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Homer G. Rosenberger Jr. (November 19, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

HOMER G. ROSENBERGER, JR., M. D.

November 19, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Homer G. Rosenberger, Jr., M.D. [Doctor of Medicine] Today's date is November 19, 1971, Whittier, California, Arena interviewing. Dr. Rosenberger, would you mind beginning, so we can set the chronological period, with your date of birth and place of birth?

ROSENBERGER: I was born on January 31, 1913, in Whittier, California.

ARENA: Well, you might be aware that the President was born in that same year and in that same month, January, so that you are as contemporary as you can get, January, 1913. He was not born in Whittier, as you know, although he claims Whittier to be his home town. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the alma mater of the President, Whittier College, has a special tie with you and your family. Your grandfather, Absalom Rosenberger, was the president of the college. Would you spell his name, please, and indicate if he was a medical doctor or whatever his profession was, and the period during which he served as president?

ROSENBERGER: His first name is spelled A B S A L O M. He was President of Whittier College approximately 1915 to 1918 during the World War I years. He was a Quaker. He got his law degree from the University of Michigan back in the 1890's. Instead of practicing law for any length of time, he went directly into education. He was president of Penn College in Oskaloosa, Iowa, a Quaker college, for twenty years. My father came to Whittier College in 1902 as a professor of science. There were four faculty people at that time

and not very many students. My grandfather was greatly interested in Whittier College at that time. As a matter of fact, we uncovered some letters recently, written by my grandfather to my father in 1905. My father was still in Whittier. My grandfather had been extended an invitation that year to be President of Whittier College, in 1905. In the midst of the invitation and in the midst of his enthusiasm to come out here as president of the college, his wife became critically ill, my father's mother, and subsequently had died. These letters were details of her illness, her trip to the Mayo Clinic, an effort on my grandfather's part to keep his son out here until the end of the term, hoping that perhaps if she'd be able to come out to California it might help her health, or my father would be able to come back during the summer to see her. She died, so my grandfather could not come at that time, and the next opportunity to be president was in 1915.

ARENA: When did your grandfather die?

ROSENBERGER: 1934.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if he knew the President personally, if there ever was any direct contact, say maybe through alumni day appearances? The President graduated in 1934. He was not as famous in 1934 as later.

ROSENBERGER: My grandfather had a rather close contact with all the Quakers of the area. He was a prominent Quaker leader and knew the whole Nixon-Milhous family, I'm sure. And I would guess that he knew Richard, but I doubt that there was any close personal contact with Richard Nixon.

ARENA: On the question of papers, is there a single collection of your grandfather's papers? Would they possibly be with Whittier College, or would they still be with members of your family, if they do exist?

ROSENBERGER: We have them now, and somebody suggested that they might be of interest to the college when the facilities are available. They are beautifully written. He was a man with great understanding, my grandfather. His letters are quite exceptional.

ARENA: As you know, the President himself has had more than just a student's association with Whittier College. He was a student, but he also was an exceptional student in the sense that he served the highest student body office one could get. In addition to that, he served on the Board of Trustees and has mentioned his indebtedness to his Whittier College background. Would you know if Dr. Charles Cooper had access to these papers in writing the history of Whittier College?

ROSENBERGER: I don't think that he used these papers. I didn't know we had them until just recently. We were interviewed by Dr. Cooper at some length during his review of Whittier College history.

ARENA: Up to how long did your father teach at Whittier College and, if I may ask, is he still living?

ROSENBERGER: My father is not living. He died in 1940. He taught science for one year, 1902-1903, then he started medical school at the University of Southern California, attended medical school for two years there, and then went back to Rush Medical School where he graduated. Then after a year's internship at Cook County Hospital in Chicago [Illinois] he returned to practice in Whittier, I think it was in 1908, and lived here constantly from that time on.

ARENA: Climatically, that must have been quite a change, Cook County and Whittier, as well as possibly even politically. I don't know anything about the politics of Cook County other than what I've heard. But that must have been quite a contrast. Did you want to comment further on my comment, by any chance?

ROSENBERGER: I wouldn't know about Cook County in general. We did meet Big Bill [William Hale] Thompson one year, who was the Mayor of Chicago for many years. But the medical school in Chicago is a fine, old medical school. Rush [Medical School], I would gather, was not too involved with the politics of the times.

ARENA: Dr. Rosenberger, before we go on any further it might be helpful to kind of make a general summary picture at the outset of where your paths have crossed with those of the President up to now. We've already established that they go back before your time, in a sense that your ancestors, your grandfather in particular, must have had contact with the Milhous-Nixon family. What I would like to establish now in general is your contact with President Richard Nixon in a direct way, and then go back and review this in detail. We'll pick up the fine points of these associations after establishing them in general. This will serve as a kind of preview in case we don't finish the interview today. It will give us a basis on which to proceed, depending upon where we leave off. Can I just throw that question open to you? Think back from the very first time you had direct contact with the President. And by direct contact, this would include your attendance at the same school. And then in politics, not in detail, but if you did have any association with him in politics, say even attending the inauguration, certainly your recent encounter with him when the President's graduating class of 1934

of Whittier College was hosted at the White House. Just go over all those lightly.

ROSENBERGER: Being born about the same time in a small town, we knew each other from the early grades. The East Whittier Elementary School which he attended, I believe first in the Whittier area, was separate from our Whittier Grammar School, and yet there was a little overlap, so that I knew the Nixon boys and the Nixon family with their market to some degree. I was in the market many times and in a general way knew all of them, not in a very close way.

ARENA: This was from the very beginning, from the President's elementary school period. To make sure, this would not include, I presume, the Yorba Linda period.

ROSENGERGER: Right.

ARENA: The dividing date to help us here was 1922. That's when the family moved from Yorba Linda, looked around and finally settled down in East Whittier.

ROSENBERGER: In 1922 the President would have been nine. I think probably my dim recollections would go back to shortly after that. Knowing him distantly as a student at the East Whittier schools, particularly.

ARENA: Do you recall, although I didn't want to go into detail, but I'll just raise this question, then we'll keep going on a general basis and mention the other schools and the other areas of contact. But do you recall being in the same class with him in East Whittier?

ROSENBERGER: No. The East Whittier School and the Whittier grammar schools were separated so we were not in the same class.

ARENA: An East Whittier elementary school and a Whittier grammar school.

ROSENBERGER: Right.

ARENA: I didn't realize that.

ROSENBERGER: East Whittier elementary and grammar school. Aren't we talking about the same school?

ARENA: Yes. They're the same school.

ROSENBERGER: The East Whittier School which is now still the East Whittier School, is now seventh and eighth grades, but it went further back and involved

more grades originally. It was the only school. Just as we had maybe one or two grammar schools through the fourth grade, we all went to the fifth and sixth grade in Whittier in one school. We all went to seventh and eighth grade at John Muir Junior High School, and then to Whittier High School. The President and I were in the same class together for the first time as seniors in Whittier High School. I had attended Whittier High School my freshman and sophomore years, went to Harvard School in Los Angeles [California], a private school, my junior year, came back my senior year. The President came to Whittier High School from Fullerton High School his junior and senior years. So our paths first crossed in school our senior year in high school. We graduated together. The President was extremely active, as you know, in all parts of the school. I think so active that perhaps everybody knew him and he seemed to know everybody, and yet I doubt that anybody knew him very intimately. He was an extremely busy, active man. He was manager of the student body and involved in most things. Then when we graduated from Whittier High School, he went on to Whittier College and I went to Stanford University. I stayed home my sophomore year and attended Whittier College, and so again was in the same school class at Whittier College. Then I went back to Stanford for my junior and senior years.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, why did you elect not to spend all your four years at Whittier College, in view of the family background?

ROSENBERGER: I was tempted to stay at Whittier College. The appeal at Stanford University was great and I had premedical school ideas, and I ultimately went on to Stanford Medical School. It seemed like a logical progression. I basically stayed home my sophomore year for the same reason, though, that I could have considered staying home at Whittier College. I did have a close attachment to Whittier College. Many of my high school friends had gone on to Whittier College. My grandfather had been related and my father related to the college, was the basic reason I did come home my sophomore year. Then I went back and stayed on another four years after my A.B. [Bachelor of Arts] at Stanford, for my M.D. [Doctor of Medicine] degree.

ARENA: Of course, the sophomore year is the justification for your alumnus status.

ROSENBERGER: Yes, I'm an alumnus.

ARENA: I'm sure that most colleges do have something special like that, even if you have taught at some colleges but were not a student, you're considered an alumnus. I receive alumni mail from St. Joseph College where I just taught; I was never a student.

ROSENBERGER: I'm an alumnus of the University of Southern California when it comes to fund raising because I took some summer school courses there. An alumnus of Whittier College was a little different. There was a closer relationship. Whittier College was a small college of four hundred students. It was a home-town college. The majority of the students either lived in Whittier or they were raised in the environs of Whittier. They came from as far as Long Beach [California] and an occasional one from a great distance, but a very occasional one. Classmates were fairly close. The majority of them had been raised together, so that I had many classmates at Whittier College, even though I was there only a year, that I started school with in the first grade. So the relationship in a small college, small community college like Whittier College at the time, was closer. I still don't feel that I had a close relationship with the President, and I wonder if many students in college really did. He was an extremely busy man. Besides his jobs at the college, he worked at the grocery store. He was very busy, and highly respected.

ARENA: This characteristic of constant work on the high school level carried over on the college level as well.

ROSENBERGER: Yes. Looking over old annuals, I was most impressed by speeches that were quoted in the high school annual written completely in his junior and senior years, both--speeches in the political science vein as early as those years in high school. He was training himself in political science.

ARENA: Your wife, Mrs. Rosenberger, very thoughtfully brought those annuals with her this morning during the interview, and we read some excerpts and we had a chance to discuss those points. One of the speeches was the oratorical winning speech dealing with the U.S. Constitution. To finish up this matter of a general overall view of your direct contact with the President, now, we've gone up through the college level. Was there during the college level such contact as seeing him at football games, or seeing him appear in debates, or seeing him perform in college dramas? Did your association with Whittier College, whether you were a sophomore in attendance or not, because sometime you might have been down on weekends. Do you recall any contacts such as those?

ROSENBERGER: Those contacts were general. I saw him in each of those areas.

ARENA: Good. Because I'll want to go back and refer to your impressions of those contacts. Is there anything else on the college level or high school level, or previous level? Not particular incidences but contacts, for example, on a social level. Do you ever recall on any of

these school levels going out on double or group dates with the President? Did you ever see him in that context?

ROSENBERGER: No, I don't think that I was very active that way, anyway. I was deeply involved in premedical laboratory courses that required a lot of time. I don't think that I was very socially active. I rather believe that he wasn't socially very active, either, during the sophomore year, if you're talking about dates and this sort of thing. He was socially very active in the sense that he was involved in every part of the school activities, but not particularly dating.

ARENA: I just wanted to be sure. Following this period, the school era, did you have occasion to have contact with him on the post-school level, I'm thinking after he received his law degree in 1937 and he went into law practice? Did you have any opportunity of having contact with him there? For example, were you one of his clients?

ROSENBERGER: No, I was not a client. At medical school I went to Stanford University, he went to Duke Law School, so we were separated considerably. Then we were in opposite branches of the service. I was in the Air Corps, now called the Air Force, as a doctor. He was in the Navy. Our paths didn't cross. We saw each other occasionally after the service. We both came back to Whittier about the same time. I came back to Whittier in the summer of 1946 and our paths crossed there occasionally. My office was in the Bank of America Building and his was, too. But we were neither directly related professionally. I did see his father professionally a few times.

ARENA: What period would that be, the father?

ROSENBERGER: I would think that would be in the late forties, early fifties.

ARENA: You didn't belong to any of the same clubs as he did? For example, the 20-30 Club, or any of the service clubs, Rotary or Kiwanis, at the same time as he?

ROSENBERGER: Now I'm not sure about his dates in the Whittier Rotary Club. I belonged to the Whittier Rotary Club. I think I joined in 1947 or '48 so we might have overlapped there, but I don't have a memory of it. I joined the Whittier College Board of Trustees in 1950 and he was already a member of that, so our paths crossed there regularly.

ARENA: Good. That's an area we'll want to explore, also. Is there anything else now? Let me say

this, if it isn't personal, did your paths cross with him politically, although I'm not interested in politics as such? But were there occasions where he would--they'd have such things as coffee klatches--have a coffee klatch at your home, or did you attend any political sessions where you had a chance to meet with him socially, as well as be a member of the political audience?

ROSENBERGER: We were avid supporters at his meetings. Herman Perry and Frank Blake, who were the ringleaders of his congressional campaign in the Whittier area, were very close friends and perhaps our closest friends, and we were involved that way in his campaigns. We attended his talks, and my wife and I very fondly remember a trip to Pomona [California] to the depot to see him off; I believe that was for Congress.

ARENA: In 1947. The campaign was in '46 and then he entered in '47. On the matter of the two gentlemen who actively supported him, Mr. Herman Perry and Mr. Frank Blake, it would be significant that it was such men, in other words that these were respected men in the community. If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Herman Perry was the president of the number one bank or an important bank, certainly, the Bank of America, and Mr. Frank Blake, I don't recall his position at the time.

ROSENBERGER: Frank Blake was an oil developer.

ARENA: Would this be Santa Fe Springs as well as oil area in general?

ROSENBERGER: Santa Fe Springs, Huntington Beach [California] area.

ARENA: So that would be significant.

ROSENBERGER: His wife, Sada Blake was a member of the Board of Trustees at Whittier College in recent years.

ARENA: I believe he died not too long ago.

ROSENBERGER: Both of them have died within the last two years.

ARENA: A son is now serving in the Diplomatic Corps under the President.

ROSENBERGER: Yes, he is. He's Ambassador to Mali, in Africa.

ARENA: Is there any general area up to now I have left out that you would like to include? What I've tried to do is give an overall view of your

direct contact with the President from the beginning to now, yet not explore these areas at all. I intend to go back and explore them, but before we do, is there any overall area you can think of that I haven't brought up in the way of direct contact?

ROSENBERGER: The contacts that I think we should mention are the contacts as he's progressed from Congressman to Vice President to President.

ARENA: Because you have been in touch with him all along, directly or indirectly in that area.

ROSENBERGER: Yes. Not directly in the sense that I've seen him personally to any great degree, but we've been active in his campaigns and deeply interested in the campaigns, and I've seen him from time to time as he's progressed along.

ARENA: Let me go back then, Dr. Rosenberger, to the initial period, the elementary school age period. How would you describe the level of education, the nature of it, the quality of it? Because, to get right down to it, the education you received was the same one that the President received. It's the education that made a President. How would you describe this elementary education in East Whittier?

ROSENBERGER: I think our whole school area of grammar school, high school and college was on an excellent plane. I wouldn't have any figures, but I would guess that it was probably on as good a level as any place in the state, the country. But I think that education is something a person may be exposed to, but education is something that a man develops in himself. I would think that Richard Nixon's education was something highly exceptional because of this. I think that the President had a very intense education, most of which he generated himself, perhaps inspired by good teachers. The inspiration that he received from great teachers like President Paul Smith of Whittier College is noteworthy. But he was stimulated by everything. He threw himself into everything. If he were manager of the student body he threw himself into all phases of it and educated himself in student body management. If he studied drama, he threw himself into it and really learned things. If he studied history he had the active imagination and the intense interest to really throw himself into it so that he accomplished, hour for hour, much more than any student I've ever known. His retentive powers I'm sure are much greater than other students I've known. Just little examples of his ability to recall names in crowds where my wife and I have experienced passing him in a crowd, since he's been in high office and have him say, "Hi, Bill," "Hello, Alice," when he's really assimilated what must be millions of

names. This is characteristic of his mentality, his thinking from grammar school, high school, college days, all the way up.

ARENA: Is it your impression that this is an inborn trait or a gift of the gods, this retentive ability, or would you have reason to know it is something he worked at and cultivated, the ability to have this good, working memory of his?

ROSENBERGER: I'm sure it's both. I think the person has to first have the equipment, and then the interest, and then the ability to work hard at it. I don't think I've ever known anybody with the ability to work as hard as he had, and to apply his natural talent as well.

ARENA: Was it your impression because you were living in a rural community, a small community, that you were being deprived in any way--and this, of course, you probably couldn't have appreciated at the time--but looking back, or maybe by the time you were in a college level in a place like Stanford University, do you have the impression your elementary education was a poverty-stricken one in any sense of the word at all because you were living in a small rural community?

ROSENBERGER: No, I don't have that feeling at all. I had two direct contrasts with our local education systems. My junior year I attended a private school in Los Angeles. Harvard School, I would guess, was probably the top private school in the West for their grammar school, high school level. I had as classmates people who are now very prominent leaders of industry internationally. I thought Harvard School was great, but I didn't think that it had more to offer than Whittier High School. I was associated with these same people at Stanford. David Packard, as an example, our Assistant Secretary of Defense, and William Hewlett were classmates. Charles Ducommun was a classmate at Harvard School, and a classmate at Stanford University and Harvey Mudd [College]. Great leaders of American industry today, and yet I felt no great gap between Stanford University and Whittier College.

ARENA: To what would you attribute this high quality that could be found in such a small, rural community? Whittier is no New York City [New York] or Chicago [Illinois], and Los Angeles [California] was not too great a city from the standpoint of the great cities of the country at that time. And yet this high level of education could come from such a small community. To what would you attribute that?

ROSENBERGER: I think a man's horizons are the horizons he sets for himself. I think that the President had no limit to his interest as a youth. He saw far

beyond the textbook; he saw far beyond the teacher; his horizons were very broad, and his education correspondingly broad. He learned business management where I didn't in high school. He learned sports where I didn't, not that he was adept at sports particularly, but he was interested and he found out all about them and he knew all about football and the other sports. He learned about history in a way that I would never learn, all in the same environment.

ARENA: Did he ever give you the impression during this period that he was in a rush, and in the midst of acquiring this knowledge and handling these many subjects in school, and in extracurricular fashion managing the funds for the high school, for athletics for example, and at the same time working at home doing his chores? Did he ever give the impression of running fast?

ROSENBERGER: This is the very dramatic thing about the man. He was so organized that he did not appear rushed, and yet he did not have time to sit down and talk and talk and talk. He was busy. This is why I think that very few people knew the man intimately. He had very little time to throw the bull and shoot the breeze, and this sort of thing. He had busy things to do and yet he was always friendly. He was everybody's friend.

ARENA: You never got the impression when you were with him over these whole range of school years that he was difficult to communicate with, or that he just had interests that he could not share with you when you did have this experience with him. As you say, he was involved in athletics and you were not, he was involved in these extracurricular activities such as politics.

ROSENBERGER: I was involved in some of these things, but his depth of involvement in everything was so much more intense.

ARENA: And yet he didn't give you the impression when you were with him that he was in another world, or that you could not communicate with him, or anyone else that you happened to know who was with him.

ROSENBERGER: No. He had the ability to do all these things and still stay friendly.

ARENA: That's very important.

ROSENBERGER: And it's also very important to note that as the years have gone by he has been able to keep this same ability and approach to things. Those of us who knew him as a young man see these same qualities in him now.

ARENA: You anticipated my question and I would like you to elaborate on that a little bit more. What is there that you see in the President today--whether it's on TV or whether it's on radio, something he's saying, and really what you see rather than what you have read about him--where you have witnessed one of his news broadcasts where it is live, what do you see in him today that reminds you of this early period? And you know that these are traits that go back to that time.

ROSENBERGER: They go back to that time. They are traits that I have just elaborated on and they are traits that have been developed and expanded tremendously through the years, and yet the same basic Richard Nixon is still there. So that those of us who knew him then--when he says such and such is the situation--we believe him, and we know that his approach to it has been fair and thorough on the basis of our background of information about him as a young man.

ARENA: For example, the President today frequently touches on the need for leadership and need for leaders to make decisions. From your experience this is not all talk. You can recall that this was a part of his attitude and a part of his action during these high school and college years when he was also a leader.

ROSENBERGER: Right.

ARENA: Can you think of any particular crises or issues--obviously not on the same level that they are today, but they might have been to a high school person or a college student--can you think of similar crises and his handling of them that might throw light on his living with crises today? By the way, you know he has written a book about his modern crises, Six Crises, that stem from his post-political career, beginning with the Alger Hiss one.

ROSENBERGER: I don't remember major crises in those days.

ARENA: This might be a reminder, and you might not have been personally involved but you might have heard of it. His attempt to bring dancing legally and as a routine accepted thing on the campus of Whittier College, which was done as an exception from time to time, but he campaigned in his junior year on the college level. He campaigned for the president of the student body with that platform, to allow dancing on the campus.

ROSENBERGER: I wasn't on the campus that year, so I'm not directly related to that. I have a feeling that it was rather a low-pressure type problem. It

reminds me a little of the problem my grandfather had with the local Friends Church. He was the fund raiser for the organ in the church, and in those days, organ music was not considered a part of the Quaker church service. There was a problem. It was like bringing dancing to Whittier College to bring organ music into the service of the Friends church, the Quaker church. But I don't recall any knock-down, drag-out campaign about whether you have organ music or not. It was done on a rather subdued level, as I think the dancing promotion was at the college.

ARENA: This phase of the President's career in high school and college is a convenient point for us to stop.