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Clyde N. Irwin (July 5, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MR. CLYDE N. IRWIN

July 5, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Clyde N. Irwin of Whittier, California. Today's date is July 5, 1972, Arena interviewing. May I begin, Mr. Irwin, by asking you a little bit about yourself so people will know what the background of your comments are, by knowing something about you. May I ask where and when you were born?

IRWIN: Well, sir, I was born in the little town of Fayetteville, Arkansas.

ARENA: And the year?

IRWIN: The year was 1890, that was the year I was born.

ARENA: You are exactly eighty-two, then.

IRWIN: Eighty-two.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a little resume of your own education and then your career right up to the present time?

IRWIN: Well, my folks took me up to Michigan and I was in the sixth grade when they moved from Central Michigan down to southern Michigan to a little town called Blissfield, Michigan, about twelve miles from Toledo, Ohio. And then I went to school in Blissfield, to the elementary school there, and at the age of fourteen I began working, and I was a clerk in a grocery store and the meat cutter got to running for city office of some sort--I don't remember just what his office was--but he was away so long that the boss fired him and after school and Saturday nights I worked in the butcher shop and learned to cut meat in the butcher shop.

ARENA: While we are on the subject of meat and before we forget, would you mind repeating that very interesting observation you made about how hard the President's mother, Mrs. Hannah Nixon, would work from your own personal observation about her carrying and learning to cut slabs of meat. Would you mind repeating that for the tape now?

IRWIN: Well, [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon had gout in his foot and he couldn't stand on it, and they run this store out here on Whittier Boulevard in connection with the meat market. Mrs. Nixon would cut meat under the supervision of her husband, Frank, and she would carry a quarter of beef, a hind quarter particularly, out to the block and then Frank would sit there and instruct her how to make the cuts, to tell her where to cut through the hind quarter to find that dollar bone in there--they call it a dollar bone, a little bone in the joint about the size of a dollar--well then you would have the round steak and the sirloin steak on the other side of it. And he would show her how to cut the meat. And she was a hard-working woman, because Frank was so crippled up with this gout he could hardly get around at all. But she was a wonderful woman and she brought those boys up right, every one of them. They went to church and Sunday school. But you had to admire her for her courage and the manual labor that she did.

ARENA: As you know or may not know, she had quite a bit of formal education. She was in college at the time that she met Mr. Frank Nixon, I believe. Were you aware of that by the way?

IRWIN: I knew of it, but I didn't know any of the particulars. But just like you told me. I had heard it and that was all I knew about it.

ARENA: So she did have, especially for those times, quite a bit of formal education and as you say she could engage in some real hard physical labor.

IRWIN: Oh, yes, she did. And that's also true of Richard's [Milhous Nixon] wife too. She did the same thing because she came up the hard way too. And she was one of the most gracious ladies though. I knew her quite well at the school.

ARENA: Now we are talking about Mrs. Richard Nixon, Patricia Thelma Ryan.

IRWIN: That's right. Pat Ryan she was known as down at the school, and everybody loved her because she was such a gracious lady. She had a garden party for the faculty one summer. She lived up here on the hill. I don't remember exactly the spot but I remember the back yard was terraced down, and she had a garden

party up there for the faculty, and we had a lovely time because she was such a wonderful hostess. She was--I don't know hardly how to describe her only just the most gracious person you ever want to meet and a lovely person and she was a beautiful woman too. She had nice blonde hair and everybody thought an awful lot of Pat. Of course, that was before she ever thought of going with Richard. She was teaching, I think, in the business section but I don't remember if she was teaching typing or bookkeeping, but she was in the business end of the education there in the Whittier High School.

ARENA: I didn't mean to cut you off, and I would like to get back to your firsthand recollections of Mrs. Richard Nixon too, but I did want to be sure we got that story about Mrs. Hannah Nixon because from other reports we have heard that she did work hard out in Yorba Linda and some other occasions, but this is the first time that something like that has ever been brought to my attention. So you were about fourteen years old and working as a butcher yourself then?

IRWIN: Yes, after school and on Saturday, because we kept our stores open until 9 o'clock Saturday nights then. It was a grocery store and a meat market combined. But this fellow was fired because of his political ambitions, so I helped out in the meat department and I got so I could cut a hind quarter up and very seldom would miss that cut through the hind quarter where the joint was to separate the round and the sirloin steaks.

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The interview continued as Mr. Irwin discussed his recollections of various bicycles, makes of automobiles, his interest in the mechanics of automobiles, various automobile dealers in Whittier, some of whom he worked for, and his later attending the University of California at Los Angeles for credentials to teach.

His verbatim recollections of his teaching career at Whittier High School follow, together with his recollections of the President as a student and the Nixon family.

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ARENA: While teaching in the Whittier High School, did you ever have any classes with the President as a student?

IRWIN: No, he never took any industrial art classes. I heard him speak in the auditorium and knowing his folks and coming in contact with him down there at the store when he worked in the store, why I knew him.

ARENA: I see. You had this direct contact with him outside the actual classroom.

IRWIN: That's right.

ARENA: But he was in the school and you remember him--public speaking and that.

IRWIN: Oh, yes.

ARENA: Good. I want to go into that but I want to be sure to get the overall picture. Was Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] in your classroom?

IRWIN: I had Donald in classes, oh yes.

ARENA: Excuse me. I just want to get that on the record and then we will go into that. The third thing to be sure, did you ever have the President's youngest brother, Edward [Calvert Nixon]?

IRWIN: No, no.

ARENA: Now I believe we mentioned off the tape you knew him, but again in the classroom, Harold [Samuel Nixon], the oldest brother who died.

IRWIN: No, I never came in contact with Harold that I remember of.

ARENA: Well, let me just from the standpoint of the classroom get that taken care of. What do you remember about Donald as one of your students, the President's brother?

IRWIN: Well, he was just one of the boys like any of the rest of them. He was not outstanding in anything and neither was he a shirker or lazy or anything like that. He just was one of the fellows like all the rest of the fellows. Now there was some of them who will kind of goof off, but I never had that happen with Don.

ARENA: How about, if you recall, how about Donald's personality from the standpoint of getting along with you as the teacher, with maybe the higher administration, the principal, and also with his buddies, say, his fellow students?

IRWIN: I never knew of him being in any problem with the administration at all. I don't think he was ever called into the dean's office. I don't remember of him having any problem with any teacher. He was a very congenial type of fellow and easy to get along with.

ARENA: That's another question, from the standpoint of his personality, how would you compare him in likeness and in

differences with the personality of Richard Nixon, although you did not have him in the actual class? Maybe you recall seeing him with other students or that situation. I am wondering, for example, could it be said of Donald as it had been said of the President that he was a loner, that he seemed to stick to himself and that sort of thing or anything like that?

IRWIN: You mean was Donald a loner?

ARENA: Was he, right? And some people say the President was.

IRWIN: I think Richard was more of a loner than Donald was. He never seemed to me that he was that type of a fellow. He was a different type from Richard because Richard was kind of a leader. He was a fellow that was very aggressive and he would expect people to do what he wanted them to do and when he wanted them to do it and he was that type of fellow to get in and get things done. Don, as far as I can remember, was more of an easy-going type fellow and not too aggressive, and I don't think he was a leader at all like Dick was. Dick was that type of a fellow. He just had it in him and when you could hear him speak, you could see he spoke with authority when he talked and he talked like he knew what he was talking about.

ARENA: Is there anything else about Donald before we move on to the President, any questions that I have not raised? Maybe something special that he did in the class or some special incident about Donald.

IRWIN: No, not that I recall.

ARENA: Were the President and Donald attending at the same time? The President was there only two years, of course, because he had been at Fullerton [High School]. Did they overlap in any way? Did they ever come together, I am wondering? Did you ever see them together?

IRWIN: Well, I can't answer that truthfully because not to my knowledge. The years have gone by and I can't recollect whether Don was there when Dick was or not. He was younger than Richard and Dick came from Fullerton [High School] over to Whittier High School and those dates have slipped my memory. I wouldn't say for sure because I wouldn't want to confuse anybody, so I really don't know.

ARENA: But as far as your own recollection, you don't recall seeing them together at the school at the same time as far as you recall?

IRWIN: Not at the school. I would see them out at the store and out at their place of business and places like that. Then

I met Donald a lot because we used to eat at his restaurant when he had the restaurant out there. We used to eat out there quite a lot and I got to see him and talk to him.

ARENA: While we're on Donald then, bearing in mind that you knew him as a youngster in high school, what type of a person did he seem to be now that he was an adult running his own business?

IRWIN: Well, from the way the business was going, I thought he was a very big success because every time we would eat out there the place would be filled and nine times out of ten we'd have to wait to get a table.

ARENA: Which particular restaurant--I understand he had more than one in Whittier?

IRWIN: Well, the one that was on the corner where the store was. See that put that restaurant in there--tore the filling station out and moved the store back and put this restaurant up there and that's where . . .

ARENA: Was that called the Nixon Family Restaurant; was that the particular restaurant?

IRWIN: Yes, and then he had one across the street, a little farther to the west there in a store building. There was a store there and then he had the restaurant and the store too. I don't remember just what they did call that one.

ARENA: But you do recall both and eating in both.

IRWIN: Yes, but the one that I particularly remember most was the old homesite there where the filling station was and the store. They cleared that all--moved the house back and built this restaurant in there.

ARENA: How did Donald's personality seem now that he had matured and become a businessman? In other words, had he changed basically from what you recall of him as a high school young man to what he was now as a grown businessman?

IRWIN: Well, yes. He was a grown man and he was a great big fellow, big husky guy, and whenever I'd come in, he always seemed glad to greet me, and we would talk a few minutes and he was a very congenial type of fellow.

ARENA: And he did recall you back from the high school days?

IRWIN: Oh, yes, he'd come and talk to me while we were eating or sometimes he would come in and seat us at the table when we had to wait or something like that.

ARENA: Excuse me for asking this very blunt question, but from the standpoint of history and objectivity, I would like to ask it of you. Would you say that in greeting you this was for business purposes or did he seem to be genuinely interested in you as a former acquaintance and friend?

IRWIN: Well, I think it was a combination of both. Now he had an eye for business. He wanted me to come back and eat there and still he remembered the days in high school and he would ask me about different fellows, if I remembered what happened to them and so forth.

ARENA: About what period was this, Mr. Irwin, what years now? Are these years after the war, after 1945 now, or would these be throughout the war years and afterwards?

IRWIN: It was after the war but it had to be somewhere in the '46-'47-'48, somewhere along in there.

ARENA: Do you recall if in those restaurants alcoholic beverages were served? Do you happen to recall that one way or the other?

IRWIN: No, I never did see any particularly. Fact of the matter I only ate twice in the one across the street from his old homestead--the old place where they lived. I ate in the one where the store was and there was no liquor that I could see served anywhere. His mother and father wouldn't stand for it, I don't believe. They were devout Friends people and they were against that kind of thing, because his mother was a very devout religious person. They wouldn't go for that.

ARENA: Is there anything else about Donald that you would like to mention before we leave that subject?

IRWIN: Well, nothing of any importance that would add anything to this conversation anyway, because after he got out of school I lost more or less personal contact with them and my contact then was merely when I would meet him in the restaurant and he would come up and greet me and so forth.

ARENA: Let us then, before we even move on to the President, it would be helpful at this point, since we have touched on it in a way to look at the Nixon family so to speak, the relations of the different members to one another. What do you recall, if you had an opportunity to witness it, what do you recall about the discipline exercised by the parents, about their participation in religious life? Did Mr. and Mrs. Frank Nixon both teach Sunday school? Did the President belong to religious organizations? Anything about their overall family life.

IRWIN: Well, I attended that Friends church a short time down there.

ARENA: And now we are talking about the East Whittier Friends Church.

IRWIN: The East Whittier Friends Church where the Nixons attended. I attended the Sunday school class that Frank was in. And Frank was a fellow that would like to start an argument. He would bring up a question and then want to argue about it and that seemed to be his delight, to bring up some controversial point in religious matters and then start an argument about it.

ARENA: Excuse me. When you say you attended, were you a kind of guest? You weren't one of his students?

IRWIN: No, Frank wasn't the teacher. He was just there and I attended there. I didn't join the church. I lived in the [La Habra] Heights, just up above it there and it was only a short drive down there and I attended that class that Frank was in. I don't even remember the teacher.

ARENA: And he was not the teacher.

IRWIN: No, he was just a member of the class, but he was a very outspoken and, well, you would think he was a rough, gruff type of fellow, just is in his attitude.

ARENA: Realizing that this is going back for you, but can you give any examples of the sort of questions and arguments that would come up with Mr. Frank Nixon? [Laughter]

IRWIN: Well, no, I don't remember any definite ones but it would be on some religious question that you could make an argument out of. It was controversial.

ARENA: Would it be, for example, a text--not that you would remember the precise text--but would it be a Bible text verse where there would be a difference in interpretation and he would have a certain view and that sort of thing?

IRWIN: That's right, that's what would happen.

ARENA: That would be one sort. Just to be sure I get the question in though, would there be issues and questions that Mr. Frank Nixon would raise tying in, we'll say, with contemporary politics or either local or national or international?

IRWIN: No, I never heard him express himself on politics.

ARENA: In that religious class?

IRWIN: No, he never did bring up any politics. Fact of the matter is, all of the times I had talked to him when he was down at the store and when we traded down there, the subject of politics never came up. Of course, we knew where he stood all the time anyway, but he never would talk politics or he never did to me.

ARENA: Had you heard that he did that with others though--that he did like to argue politics?

IRWIN: No, I never heard that he did that. The only argument I ever heard was in the Sunday school class. He did it more just to, well, kind of rub the guys, some of it.

ARENA: In other words, he might have been chuckling under his breath when he was doing this.

IRWIN: Yes, that is what he would be doing.

ARENA: I see. Do you mind if I ask you this. It has been mentioned in some of the books written about the President's life already that Mr. Frank Nixon had been a Methodist before his marriage. Do you think any of that cropped in that maybe he was giving some Methodist points of view?

IRWIN: That's very possible because he was raised in the Methodist church and then he went to this Quaker church, this Friends church, and they have some dogma that differs with the Methodist church. On the matter of baptism, one thing, see, they don't baptize and the Methodists do. That was one of them and then there are others as well, and he would bring up things that he probably was taught in the Methodist church that wasn't taught in the Friends church. But it was in a friendly attitude. Frank wasn't a bigot and he wasn't mean or nasty about it, but he was a very strong disciplinarian with his family now. He would discipline family.

ARENA: Can you think of precise incidents that you may have witnessed where you saw some of this discipline being exercised?

IRWIN: Well, in a way sometimes he would speak to Hannah, if she would make a mistake it would irk him quite a bit and he would get all over her for it and he would say, "Now you know I told you just how to do that and you have done it wrong." [Laughter] But he would get quite provoked at that.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how she took it?

IRWIN: She was the sweetest thing you ever saw in your life. She would say, "Well, Frank, I'll try again. I'll do my best at it." She'd never yell back at him or anything. She would never raise any argument with him.

ARENA: Would you say, though, that in her way she could be firm and she had her views?

IRWIN: Oh, yes, she was as far as the boys was concerned. She was very firm with the boys and the things that she told them to do she expected them to be done, and she would see to it that they were.

ARENA: When you say the boys, now would you also be including Edward [Calvert Nixon]? Although you did not see him in the high school, did you see him in the store?

IRWIN: In and out, not so much as Don and Richard. Then I've seen him since he has grown up and become a man too, but not personally.

ARENA: Do you recall that period when Mrs. Hannah Nixon especially and the others too, but Mrs. Hannah Nixon would leave to take Harold off to Arizona and I believe this was around the last year of the President's high school period? Do you recall being in the store, for example, knowing that Harold and Hannah were up in Arizona, where Harold's TB needed special attention?

IRWIN: No. All I would know about that is what I would hear. It would come to me secondhand.

ARENA: But you did know though that she was away?

IRWIN: I knew of it.

ARENA: I was just wondering, for example, if you saw the condition of the kitchen or the condition of the house, so to speak, while Mrs. Hannah Nixon was away and the men were looking after it--Richard and his father?

IRWIN: No, I didn't go in the house while she was away. But when their mother was home, Richard had to help do the housework. He had to do dishes and things of that nature too.

ARENA: Did you ever see him do that?

IRWIN: No, I didn't. My wife and Mrs. Nixon, they attended a Bible class held down in the gas office and they would be together down there and, of course, they would talk about their families and their children. We had three girls and they had five boys, I think it was. And they would talk about their families and things of that nature, so she knew that Mrs. Nixon had the boys help her with the work. Richard had a paper route, too, that he was busy on a part of the time.

ARENA: Do you recall if he delivered that by bike, car or on foot?

IRWIN: It was by bicycle and it was in the East Whittier area.

ARENA: Do you recall the period when the President working in the store was in charge of the fruit and vegetable department and would have to get them in Los Angeles [California]? Did that ever come to your personal . . .

IRWIN: No.

ARENA: I'm sure you knew of it, but did you see him doing that personally in any way?

IRWIN: Don did that. See Don, if I remember right, he would get up and go to the market and buy these vegetables and bring them out.

ARENA: You recall Donald did that too.

IRWIN: Donald. But I don't remember of Richard doing it, but Don did. He would get up early in the morning and go to the market and bring the produce back to the store.

ARENA: This might be a way-off question from your own personal knowledge, but then maybe it might not be. As you know, the President was related through his mother to the Milhouses and there were quite a few Milhouses around. I am thinking, for example, of Mrs. [Rose Olive] Marshburn whom you probably know and Mr. Oscar Marshburn. Was there a kind of special situation about the Nixons and the Milhouses that you know--that they used to get together, for example, for annual reunions? Did you see that sort of family get-together among them or you just didn't pay attention? I was just wondering if you did notice?

IRWIN: I didn't pay attention.

ARENA: But you were aware of it?

IRWIN: I would read in the paper occasionally about the Milhouses and Nixons where they would have a party. They would get together, I know.

ARENA: I am thinking really of the period before the President got into politics and became famous. We'll say before World War II. Was that kind of generally known? Were they one of the special families or were they just one of the old families and nothing special about the Milhous side?

IRWIN: Not that I know of. I don't know anything special about them any more than the Nixons were special. They were a family--Mrs. Hannah Nixon was a Milhous, and the [Franklin]

Milhouses lived in that big house there on South Painter [Avenue]. They built a brand new house down there and in that day it was quite an elaborate house, the size.

ARENA: This would be the house of the grandfather where Hannah grew up?

IRWIN: Yes.

ARENA: Mr. Franklin Milhous owned. And you recall that house very well?

IRWIN: Oh, yes, and Mrs. [Rose Olive] Marshburn.

ARENA: You know just again a stab in the dark here. I have seen pictures and maybe you have too of Mr. Orville Espolt showing on the Nixon ranch, Franklin Milhous I mean, showing a black driving a team of horses. Also I have seen with Mr. Espolt a picture of Hannah attending one of the Whittier elementary schools where there are two blacks also in the picture. It was a small group. One thing I am wondering, did you happen to know any of these blacks who would go back to that period around 1900 or what might have happened to them because now, of course, the interest in black history, it would be interesting to know what happened?

IRWIN: No, I didn't know anything about those. I really didn't know the Milhouses too well. I knew who they were when I'd see them; I knew there were the Milhouses. I knew the Marshburns and that Mrs. [Rose Olive] Marshburn was a Milhous, but as far as being personally intimately acquainted with the Milhouses, I wasn't.

ARENA: Going back to your personal recollection of the President's days in high school, and we realize he was not one of your personal students, but he was one of your students in the sense that you were a member of the faculty. What do you recall about him?

IRWIN: Well, the thing I recall, the outstanding thing about him, was his ability to deliver a speech. Now he gave the speech--I've heard him give several speeches--he gave the speeches in here to the student body in the auditorium.

ARENA: That's the speech on the Constitution in the yearbook of Whittier High School by which he won the oratorical contest?

IRWIN: Whittier High School. And his ability to deliver that, you would think he was a man forty or forty-five years old and had been a lecturer all his life, the way he would present the thing. You've heard him talk on the television and so forth, it's just like that, very positive, and I just marveled at his ability

to deliver that speech. He never repeated himself, he never stuttered around about it, but he gave that speech, and it was all by heart.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, since you did know him as a public speaker way before he became President, what other similarities or differences would you cite? I am thinking of the way of his delivery, in the way of his clarity. Did you see him speak without notes and that sort of situation? Whatever you could make in the way of comparisons to the young high school orator and the present day President as a speaker.

IRWIN: If he had any notes, you couldn't see them and wouldn't know it. They were on the podium and nobody could see them. As far as I watched him, I never noticed him ever refer to any notes in any way when he was speaking. He might have had them as far as I know, but I never did see any notes because they were hidden and you couldn't see anything on the podium anyway. But he would look right out at the audience . . .

ARENA: Just as he does today.

IRWIN: Just like he did in his last news cast, yes. He just spoke right out of his head and heart and give the speech without any problems whatsoever. I think, and this might be wrong, but I recollect somewhat that he tried out for the football team down there. Now he might have been a manager of the team.
[End of tape]