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Melville Charles Rich (October 26, 1971, first interview)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. MELVILLE CHARLES RICH

October 26, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview with Mr. Melville Charles Rich of Whittier, California. The date is October 26, 1971, Arena interviewing. May we begin, Mel, by my asking you where and when you were born?

RICH: I was born in Whittier, July 3, 1913.

ARENA: Which happens to be the exact year of President Nixon.

RICH: That's right.

ARENA: And would you go into your educational background, including the early years up through college, in a summary fashion?

RICH: Well, I went to school here, of course. The first school was the Broadway School, which later became the Lincoln School. Then to the old Bailey School where they took, I guess it must have been, the fifth and sixth grades. And then from there to the John Muir [Junior High] School, where they had the seventh and eighth, and then to Whittier High School. Then I spent my freshman year at the University of Notre Dame, my sophomore year at Loyola University, and my junior and senior years back at the University of Notre Dame.

ARENA: And what is your present position?

RICH: Managing Editor of The Daily News.

ARENA: Now may I ask you in general, and then we'll go into detail, as much as time will allow for this interview, but in general, where have your paths--yours and President Nixon's--crossed, over the years?

RICH: Well, we were in Whittier High School together for two years, his junior and senior years, my sophomore and junior years. He went to Whittier College. I was not closely associated with him then, but we would meet occasionally. We knew each other. Of course, when he went to Duke [Law School] we were out of touch. He came back to Whittier and he served as, well, I guess the title was Deputy City Attorney or Assistant City Attorney, and by then I had taken a job with The Daily News, then called the Whittier News. Among my assignments were occasionally attending the city council meeting, and I became acquainted with him through that position he had. Then, meanwhile, I had joined the Whittier 20-30 Club, which was a young business and professional men's organization, which no longer exists, and he also joined, so we were 20-30 Club members together. I guess until the time he departed for the service, I believe it was, or Washington . . .

ARENA: First, I believe, he went into the OPA [Office of Price Administration] in Washington, D.C.

RICH: Right. Then, of course, I didn't see him again until he came back to Whittier to campaign for the office of congressman. Since then, of course, it has just been off and on meetings, by chance, mostly. I have covered him on a number of occasions, of course.

In 1955, I guess it was, he was the Vice President of the United States and I decided to take my family on a trip. I guess the oldest was our daughter, who was then about sixteen, and I decided that on our itinerary we should go to Washington. I had informed the congressman of our district at the time that I was coming, [Patrick J.] Hillings, but I hadn't told Mr. Nixon. I didn't expect him to even be available for any time. But when we arrived in Washington at our hotel, here was a note to call the Vice President. And I remember that. The desk clerk said, "I have a message here for you to call the Vice President." I said, "The Vice President of what?" Of course, in Washington there was only one Vice President. I certainly didn't expect to hear from him. Well, when we got into our room, Dick called me and insisted that we come and visit him at his office, which we did. He was very generous with his time, and I appreciated it very much, the attention he gave our children. My children are more important than I am, as far as I'm concerned. I appreciated the amount of time he devoted to explaining to them the functions of the government, his job, et cetera. Then he turned us over to one of his aides, who spent the next three days with us.

I was also attending a conference, representing the City of Whittier, a tree conference, believe it or not. I'm not an

expert on trees, but I was on the Parks and Recreation Commission, whose National conference was going on there. So, since I was going to Washington, they decided I should represent the Recreation Commission and the City of Whittier at the conference, and I did. And I was very faithfully attending daily sessions, and Mrs. [Billie A.] Rich and the three children were being escorted around Washington, seeing all the major points of interest. We did enjoy luncheon one day in the Senate dining room. Most of the time during the daytime I was in session at the conference. I found it extremely interesting, because the problems being discussed applied to Whittier, and because of that I probably attended that conference more faithfully than any other before or since. As I say, I'll never forget the incident when we did check in and the clerk said, "The Vice President wants you to call him." Mr. Nixon was far from my mind. I didn't really feel that I wanted to impose upon him in any way. But it turned out real fine, and was an experience, I can guarantee you. My children have never forgotten it.

ARENA: Still sticking to this general resume, your direct contact with the President, was there any social activity outside the school, whether it was high school or college? Did you double-date together? Did you attend football games and affairs like that? And, continuing on, did you visit his family; did he visit your family? Was there that type of a personal contact? And did you ever see him in any plays, either the ones on the college level, and then the Community Theater?

RICH: I forgot to mention that, too. I was involved in the Whittier Community Theater. At that time it was called the Whittier Community Players. I was strictly a backstage person. I had no real dramatic ability, and occasionally in a mob scene they would cast me, but most of the time I was moving sets and props and so forth, and I got interested in that organization through my sister, who was for a good many years on the board.

ARENA: Could I ask you her name, Mel?

RICH: Yes. Her name was Mrs. Elsie Caylor, and she is now deceased. So I became interested through her in giving a helping hand to what I thought was a worthy organization that needed a little more, in my case, muscle than they had, so I helped move a few sets and pull a few curtains, and I think I can remember on two occasions at that time when they needed a rather hefty number of stand-ins, you might say, on stage; so that was, at that time, the limit of my public performance; never any words to speak, which suited me fine. And then, from that interest I remained active in the Community Theater and later served as the president of the board of directors, and even later had a couple of speaking parts, of no consequence.

But yes, to my memory, I did not work on the play at which Mr. Nixon met the now Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon, however. I don't recall that, at all.

ARENA: I believe the name of the play might have been, "The Dark Tower".

RICH: That's what it was, and I don't remember . . . I may have been busy with something else at the time. I was of course, working at The Daily News. I was also covering sports at that time. They used to produce their plays on Friday and Saturday, and those generally were good football nights when I was busy at something else, so for a period of time I didn't have much time to devote to them during the actual performance of the play. Most of my work was on the scene ahead of time.

ARENA: Well, I would like to cover that a little more in detail, anyway, so we have an idea of how that theater and the Community Players worked, so that we can have a better idea of what the President's role in it was, since you were so directly involved. And how about this other business of double-dating, or home contact with the President?

RICH: No, the only social relationship that we probably had was that in the 20-30 Club. We were a great social organization. All young fellows, all young-marrieds, most of us, or not married at that time, which was probably my case. I didn't get married until 1939, so I was probably single. But I don't recall that I ever missed any of their social parties, and we had quite a few. We had to do that, I guess you might say, to appease the wives, because our activity in the club kept us out. Well, we met on Tuesday night and we generally had a board meeting some other night, and some project some other night, so those who were married had to keep peace at home, and we would plan and carry out a social night where the wives or girl friends were present, too. And that would be probably the limit of my social relationship with him.

ARENA: When we do get to that point, though, I will ask you such things as: Do you recall the President's role in the social activity? For example, did he play the piano? Was he married or was he dating at that time, and who his dates were, and so forth; and to maybe give this a little more organization as we go along, bearing in mind that we're not going to cover all this in this first interview, I'll go back chronologically, and then where we leave off is where we'll begin in subsequent interviews, if that sounds agreeable.

RICH: Yes.

ARENA: In the earlier period, then, from the standpoint of direct contact, would be the high school level.

RICH: That's right.

ARENA: I believe you said he was one year ahead of you.

RICH: Yes, he was.

ARENA: And you only attended the school two years.

RICH: He only attended two years.

ARENA: Oh, that's right. He had come from Fullerton [California].

RICH: Right.

ARENA: That means that, in that sense, you were there together one year actually on the campus. But to make sure, before we go into that--that would be a natural starting point--had you in any way come into contact with other members of the family? For example, do you recall going into the Nixon market where his father . . .

RICH: Yes. It was in East Whittier, which made it convenient as far as I was concerned, whenever I had to go to the market.

ARENA: Where were you living at the time?

RICH: We were living in the northeastern part of Whittier on what is Haviland Avenue, right at the foothills of Turnbull Canyon.

ARENA: Beverly Boulevard and Haviland Avenue, right there.

RICH: Close to it. That's correct. But on occasions, why yes, if we were headed toward East Whittier, we would stop at the Nixon market.

ARENA: Would you describe now, from the best of your recollection, the physical setting of the store, and giving the date about when you're describing, and the surrounding area? I'm sure it's nothing like it is today.

RICH: That's true. It sat pretty much in the middle of citrus property, mostly oranges. It was a typical market of its day, without all of the modern conveniences that have since been developed. As I remember the place, they had, I guess you would even call them a check stand then. I don't remember what we did call 'em, but that was near the entrance, but sort of in the center of the store, surrounded by shelves of groceries, a produce department, and meat; and of course, the bread and cracker and cookie counters. Of

course, we didn't have anywhere near the different merchandise in the markets in those days, but it was rather typical of most of the stores that I had become acquainted with. We traded at Orcutt's [Market], which was in uptown Whittier here, not too far from where we sit; as a matter of fact, just across the alley here. And they were very much alike in many respects, the way they were put together and planned and arranged. So it was typical of its day, I guess you would say.

ARENA: Could you see the family living quarters, if you can recollect?

RICH: I don't remember that you could see--if you could the door was probably closed--but I don't recall that it was in view when you were in the store.

ARENA: Do you recall it being always crowded, or just straggling, sort of, customers?

RICH: No, not always crowded. As I say, it was a country-type store, and I imagine they had their peaks, when there were too many customers and not enough help, and then an hour or two earlier or an hour or two later there were too many employees and not enough customers.

ARENA: Possibly you didn't know the President directly at that time, but did you know from recollecting a little later on, what he was doing, if anything, when you were in the store? Was he ever waiting on you, for example?

RICH: I wouldn't want to say. I don't believe that he did, no.

ARENA: Or do you recall the boys--this would be the President, as well as his younger brother, [Francis Donald Nixon] Don, and then there would be a very young brother who was born just around the time the President graduated from high school, 1930. That would be Edward [Calvert Nixon]. Now, do you recall those boys, particularly?

RICH: Well, Donald and I were perhaps even better acquainted than Dick, because Dick was away from Whittier much of the time. Don, I guess I can say, I came to know fairly well. He also was in the 20-30 Club. And later on he operated the family store and expanded from that, and I've always kept pretty good track of his growth, and was very sorry for any failures that did occur to him, because I always liked Don very much, and he had a lot of misfortune befall him. But I guess the last time I really spent any time with Don was when a group of us here in Whittier made, a good many years ago, I believe it was a trip with the Metropolitan Water District. He and I ended up as roommates on the trip. They paired you off in a dormitory-type structure out near Parker Dam.

ARENA: Near what city in California is Parker Dam?

RICH: That's in Arizona. It's right near the California-Arizona border. Nevada isn't too far away from there, either. And this trip included sort of an inspection tour of the Metropolitan Water District's facilities.

ARENA: Speaking of contact with other members of the family, do you recall the first-born brother who died, Harold [Samuel Nixon]?

RICH: No.

ARENA: And the youngest fellow, who would have been in between Edward and Donald, Arthur [Burdg Nixon], who died as a very young boy?

RICH: No.

ARENA: You didn't know those other two at all?

RICH: No. As a matter of fact, it has only been in recent years that I have become acquainted with Edward. He, too, was gone from Whittier much of the time. And, well, Don was the one that was around here for a number of years, and this is where his business was, so I really got to know him better than any of them.

ARENA: Did you and Don, possibly, have any classes together anywhere along the line?

RICH: No. He is younger than the President.

ARENA: Yes.

RICH: No, I don't recall that I ever did have a class with him. They pretty well grouped you by your class in school. In other words, all the juniors together and all the seniors together, and so forth. My only recollection of Don in high school is that he was a big kid, and he came from East Whittier, and it always seemed to me that most of the kids who came from East Whittier were big. Two or three of our best athletes in high school were from the East Whittier Intermediate School. One of them was John Arrambide, and if I may inject right now, it might be well, if you don't have John on your list to be interviewed, he might be a good one to interview, because John, too, went to Whittier College and he was in my class. John is at Mt. San Antonio College.

ARENA: Now?

RICH: Yes. And John--of course I'm prejudiced--in my estimation is probably THE finest all-around athlete we ever had at Whittier High School.

ARENA: And he was from East Whittier.

RICH: Yes.

ARENA: Did Dick himself participate in sports, do you know?

RICH: Not in high school, I think primarily because of lack of time. If my memory serves me correctly, he--I know he was working at the market--almost every morning had to go to Los Angeles [California] to pick up fresh produce, vegetables and fruit for the market. Of course, he was a very studious fellow, and any spare time he had I guess he devoted to his studies. I might say that in my early acquaintance with him I resented him for two reasons. One is I was primarily interested in sports. Although I was never a great athlete, I went out for everything; and secondly, I was not a real good student. And of course, he devoted no time to sports, not having any to give, which you may say is one reason for a gap, and the other is that he was such a good student, that I was very resentful of all the A's that he could knock down, and I couldn't earn any, and this created a bit of resentment on my part, and with others who were in school with me at the time, also. He was an extraordinary public speaker, and there would be another subconscious resentment I'd have, because I was absolutely fearful of ever getting up before TWO people. Although I did take public speaking in school, I never did really overcome that fear until a good many years later.

ARENA: Was that taught on the high school level, Mel?

RICH: Yes.

ARENA: Public speaking?

RICH: Yes.

ARENA: And if I could go back, excuse me, to John Arrambide for a moment, since Coach [Wallace J.] Newman brought the name up and made the same suggestion you did. You're the first source that he came from East Whittier. Would you happen to know if he knew the President at East Whittier?

RICH: At East Whittier? I couldn't tell you that for a fact, but I would be very much amazed if he didn't.

ARENA: What year did he belong to?

RICH: John was just a year behind Mr. Nixon. He was in my class. We graduated in 1931, and Dick graduated from high school in 1930.

ARENA: And Arrambide, if I'm not mistaken, went on to Whittier College.

RICH: At Whittier College I know they knew each other, because John was an Orthogonian, which is a men's society that Dick had considerable to do with, one of the founders, if not THE founding person of it. Dick, of course, was on the football squad; and John was, probably without question, the outstanding member of the football team.

ARENA: I wonder if I could digress for a moment here to help get some of the setting of East Whittier in which the President grew up after he came from Yorba Linda [California]. And I assume, by the way, you had no personal contact at all with the Yorba Linda years.

RICH: Not a bit.

ARENA: Of course, I know you know about it indirectly, but I just wanted to make sure of that. But what was the attitude, including your own, of those people out there in East Whittier? Were they considered more rural? Were they considered lower economically? Just how were they considered by the members of the inhabitants living in Whittier at the time, and was there any counter-attitude or reaction that you can think of, of the people in East Whittier regarding the people in Whittier? Any notion, for example, that the people of East Whittier thought that the upper class, so to speak, lived in Whittier? I'm taking advantage, frankly, of your overall sophistication and your background in asking this question. I could not, obviously, ask this of just anyone, but I can't help but take advantage of your overall background and interest in history in asking you that, especially social history.

RICH: Yes. Point number one: We were never associated with each other, of course, until we reached the high school years, and most of us, I would say, in Whittier--me, I can speak personally--had a bit of resentment for anybody who came from East Whittier, South Whittier, Pico Rivera (then Pico and Rivera), Santa Fe Springs, et cetera, because they were interlopers as far as we were concerned. They were coming to OUR high school, Whittier High School. It just happened to be in Whittier, but there was THAT resentment.

ARENA: To establish the historical fact here, at that time it was the only high school, unlike the present time.

RICH: That's right, serving the entire area. And as far as any economic standards were concerned, I always figured

that the people in East Whittier were better off than most of us in Whittier, because they owned good pieces of land; that is, most of them did. And we kind of put everybody in the same class, and in a way, I guess you could say, I was a little bit envious of most of them who came from East Whittier. I always figured they were pretty well off. And here again was the interesting fact, in that we had no school buses at that time, so most of the kids who came from a distance had automobiles, and they were the ONLY ones who had automobiles. To me at that time it was a sign of wealth, which it no longer is, but it was to me.

ARENA: Do you recall if the President himself--I just don't recall what the law was--did drive in his own car during the high school years?

RICH: I don't recall that he did. I don't know how he would get back and forth to school if he did not, unless somebody in his family provided it. A lot of us rode bicycles, too. A good many of us who had to travel any real distance to high school rode a bicycle. I did infrequently, only when I was late. I could hurry a little bit--it was all downhill from my house. I didn't live too far to walk and generally did walk, and there were numbers of us who lived in that part of town who went to high school together, and usually went to school together. We would walk it. But East Whittier to me was. . . . There were a good many of the new families that lived there, as well as others; so, as I say, anybody who came from East Whittier. . . . I wasn't the least bit class conscious, but if I had been, I'd say that they were better off than most of us in Whittier. Some were, of course, and some were not.

ARENA: In view of the fact that I'm going to go into the religious setting of the community and the President--he was a member of the East Whittier Friends Church--do you mind if I ask you what your religious denomination is?

RICH: I'm Episcopalian, but I've always been rather broad-minded about religion. Being educated in a Catholic school probably contributed greatly to that, and then I found that most of us are striving for the same thing, and our beliefs aren't too far apart. We have a different way, I guess, but we're pretty much alike in that respect. And I could understand, very sincerely, during World War II, Quaker boys--and we had a few around Whittier--who declared themselves to be CO's [conscientious objectors]. I could understand that. Most of the people could not, and I could. To me, they showed a lot of courage, more than I had, really. And sort of privately I agreed with them, that wars don't really settle anything. It's probably the wrong way to approach international problems, but they came in for an awful lot of abuse. And if

I may speak very frankly, the [Oscar O.] Marshburn family came in for a lot of abuse, and this I didn't approve of at all, and I alienated myself, I'm sure, with a number of people by daring to defend them. Yet I could understand this, very strongly, that they may have been a little wiser than most of us; and as time goes on I'm more convinced of that than ever before. And so I'm really not a good one to compare religions, because . . .

ARENA: However, you can give YOUR viewpoint and I'd like to raise the question. How was it for a non-Quaker--in your case an Episcopalian--to grow up in a town, fairly recently as history goes, founded by the Quakers and where so many of the leading citizens were Quakers?

RICH: I've had no problems in my entire life relative to that at all. A friend of mine, Mary Frances Kennedy Friede, writes under the pen name of M. F. K. Fisher. She opened herself up to considerable criticism when she was describing her childhood in Whittier. Her father hired me at the newspaper.

ARENA: His full name, Mel?

RICH: Rex B. Kennedy. He was one of the great influences of my life, and I always considered him to be a very good friend, and also M. F. K. I still consider to be a friend, but she dwelled on the fact that the Quakers kind of looked down their noses at the Kennedys.

ARENA: To make sure, you're talking about the Kennedys of Whittier?

RICH: Right. And I never had that experience. Some of my friends were Quakers, and I don't think their parents really cared that I was NOT a Quaker. I mean, as long as you behaved yourself, conducted yourself properly. Well, I went to school with kids that I didn't even know were Catholics, for instance, until a good many years later. And this is the impression I got, and I went to school with kids that I didn't know were Quakers until years later. Tolbert Moorhead was one.

ARENA: And would I be correct in assuming, Mel, when you're talking about going to school, this is public school all the way through; no private school is involved here.

RICH: Yes, right. No, I assumed, falsely, that those who came from St. Mary's School here were Catholic, and most of them were, I'm sure, but I had a niece and nephew who went to St. Mary's and they're Episcopalians, also. But in those days religion really wasn't that vital to me. It isn't today.

ARENA: Mel, could you give a run-down, possibly, on comparing the breakdown of religious denominations around the time you were growing up, the twenties and thirties, as compared to what it is today, from the standpoint of percentage of Quakers, percentage of Catholics, percentage of Episcopalians and other Protestant denominations, or does that not come readily to mind?

RICH: Well, I can't give you any factual figures, but I'm sure there are fewer, on a percentage basis, Quakers here today than there were when I was growing up. There may even be fewer Catholics. I wouldn't say that that's a matter of fact, but there are many, many more Catholics than when I was a youngster; but there are many, many more people, too.

ARENA: Is it a fact, by the way, that about one-third of the population of Whittier is now made up of those of Mexican ancestry?

RICH: That would be a rather high figure, but it would be a substantial number who are.

ARENA: You have to be careful, of course, but assume that they would be Catholic, and therefore, compared to what it was back in the twenties and thirties, that might make a difference.

RICH: In speaking to some groups a few years ago, I used as an example, discrimination. Certainly there was discrimination in Whittier in the eyes of SOME people. And I said the person most discriminated against when I was a kid must have been the Mexican-American, because the fact that he was Mexican-American to many denoted, also, that he was a Catholic. And to many others who were politically conscious, it denoted he was a Democrat, so lots of people looked down their noses at a Mexican-American. Here again, some of my best friends in high school were Mexican-Americans. It's too bad, really, at least as far as I'm concerned, that we can't keep this attitude throughout life that we have when we're youngsters, because I never recognized a difference in skin color. Some of my friends were Japanese. And I never recognized the difference in religious faith. It is just too bad that as we grow older we find this difference that really is non-existent. It isn't that important.

ARENA: Were you conscious of the fact that the Quakers in the history books come out really shining, from the standpoint of their having a tolerant attitude, from the standpoint of their being pro-self-government, in their almost innate make-up? I'm thinking, for example, of William Penn starting the colony of Pennsylvania, allowing a constitution,

and so forth. I was just wondering, would the Quaker community such as Whittier be at a disadvantage, in that they would be blowing their own horn, if they brought out what pretty well most U.S. history books do indicate, that the Quakers stood for, self-government?

If I could just stick to that broad question for a moment, the change of the social make-up of the community. In this case, Quaker as it was in the 1890's, as well as what was happening in the 1920's and '30's--obviously something was happening. It was not the same community, although the roots and the traditions were still there. One can't help thinking of similar changes in U.S. history; in particular, the founding of a community like Plymouth, Massachusetts, by the Puritan Pilgrims, and the changes that took place from the time they were Puritans to the make-up of Massachusetts today. Now, somewhere along the line it would be interesting to make a comparative study of a community such as Whittier and Plymouth, Massachusetts. But that's the sort of thing that was happening. Whittier was changing for many reasons, not the least being the influx of immigrants which, of course, is the history of the United States. But here it was a question of the rapidity with which it was changing. And the other thing that would make it distinctive, of course, would be the reaction of the so-called old guard, or the older citizens, to these new changes. But at any rate, it's important to notice that that was going on while the President was growing up. And as I mentioned earlier, he was a part of this, in the sense that he was the son of virtually a pioneer Quaker family, since his grandfather [Franklin Milhous] had come in 1897, only ten years after the formal founding. And I'm sure that those who founded the college, not allowing smoking, drinking or dancing, would have raised an eyebrow when the son of such a descendant was so instrumental in bringing that change about. Anything else you'd like to bring up, Mel, about this climate in Whittier in which the President and you, since you were born in the same year, grew up together?

RICH: Well, to most of the city by far--when I say city I mean people--simple things were probably the most desired things at the time. We were a small group of people, pretty well surrounded by, well, you couldn't call them open areas because they were developed areas, oranges, avocados, walnuts and so forth, but as a kid, of course, we could roam through the hills here; they were wide open. They were owned, but we didn't know they were owned. And as a result it was a good many years before Whittier had any real park system, which the influx of people and the disappearance of open areas required, the development of more and more parks. In our day-to-day lives the simple things, here again, were important. I can remember when some family bought a new car, and gosh, that was big news. I get a big kick out of reading back through the files of the newspaper and reading items that a particular family just took delivery of a new Franklin automobile, or something. Not

an ad, but strictly a news story, because that was a big event. So Whittier was that type of community, really. We even saw horses downtown once in a while. There are still a few scattered evidences of the days of horses. I can show you a few rings that were built into paved curbings. They were put there for the express purpose of tying the reins of a horse, because lots of deliveries were made here by horse. I can remember as a youngster, the city trash collector. I guess he picked up a lot of rubbish, or what no t, but he drove a horse-drawn wagon. I used to have a standing joke with him. I'd always try to hitch a ride, and I'd ask him, "Turn up here", and he'd say, "Oh, let us go on," the reference being to turnips and lettuce and whatnot. "Are you going to turn up here," or "Let us go on another block." This sticks out in my memory. One of the big events of my life would be, usually Sunday after church was a picnic day, and we'd go out here to what is now a little stream of water; it was then the San Jose Creek, and the San Gabriel River, and have a family picnic. And we weren't alone. I mean, there were many other families there, too. But these were all the simple things in life that were important to us then. Now as we get older, I get very critical of the younger generation because the simple things in life don't mean much to them. Or at least, it isn't evident that it does. I'm sure my kids would never get a big thrill out of a picnic, but I did. I mean, I looked forward to them. I wanted Sunday school class to get out and church service to get over so we could go on a picnic. And this is what we did.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

RICH: Of course, the easiest mode of transportation was the rapid transit system, which we did have, which was the so-called red cars or Pacific Electric Railway, that came right up to the heart of town, right out here, and many, many people took that to and from Los Angeles. We bemoan the fact now that we don't have a rapid transit system. We had it then and it died for lack of patronage as time went on, but that, too, was a bit of excitement, when my mother would dare to take three kids on the red car to Los Angeles and back. She might want to do a little shopping over there, or something.

ARENA: How long did it take, when you say rapid transit?

RICH: As I remember, it was about forty-five minutes to an hour. It would depend on how many stops he had, and they did make stops; it wasn't a through service. It stopped, some days, many times between here and Los Angeles. As long as there was room on the car, the conductor would stop and pick up more passengers. But I think it was probably hourly service. And I can remember, dimly, one family telling me about the time they went to Los Angeles on the street car to a theater, and I think the last car left Los Angeles for Whittier at midnight,

and they were late. I don't remember now how they got home, but somebody had to be called over here to come and get them over there. That was one thing.

Another thing that sort of made Whittier an isolated community, there were times when the bridge on Whittier Boulevard was the only link by automobile that we had, directly, between here and Los Angeles. There were times when the winter storms would wash out the bridge. At that time, we were pretty well isolated as far as Los Angeles was concerned. And later on they opened up Beverly Boulevard, and still later Washington Boulevard and a few others. I can remember fording the stream, I mean in an automobile. My father on his job had to have a car. So I can remember an automobile from the beginning of my memory, of some sort. It was fortunate a good many times, I'm sure, that it was high-wheeled, because cars in those days were, because that way you could ford the stream out here and get to Los Angeles, if that's where you were going.

ARENA: California is noted now for being the state of automobiles and not so much for local bus transportation. Was this not the case, though, when you were growing up, before World War II?

RICH: Well, I have talked to a good many classmates from the high school, and we have discussed the fact that at the time we were in high school there were very, very few of our classmates who had automobiles. I didn't own an automobile until I got out of college. And my brother did, I remember, when he was in high school, because he had worked and saved his money and bought a car. There were others who did. There were some who did have cars. In most cases, they were kids who were coming from a greater distance to school, and it was either somebody in the family bringing them, or getting them a car to drive to school.

The school district at that time paid mileage, and then I guess that had reached a point where it got to be rather expensive, so in lieu of paying mileage, they started buying buses. Athletic teams were hauled to and from different cities by private family automobiles. I mean, the parents of kids on the team were asked, "Would you take a carload of kids?" And this was the way you got from one place to another. This, I'm sure, became a problem to many families, so when it came time to vote some tax money to buy buses, why, they were all for it, because it was quite a disturbance in the family, I'm sure. I'm not sure that this change has been for the good, either. We used to walk more. Nobody in my family would take me to school unless it was pouring down rain. But even then, I was issued a raincoat because it might be raining when I got out of school, and nobody was going to be there to pick me up. We didn't need a two-car garage, because most families had but one.

ARENA: And the distance between the school and your home, the present distance from Haviland to Whittier High?

RICH: Oh, one mile. But as time went on, more and more kids got automobiles. We went through the hot rod craze. Well, first it was the stripped-down craze. That was an automobile that the body had been removed and there wasn't much left except the engine and a couple of seats, and then we went through the hot rod craze. Now it amazes me to go down to the high schools. There are cars by the hundreds parked around them and kids drive Cadillacs, you know, many of 'em, and I almost could say that this is a society of lots, really. We had, for instance, a German girl visit us one summer three or four years ago, with whom we still correspond. She lives in West Germany, and she was absolutely amazed when we went by Whittier High School one day during summer school, and there were all these automobiles. She wondered what special event was there, and I said, "Oh, nothing, they're just having school in the summertime. You can take classes in the summer." She said, "Why are all the cars here?" And I said, "Well, they belong to the teachers and students." She said, "Students!" I said, "Oh, yes." And her family didn't even own an automobile in Germany, never had, and like she said, her mother and father probably never would. Now she has since married, and our influence on West Germany has shown great effect--she and her husband, of course, have an automobile. But she was absolutely flabbergasted by the fact that so many young kids owned cars. I said, "When they get to be sixteen . . ." It's just like, when I was a kid you got your first pair of long pants. Now when you get to be sixteen we start talking automobiles. I have a thirteen-year-old grandson who's still got three years to go, and he has his eye on the car I drive right now. [Laughter] It has what Chrysler calls a Henny engine, and they take those out and put 'em in hot rods, or dragsters, they call 'em, I guess, and he knows a little bit about that Henny engine. It's a pretty hot engine, and he keeps telling me, "Poppa, you just hang on to that car. I'll be sixteen one of these days." Well, of course, this sometimes is called progress. I'm not always sure it's progress. But most everything we do is for convenience sake.

ARENA: It's probably at the rapidest rate in history.

RICH: I remember when George Allen came to Whittier from Morningside College, and his first criticism of the Whittier College football squad was the fact that--he polled them--his figures showed that all but two had automobiles. And he didn't like that for a minute. He would rather have these football players walking, and this disturbed him. But of course, instead of him changing all the kids, why, the kids changed George. I mean, he had to live with it, and they weren't about to give up their automobiles. They'd have probably quit the squad if he had had an order out. But I remember George moaning to me--we became friends right off the bat--that he polled the squad and all but two had automobiles. And this was a great issue to him. Healthwise, it probably hasn't helped. I mean,

we come up with developments in the field of medicine that make us live longer, but I'm not sure we're as healthy as we used to be, or as physically fit as we used to be. My father-in-law, for instance, lived into his eighties; he was a farmer. And I hate to admit it, but the day before he died, he could have put me on my knees out there if I tried to keep up with him, doing the chores that he had on his farm. I'm sure, because I used to watch him and he was just accustomed to good physical output, and I've become more or less unaccustomed to it.

ARENA: Speaking of the question of old age and activity, the President's grandmother, for sure--and possibly you recall her personally, Mrs. Almira Milhous--was known to be active to the day of her death. She lived to a ripe, old age, and her activity consisted of looking after the chickens and looking after her garden. Is it your view that the farm family is much better suited to, and farming life is a much better situation for, the older person than the city family and the city older person?

RICH: Yes. Of course, the older I get the more rural I get, I guess you could say. And I yearn to live on a farm. I figure I could live longer if I lived on a farm. My grandfather was a carpenter and building contractor; and yet, in his later years, after he had reached an age when he couldn't do that he had to live on a piece of ground, and as long as he was physically able to take care of it, he had his own little old farm, which consisted of chickens and a few domestic usable items like turkeys and ducks, and he lived to be eighty-two. And my father, who I always thought was rather physically fit, didn't make it to the age of sixty. And yet, I see people who have really not been accustomed to physical activity much of their lives, still live to a ripe, old age. That may be an inherited characteristic; I don't know.

ARENA: On the question of the attitude of living on a farm or in the city, comparing this or noting for a moment the attitudes between East Whittier and Whittier, what about the attitudes between East Whittier and Whittier together, as compared with Los Angeles? Do you recall wishing you had been brought up in Los Angeles? If you recall the President's own attitude, maybe on the high school level, was there the notion that they had a much more interesting and exciting life in the city, and can you recall specifically wishing that you didn't live in Whittier, that you lived in the big city?

RICH: No. All my life I've had pity for people who had to live in a big city. I really have. And I came to know a number of people when I was much younger who lived there, and I felt pity for them. And Los Angeles wasn't really that big at that time. It was big, but not as big as it is now.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, Mel--and you probably know this, too--but when the President's father [Francis Anthony Nixon] retired, so to speak, from East Whittier, when he left his store, and the date was 1947, he went to work on a farm. He didn't go to a city, or anything like that, and I mean WORK on a farm, and the farm was in Menges Mills [Pennsylvania], and you might be aware that's where Edward Nixon finished his school years.

RICH: Right.

ARENA: As you say, that's your attitude. Is that a fairly prevalent attitude of Whittierites in general, or is that too broad a question?

RICH: I'm not in a position to speak for all of them, but this certainly would be true of myself and my brother. My brother was very young when they moved to Whittier, only two. He and I have felt this. As a matter of fact, we discuss now that when we retire we're going to move. I mean, we've got to get away from the people. There's too many. Now, we may change our mind after we move and come back, but a metropolitan area to me is not a healthy area. It isn't, for lots of reasons. Smog is just one of them. There are lots of other reasons that I don't like a metropolitan area.

ARENA: If I could give a real historical perspective to this, and you might recall this back in your old U.S. history days, [Thomas] Jefferson hated the city, didn't want the U.S. to become an industrial city, whereas [Alexander] Hamilton was the pro-city man, especially since he was an admirer of England, and England was the country that was headed toward the industrial revolution in big cities. Would you say this is an old American problem, an old American question, and maybe it's still basically the same thing, that the Jefferson-Hamilton pro- and anti-city business hasn't left us, or is it more complicated than that?

RICH: Well, the monetary advantages may have become too important in this country. You can't live without money, I grant you, but sometimes I think we put too much emphasis on earnings. Those opportunities you're only going to find around a big city. I owned and operated a newspaper in a very small community in Idaho for a period of a year, and I was very interested in the 1970 census. It has seven fewer people today than the 1940 census produced. And I can understand why, because it's still a rural area. It's still farm and agriculture, and a young person really doesn't have the opportunities there unless Dad turns the farm over to him. Well, if Dad has seven children, he wouldn't have much to turn over, to divide equally seven ways. But I can understand why young people do leave.

I may be entirely wrong about Mr. [Richard] Nixon, but in both cases where he has bought two homes, he is sort of secluded, and I think the old farm yen. . . . He may not be conscious of it, and I may be entirely wrong, but I feel that he likes to live around space rather than right next door. I'm not sure he enjoyed his apartmenthouse living when he lived in New York. Of course, he did a lot of traveling at the time, but I'm not so sure that this hasn't come back to him. He and I are about the same age, and I know I have a yen to get out somewhere where my neighbor doesn't look right in my window. And yet, if you're a young person, where are you going to go for the great advantages of progress, except to the big city? I mean, that's where everything is, and you're not going to be content to stay home and settle for less. We're pretty well taught that we need money to provide the things that other people do have, and so this is the way we go.

I told my daughter who has four boys that I'm just awfully sorry that she and her husband aren't just nuts about farming, because I'd like to see them brought up on a farm. Now I have a son, however, with three children, and he prefers the spacious areas to the metropolitan areas. He is now living in Stone Mountain, Georgia, on a piece of ground that is probably an acre or better. Twenty-three pine trees, and his neighbors aren't right next door to him; they're next door to him but they aren't. He likes the open spaces, and Stone Mountain, Georgia, has got lots of it. We visited them this summer, and I was very much impressed. I kind of liked it there for that reason. I mean, they weren't all jammed together. Now, downtown Atlanta, of course, is entirely different. Stone Mountain is just a few miles from Atlanta, and he works in downtown Atlanta, but this had great appeal to me, and it does to him.

We carried the family ecumenical attitude to great extremes. He graduated from Brigham Young University and he married a Mormon girl. They lived in Salt Lake [City, Utah] for a couple of years before he took a job that brought him to Southern California, and then they lived here in Whittier. He was always anxious to get back out to a less-developed area. Salt Lake is highly developed, but they lived out on the outskirts, where, within fifteen minutes, he could have his fishing line in a nice stream and catch some trout. Where he is in Georgia, it's very much the same way, and this appeals to him. As I say, I don't know if Mr. Nixon is even conscious of this, but his desire for seclusion. . . . You don't want to be stuck way out, SO far away, but the automobile and other modes of transportation bring everything closer, so you can still live out a distance and get a doctor when you need one.

ARENA: Would it be accurate to say that the present location of the President in San Clemente [California], with the availability of a big city like San Diego [California], and another big city like Los Angeles, would be more the equivalent of his and your youthful period, where Whittier was very

much like San Clemente is today, and you would have open space between you and Los Angeles, and you would have the best of two worlds?

RICH: That's right. When I was a boy, my parents built the first house on Haviland Avenue, and they selected . . .

ARENA: Excuse me, when you say built, that is a very frequently used term of many of the pioneers, like Grandfather [Franklin] Milhous built the home in which the President and some others grew up, in the year 1897. Was that a case where he did the physical labor, along with fellow carpenters or fellow persons like that, rather than the idea of getting a contractor to build your own home and you say you built your home?

RICH: No.

ARENA: Did he actually do the building himself?

RICH: He had a contractor who was assigned certain parts of the house, and some of it my dad did himself.

ARENA: About when was the date?

RICH: 1919.

ARENA: That was pretty open country then, except possibly for what is now known as the Hatcher house, and maybe the Harvey house at the intersection of Painter [Avenue] and . . .

RICH: Beverly [Boulevard]. Yes, there were a few houses on Painter [Avenue], of course. We were the only house on Haviland [Avenue]. Now, Haviland is a divided street. It has an area where there is a lapse, and . . .

ARENA: Excuse me. One of the old members of the community, Miss Catherine Phelan, lives there now.

RICH: She lives right across the street.

ARENA: Oh, I didn't realize that.

RICH: Not when I was a youngster. They moved in later. That side of the street that she lives on was an orange and lemon grove when I was a kid.

ARENA: It goes way up into the hills.

RICH: Right across Turnbull Canyon Road there, which is now Beverly Boulevard, right up on the hill. You mentioned

earlier, I guess it was the Marshburns who noticed the characteristics relative to both his mother and father, and I, too, have noticed that in him. I was never really close to his father but from tales I've heard, he was very argumentative and had some fixed notions and was pretty well set in his ways. He loved to argue. And this I can see in Richard Nixon, and I can see some of his mother's peaceful serenity, sweetness, on occasions, in him, too. So I think he probably inherited from both sides of the family. Don [Francis Donald Nixon], as I remember, is not as argumentative as Dick could be. When we were in the 20-30 Club, we were an arguing society. We disputed actions of the board, the common members, and we used to do a lot of arguing. But he was president of the 20-30 Club during my term as a member, and I was on the other side of the fence. The group that elected him brought in a single slate, and to me that was most undemocratic, and they tried to avoid nominations from the floor, and they succeeded. I mean, they caught us flat-footed. [Laughter] But when they tried it again later--we used to elect a president every six months--we were ready for them. We ran a rebel slate and beat 'em. And this was all part of the fun. Of course, we were pretty serious at the time. But as I think back on it, they were some of the fun days of my life, when we were in 20-30 Club, because we were all young and vigorous and thought we were pretty wise, you know. I mean, we were in our early and middle twenties, and we were pretty wise people. We had answers to all the world's problems, and whatnot. So really, all his life, he's been, well, I guess what you would call a debater. That would be the best term to use.

ARENA: Maybe that would be a good time to lead into your first-hand contact with him, for the first time, on the high school level. Let us begin with that subject, Mel. Did you ever attend any of the high school debates in which the President participated? Will you describe, and take as much time as you care to, the whole business of his high school debating?

RICH: Yes. I attended them because I was required to, not by choice. I could think of nothing duller than to sit and listen to two students debate ANY issue, really. And I came to recognize in him, with resentment, a great ability that I didn't have. Now debating was a real major activity on the campus at the time. Preceding his enrollment in Whittier High School we had a student by the name of William Behnke. His family still lives around here, the parts of them that survive, and Bill Behnke was a very excellent debater and went far in the field, later became an attorney-at-law, went to Yale University, won a scholarship to Yale, if I remember correctly. Well, Bill Behnke had great appeal for me, because Bill Behnke also was an athlete. Bill was both an athlete and an outstanding student and debater. Debating at that time, as I say, was a real major activity and attracted great community interest, and we didn't

have too much going on around here to attract the community. No television, of course, to keep you home, and that sort of thing, so anything that involved the community and competition --I've thought of this--where there was going to be a winner and a loser, Whittier College on a per capita basis used to just draw tremendously, to such a degree, for instance--Whittier played all of its football games in the afternoon, no night-lighted fields--that they shut the stores down. Because, why not? Everybody was going to be at the football game. They aren't going to SELL anything, so they shut the stores down. My father, who was a great booster of Whittier College, organized a businessmen's group, which at first was called the Howling Hundred, because he got a hundred businessmen involved. They sat in a section with their wives and families and cheered for Whittier, of course.

ARENA: Not necessarily men who had graduated from the college, either.

RICH: Oh, no. Just members of the community.

ARENA: And would it be a correct observation to say that there was much more of that then than there is now?

RICH: Oh, it was tremendous. The community spirit was much, much greater. I mean, if Whittier was playing, that was the thing to do, go and root for the home team. Well, the same thing with a debater. If a Whittier youngster was debating somewhere, you went to give him the moral support that the community could give. So, yes, I remember Dick as a debater, a very good one, and I remember him and Merton Wray as students at the high school. We had to sit in the audience and listen to them when they were debating, getting ready to declare a school champion, someone who was going to go on to a regional speak-off, or something.

ARENA: And Merton Wray being the present Municipal Judge Merton Wray?

RICH: Yes.

ARENA: And when you say that these two were debating, would they always be on the same side?

RICH: No, they would be frequently opposed to each other. Anyhow, as I say, anybody that had any talent, anybody who could play the piano I didn't like, because I couldn't play the piano. Anybody who could toot a horn I didn't like, because I couldn't toot a horn. This is an envious streak that you might say I had for many, many years. I could play the drums--not very well, but I could play them. I could make noise with them, so I didn't envy the drummers. I mean, I envied the

fact that they were beating the drums when I felt that I should be.

ARENA: Was there a high school band during that period?

RICH: A very awful one. [Laughter]

ARENA: And did the President play in that?

RICH: I don't recall that he did. He may have, but I don't recall that he did. I didn't pay much attention to the band, because it wasn't very good, nor the orchestra. Incidentally, we're having our fortieth high school class reunion a week from next Saturday. I hope none of this becomes public before then, because some of the people who are there may have been in the orchestra, and it was lousy, I'll guarantee that. But now, of course, high school musical organizations are excellent. This is amazing progress that's been made in the high school. I guess we just didn't know how to. . . . Well, it just wasn't the in thing to be a part of the band or orchestra, and now it has become a more acceptable pastime or recreation. There are some great musical organizations.

ARENA: On the question of debating--and we'll tie this in, maybe, with extracurricular life in general--what were all the extracurricular activities in which a high school student, including the President, could participate at that point? Debating, the school band?

RICH: Well, we had debating, the school band, dramatics. We had a Spanish club, and I don't know if they have these any more or not, the English club for students that were going to go on to college and major in English. We had these various specialized activities that you could belong to. You could . . .

ARENA: What did you belong to, if I may ask?

RICH: Well, I was in the dramatics club. Here again, I was there for the purpose of trying to overcome a fear of standing up in front of people, and not for the purpose of becoming a Hollywood actor. That was of great concern to me, because I wanted to be a newspaperman, and I figured that somewhere along the way I'd have to overcome this fear of speaking to people, because that's where I'm going to get my bread and butter. And I don't know who suggested that I take all these courses, but I did. I took all that I could absorb.

ARENA: You didn't, by any chance, come into contact with the President on the high school level, as far as acting is concerned?

RICH: In drama, I can't remember that I did, no. It doesn't cross my mind that I did. I was never good enough to be cast in a play, I guess you could say, of any great consequence. I can remember one play where I was a member of the cast, and we went down and entertained the people at Metropolitan State Hospital [Norwalk, California]. And that's the only one that I can remember that I had any real part in. I was really a very timid individual. Lots of my friends wouldn't believe that, but I was, and I was absolutely petrified by people.

ARENA: I think you had lots of company, including yours truly, on the high school level. Shall we stop for a moment?