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Charles R. Rothaermel (January 14, 1972, second interview)

C. Richard Arena

Second Oral History Interview

with

MR. CHARLES R. ROTHAE RMEL

January 14, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #2 with Mr. Charles R. Rothaermel, January 14, 1972, Arena interviewing. I believe in our first interview, we agreed that you should call me Dick and it's okay for me to call you Tag. Shall we continue that understanding?

ROTHAE RMEL: That's fine. Very much so. Right.

ARENA: Good. I recollect, Tag, that we got to a kind of general summary of your general contacts with the President and his family and then, as time allowed, we went into detail with some of these general subjects. Really, what I'd like to do is to continue on specifics, as we had originally outlined in this general summary. But, at any point in this and any other subsequent interview we may have, if you do suddenly get some flash of recollection, regardless of what the point is, don't hesitate to, you know, elaborate on it. The idea of going from the general to the particular is merely a guide, but the idea is to remember whatever and as much as you can, so if suddenly something dawns on you, don't hesitate to go right into it. And I do recall your mentioning that you had gone on some outings with the President, and I want to be sure that we take that right up to the present time. In other words, this one outing was during the period, oh, I have the impression, before college. Was I correct in that, where it was a kind of camping trip or overnight sleeping situation, or was that after college?

ROTHAE RMEL: No, that didn't occur with me and Dick. You must be thinking of another interview with someone else somewhere along the line. My relationships with Dick at that time were almost purely on a high school campus basis. I traveled back and forth from Fullerton [California] to Whittier

because my dad was in business up here, and I worked for him when not involved in some after school activity. Occasionally after school I do remember dropping Dick off a time or two, giving him a ride, that is. But you know, at that time kids didn't do things like they do today. Your friendships, unless you lived VERY close to somebody, unless somebody lived in the same block or two that you did, you didn't really see a great deal of them outside of on the campus at school. And that was where my relationships with Dick occurred, until later when he would be in the market that his father had and from time to time I would see him there. And then, after he went to law school, I didn't see him for, perhaps, several years while he was gone there.

ARENA: That period of high school then would be, as far as Whittier High, the two years of 1928-29 academic year and 1929-30, with his graduating in '30.

ROTHAERMEL: Right, but I went to school with him at Fullerton High School before that, in the freshman and sophomore years.

ARENA: Right, and at Fullerton you did have a four-year period, so you would have been with him in the high school for those two years.

ROTHAERMEL: 1926-27 and '27-'28, as I recall, those would be the years.

ARENA: Right. And as far as the legal or law practice era, he did graduate in 1937, and would have been in the area between 1937 and 1942. It was in 1942 that he went to Washington as a lawyer with the Office of Price Administration, and then shortly after that he entered the service. So we're both clear on that, and by way of reminding me, especially. Then, I would like to bear in a bit more on the high school period. As a matter of fact, up to now you're probably the only one whom I've had the pleasure of interviewing that knew him during the Fullerton High period. Did you belong to any of the same extracurricular activities while you were at Fullerton?

ROTHAERMEL: Only, I remember that Dick was out for football in the freshman year. I don't recall the sophomore year. At that time we played in the CIF classifications of varsity, which was class A, B, C and D. I started out as a freshman on a class C team. When I was a sophomore, because of weight gain and height gain, I was class B. And junior and senior years I played varsity. I am not sure, but I rather have an idea that Dick still played C's when he was a sophomore, if he went out. I do remember being out for the same team in my freshman year.

ARENA: Do you recall meeting his father or other relatives at some of the games? There is one experience of a neighbor picking up some friends and taking them to see Fullerton [High School] play. I was just wondering if not that particular game, if you do recall that his father attended the games. Maybe you saw the Nixons, maybe even BRING Richard to the game, or was there a school bus that took care of that?

ROTHAERMEL: Right. Normally, games in that classification, at least, and at that time we didn't have lights on the fields as we do now, they were all afternoon games, and you would play right after school, so that you wouldn't go home and get brought back to a game. And in addition, if you were on the team or playing on the field, you wouldn't have any idea who was in the stands, really. I don't have any recollection of anything like that. We usually played out on a practice field across the street from where the big football field was. We didn't really have any stands, oftentimes. Kids would come and stand along the sidelines, perhaps, and watch us play, but . . .

ARENA: Especially during these two years.

ROTHAERMEL: Varsity was different, right.

ARENA: Do you recall the means by which the President traveled to and from Fullerton during those two years, by the way? Did he regularly take the bus? And this idea of you dropping him on and off, would this have been dropping him in Whittier from Fullerton?

ROTHAERMEL: No, as I remember it, the ~~times~~ that I dropped Dick off were at a house which was just after where Fullerton Road turns and becomes Whittier Boulevard, really in La Habra at that time. And again, this is real hazy. I may be reading something in here that I shouldn't be, but it seems to me that this was about the time when maybe his mother was gone away from home with his younger brother who was ill. And maybe he was staying with somebody else at the time. I just don't know. But it wasn't at the house that was near the market. It was out in La Habra from there.

ARENA: It's true that his mother was away from time to time and father and son were left alone to look after, and it could have very well been. One of the last places where the mother was away with the sickly son. . . . You might recall that sickly son was Harold [Samuel Nixon]. I don't know if you ever met him or not.

ROTHAERMEL: No, I didn't.

ARENA: But you might have heard of him. He was the oldest son. He was the one who had tuberculosis, and it was in Arizona where they would stay from time to time, and father and son were left to take care of the grocery store. Did you have any experience, although you were going to Fullerton, with Whittier High School around that same time? What I'm getting to is, I was going to ask you to compare Fullerton High School of that era, 1926 through 1930, with Whittier High School, from the standpoint of exploring what adjustment, if any, what changes a transfer student such as the President would have to deal with if he were going from Fullerton [High School] to Whittier High School, if any? I'm thinking, in a way, of the level of work, academic level, the size of the student body, and that sort of thing.

ROTHAERMEL: I think the Whittier student body was perhaps a little larger than Fullerton's, but not much. It would not have made a difference, I don't believe. In Dick's instance, I'm quite sure there would be no problem of transition, because he had gone to East Whittier [Elementary] School. He already knew the kids who were going to Whittier High School, many of the kids he'd be with, in any event, because at that time the East Whittier kids all went to Whittier High School.

ARENA: I was just about to explore that, to make sure. It was unusual for one who went to East Whittier Elementary to go on to Fullerton, as he had those two years, would you say?

ROTHAERMEL: I don't know what the circumstances were there, unless it was that they lived in the Lowell Joint School District. Now, a joint school district is one which is partly in one county and partly in another. This overlapped Los Angeles County and Orange County. And when you live in a joint school district, you may elect to attend the high school of one county or the high school of the other county. So, I don't know whether he did this because he elected to, or whether circumstances of some kind or another entered into it. But he did start his high school experience at Fullerton, and later transferred to Whittier.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, by way of continuing this description of what the schools were like at that time, are the high schools of this area, Whittier and Fullerton in particular, from the standpoint of organization and, we'll say, chain of command, quite different, aside from the usual change that would come with size and larger buildings, newer equipment; but are the schools run pretty well, and is the organization pretty well the same today as it was back in that time, the late 1920's?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, organization of the schools has changed. For instance, in my high school days, I don't remember

such a thing as a counselor. You had a boys' vice principal and a girls' vice principal, normally.

ARENA: Was there someone, by the way, who was called a dean? I know at Whittier there was. They referred to a certain individual as the dean, which caught me by surprise, but I understand that Whittier had such things. He might have been mainly a disciplinarian. But they did use that title, dean. Does that ring a bell with you for Fullerton or any other school at that time?

ROTHAERMEL: No. I don't have any recollection of any such title as dean when I was in high school. Now later on, after I began to teach, I was Dean of Boys, for instance, at California High School for a while. That concept did develop. Now they've done away with that concept again, and we're back on the assistant principal basis. So you know, things wax and wane, and it depends on, I guess, who's sitting in the driver's seat as to what kind of a setup they like to see at a given school, what kinds of pressures they expect people to take with certain titles or with another title.

ARENA: Did Fullerton allow opportunities for what is probably more frequent today, but maybe not necessarily, field trips, bus trips to museums, even a visit to a jury trial, or out-of-class opportunities?

ROTHAERMEL: Yes, we had field trips at that time.

ARENA: Do you recall what some of them were like and, in particular, do you recall where you might have been on one with President Nixon?

ROTHAERMEL: No, I don't have any recollection of that. One I remember very well, but it was in the eighth grade, I think, or something like that, was a trip to Catalina [Island, California] on what was [called] the Avalon.

ARENA: Would you mind describing that?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, it was just that if you did a certain job academically over a certain period of time you got the opportunity to go on this trip. And it was a school-arranged trip and such as that. And I'll never forget that day [Laughter] because. . . . Perhaps I shouldn't tell it on something like this, but a friend of mine, who was a much closer friend of mine than Dick, by the way, named [Charles] Charlie Oxarart who lived on the Bastanchury ranch at that time, which was between Fullerton and La Habra, the big Bastanchury ranch, which later the Times-Mirror Corporation bought, and which now is Sunny Hills, and Charlie's dad was, oh, like the secretary of the Bastanchury Ranch

Company. I believe that was his title. They were Basque people, and there were many Basque in this area at that time. But Charlie and I happened to be standing right along the rail on a lower deck on the Avalon going over to Catalina, and somebody up above got seasick and we got sprayed. [Laughter] Pretty well, too.

ARENA: I've never taken the trip myself. Is the trip to the island usually rough, or anyone who's not used to it could get sick?

ROTHAERMEL: No, it would be very unusual. Oh, it could be rough, but you're not likely to take it in very rough weather. They don't normally do that. That was just somebody who was very prone to becoming seasick, I would guess.

ARENA: Speaking of Basque, did you know--I think we mentioned him last time, but to be sure--an [John] Arrambide?

ROTHAERMEL: Yes.

ARENA: And his city, was he a resident of Whittier, do you recall?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, John went to Whittier High School and was a fine athlete, a top-notch athlete.

ARENA: He's still an athletic director in this immediate area, and we're trying to track him down. We know we have the name of the school, but he's a hard man to track down in his office. I think he likes to be with his students, but he's evidently not a desk man. But I know that he and President Nixon knew one another.

ROTHAERMEL: Yes, I'm sure they did.

ARENA: Speaking about the Basques, what occupation, if they concentrated on one particular one, did they seem to belong to, and where were they located from the standpoint of the entire area? Were they congregated in Whittier or sprinkled about Whittier, Fullerton and so forth?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, the Bastanchurys, I'm sure, were the start of the Basque intrusion into this area, and originally the Basque who came here were all shepherders. And as we knew of him, old Grandpa Domingo Bastanchury acquired all of that land, because of grazing rights and purchases and such as this over a period of time. Most of the Basque people that I knew, the Arroues family, the John Oxarart family, the [Domingo] Bastanchury family, the [Gracian] Arrambides up in Whittier. . . . And then over in the La Puente [California] area, maybe you know about the

Basque restaurant over there. It's been there for a long, long time. I don't know whether it's still there or not. I haven't been over there recently. But all of these people came in here as shepherders, initially, and then got into other kinds of agricultural pursuits later on.

ARENA: Does the name Guirado ring a bell?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, Eddie is of Mexican, Spanish descent, not Basque, if you're speaking of [Edward] Ed Guirado.

ARENA: Yes, the judge.

ROTHAERMEL: Right.

ARENA: To what extent . . .

ROTHAERMEL: Oh, you asked about the areas, by the way.

ARENA: Yes.

ROTHAERMEL: The area from Fullerton generally out to Brea, through La Habra and La Habra Heights, over into the La Puente Valley and Whittier, this was the area where, to the best of my recollection, nearly all of these Basque families settled in here.

ARENA: And would they be in the community part of the area or would they be in their own individual ranch homes? For example, did [John] Arrambide live in the city itself or did he live outside on a ranch? Was there a typical set-up there that the Basque . . .

ROTHAERMEL: I think it was more typical for them to live on ranches or farms, whichever you want to call them. But they would have referred to them as ranches. Now, on the Bastanchury ranch, as the Bastanchury boys grew up. . . . Let's see, there was Domingo, Jr., and Joe and John, and another one whose name I can't recall right now. But there was what they called Rancho Viejo on the old Bastanchury ranch. It means Old Ranch. That was where the original old ranch house was, and it's just to the east, less than a mile to the east off of Fullerton Road, right about in the middle of Sunny Hills was where old Rancho Viejo was. Then, old Mrs. [Domingo] Bastanchury built her house on Bastanchury Road, which is the road that runs along the top of the hill with all the palm trees, the very tall palm trees along it. She built her house down at the end of that road. Then Joe Bastanchury built his. Then D. J.'s [Domingo Bastanchury, Jr.] house was right about where that big Alpha Beta plant is now. Johnny Bastanchury, I think, lived in Los Angeles most of the time.

ARENA: Would these be contemporaries of yours?

ROTHAERMEL: No, these were contemporaries of my parents. Their children are contemporaries of mine.

ARENA: Right. And would they have been born in Europe too, in the Basque countries?

ROTHAERMEL: I'm really not sure, but I'm sort of under the impression that they were born here, but I'm not positive.

ARENA: Do you recall meeting them, the parents of your friends, and what language was spoken, we'll say, around the home? I'm just wondering, for example, if people like John Arrambide were exposed to one language at home and one language in school.

ROTHAERMEL: Well, I think some of them were multi-lingual and some were not. Some wanted to just be English-speaking. Now this is strange, because the Basques are very very clannish, historically. Oh, the other Bastanchury was Jaston Bastanchury, and his house was out. . . . What's the development on about the corner of Malvern [Avenue] and Beach Boulevard, the big real estate development in there?

ARENA: You're talking to a new Californian.

ROTHAERMEL: There's a big country club out there, golf course. But anyway, his home was at the very western end of the Bastanchury ranch properties at that time.

ARENA: It wouldn't be Los Coyotes [Country Club]?

ROTHAERMEL: Yes, that's right.

ARENA: And to get up there, you go through this hilly area.

ROTHAERMEL: Those are called the Coyote Hills.

ARENA: I see. Would that have been the heart of Basque country too?

ROTHAERMEL: Yes. That was all sheep grazing land initially. It later became oil land. And that's why they began to. . . . You see, the Coyote lease--and again, my memory might be wrong on this, but I think--was developed by Standard Oil [Company]. They leased the property from the [Domingo] Bastanchurys and drilled and got a lot of oil in the Coyote Hills out there. And that is, I'm sure, where all the Bastanchury wealth came from.

ARENA: During your day, your youthful period, that was the case, or was it? Had oil been discovered as you were growing up with these young Basque fellows?

ROTHAERMEL: Oil had been discovered before that, but really not developed fully until a little later on. Well, during the time that I was in high school, early days of being in high school, was when the Santa Fe Springs [oil] field really got rolling big. Oil had been discovered there long before, but it really got rolling big in, you know, the twenties, along in there I would say. That's my recollection, because my father was in the meat business here in Whittier, and I used to deliver meat to those restaurants out there. And, you know, Santa Fe Springs [California] just ran twenty-four hours a day. Everything was open twenty-four hours a day.

ARENA: In other words, that was an oil boom era.

ROTHAERMEL: Oh, it was.

ARENA: While you were growing up.

ROTHAERMEL: Right, it sure was.

ARENA: Would it be correct to say that, just as that influenced your father directly, it influenced the average merchant and, we'll say, the average person, including the Nixon family, that coming of oil in the early 1920's?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, I would say it had heavy influence on many areas.

ARENA: In addition to the Basques, what other ethnic groups-- of course the Mexicans--but what other groups from Europe and from Africa, the blacks, of course, the descendants of the early blacks in our own country, were prominent by their presence?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, of course, Anaheim [California] was a German settlement. And Anaheim and Fullerton are only two and a half or three miles apart. My father, as a matter of fact, was German, and his mother owned a rather large piece of property in Anaheim, a place now torn down. I wish it never had been, but it was called the Sheffield House, and it was the only brick house there at that time, a rather large brick house.

ARENA: Did it have a particular German style of architecture as well?

ROTHAERMEL: No, I wouldn't say so, because this was not built by my grandmother, but by somebody that she purchased it from, and I have been told that the bricks for that house came from the Philadelphia area, all the way around the [Cape] Horn, and up to Anaheim Landing, which is about where Seal Beach [California] is now, but it was called Anaheim Landing at that time because, when they were building Anaheim, that's where all of the supplies came in at Anaheim Landing.

ARENA: Do you remember what the average occupation of the average German was in Anaheim? Was it farming as well?

ROTHAERMEL: Well, yes. You see, they came there to get into the vineyard business.

ARENA: In other words, these would have been, I'm guessing, you'll confirm it, mainly from the southern part of Germany, those closer toward France, which is, if I'm not mistaken, the vineyard region of Germany, historically. There is the wine region of Germany along the Rhine, so to speak.

ROTHAERMEL: I don't really know, but I would gather so, since that was the basic reason for developing that area. And the grapes, apparently, were very successful for a little while, and then they had some kind of a blight and they just got wiped out.

ARENA: About when do you think that took place, this blight?

ROTHAERMEL: Oh, before I was born.

ARENA: You were born in 1913?

ROTHAERMEL: 1912. I would think that this was probably in the late 1800's, when the blight hit them and wiped them out. Now, one building is still there. As you go down the freeway, just before you get to Disneyland, if you recall, there's a big building on the right-hand side that looks like a sort of warehouse building, or some such thing as that. That is the big winery building that was built for the people to bring their grapes to and such. I don't know when it was built, but way early in the game.

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ARENA: It just so happened that this morning I was interviewing a gentleman of Yorba Linda who mentioned the same problem, that vineyards had been important in that area and then there was this blight, so it affected all of California, or certainly quite a bit of this region.

ROTHAERMEL: In regard to Anaheim, I remember a story told many times and told to me by Fay Lewis, who was a well known attorney, first in Anaheim, but the Lewis family lived here in Whittier for many years. He really was Lafayette Lewis, but everybody called him Fay. His wife just very recently died. Rose Lewis, perhaps you read something about it in the paper. His oldest son, Jack [Lewis], formerly was the business manager for the Whittier Union High School District, and he was the man who was responsible for really foreseeing the need and buying up all these properties on which all these high schools are built now, long before the properties went out of sight in price. And he has two other boys and a daughter. But Fay used to tell the story: One of the things that they were plagued with was small animals getting into their crops that would come down out of the hills just to the east of Anaheim and all over that area, because the Santa Ana River ran down not too far from that, you see, and their crops would just get eaten up by small animals.

So, I remember Fay telling about going up into the hills and cutting, would it be willow boughs, and bringing them down and making a stake fence out of them. And then, because these things root out so easily, they all began to root out and all began to grow as trees, instead of being a fence any more. But it was kind of a laughing matter amongst the people at that time. But I remember hearing that story from him, from my dad, from other people who lived in Anaheim at that time.

ARENA: Did the Germans of Anaheim, from your own recollection, carry on, we'll say, traditional holidays in traditional costumes with traditional dances, so that someone like a member of the Nixon family, 1912 on, would have been exposed to a different culture, a different society, a different language, a different way of life, in other words? Were there open festivals and that sort of thing? You mentioned the Basques retained their clannish tendencies. Was this true of the other groups, and did this clannishness include songfests, particular celebrations and so forth?

ROTHAERMEL: Yes. As a matter of fact there was a park in Anaheim, I'm trying to recall the name of it now, it's still there I think, just off the freeway now . . .

ARENA: Named after a particular German . . .

ROTHAERMEL: No, no, it wasn't that. As I try to remember it, it wasn't really a German name, more English than German. I'll have to check up on it now, because my curiosity is aroused. But I remember the old German band playing out there on Sundays and this kind of thing, you know. Yes, they had that kind of thing going on, festival kind of thing.

- ARENA: Do you know if German was taught at both Fullerton and Whittier High School around that time? Especially around 1926?
- ROTHAERMEL: I think so. I don't really remember. I took Latin and Spanish, and I didn't really pay too much attention to what other languages were offered, because those were the two I was interested in.
- ARENA: My own recollection is in the 1930's, German was popular among pre-med students and science students. It used to be one of the favorite languages of students who were heading in that area.
- ROTHAERMEL: Right.
- ARENA: I don't know about the 1920's. In addition to the German and the Basques, did the Italians or the Japanese have particular communities, or were they sprinkled here and there?
- ROTHAERMEL: They were pretty well spread out. Now, one Japanese family I remember VERY well, because Mitsui Oba was a good friend of mine. We lived close together. But you know, they were just part of the community. They were not a SEPARATE part of the community.
- ARENA: Were they farmers by the way?
- ROTHAERMEL: Yes. His dad did farming, I think mostly nursery-type work was what his father did.
- ARENA: But there would have been no solid community in one area, as was marked by the Germans and was marked by the Basques.
- ROTHAERMEL: No. Well, now, the Basques didn't really congregate in a GIVEN area to that extent. They were scattered and their big deal was to meet on Rancho Viejo every weekend or every other weekend or something like that. All the Basque families gathered together.
- ARENA: Oh, I see. In other words the Rancho Viejo was a gathering place for different affairs.
- ROTHAERMEL: Later on, after Mrs. Bastanchury built her new house, yes. They had a great, huge handball court there, and big barbecue facilities and this kind of thing. Big old bread-baking ovens, you know, right there built out of the ground, and all this kind of thing. It was a very interesting place,

and I've been to many marvelous barbecues out there, because of Basque friends I had, and the Bastanchury friends. As a matter of fact, Jaston Bastanchury and his wife were my Godfather and Godmother.

ARENA: Do you know to what extent the groups had their own language newspapers? I know the Germans back East did that rather frequently. You might recall that Carl Churz, a great friend of President Lincoln, came to the country as a reporter for a German newspaper, and wrote articles in German for Germans on the East Coast. I was just wondering to what extent THAT was maintained too, the literary heritage, as well as the economic idea of bringing the grapes; did they also bring key ideas and the use of the language like that from your own recollection?

ROTHAERMEL: I don't recall.

ARENA: You don't recall seeing, for example, German newspapers in your home, or friends, maybe, of your family?

ROTHAERMEL: No, I don't really recall that. Of course, I would have been pretty young at that time. Probably just before, or when I was VERY young this might have happened but, now, the other thing that blocks out a lot of this for me is that World War I came along at about the time, as far as we were concerned, when I was maybe four, five and six years old. At that time it was very, very unpopular to be German or to do anything German, and I have an idea that at that time and for some few years after, that things that were of a German nature in given communities were probably pretty well done away with because it was most unpopular.

ARENA: I really appreciate your granting this second interview, Tag.