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Merritt T. Burdg (July 20, 1972)

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Oral History Interview

with

Mr. Merritt T. Burdg

July 20, 1972

Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Merritt T. Burdg. T. the middle initial stands for Talbot. Talbot Ware was the grandfather of Mr. Merritt T. Burdg. Burdg is spelled B U R D G, of Whittier, California, Arena interviewing. Today's date is July 20, 1972. May I begin, Mr. Burdg, by asking you where and when you were born?

BURDG: In November 1898, in the little community of Hopewell, Indiana, which is somewhere between Butlerville and North Vernon, I understand.

ARENA: And I do understand, and I'm sure you do too that North Vernon is where the President's mother and grandfather lived before they moved out to Whittier. Did you ever visit North Vernon?

BURDG: Yes, on a trip a few years ago. We looked up the old home where I was born. The little church across the road was gone, but the cemetery was still there on the opposite corner. I understand that the Milhouses lived in the general area, farther down the road, I guess.

ARENA: Do you recall as a young man--or did you leave when you were quite young--do you recall that area?

BURDG: Not really. It looked familiar, revisiting it, but I left there when I was five years old, so I didn't remember very much.

ARENA: Do you mind giving me the name of your own parents and indicating what the religious persuasion was?

BURDG: Yes. My father was Lewis Burdg, and my mother was Anna Ware Burdg. She, of course, was the daughter of Talbot Ware, who was the father of two generations, my mother being of the older generation and, in fact, became the housekeeper, the one who maintained the family, I understand, following her mother's death when she was approximately eighteen years old.

ARENA: Mr. Burdg, you recall that the President's grandmother's maiden name was Burdg. Would you say what the precise relationship is between you and the President, or follow down that line of Burdges for us?

BURDG: This may sound rather contradictory, confusing, but both my father and [Franklin] Frank Milhous, the President's grandfather, were married twice, as I understand it. Each lost their first wives at an early age. My father's first wife's last name was Woodard, Martha E. Woodard. That, of course, has no bearing on this present relationship, so far as the President is concerned. Frank's second wife was my father's first cousin, because their fathers were brothers, as I understand it. And Almira Milhous' father, I believe, was Oliver [Burdg], and my father's father's name was William Burdg, brothers.

ARENA: Thank you very much. What was your father's occupation back in Indiana, and did he retain that same occupation here in California?

BURDG: I'm not absolutely sure. I guess I had better say that he was a farmer, and when we left Indiana to go to Maine when I was five, we stayed there for seven years, and my father worked at various occupations there. Then we came to California, I believe it was 1911, and he was a rancher from that time on.

ARENA: In what part of California, if I may ask?

BURDG: Here in the East Whittier area.

ARENA: And did he always remain in that precise area?

BURDG: Approximately, yes.

ARENA: As far as you recall.

BURDG: Yes. Either East Whittier or what we then called North Whittier Heights, just over the hills.

ARENA: Is your father still living, Mr. Burdg?

BURDG: No, he's been gone a good many years.

ARENA: And may I ask you to give a brief resume of your own educational background?

BURDG: When we came to California, as I say, in 1911, I first attended school in what is now the Woman's Club in East Whittier, which was then being used because of a prior earthquake and the East Whittier School was damaged. That was the seventh grade. We moved into Whittier for the eighth grade at the old Bailey Street School. Then we found ourselves back in East Whittier, I believe, when I was a freshman in Whittier High School, and actually drove a horse and buggy to school, which was one of the last to do that, because the state was taking on the transportation from then on, as I understand it. I graduated from Whittier High School in 1918, was over at Pomona College in the SATC for a few months in the latter part of 1918.

ARENA: Excuse me. Would you mind indicating what the letters SATC stand for?

BURDG: Student Army Training Corps.

ARENA: And they had that program in World War I also.

BURDG: At this time, just toward the end of it, apparently.

ARENA: I see.

BURDG: And I was headed for registering, at least, for the draft that fall. However, I came back to Whittier after the war was over and went to Whittier College, I believe beginning the second semester, which would be in 1919. At my first student

body assembly I was elected editor of the school paper, and I was too frightened to object, too surprised, but I had done that similar work in high school. I graduated in 1923 from Whittier College. In the same class, among others, was Jessamyn West McPherson.

ARENA: That was her precise class?

BURDG: I think I'm correct, yes.

ARENA: Thank you.

BURDG: After graduation, I worked for a year and a half at what was then the Whittier Savings Bank at the corner of Bright [Avenue] and Philadelphia [Street]. The building is not now standing. It was where the American Savings is now. And then in 1925 I accepted a job with the then Whittier Building and Loan, which has since been absorbed, shall we say, by the American Savings [& Loan Association] organization. I transferred to what was then the Mutual Savings and Loan, now the Quaker City Federal Savings and Loan in the fall of 1929, just about the time of the stock market crash. I spent approximately thirty-five very happy years, and was retired there in 1964.

ARENA: As you know, in our project we're interested in the President's parents and, of course, their own background, since they obviously shaped his life so much. What do you recall of the President's mother prior to her marriage to [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon? I'm thinking of the fact that she did live in Whittier ever since 1897, and of course that was before you came, but maybe you saw her living on her ranch; maybe you had direct contact with her. Whatever comes to mind about Mrs. Hannah Milhous Nixon.

BURDG: I'm afraid I'm hazy on that. I remember driving home from church, the Friends Church here in Whittier, to East Whittier, on a Sunday, and Frank Milhous coming out from the house. He had just gotten home from the same services, talking with my father and the family. That probably is the best recollection I have of Frank Milhous. Now, so far as Almira [Burdg Milhous] is concerned, I saw her on several occasions in her later life at the family home down on Whittier Boulevard where the Quad is now. One such occasion was when a Dr. Howard G. Burdg from the East, who had been working on genealogy, was present and gave a talk about the genealogy of the family, I think in planning and preparation for the publication of a book in that regard.

ARENA: If you don't mind my asking, was the doctor in connection with medicine or an academic or scholarly degree?

BURDG: I think it was scholarly, if I'm not mistaken.

ARENA: Thank you.

BURDG: I believe he was from one of the eastern universities, but I'm not sure.

ARENA: And again, if you don't mind my asking, this would be of particular interest for future research, did he have anything in print, either at that point, or do you know-- I believe you said he was working on something--and is that in existence anywhere? Do you know of anything that he may have written, and where that may be found?

BURDG: I'm sorry, I don't really know. I think that my oldest sister obtained a copy of his work, but I think it was not as pretentious, maybe, as he had hoped to make it. My older sister is not now living, and I wouldn't know what became of it.

ARENA: Thank you. Do you recall anything about the personality of Mr. Franklin Milhous, from the standpoint of, oh, maybe his manner, bearing in mind, of course, that you were a youngster yourself, but his manner to you, how he was thought of by the community in any way, did he serve on any civic boards? I'm thinking, we'll say, of the Board of Education, where you may have had some contact, maybe indirectly; maybe you were a pupil or something like that.

BURDG: No, I'm afraid I don't know of his connections, except I'm sure he was very active in the Friends Church, and was very well regarded in the community, a very forthright gentleman. I can remember his toupeewhich, of course, as a youngster, was of interest, but he was a very fine gentleman, I'm sure.

ARENA: Do you recall any particular incident involving the toupe, in the sense that, since they were not as common or as popular as they are today, it might have been, maybe, it might have been one of the secrets that he did not want the community to know about, but anything that comes to mind there.

BURDG: No, it was just that it never changed. It was always the same color.

ARENA: And what color was that, if I may ask?

BURDG: Reddish tinge, as I recall.

ARENA: Did you happen to see him with it off, by accident?

BURDG: No, I never did.

ARENA: What do you recall of his wife and the President's grandmother, Mrs. Almira Burdg Milhous?

BURDG: I wish I had the proper adjectives for her. She was certainly a sweet, lovable little lady, in her maturity at least, and very able. As I recall, she could write verses for occasions, and always seemed to have the right words at the right time. Of course, she was the mother of a good sized family, all of whom turned out very well, I'm sure. It was a pleasure to have been in her home on the few occasions that I was. That probably could have been more, had I made it so.

ARENA: Do you recall, possibly, ever attending any of the Milhous reunions in her home, where obviously she was a Burdg herself, married to a Milhous?

BURDG: There used to be, for some years, a Jennings County picnic for people who had moved to California from Jennings County, Indiana. It was quite an established event, and we always attended. I do not recall that there was ever one at her home, although that was a possibility. I think it usually required larger facilities because of the crowd. It was quite a large gathering.

ARENA: From your own general knowledge, Mr. Burdg, just how many Burdges would be in the immediate area of Whittier? I'm thinking, of course, of any of the close relatives of Almira Burdg, and that line? I'm thinking of those who would be, we'll say, as closely as possibly related to the President; for example, her own immediate brothers or sisters and their offspring. And this would be, I realize, very general. You could only give a general estimate. Is there any notion at all as to how many of the Burdges, through the President's grandmother's side, might be in this immediate area?

BURDG: I'm not very clear on this. There was a, I think her stepson. I'm trying to think of the name. I know it very well--Griffith. He was the father of two children, a son by the name of Carleton, I believe.

ARENA: Excuse me. That would be from the first marriage of Mr. Milhous?

BURDG: I think I'm correct.

ARENA: Yes. I have had the pleasure of meeting him. It's a [William] W. Carleton Milhous and an Esther Milhous Dodson.

BURDG: Dodson.

ARENA: They were just in this immediate area not too long ago. But they are living in Arizona now.

BURDG: Incidentally, I believe Esther was also in my class in college.

ARENA: And speaking of that situation, also from the first marriage--their father, of course, was Griffith Milhous. I wonder if you had him as a teacher?

BURDG: No, I didn't take music lessons. He did teach music privately, I believe. I don't know whether he ever taught organized classes or not.

ARENA: He taught for a brief period, and I have met some of the people who had him as a teacher, in the John Muir Junior High School, I understand. One person was Miss Ola Florence Welsh, now Mrs. Gail Jobe. But it was a short period, I understand.

BURDG: Oh, yes. The only other person whose name comes to my mind who is still living is Oliver Burdg, who used to work with the water company at Yorba Linda [California]. Oliver, called Ollie, had a sister, Bertha Bolen, who lived here in Whittier until her death some years ago.

ARENA: Excuse me, go right ahead.

BURDG: Ollie is now living with one of his sons at Cerritos [California]. He is quite elderly and probably not able to get around very much. I last saw him at the funeral service of his wife.

ARENA: Am I correct in that the grandmother of Mrs. Hannah Milhous Nixon was Elizabeth [Milhous], and she also lived with the Milhouses for a while, and maybe you may recall her. She, of course, would have died much longer [ago]. This would have been the great-grandmother of the President, who also came with the Milhouses from Indiana back in 1897.

BURDG: I'm afraid I just don't remember, offhand.

ARENA: I see. Do you recall that she existed, though? Do you know of her, even though you did not know her personally?

BURDG: It sounds very possible, but I don't believe I recall her appearance.

ARENA: Would I be correct in assuming, on the basis of your answer to this question about the Burdges, then that there are very few who would be directly related in the immediate area to the President's grandmother, Almira Burdg Milhous?

BURDG: Very few bearing the name of Burdg, at least. Of course, I have a couple of nephews and a niece, not here in this area. In fact, the two nephews are on the east coast, one in Washington, D.C., connected with the Federal Reserve, the other a professor at William and Mary. Their sister is a retired teacher living at Colton, California. My son, Marvin Lewis Burdg lives in San Diego [California] and my nephew, Donald Lewis Burdg lives in San Fernando [California]. But I do not think that there are other Burdges in this area except the three sons of Oliver that I mentioned, and I think no one of the three is still living in Whittier.

ARENA: Thank you. May I ask you now, from your own personal recollection, when was the very first time that you saw President Richard Nixon in your life--the very first time--and if it was an unusual incident, would you describe it?

BURDG: If I had known he was to become President, I probably would remember such an incident. I don't believe I can recall. . . . He and the family attended the East Whittier Friends Church. We had always--that is, from my boyhood--attended here in Whittier. And that five miles distance seemed to make some difference. Of course, they were in Yorba Linda and other places.

ARENA: Have you ever been there yourself, Mr. Burdg? With his family, of course, he left Yorba Linda in 1922, if that's of any help. He was born there, as you know, in 1913. Do you recall ever visiting that area between 1913 and 1922?

BURDG: No, I don't believe so. I can't say that I do. We were down at the flag raising celebration within the past year. It had a familiar appearance, but I don't know that I was ever there during that particular period. But I. . . .

ARENA: As far as the move to . . . Excuse me, go right ahead.

BURDG: Well, I was just going to say, I had an aunt who lived not far from there for a while later, but not during this particular period that you refer to.

ARENA: Speaking of Jessamyn West, you may recall that she grew up there also, for so many years.

BURDG: I noticed in her book, she describes having swum in the irrigation ditch, what we would call the irrigation ditch, which is apparently still there. Some of the things that I might think I remember might have been from the reading of her books.

ARENA: I see. Then, I didn't mean to cut you off about your recollections of the President, but when is the first time, if not the first incident? When do you recall meeting with him, and that meeting is clear in your mind, say? And bear in mind, this would be either as a young man in the grocery store there, as a youngster on the high school level; and then, of course, college, and then law. These were his major, you might say, life careers in Whittier.

BURDG: I undoubtedly saw him on many occasions, but to recall now I'm not too sure. One of the early things that I do remember--and this doesn't go back too far in his experience--was marching in the so-called torchlight parade from uptown down to the high school when he was first running for Congress. I think I still have the banner in my garage that I carried. I wish I could think of something prior to that.

A later time was after his election, I believe to the Congress, and I was, as I said, working at what was probably the Mutual Building and Loan, and I remember that [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley, a board

member and associate of Dick, had him down to a board meeting. I was not in the board meeting. I heard afterwards that he indicated that the biggest problems that he faced at that time was the labor situation, and I guess it hasn't changed too much since that day.

ARENA: On the question of politics, but not politics per se, but from the standpoint of family background, of which you have direct knowledge in the sense of being a Burdg and so forth, do you mind if I ask you? Thinking back over your years of experience and long life, have there been any members of the family on the Burdg side, or any of the other relatives you may have met; for example, Mr. Marshburn, and the Milhous side, but have there been any others in the family who were as involved in a direct way in politics as President Nixon? I'm thinking of, even though they may not have run for president, of course, but maybe on the state level or city level? Or was this entry into politics by Richard Nixon the first experience you can think of?

BURDG: I think I'll have to say it was. I don't recall. Of course, we had a portion of the family that lived in the southern states, and I'm not too sure whether any of them became involved in politics, but as far as those members of the family in this area, I don't think there was anyone else of outstanding political ambition.

ARENA: Now, I'd like to ask you from, again, your experience in the community, Mr. Burdg, to think about some of the other immediate members of the President's family. We have mentioned Mrs. Hannah Nixon, and I was concentrating on your recollections of her as a young girl and her parents. What do you recall about Mrs. Hannah Nixon, your direct contact with her at ANY time, bringing it right up to the day of her death? How would you describe her, bearing in mind that the President himself has acknowledged his indebtedness to her?

BURDG: Well, she was a very able person. I thought she was matronly in bearing; she was a good all-around person. There were a great many complimentary characteristics mentioned at her funeral service, and I'm sure they were all correct. I'm trying to search MY memory in the early times. I can remember the marriage, after one Sunday morning church service, I think, of her sister, who is now Mrs. [Jane Milhous] Beeson, one of the two remaining sisters. I'm searching for early recollections of Mrs. Nixon. I remember, of course, in later years when she used to come

into our office on numerous occasions, and it was usually my privilege to visit with her each time she came.

ARENA: Was she aware that you were related?

BURDG: Yes, she was, and was very gracious in admitting it. In fact, probably the first and maybe the only time I ever actually spoke to [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon was following this rally at the high school that I mentioned, which we termed a searchlight parade, torchlight parade. At the conclusion of that occasion, Mrs. Nixon introduced me to Pat, and Pat responded something to the effect, "I believe we're related aren't we?" or something like that, which puffed me up a little, even then, and would more so now. I wish I were more alert to recall Mrs. Nixon in the earlier days, but I do know that she worked in the store out at East Whittier. I was in their home on some occasion before the last home which she purchased in La Habra, this one being in East Whittier.

ARENA: This may be a difficult question, and it's strictly speculative, but historians would not forgive me if I didn't ask it. Knowing the President as you do, and the background, knowing Mrs. Hannah Nixon, what characteristics, what traits do you see in him that you would say come from Mrs. Hannah Nixon? I'm thinking, maybe, of the habits, the mannerisms. How did her training, obviously his mother, but mothers are teachers, too. How do you see her training reflected in the man today? And of course, this would be your estimate.

BURDG: Yes, and I can't do it justice. I'm sure she had a great deal to do with formulating his habits and customs and beliefs. I think she was very forthright, very quick to make decisions, and fair in those decisions, as she understood the question to be. I think she was very tolerant of other people and did her best to give everyone else the benefit of the doubt. I think she must have been a marvelous mother to have instilled in her children the strength of character that she did. I'm sure that I had more occasion to meet Don [Francis Donald Nixon] on occasions than I did Dick, because he was younger, maybe; that is, he was here when Dick was not here, shall we say. But I think Mrs. Nixon must have been just about as perfect a mother as one could expect.

ARENA: You say you recall her, seeing her in the grocery store. Precisely what would she be doing in the store when you saw her? I'm thinking again of any particular incidents, or what you recall in general. Did she handle all phases, that is,

sell to the customers? Did you see her, maybe, looking after the books of people, keeping the records? Was she the one with whom you had most contact from the standpoint of the business affairs of the store? For example, when she did come to the bank, was she doing this in connection with handling or managing the books, so to speak?

BURDG: Well, this would have to come along later, after she had sold the store, that I would have met her in a business way. As far as the store was concerned, I didn't actually see her in the store but a very few times. But my guess is that she was keeping the books and running the business end of the store. That is a guess, however, and that each of the boys had their assigned tasks. You will recall the story, I'm sure, that Mrs. [Helen] Neushutz tells of Dick carrying her groceries home for her. The Neushutzes lived near the store in East Whittier.

ARENA: I didn't realize that. Would you know if there are any members still living there?

BURDG: Well, Mrs. Helen Neushutz who survives her is living in the Leisure World Retirement Home in Seal Beach [Californial].

ARENA: Thank you. And would you remember the first name of Mr. Neushutz?

BURDG: Well, he was Fred. He is deceased.

ARENA: I see.

BURDG: She is Helen, Helen Neushutz.

ARENA: Thank you. I didn't mean to cut you off. I wanted to be sure to get that name.

BURDG: I started to say, the story goes that as Dick was carrying her groceries home for her. In the conversation he asked Mrs. Neushutz if she read the Congressional Journal, and when she replied in the negative, he said, "Well, I must order that for you," which seemed far-fetched for a youth, a teenager, shall we say.

ARENA: What do you recall about Mrs. Hannah Nixon, from the standpoint of her civic and religious responsibilities in this sense: Did she participate in any women's

organizations, from the standpoint of civic? From the standpoint of religious, was she in any of the committees or meetings where you may have had direct contact with her?

BURDG: No, I didn't have any contact directly with her. At the funeral service the pastor, Charles Ball, indicated that she was a member of what they then called the "Meeting on Ministry and Oversight" of the church, which is the body which advises the pastor of the church, and that she used to cross the boulevard to attend meetings until later years, when someone would pick her up and take her to the meetings. So that would imply to me that she must have had a good deal of understanding of the church and its organization, its function, and been willing to devote time and effort to it.

ARENA: Would I be correct in assuming that Mr. Charles Ball was the pastor of the East Whittier Friends Church at the time?

BURDG: That's right, at that time.

ARENA: Would you have any idea where he may be now?

BURDG: He is teaching at Azusa Pacific College in Azusa [California].

ARENA: Thank you very much. Is there anything else about Mrs. Hannah Nixon that I have not raised in the way of a question that you would like to bring up at this time, Mr. Burdg?

BURDG: Well, I wish I could summarize from my standpoint her appearance and her bearing, but it's difficult. She was of good stature, very courteous, and yet I'm sure she was very alert to everything that she came in contact with.

ARENA: On the question of courtesy, do you recall the President's own mannerisms in that regard?

BURDG: I've often wondered which of his mannerisms might have been inherited from her and which from the father. They were somewhat different, I'm sure. I think he is probably a very happy development of both of them, embodies probably the best of both parents.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: We were just referring to Mrs. Edith Nunes off the tape and will now make sure we have it for the record. Edith Nunes is the daughter of Mrs. Martha [Mildred] Gibbons. We were just discussing before this telephone interruption the relationship of your relative, also, Edith Nunes, who is now living in Idaho. We were discussing that you did come across her a few years ago in Hawaii, and she mentioned that a Chinese lady, now a Mrs. Lee, and she, Mrs. Nunes, used to get rides from the President back and forth to Whittier College. And certainly, she is worth looking up, Mrs. Lee, and of course, Mrs. Nunes. Is there anything else, Mr. Burdg, that you would like to bring up in the way of this interview that I have not covered myself in these past few minutes?

BURDG: No, I think you've done very well to get more than I expected you to be able to get from me, because I do not remember details as well as some.

ARENA: Well, you've remembered quite a bit, and I certainly appreciate it.

BURDG: Thank you.

ARENA: Thank you.

