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George S. Buehler (February 24, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

DR. GEORGE SIEGRIST BUEHLER

February 24, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

- ARENA: This is interview #1 with Dr. George Buehler. Today's date is February 24, 1972, Arena interviewing. And you say that your mother's maiden name is Siegrist?
- BUEHLER: Yes.
- ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you where and when you were born, Dr. Buehler?
- BUEHLER: I was born in Whittier, California, December 21, 1911.
- ARENA: Would you mind giving a brief resume of your formal educational background, your medical career, when you began practice?
- BUEHLER: I attended grammar school in Whittier [California], high school at Whittier, California, then attended Stanford University for four years, graduating with an AB degree. I graduated in 1934, then went to medical school at Stanford, graduated in 1938, interned at the Los Angeles County General Hospital from 1937 through 1939, was in the service for almost five years from 1941 through 1945, or was it '46 when I got out? The war was over in 1945. I actually got out in September or October of 1945, but had extended duty to January 1946, something like that, almost five years. Since then I've practiced here in Whittier, California.
- ARENA: Would you mind giving the name of the high school and your graduating year?
- BUEHLER: It was Whittier High School and it was in 1930, class of 1930.
- ARENA: It just so happens, and you might be aware of this, that was the same year that President Nixon graduated.

BUEHLER: That is correct.

ARENA: Although he was there only two years, you possibly might have been there for the entire four years?

BUEHLER: I was there for four years, yes.

ARENA: He transferred from Fullerton High School. Do you mind if I ask you what you do recall of your association, if there was any, with President Nixon during those high school years, 1928 through 1930, even if it was a distant association, in the sense of seeing him appear in debates or any programs or assemblies where he was competing in oratorical contests--anything that comes to mind about that period?

BUEHLER: Well, this goes back quite a ways. I guess it's senility or something, but my memory isn't too clear on some things. The things that I do remember very clearly are that he and I were very much associated in the management of the student body. This meant someone who sold tickets for the football games, took charge of the money and brought it in and put it in the safe at the school, and things like that. He and I both worked at this quite a bit. Then, of course, I remember him in some of my classes. And, of course, I remember him very much for his oratorical contests dealing with the Constitution. I was manager of the stage crew our senior year. A number of these programs were put on in the auditorium, and I remember Dick sitting around reviewing his notes, going over his speech the last minute before he went on the stage.

ARENA: Would you say that you recall him as being nervous during that period, and was he nervous during the delivery in any way?

BUEHLER: No. It was my opinion that he was extremely composed and so forth. I think he was a little nervous. I don't think anybody could help but be a little nervous when you're debating or giving an oratorical speech and it depends (on that performance) whether you win and whether you go on to further debates and further speeches higher up. I think there was a monetary prize that was given for the best debates. This was if you won in your own school and then went on to larger areas constantly, and I'm sure that no one could have done this without being a little nervous because quite a bit depended on it for you. I remember him real well in that regard, and I didn't feel that he was a nervous type at all. He was quite composed and quite at ease--I always thought remarkably so. I know I could never have been that much at ease if I had gotten up in front of an audience like he did. I thought he handled it extremely well. He was very talented, I thought in those days, to be able to do as well as he did.

ARENA: Do you recall that the contests and the occasions where he did speak in that fashion, in a contest or where it

was a debate. . . . Of course, in a debate the answer would be yes. The question is, how was he in thinking on his feet?

BUEHLER: As far as the oratorical contests were concerned, these were prepared speeches where the speaker was judged as much as anything on his delivery. These were pretty much memorized speeches. But he was active in debates also. I remember him debating a number of times, and in our composition classes, he gave extemporaneous speeches very well.

ARENA: You recall, then, attending the same classes with him?

BUEHLER: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Do you recall who some of the teachers were, and whatever you do recall about his work in the class.

BUEHLER: Well, I don't remember just what classes. I think that we were in an advanced composition class together. Outside of that, I don't remember what classes.

ARENA: Do you happen to recall if you were in the same government class, which would have been with a Mrs. Jennie Lavin. Does that name and that subject ring a bell?

BUEHLER: Oh, yes, the name and the subject are familiar. I think that he was in the same class as I was.

ARENA: Is there anything further about that that you might recall? I understand it was U.S. History as well as Government.

BUEHLER: Yes, it was a combination of U.S. History and Government and the study of the Constitution. I don't remember any other details than that however.

ARENA: Is there anything about this high school period that you recall? Was there an unusual event that took place, say, around that time? Was that about the period when there was an earthquake, by the way, I'm wondering, or anything unusual that took place during that period that comes to mind?

BUEHLER: No, I don't remember anything special at that time. Another thing that I do remember is that there was a rather heated contest for the presidency of the student body that year. I imagine this has been told to you many times.

ARENA: I always like to get a person's firsthand recollections though, if you recall it.

BUEHLER: No, there was nothing special about it. There were three people running. Dick Nixon was one of the candidates. Roy Newsom who is now. . . . I guess he's dean at the college, is he?

ARENA: Vice President.

BUEHLER: Vice President. He was running, and a fellow by the name of [Robert] Bob Logue was the third contestant. Bob Logue won; apparently the other two split the vote. The last I heard of Bob, I think he's retired now, but he used to run an auto supply house in Winnemucca, Nevada, and lived up there for many years.

ARENA: Do you recall that there was any particular issue or campaign heat generated over any particular issue?

BUEHLER: I think it was a rather heated election. I mean by that that everybody was trying his best, no one was slack on it. I don't remember any particular issues that were involved.

ARENA: Do you recall any particular reason why Mr. Logue won, other than the fact that it could have been these two others who split the vote? Could there have been any other factor?

BUEHLER: That's the only factor I know of. I think that Nixon and Newsom appealed to a certain, more or less, group of students, whereas Bob Logue appealed to a slightly different group, and I think that Nixon and Newsom just sort of split the vote between them, and as a result Bob Logue won. Bob was a nice guy. I'm not in any way trying to belittle him, his ability, or anything.

ARENA: Do you recall any possible contact with the President sportswise? We've talked about the academic and extra-curricular side.

BUEHLER: As I remember, he wasn't active in sports in high school. Neither was I. He and I were both, as I say, managing the student body activity as far as the football games and things like that were concerned, but we weren't participating in the athletics themselves. I was manager of the baseball team also and helped manage the track team later on. As a result, I didn't participate in any of these things, only as a manager, not as a participant.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask, if it isn't too personal, did you do the managing because you were not up to meeting with the competition, we'll say, sportswise?

BUEHLER: Well, I always have had one excuse for not participating. I had a problem with furunculosis boils all through my high school years. And, of course, this wasn't very conducive to putting on athletic equipment and participating in contact sports. And then when I got to college, I figured I didn't

have the necessary high school background in athletics. My sons have been very active in athletics, however.

ARENA: Do you think there would be any special reason why the President didn't participate actively, in view of the fact that later on in college he kept trying to play on the varsity football team, and as you know, kept warming the bench?

BUEHLER: Well, I think that he had all that he could handle, with these debates and with these oratorical contests that he was in. I think that he was kept pretty busy in activities other than athletics. I don't know why he participated when he got into college, unless it was because of the popularity of the thing; you know, you liked to make the team if you could.

ARENA: Did you possibly meet with him or have any contact with him on a social level, say, double-dating?

BUEHLER: No, nothing like that.

ARENA: You don't ever recall attending an affair where, even though you were not together necessarily, but you were there, such as a dance, where you might recall his interest or his ability in that form of recreation?

BUEHLER: No, I don't remember any of those things.

ARENA: Did you ever happen to belong to any of the same organizations outside of school? In that, I'm taking it almost up to the present. I'm thinking of, in the high school era, I know he belonged to the Hi-Y Club. Later on he belonged to such things as the 20-30 Club. And later, some of the service organizations, such as Kiwanis [Club]. Was there ever any contact with him in that area?

BUEHLER: Yes. I remember him in the Hi-Y Club, to which we both belonged. After World War II, he came back to Whittier. I did too. I had an office on the fourth floor of the Bank of America building, and he was with [Thomas William] Tom Bewley and a law firm that had their office on the sixth floor of the Bank of America. And I know every once in a while I'd have to work rather late, and I'd leave the bank building at midnight, and I've ridden down in the elevator with Dick Nixon at midnight more than once, because he'd been working late also.

ARENA: Do you recall that he recalled you and the high school period by the way, in your meeting with him, since you had strayed in a way, both gone off in the service. Do you recall that he did recall you?

BUEHLER: Oh, yes. He knew who I was.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you what impression you had of him as a lawyer? Maybe after you got home, you said, "Well, that's what's happened to Dick Nixon, my high school fellow-manager." I was just wondering if you recall making any observations about him as a lawyer and his personality now that he was in a profession, and your recollecting especially that he had been in debates and other public speaking performances?

BUEHLER: Yes. I personally never treated him or his family, other than on one or two minor occasions when he had speaking engagements or something and he'd have a real sore throat and ask, "Can you give me something for this sore throat?" So once or twice I think I prescribed something. I might have even given him samples from the office, I don't know. Our paths, other than just meeting casually in the elevator or something like that, didn't really cross after that. We didn't have any occasion. I stayed out of legal difficulties and he apparently stayed out of medical difficulties, so we didn't have too much occasion to meet. Oh, there was no question but what Dick was a brilliant young man and a very amiable sort of a person and always a pleasure to talk to.

ARENA: Did he seem fatigued at that point, or does anything come to mind about some of those elevator jaunts? Any particular subject that you recall might have come up?

BUEHLER: No, nothing special. Of course, he was obviously working late and I was too, and when you work late you get tired.

ARENA: Did you happen to attend, during this period when he was a lawyer, any of the plays in which he was appearing through the Whittier Community Players, a volunteer acting group?

BUEHLER: My wife and I used to attend community plays fairly frequently. I don't exactly remember any that Dick was in however.

ARENA: Do you recall that he might have appeared in any when he was in high school by the way?

BUEHLER: He was in several of the high school plays if I remember right.

ARENA: Did your paths cross along religious lines in any way? Were you a member of his same church, for example?

BUEHLER: No. I think he was a member of the Quaker church and I was a Methodist. Our paths just never crossed in that regard.

ARENA: If you don't mind my asking, did you ever experience or did you ever feel that being a Methodist in a Quaker-founded community, you were at a disadvantage for any reason at all?

BUEHLER: Gracious no. I never took my religion that seriously, I guess. I didn't feel that other people did either.

ARENA: Do you recall that there was anything like, we'll say, ecumenical activity, for example, through organizations such as the Christian Endeavor, of which he was a member? Did you belong to something like that where you might have come across the President?

BUEHLER: No. I did belong I think, in high school days, to the Epworth League, which was the Methodist equivalent, but the names have all been changed since then. This was strictly a Methodist young people's group, whereas Christian Endeavor, I think, included many other protestant denominations.

ARENA: Do you recall that the President was working in a grocery store during his high school period and also working as a delivery boy, and did your paths cross there in any way-- your family, for example, shopping in the Nixon grocery store or in receiving the groceries from this young delivery boy?

BUEHLER: No. Of course, I knew where the Nixon store was out in East Whittier, have been by it many times and have dropped in there several times to make minor purchases, I think. This was out in East Whittier. We lived right in Whittier and, while the distance was not great, my mother did all of her shopping in Whittier. When I used to have to go to the grocery store to pick up something that she'd forgotten or that she needed extra, it was always here in Whittier not out there. I'm sure if one had lived in East Whittier, it would have been very convenient to shop at the Nixon store, but living in Whittier, we didn't go out there.

ARENA: Did you, anywhere during this period, come into contact with any relatives of the President, such as members of the [Oscar O.] Marshburn family, including their children? Now one of them is Dr. Theodore Marshburn. You might know of him, an eye medical doctor. And his own father, Oscar Marshburn. I was just wondering if there was any contact along those lines, including the President's parents themselves in any way?

BUEHLER: No. My wife knew the President's mother fairly well. I mean, they were acquainted well enough so that Mrs. Hannah Nixon always knew my wife and my wife knew Mrs. Nixon.

ARENA: Do you recall in what capacity, like belonging to the East Whittier Women's Club or something like that?

BUEHLER: No, I don't think it was that, but they belonged to the Republican Women's Club or something of that kind. My wife has been active in Pro-America, and while I'm not sure whether it was that organization or not, it could have been something of that kind too.

ARENA: Do you recall that this might have been at any time before 1945, in other words, the year when the President became actively interested in politics?

BUEHLER: I don't think so, because we were married in '39. I practiced in Whittier for a couple of years, went into the service in '41--went in about March or April of 1941. And then my wife and I were, of course, away much of the time, although my wife, after I went overseas, came back to Whittier and stayed. But I doubt if she was active in any political group at that time.

ARENA: Do you recall that you and your wife ever had Mrs. Hannah Nixon in your home or vice versa? Do you recall any social engagements in the company of Mrs. Hannah Nixon and, of course, maybe her husband, Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon?

BUEHLER: No, I don't recall any. My wife might have been in her home one time or another, but I'm not positive about that.

ARENA: Did you possibly ever come into contact with Mr. Frank Nixon through the fact that he was also--he had been a Methodist before he became a Quaker? Was there ever any knowledge to that effect? Did Mr. Richard Nixon ever bring that up in any way with you?

BUEHLER: No, I didn't know that.

ARENA: It is in books, those books that deal with the President's biographical life, and I thought there might have been some connection there. Having been born in Whittier, do you recollect, possibly, that your parents or any of your older relatives, say, some older aunts and uncles, knew Mr. Frank Nixon before he was married, and whether or not he was a member of one of the local Methodist churches, for example?

BUEHLER: No. My father came to Whittier in 1909 and started practicing medicine in Whittier. He practiced here until he died in 1946.

ARENA: Would it be correct to say that you were brought up in the city proper or on one of the ranches in the surrounding area, by the way?

BUEHLER: No, we lived right here in the city of Whittier. I was born on South Painter Avenue, right across the street from Whittier College, or almost across the street from the college. Then, when I was about two or three years old, my parents moved to a home up on North Friends Avenue. In those days it was 432 North Friends. I can't tell you what the address would be now, because the addresses have all been changed. I think it's about the 6200 block south now, as I recall it, but it was 432 North Friends then. We lived there until about 1932, at which time my parents moved to the home where my mother lived at the time of my father's death and after on North Alta Street. When my wife and I first came to Whittier, we lived on East Hadley, right across the street from the Murphy Memorial Hospital, which is now used as a college dormitory. Then we lived on East Walnut Street until we moved to where we are at the present time.

ARENA: Although you grew up in the city proper, did you find any distinction, any differences with those youngsters who attended school with you, who grew up on the surrounding farms or ranches?

BUEHLER: I was never aware of anything like that. This used to be called Whittier Union High School District. There was a high school here in Whittier which served a very large territory, all of East Whittier, all of the Santa Fe Springs area and beyond; all that is the Whittier Union High School District now, plus the El Rancho District were bused into the high school here in Whittier when I was young. As a result, Nixon came from the East Whittier area. Roy Newsom lived on a ranch down near Rivera [California] and came in, and there were a great many students that came from these areas. And I know that a lot of the fellows that played on the football team and the other athletic teams in those days came from outlying areas, lived on ranches. The only possible distinction that could have been present was the fact that, of course, they came by bus and went home by bus, and as a result they might not be able to indulge in extracurricular activities or after-school activities as much as those who lived in town and could go back and forth and didn't have this transportation problem. That would be the only difference that I can imagine.

You know, when you talk about farm boys around this area, Whittier was surrounded by some of the most beautiful orange and walnut orchards anywhere in the country for that matter. And these weren't poor kids. An orange orchard some years wasn't a very good paying proposition, they might have adverse conditions, but most of the time the orange orchards were a pretty good paying proposition. And they were beautiful orchards, and most of these people had some very nice homes on these orchards, and they weren't poor people. They were as well fixed as the city people, so there was no economic distinction.

ARENA: And from your recollection of U.S. history, would you say that the citrus growers did not suffer as much, or

nearly as much, as other farmers throughout the country--this would be in the thirties.

BUEHLER: That would be my opinion. My father and mother had fifteen acres of orange grove, and some years it didn't pay too well, but most years it paid fairly well. Like anything else, when you're in agriculture, you have better years and worse years, but in general I think it was a pretty good paying proposition.

ARENA: What I tried to show, or tried to raise, in regard to the distinction, if there was any, between these brought up on the ranches--citrus ranches in particular--and those brought up in the city, would the same be true of adults? Say, your parents, your mother, was there a distinction on the adult level, if you can recollect, between those who lived in the city and those who lived in the citrus grove area?

BUEHLER: No, none at all.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, would it be accurate to say that the citrus area itself, such as East Whittier, the families who lived there were equal economically and possibly superior even, economically, than those living in Whittier at that time, the twenties and thirties? Was that the more prosperous area, rather than Whittier, the city of Whittier of today?

BUEHLER: I don't think that you could quite say that. I think that they were about equal.

ARENA: But there was certainly no inferiority on the part of East Whittier, which we tend to think of, because it's on the outskirts now, and was maybe the tail end of the community economically. It was definitely not that from your opinion?

BUEHLER: I wouldn't say so, no. My parents had their ranch over in North Whittier Heights, and my mother belonged to the North Whittier Heights Women's Club.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you your mother's full maiden name?

BUEHLER: Lena Siegrist. Her given name was Lena.

ARENA: And you mentioned a North Whittier Women's Club?

BUEHLER: Yes, it was over in North Whittier Heights, the women's club there.

ARENA: You say was. It no longer is in existence?

BUEHLER: I think it still is in existence. As far as I know, it is still in existence. This is what is known as Hacienda Heights now. But it used to be known as North Whittier Heights.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if your wife, in meeting with Mrs. Hannah Nixon, recalls that she was active in the club, and not just a member with a card, but did she belong to committees; did she play a particular role in the organization?

BUEHLER: Well, I think she was fairly active. However, she was getting along in years at that time, the time that my wife knew her.

ARENA: This would have been after 1945.

BUEHLER: Oh, yes. My wife was always very fond of Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon. She liked her very much, spoke very highly of her and enjoyed her company. And as I say, I don't know how much association they had together actually. But I know my wife would come home from meetings every once in a while and mention that Mrs. Nixon was there, and she had sat with Mrs. Nixon, or she had lunch with Mrs. Nixon or something like that. And I know that she enjoyed her company very much, and always thought a great deal of her.

ARENA: As the interview is coming to a close, do you mind if I ask you if there is any subject or topic in relation to your association with President Nixon that I have not raised that you would like to bring up at this point?

BUEHLER: No, I think not. I've always felt, personally, that Richard Nixon was, to use the slang expression, just a good guy, and I always felt that he was quite a human individual. I mean, sometimes you think of the President of the United States as sort of a godlike figure, but I certainly can't think of Richard Nixon that way. I think he was a real fine, intelligent young man when I knew him. He was an exceptional young man, but just another one of the fellows, really. He had very good speaking ability. He could speak very well on his feet. He could think on his feet.

ARENA: While we're on that subject of speaking, during that period of high school education, would you venture to make an observation regarding the level, the quality of Whittier education, especially in view of the fact that you were going to be tested, so to speak, when you went on to college, with students from all over the state, as well as other states? How would you assess the quality of your education? And by yours, of course, I would include the President, because he went to the same high school?

BUEHLER: Well, I think it was very excellent.

ARENA: Did you ever feel at a disadvantage, that you had not gotten as good an education, for some reason or another, as you went through medical school, where you were competing, of course?

BUEHLER: No. I went on to Stanford [University], which is considered a good academic school, and I had no particular trouble at Stanford. I felt that the preparation that I had received at Whittier High School was very excellent, as good as the average student that came into Stanford. I'm sure you are very well aware that [Homer G.] Bill Rosenberger, Jr., was in our class in high school also. He went on to Stanford undergraduate, and to Stanford Medical School also. His father practiced here in Whittier many years. His father and my father were fellow practitioners here in Whittier. So that I think that those of us who left Whittier High School at that time were able to compete on a very equal basis with the best students from other areas.

ARENA: On the question of making this general observation about the President, would you care to make an observation on, we'll say, the Nixon of today as compared with the Nixon of your high school contact? I'm thinking of the fact of the present daring visit to China, and the main thrust seems to be the uniqueness of it, the historical momentousness of it--if there's such a word as momentousness. Can you recall that he did things like that on that level back in high school? Was he the type of person who did, say, some extraordinary things, out of the ordinary range of activity, when you knew him, so that you might not be as surprised that he would do such an unexpected thing as he is now doing because of your earlier association with him?

BUEHLER: Well, obviously, you would like specific examples of something that was a little out of the ordinary.

ARENA: I realize specific and general are two things, and . . .

BUEHLER: I have nothing specific. But I'm not too surprised that Dick might do something like this. Now, this really should be off the record, but I don't mind if you put it on the record. My wife and I see a little differently on this China tour. My wife is definitely critical of it. I realize that China's record has been anything but savory, a pretty unsavory record, the way that people have been treated in China and all the rest. But I'm not quite ready to come out and condemn the President for this. This might turn out to be a good thing. I don't know. Obviously, all I know is what little I read in the paper, which isn't too much, and what little I see on TV, which is very little. But he undoubtedly has some information on it and he feels that there's a good chance for success on this thing or I don't think he would do it.

ARENA: Knowing him as you did back in high school, although I'm not dwelling on the political aspects of this as such and neither are you, but it is this idea of comparing the young man and the old man, where you knew both; where I say old man, let's say mature man, and that's what I'm interested in. Would you say that he--especially recalling his debating experiences and performances--would you say that he's the type of person who could be taken in by a shrewd Chou En-lai, by a shrewd Mao Tse-tung? Again comparing him with any person you want to think of, would you say that he can keep his wits about him during this situation, because of your insights and your personal contact with him in the earlier period?

BUEHLER: Let me just state this without anything to back it up. That I would much rather trust Nixon over there negotiating and talking with these people than anybody else I know of recently. And I'm not trying to slam other administrations, but I would trust Nixon more, because I think that he's less likely to be taken in than some of the others might have been. I think Nixon understands what Communism is, and I think that he realizes how Communists act. While I'm sure that you can't just go over there and get wild-eyed about the whole thing, you've got to use some tact and so forth. I really don't feel that he's going to get taken in by them as much as I would feel others might.

ARENA: Dr. Buehler, I really can't thank you enough for answering ALL of my questions so frankly and fully. As I say, you will receive a typed copy of this, where you can add or detract or make any corrections. Thank you very much for your time.

BUEHLER: I'm happy to talk with you, and I wish I had more information. I wish I could remember those days better, but it has been quite a while ago and there's been quite a bit of water under the bridge since.

ARENA: That's history. Thank you very much.