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Ralph F. Burnight (April 3, 1972)

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Oral History Interview

with

DR. RALPH F. BURNIGHT

April 3, 1972
Bellflower, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Dr. Ralph F. Burnight. The F. stands for Fletcher, of Bellflower, California, where this interview is being held, April 3, 1972, Arena interviewing. May we begin, Dr. Burnight, by my asking you where and when you were born, with a very brief resume of your educational background, your professional experience, and your present situation?

BURNIGHT: I was born in Pasadena, California, January 5, 1897. My family moved to Redlands, California, when I was three years old, and I attended elementary and high schools there, graduating from high school in 1914, then went to the University of Southern California. At that time my family moved to Los Angeles [California]. I lived in Los Angeles during my college career. In 1917 I was called into active service, because I was a member of the National Guard and was called into federal service. I served all during World War I, part of the time overseas in France. After the armistice, I came back and took graduate work at USC [University of Southern California]. Then I was chosen by the student body at USC to be their representative to a university in China. They at that time had decided to adopt a university in a foreign country. They chose Yen Ching University in Peking [China]. I was there for two years, taught history, sociology and some English, and then came back and taught at Washington Union High School just outside of Fresno [California] for two years. Then in 1924 I came to Excelsior Union High School in Norwalk [California], and I was there as a teacher of history and sociology and became Boys' Vice Principal in 1927, and then was made Principal and District Superintendent in 1930, and I continued in that position until 1957. At the latter part of that

time I was simply District Superintendent, because we had added a couple of additional schools and so we had principals in each one of them. In 1955 we formed the Cerritos Junior College District and I became President of the college and continued with the two jobs, with Excelsior Union High School District and with Cerritos until 1957. By that time the building program of the college was well under way. We were in the midst of getting the college operating and that was a big enough job by itself without the high school, so I resigned from the high school district. From then on I was with Cerritos College. I retired in 1962 and was named President Emeritus.

Since that time I'm retired, but I think I'm busier now than I was before. I'm pretty well tied up with the church--Presbyterian church, our local church, and also the Presbytery, which includes all of Orange County and all of Southeast Los Angeles County. I'm Chairman of the Ministerial Relations Committee, which takes quite a considerable amount of time. Then I work quite a bit on several boards of YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] and the United Way, and about three cultural organizations in Bellflower. Well, I think that's about enough.

ARENA: Although I realize you did not know the President--correct me if I'm wrong--before 1945, or now possibly you did. I'm just thinking when he married your former student in 1940, Thelma Ryan [Patricia Ryan Nixon], maybe you did meet him before 1945.

BURNIGHT: No, it was about 1945.

ARENA: About then, I see. Then you, in having any discussions with the President after you met him, did he ever mention the fact--I'm thinking of your foreign experience in China and your interest in your church--that his mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon] had hoped that he [President Nixon] might some day grow up to be a missionary for the Friends Church in Central America, something that the President has mentioned in his book, by the way, Six Crises?

BURNIGHT: I had forgotten about it until you mentioned it, but I remember at the time he came to dedicate the Artesia High School--that was when he was Vice President--this subject came up and he just mentioned casually that his mother hoped that he might be a missionary. He didn't say where or anything of the kind. He went on to something else. I'd forgotten about it, but that is true; and that was, I think, about 1950 when the Artesia High School was dedicated.

Just on the long chance that he might be able to come out and give the dedicatory address, I wrote to him and asked him if he would and then didn't hear from him for a long time. We gave up any hope that he might come and were saying to ourselves, "Well, we tried." In fact, we had started to make arrangements for

someone else, and one day I received a long distance call from Washington, saying that if we could have the exercises on a certain day at about noon, he would be in the area and would be glad to come and speak. And he said the reason he was interested in it was because, if the Artesia High School had been in existence at the time Thelma was in school, that's the school that she would have attended, because it was not too far from her old home. So he very graciously came out and I had more of a conversation with him at that time than at--I was going to say any other time--but he came to Cerritos College on two different occasions. One was to address a high school student congress which we were having for the high schools in this area, and I've forgotten the other occasion that he was there, but we did have a chance to talk briefly on each of those two occasions.

ARENA: As you may recall, he participated quite fully in student government himself, both on the high school and college level, and his remarks from personal experience alone to this group of student government people would be quite interesting. Would you happen to know if his talk was reported or printed and you could, through research, actually find a copy, from the standpoint of historical records?

BURNIGHT: I doubt if it was reported.

ARENA: As you know, he does speak on his feet quite a bit, and possibly he spoke from notes and did not have a full text.

BURNIGHT: As I recall, his talk on that occasion was more or less extemporaneous. He didn't use notes of any kind. He spoke about his experience in student government, at Whittier College particularly.

ARENA: Is there anything in particular you recall about his comments?

BURNIGHT: No, I don't. I just remember that he made that connection that he was interested in this student congress because he himself had been rather active in student body activities, but I don't remember anything he said.

ARENA: I believe you may know a common acquaintance, Mrs. Marian Wilson Hodge.

BURNIGHT: Oh, yes, very well.

ARENA: Well, I had the privilege of having an interview with Mrs. Hodge, and I do recall her saying something to the effect that President Nixon did visit Excelsior

[High School] somewhere along the line to engage in a debate, possibly around the same time that the now Mrs. Richard Nixon [at that time Thelma Ryan] was a student. But I was just wondering if you have any recollection yourself of the young debater from Whittier making a speech. She, of course, knowing both this area and Whittier, would be more likely to remember.

BURNIGHT: She would remember because she was an English teacher at Excelsior and I think, probably the sponsor for the debating group. But I hadn't realized that he had done that.

ARENA: As you know, Mrs. Richard Nixon was a student with her brothers in your own school at Excelsior. Is there anything that you recall concerning personal contact with her? I realize there would be records, and so forth, but I'm just wondering if you ever had any personal contact with her, maybe as a student leader, where she was a student leader, or something along those lines.

BURNIGHT: She was a student in one of my classes in United States History when she was a junior. I was Vice Principal at the time, but I had kept two or three classes each year, and she and Tom [Thomas Sanford Ryan] were in this class. I remember her quite well there. She was, I was going to say, not an outstanding student, but she was--and I remember this because I looked it up once--I had given her a "B" for the course. I gave her a "B+". At that time we followed the curve in grading, and she was just one or two points below an "A-", and so, very conscientiously I gave her a "B+". I found out afterwards that, had she gotten an "A-", she would have been on the honor roll at commencement. And so it was that grade that I gave her which kept her off. She was a member of the California Scholarship Federation, however. I'm not sure if she was a life member or not.

But the thing that I remember best about her--now this gets into her personal life more than her school life, and you undoubtedly have gotten this in other interviews--her mother passed away before she entered high school, she had her father and her two brothers in the home and she kept house and did the things that her mother normally would have done and attended school at the same time. Then during her sophomore year, I think it was--I'm not real sure of that--her father passed away, and she became really the head of the household, although her brothers were both older than she. But she did the cooking and the housework and really kept the house, the family, together, along with a full-time course at high school.

In addition to her work in her classes, she was fairly active in extracurricular activities. She was on the debating team. She was in dramatics. I believe she was secretary of her class, the junior class. I would have to look up those details. But even at that time, or after she graduated, that had made a very great impression on me--the fact that a young girl of that kind would do

the job that she did in keeping the home for the two brothers. They all graduated at the same time. It's not very many girls that would do that. And sometimes when the kids would complain about the fact that they just had so much work to do and couldn't do their schoolwork and all, without mentioning her name--and, of course, at that time she was not famous--I would simply say that I remembered a girl I had had in my class once who did all these things, and then of course moralized a little bit, that if she could do it, I don't see any reason why you can't do it. But it made quite an impression on me.

After she graduated from high school I lost track of her, because as students do, she moved away. She went to Whittier or possibly at that time she went to USC [University of Southern California]. And at the time that Dick was nominated for Vice President, I didn't realize that she was Mrs. Nixon. On the radio and in the newspapers they said Patricia Ryan. Well, we called her Thelma when she was in high school. I believe she started using the name Pat or Patricia--that was her middle name. So it didn't occur to me that it was the same person until I met one of the women who had been a teacher at Excelsior [High School] at that time. She said, "Isn't it great about Thelma?" I said, "What?" She said, "Didn't you know? She's Mrs. Nixon. He's going to be Vice President." Well, anyhow, those are the main recollections that I have of her back at that time.

ARENA: Do you recall her coming out recently--by recently within the past five years or so--to dedicate a park that local citizens offered, and I believe the basis of the park was her own home?

BURNIGHT: It's her old home, yes. I was there at that dedication.

ARENA: Would you mind describing that experience, from whatever you do recall of it?

BURNIGHT: Well, of course, by that time they had repainted the house and had fixed up the grounds around it a little bit in preparation for this event, and [had taken] the necessary steps to make a park out of it. There was a good-sized crowd there, many of the people who had known her when she was living there and in high school. There were quite a number of politicians there, of course. And then she, and was it Tricia [Nixon], were there? The Secret Service gave everybody orders they were to stay in the area reserved for the spectators and nobody except the official party was to be up near her. The ceremony took place on the front porch of the house, and the people were out in front and on the street. The crowd

covered quite an area. But after the ceremony was over, many of her old girl friends who were there didn't let the Secret Service bother them. They went up and shook hands with her, and the first thing you knew there was a line there. She was very gracious in greeting people, and I think the Secret Service people just threw up their hands and stood around and watched the crowd to be sure that nothing untoward happened. But it was a very orderly group, very nice. I remember how gracious she was in receiving the people that went, in spite of the instructions that had been given beforehand that no one was to come inside the rope.

ARENA: Dr. Burnight, as far as you know, is the home now kept as it was when she lived there with her brothers? In other words, from the standpoint of history, is it a reproduction, because it possibly may have been lived in by others, of course, after she moved out? Do you know anything about that?

BURNIGHT: One of her brothers, I think it was Tom [Thomas Sanford Ryan] lived there for many years, and I don't know of anyone else living there. Possibly there was for a short time. But Tom had lived there for a great many years. I haven't been in the home at all, and I wasn't when they were living there. But as I understand it, it's about as it was--as nearly as they can make it--when she was there. Tom told me that they had added on another room since Thelma had lived there. I've talked to Tom on a couple of occasions.

ARENA: Would I be correct in assuming that the home was the basis of a ranch, that it was not in the community at THAT time, it was strictly on a ranch?

BURNIGHT: At that time it was quite a little ways from the community of Artesia, and it was on the ranch. I'm not sure of the size of the ranch. Of course, out in that area at that time everything was ranches, and the houses were quite a ways apart. I presume there was a house on every, well, I'd say the houses were not closer together than five, maybe ten, often twenty acres apart.

ARENA: On some of the extracurricular activities in which she participated that you mentioned, correct me if I'm wrong, I don't know if you mentioned drama and acting. As the story goes, that's how she did meet the President. I was wondering if you do have personal recollections of seeing her as an actress in any of the school plays?

BURNIGHT: Yes. The senior play was called, "The Rise of Silas Lapham," and she was in that. As I recall, the part she took was that of the young daughter, which was one of the leads in the play. I remember that she was in it, but I'll have to confess that no one of the parts stands out now too much in my mind.

ARENA: What do you recall of her in a descriptive way, physically, when you knew her as a high school student?

BURNIGHT: Well, she was rather slender, medium height. She was very friendly, but as I recall, she was not the exuberant type. She wasn't loud or did a lot of talking, loud laughing, or things of that kind, but she was quite friendly.

ARENA: Did she have a mature, purposeful air about her, I wonder, especially in this period when she began to run the household, so to speak?

BURNIGHT: She was a little bit more serious at that time, but she was bound to be a little bit more mature than someone who had no responsibility except to get up in the morning and come to school and could do what she wanted to after school. Because as soon as school was out, of course, she had to stay for some of these activities, but then as soon as possible she want home, because she had a lot of work to do. I just remember her as a fairly serious, quite pleasant girl.

ARENA: Did you have any contact with her during her Whittier High School teaching period, including a request for a recommendation or anything like that? Or did someone contact you from Whittier High School about her in that regard?

BURNIGHT: No, I don't believe so. They undoubtedly asked for a transcript, but that didn't come through my hands. I don't recall that.

ARENA: Was the community in which she grew up at that time, while attending your high school, strictly an agricultural community and she was a typical member of the high school?

BURNIGHT: That's right. Artesia [California], the business section and the residential sections of Artesia were relatively small--oh, not more than six blocks by six blocks--and all around it were small truck farms, some alfalfa, quite a lot of berry ranches. At that time there were a number of Japanese coming in that were working these truck farms and berry ranches, particularly strawberries. As I recall, I wouldn't be sure of this, but I think the Ryan ranch was mainly alfalfa, but I could be mistaken on that. That area around there and near her home at that time was mainly alfalfa.

ARENA: From what has gone on since in her becoming literally, of course, not only of the country but of international importance, how would you assess her complete educational experience as, we'll say, a training ground for what was to come? Basically, was she at an advantage or disadvantage from the standpoint of living on a farm when the United States was becoming an industrialized state, even more and more? Do you see anything of significance there, the fact that she, after all, this was a farm girl attending a rural community, and correct me if I'm wrong, a rural community high school?

BURNIGHT: It was a union high school. In fact, it was the high school which took in the entire three unified districts of the present time, the Bellflower Unified District, the Norwalk-La Mirada District and the Artesia, or the ABC Unified District. So it was a small country union high school. We took a great deal of pride in it. It was a model high school for that type, a rural high school. In fact, it was written up in a couple of educational books as being a model of its kind. In answering your question, I would say that I don't think that handicapped her in the least, because she took advantage of every opportunity that she had and, of course, when she left high school, I believe she then went to USC [University of Southern California], got her teaching credential, and I believe she taught business subjects which, of course, has very little connection with an agricultural background, but she was determined to make good on her own and so she worked hard, as she had in high school.

The background really has more to do with their social relationships than it would be her professional, but she was the kind of a girl who was readily accepted by any group. Now I know that when she was at USC she didn't have a lot of money because she had to work her way through, so probably she didn't get in at least the more

expensive sororities. Whether she was in a sorority or not, I don't know. But she was the type of girl, as she has been since, who studies the things that she's going to do and goes ahead with a purpose in mind, and she's willing to spend the effort and the energy to do what she needs to do. I would say the fact that she had to work hard was an asset to her rather than a handicap.

ARENA: As a matter of fact the Whittier High School, which the President attended for his last two years, having begun at Fullerton High School during his last two years, graduating in 1930, had courses in agriculture. I was wondering if that was true of the area, including your own high school at that time?

BURNIGHT: Oh, yes. We had a very strong chapter of the Future Farmers of America, FFA it's called, which was one of the strong chapters in the State of California. Lately, I believe it's been phased out because most of the agriculture activities are gradually being pushed out of the area, particularly the dairy industry, so most of the boys in this area are not interested in becoming farmers. They want to do something that will pay them a little bit better. There are a few of the Dutch boys who still work on the dairies for their fathers, but most of them are looking for some other type of life, so that I don't think that the FFA still exists. It was moved from Excelsior High School down to Artesia High School in later years.

ARENA: In view of the several special assignments in international relations the President has dispatched, so to speak-- Mrs. Nixon off to Africa, off to Latin America on her own, as well as taking her along to China--do you recall any particular interest in foreign affairs, including foreign languages, that comes to mind during her high school years?

BURNIGHT: No, I don't. Of course, we discussed international relations in American History, but I don't recall any outstanding interest that she showed, more than any of the other students. It might have been that the teacher didn't make it interesting enough.

ARENA: What do you recall of Mrs. Richard Nixon's brothers who also attended your high school?

BURNIGHT: All three of them were in the same class. Both brothers were older than Thelma, but I imagine the reason they were in the same class was because at that time both Bill [William George Ryan] and Tom were not too interested in school and they probably did pretty well at that time to be in the same class with their younger sister. They were more interested in athletics, and they were both very good athletes. I remember particularly in football. They probably also took part in other sports, but football was their main sport. Tom was captain of the football team one year. I don't think Bill was captain, but he was quite a bit larger than the other boys, so I imagine he was probably one of the backs. But I remember them both quite well. Tom was in the class with Thelma in American History that I taught. I never had Bill in class, however. He was in some other section.

ARENA: Dr. Burnight, would it be an imposition to ask you to go over your method and your aims and the scope of the U.S. History course that you taught? I'm thinking as a fellow historian who has also taught U.S. History, what some of the special problems were you must have had. Did you have in mind, for example, that the majority of your students were destined to go on to college, or was the course aimed mainly, say, for citizenship preparation, which I think was the fundamental idea of most high school U.S. History Civics courses? You would know a lot more about that than I.

BURNIGHT: Well, we used the text that was used by most schools at that time, Muzzey's American History.

ARENA: I can't recall his first name, but I've used it also.

BURNIGHT: The emphasis in Muzzey, and the reason it became so widely used was because he shifted the emphasis in his history from purely dates and events and things of that kind to social history. I think his was one of the first books to do that, and so the emphasis really in that course, if I can remember that far back, was mainly preparation for citizenship; and we discussed problems of practical government to quite an extent, civic affairs. Of course, there was a separate course in Civics, as was required by law at that time. But we did quite a bit of that in history.

ARENA: Do you recall about how large that particular class was? Was it about the average size of all of your classes at that time?

BURNIGHT: It was between twenty-five and thirty, probably nearer thirty. Most of the history classes were about that size at that time.

ARENA: Was there possibly any unusual occasion? I'm thinking of some special visitors in assemblies that could have tied in with the course. I know on one occasion I recall an interview where Mr. William Jennings Bryan visited Fullerton High School. I'm wondering if there was some known speaker or known personality who visited your school that Mrs. Nixon might have heard?

BURNIGHT: I remember one of the speakers we had, whether she was in the school at that time or not I don't know, was Hamlin Garland, who was an historian, mainly interested in the development of the Midwest and particularly the Indians. I don't remember others. It was after her time, but the ex-Governor, Frank Merriam, came and spoke. I hadn't thought of that angle for a long time, and I don't recall anyone else. We were a small school and people came there by special invitation. We weren't large enough to attract very many notables, so I just don't recall anyone else. Hamlin Garland made quite an impression though and I remember him. He was a fine old man.

ARENA: As this interview is coming to a close, is there any comment or any point you would like to raise that I have not myself?

BURNIGHT: No, I think we've covered everything where I've had any personal connection with Mrs. Nixon. She has, of course, been back on several occasions. I've enjoyed meeting with her whenever she was back. There are still a couple of her bosom pals, girls who still live in the area, and usually she's so interested in talking to them that the rest of us just enjoy watching them.

My one memory of President Nixon, of course, when he was Vice President, very soon after he became Vice President--in fact, it was at the end of February [1954]--I was attending a Superintendent's convention in Atlantic City, and so I stopped in Washington and just on a chance that I could see him, asked for an appointment and was given one. And I remember, this was in the Capitol, not over in the Senate Office Building. The time for the appointment came and I was ushered into the Vice President's office which, of course, is a very beautiful room. We sat and just chatted for fifteen or twenty minutes.

I know that we went over the allotted time, and I know that there were a lot of people waiting outside. I felt just a little bit guilty, but I appreciated very much his taking the time to see me.

ARENA: What do you recall that is not confidential, of course, or personal about that meeting with him?

BURNIGHT: He mainly liked to talk about the fact that he had lived in the area, attended Whittier College, and he knew of our area because he had been down there. He talked about Artesia and what was going on at that time.

ARENA: Thank you very much for the privilege of this interview, Dr. Burnight.