quakers were loners by definition. There are all kinds of ways to do things together--business men's breakfast groups, women's prayer groups and sewing groups and service committee oriented groups. The Young Friends movement in the Whittier meeting was a very close group when I was there of thirty or so young people who worked very closely. I just don't buy that.

ARENA: As this interview comes to a close, is there any question or topic that I have raised that you would like to comment on?

BRONNER: Well, I said earlier, I guess, that I would like to say something about the kind of education one was getting at Whittier College in the thirties.

ARENA: Please do.

BRONNER: Dr. Coffin had organized this new kind of curriculum which was sort of what we would call a core curriculum kind of thing--I don't know what it was called in those days--but all the students had to take courses in science and the humanities and in social sciences. And as a history major coming from a junior college, I took the other earlier courses as well as the later ones, all jammed into a two-year period. I did escape the freshman course but I took the sophomore course in English Civilization and then the junior and senior courses.

And one of the interesting things about Paul Smith, who was head of the History Department (and was the major advisor to President Nixon and to me) one of the interesting things that he did, in place of the usual civics course taught in most colleges in California--you had to have a course in government or civics or some such thing as a state requirement--one of the things we did there was to work on various topics . . .

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Would you mind repeating maybe just the last line or so, in case some of that was lost? You were discussing Dr. Paul Smith's particular method.

BRONNER: I was talking about the course on the vice-presidency and how some twenty years ago when Richard Nixon was elected Vice President, this reminded me of that course. There were other sections of the course having to do with the Constitution and the nature of the Constitution, and I have thought over the years that the emphasis on constitutionality--study of the Supreme Court in that course--must have been the first time that Richard Nixon really got into these fields in a serious way. He, of course, went on to graduate school in law later, but if he was as influenced by that course as I was a few years later, it must have been an important influence on him. The sophomore course on English Civilization, Sir Esme Winfield-Stratford's book was sort of the center of that course, placed great emphasis on the development of Anglo-Saxon culture, Anglo-Saxon law, Anglo-Saxon way of looking at things, and I realize now that there was probably an overemphasis on the middle America kind of thing--the Anglo-Saxon middle America type of thing as contrasted to cultural pluralism that one would have found in a big university like Temple where I taught fifteen years, and it always assumed that people were Republicans, that they believed in all of the American virtues. There was a core of this kind of feeling which I guess would reenforce the ideas of this woman who wrote the New York article. I can remember one old retired minister telling me once sort of in a whisper that he understood that Professor David Henley was a Democrat. He didn't really believe it, but he heard it and he found it almost more than he could take. I don't know where David Henley is now. It would be fun to interview him. I think he is down in North Carolina. [Arena note, 4/5/73--he is in Lakeland, Florida--refused our request for an interview.] That's where he came from originally, and I suppose the Guilford College Alumni Office could locate him.

ARENA: Speaking of that period when you were attending Whittier College, the late 1930's, that was also around the time the President was appearing in some [Whittier] Community Players productions. Did you happen to have the opportunity to see him as an actor?

BRONNER: No, no.

ARENA: How about his mentor on the Whittier College campus, Dr. Upton, his drama coach?

BRONNER: Well, Albert Upton was a very capable, creative kind of a man. When I was at Whittier, Charles Cooper was directing the theatre, and I was in a play with Charles Cooper and took a course in Modern Drama from Charles Cooper. I still remember Upton's reading "Beowulf" to us in the English Civilization course and Upton and Smith together ran the junior major course for English and history majors together. I don't know whether that course had been created by '33 when Nixon was there or not, but certainly in '39, these two men together ran the junior major course. What we did in that course was to use House Document No. 398, I think it was, which was the debates at the Constitutional Convention and each one of us had to choose a subject and do research in the debates and write an extended paper based on the original documents published in this House document. I remember I worked on the place of the property class and was warned either seriously or not--I'm not sure which--not to read Charles Beard's book about it. I don't remember now frankly whether this was because it might influence the way I would write my paper or whether it was felt that Beard was just a little bit dangerous. I suspect the latter.

ARENA: On this question of the contrasts and differences between the Quakers of the East and Quakers of the West, this might be a bit unfair since you have two loyalties, how would you compare Haverford with Whittier--colleges?

BRONNER: Well, there is an enormous difference. At Haverford we have the brightest young men in America. There is no one admitted to Haverford who isn't in, I suppose, the top 5 percent of the young men of college age. And the students do a great deal of work on their own. The faculty-student ratio is ten to one. The library is 300,000 volumes and the students all live on campus. It's just an entirely different place from Whittier, which, to be sure, today is a great deal more rigorous than when I was there but it has the societies, it has the rah rah of sports. Haverford maybe wins one football game a season. Whittier expects to win the championship at least every other year.

To go back to the period. I was at Whittier from '39 to '42 and out for the war and came to Haverford in '46, and I guess I would say the courses I took there as a master's candidate at Haverford were considerably more rigorous than the ones at Whittier, but I was able to go through Whittier working up to forty hours a week and taking a full course. I had to because my parents couldn't help me at all in going to college. Whereas at Haverford when I got here, the first semester I studied full time. The second semester I began to do part-time work, to teach at Temple before the second semester was over. But the intellectual quality was starkly different, really, between the two institutions.

ARENA: As you know Whittier is no longer officially a Quaker college in the sense that the majority of the Trustees and so forth has to be Quakers. I wonder if the same thing is true at Haverford and also to what extent, just to complete that comparison, the percentage of students may be Quakers, the percentage of faculty and so forth?

BRONNER: I think Haverford does much more to emphasize what it regards as Quaker concepts and ideas than does Whittier. We now can have up to a quarter of the board of directors non-Quaker, but three quarters are Quaker. Less than 10 percent of the students are Quaker, but quite a few students come here because of what we regard as the Quaker emphasis on freedom, on pacifism, on personal responsibility.

On the other hand, I know the last time I was in the dining hall at Whittier, they offer prayer before meals and Haverford wouldn't think of that. This just wouldn't come up. I would say that most students at Haverford--I shouldn't say most--but a majority of students at Haverford would oppose the Vietnam war to the point of not entering the Armed Forces. A few would enter the Armed Forces but they are a minority, and I suspect that isn't true at Whittier and wasn't true in World War II. Whittier College did decide it wanted to have a military unit in World War II and William Orville Mendenhall resigned in protest against that. Whittier never got a unit but still managed to survive.

Haverford brought in a president for the war years who was not a pacifist. They did have an Army unit to study weather--a meteorological unit but they also had a strong program of relief and reconstruction--of training young men and women to prepare to do relief work. First, they hoped to do it in Italy while the war was on and then later on prepare to do relief work generally anywhere when the war was over, and carried on with a technical service program to prepare young men and women to do overseas development work with the United Nations for another ten years after the war was over.

ARENA: Given the President's and the country's great responsibility in international affairs today, and not going into politics per se, but was the training at Whittier, especially suitable for one who would be an internationalist, or for one who would be responsible for international affairs?

BRONNER: Well, Whittier ran the Institute on International Relations all during that period.

ARENA: Would you explain that?

BRONNER: Well, the American Friends Service Committee sponsored, on a number of college campuses throughout the United States, week-long sessions to discuss the question of international relations and relationship to the League of Nations, responsibilities of Americans in the world at large.

ARENA: Excuse me. I was thinking more of Whittier College in the thirties.

BRONNER: Well, this is what I'm talking about. This was in the thirties. Paul Smith was the director of these institutes and they brought speakers in from overseas--from Asia, from Europe--to lead discussions, to lead seminars on the question of international relations. Now, I can't remember offhand just when those institutes started, but certainly they were there in the thirties, and I must admit that I was too poor to ever be around in the summertime to go to one. I was a faculty member at one later on. I suspect that Nixon may have had to work in the summertime as I did and didn't get into them. But these institutes did have an influence that I think carried over into the year. Certainly Paul Smith with his great enthusiasm and vitality talked about them and encouraged people to think about them even if they couldn't go.

There was the Japanese lantern on the campus to emphasize the friendship between Japan and America, particularly Whittier, which I think I remember clearly was broken by some hoodlums not long after Pearl Harbor, but there were students in the Y [Young Men's Christian Association] school again and other areas from Japan that did provide an opening up.

The college did take advantage of Quakers from other parts of the world who came to the area to speak to the student body and brought outsiders who weren't Quakers from other parts of the world in. Dennis Brogan, I know, spoke at Whittier when I was a student there. He may have been at the Huntington Library at the time and Paul Smith got him to come over to give a lecture, but I can remember Brogan speaking to us. There were these international visitors although emphasizing goodwill, emphasizing peaceful relations, there wasn't much of what you would call hardheaded, pragmatic international relations as I remember.

ARENA: Well, I think that just about covers it and I am very grateful for your remarks amplyfying the times as well as the personal contacts that you had with the President. Knowing him, knowing his community, knowing the East and knowing the world as you do, you have given us insights that up to now have been denied us. I know my fellow historians will agree with me in expressing this appreciation. Thank you very much.

BRONNER: Thank you.