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Thomas S. Ryan (March 30, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. THOMAS S. RYAN

March 30, 1972
Glendale, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Thomas Sanford Ryan, of Glendale, California. We are now in Whittier, California. The date is March 30, 1972, Arena interviewing. May we begin, Mr. Ryan, by my asking you where and when you were born?

RYAN: I was born in Ely, Nevada, February 24, 1911.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief resume of your educational background and your present position?

RYAN: I was educated in the Artesia Elementary Schools and Excelsior High School, which was the area high school, and then the University of Southern California, and I graduated from the University of Southern California in 1933 and got a master's degree in 1935. I am presently Dean of Occupational Education at Glendale Community College, Glendale, California.

ARENA: And of course, you are the brother-in-law of President Richard Nixon. Do you recall the very first occasion on which you met the President? Could you describe that occasion?

RYAN: Well, during high school and college I worked in a drug store in Artesia [California], and occasionally, even after I was teaching school, I worked there on Sunday to help the druggist out that owned the drug store, because he had helped me a great deal to get through college by giving me employment, even in high school. Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] and

the President--Dick, as she calls him--drove by and we had a long chat for about an hour. I just stood on the sidewalk and they were in their car and we chatted back and forth for about an hour. That's the first time I met the President.

ARENA: Do you recall now what impressions you had of him then?

RYAN: Well, he was a lot like he is now. He was always very complimentary, and he always finds out how you feel about things. He was always very friendly, and because I was a coach--I started coaching in high school and I was a coach at that particular time--and he was interested in sports, so we started talking football, and I could have used some of his good plays that he gives the professionals now. [Laughter] Anyway, they soon went to one of my games in Monrovia [California]. My Burbank High School team was playing Monrovia [High School], and they came out and watched the game and we chatted awhile afterwards.

ARENA: Just out of curiosity, did your team win that game?

RYAN: No, we lost the championship. We lost the last game of the season and the championship, but we had a real fine team.

ARENA: As you know, the President has stated publicly of his acquaintance with Chief Wallace Newman. Had you been aware of the Chief around that time when you met the President, and that he had been a USC [University of Southern California] alumnus himself?

RYAN: Oh, yes, and out of high school I was recruited by the Chief to go to Whittier College, which I passed up to go to USC, but in later years he did recruit from Burbank High School. I recommended certain players to Whittier College through the President, and they were very happy at Whittier.

ARENA: The President is not only an alumnus, as you know, but he served on the Board of Trustees for a while. Did you ever get to meet Mr. Newman, by any chance?

RYAN: Oh, yes, we're friends. I met him, maybe, ten different times. Actually, from Excelsior High School, which wasn't very far, quite a few of the players from the local high school went to Whittier, and I used to go and watch their teams play.

ARENA: How do you account for the great respect--and I might even add awe--with which he is held by so many of his former players that he coached, and even taught? As you know, the Chief also taught.

RYAN: Well, of course, I didn't get this from the President, but some of my players who went there said that he instilled a great school spirit. He just had that knack of implanting this tremendous school spirit and pride and dedication and so forth in the players, and that's why he was so successful as a coach. That's the hard thing to do, and he was successful, and so he had some perseverance, I guess, or whatever it takes to do that. He had it, and every boy that came under his supervision in a way, I feel, was greatly aided by that. He always left them something very important.

ARENA: As I'm asking you these questions about the Chief, it just dawned on me that you, as an administrator, have had this contact with him, and there are at least two other gentlemen I've had the privilege of interviewing who also knew the Chief. In this case, these were players. One--and you possibly may know him, also--is Richard Spaulding, who was a classmate of the President, who happens to be principal of Buena Park High School. Another administrator is Mr. Jack Mele, who is the principal of Whittier High School. Would you mind commenting on the relationship, if you see one, or is this just a coincidence, between college sports, such as football, and learning things, such as leading such institutions as high schools?

RYAN: Well, of course, being a coach or a player, you know, you have to relate with your players in your game, and that's why you can't learn it out of a book. And that's why the great pro coaches, all of the pro coaches, are former players because a person who hasn't played the game can't relate. If you've never been in a team situation, like football in high school or college, or anything, there's something there that you never get out of any other form of endeavor.

ARENA: Mr. Ryan, did you and the President, possibly, ever go into that topic, the subject of football, we'll say, and administration? Without going into politics, per se, as you know we cut off at 1945, but I'm just wondering, because both of you had that common interest, and I might even say love of the game, did that ever come up in any way, relating your experience in football as a basis for your education in life?

RYAN: No, it hasn't, really. We just talked, friendly. We never got into any philosophical discussion of success and failure and these things.

ARENA: Did you ever hear Chief Newman referred to as a philosopher by any of his former players?

RYAN: Well, yes. In fact, one of the high school coaches was a player at Whittier, and he came from Whittier when I was about a senior in high school. And he explained that to us, relating how this man and his philosophy of life in working hard, and all those things that make a team go.

ARENA: I have heard his former players use that description in describing him. They got so much out of his philosophizing, and even his contemporaries will sometimes call him a philosopher, and I was just wondering to what extent you had also. This seems to be fairly common. I believe off the tape we were discussing, by way of pre-tape acquaintance here, your contact with the President's father, [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, and one particular incident, his building something. Would you mind going over that again for the record?

RYAN: Well, we had this ranch where we all grew up and we kept it in the family, and my brother [William G. Ryan] and I used to go out there often weekends. In fact, we had an orange grove and we worked the orange grove and everything, and we'd occasionally go to the President and Pat's house, or the family would have a--actually, the Nixon family had a family social after the wedding. Anyway, it was brought up that we were going to build a fireplace. We needed a new fireplace in our house, so Frank volunteered to help us. So on three Saturdays he came out and actually built this fireplace, because he was the expert, and we just handed the stuff to him. And then it dawned on me years later that Saturday was his big day and he was sacrificing a great deal by taking his Saturday away. And actually, he would get up way early in the morning, like about 1 or 2 o'clock and cook a couple hundred pies, because everybody came to the store on Saturday to get his pies, and of course he had to get up a lot earlier to get his pies baked before he came and helped us with the fireplace.

ARENA: Do you recall ever eating any of his pies?

RYAN: Oh, yes, I'll say.

ARENA: Did you enjoy them?

RYAN: Yes, indeed.

ARENA: Was there a particular favorite of his, by the way? Did he have a particular pie that he was famous for?

RYAN: Well, I'm not sure. He made an awfully good cherry pie, and of course, apple has always been my favorite pie.

ARENA: In addition to revealing, I think, quite a bit about his personality, in telling the incident of the brick oven, is there anything else about his personality or character that you can recall?

RYAN: That was a brick fireplace. Well, once we took the girls [Tricia and Julie Nixon], my wife and family-- we have boys the same age as Tricia and Julie--and we took them to the beach one Sunday afternoon when they were staying with the grandparents [Frank and Hannah Nixon]. And we got home about an hour after we said we would and boy, he really chewed me out good for that. He said they were responsible for them and they were worrying, and here I was keeping them out, and he talked to me just like a young kid that had kept his daughter out, or something like that, but he really didn't mean it, I guess.

ARENA: He didn't want you to do it again.

RYAN: I'll say he didn't. Well, he was right. They were responsible and we kept them out later than we expected, and we shouldn't have done that.

ARENA: As you know, the President's brother is in the Naval Reserve, Mr. Edward C. Nixon, and I believe you mentioned off the tape that you had been in the Navy yourself. Had you ever had any contact with him in that regard?

RYAN: Well, yes, in the '50's sometime, I guess he wanted to get in the service and become a Naval Aviator, and because the President was in the Navy his mother wanted him to get in the Navy, and she knew that I was in the Navy Reserve at Naval Air Station, Los Alamitos, California. So she asked me one day if I wouldn't help Eddie get in the Navy. I said, yes, I'd help Eddie. So I met him down at the Naval Air Station, Los Alamitos, California, and introduced him to the Commanding Officer, who seemed very much impressed with him. He passed the physical exam and then he took the written exam and he got one of the highest scores, I guess it was the highest score that they ever had down there. He only missed one question. So, by day's end he was in the Navy. And his mother several times thanked me for taking my time and I really didn't take any time, but she was so concerned about anybody doing anything for them, you know. They appreciated it very much, and she was always so considerate of people that she didn't even want them to take a little of their time to help them at all. So she was a wonderful, wonderful person.

ARENA: As you know, the President has mentioned that following his wedding--or maybe you don't know, but it is in print in several places--that he went to Mexico for his honeymoon. I was just wondering if you know of any particular reason why Mexico was the choice, since you were a member of the wedding party--correct me if I'm wrong--June 21, 1940.

RYAN: That's right. No, I don't know, except I don't think they had very much money, and that was an inexpensive trip. That was probably one reason, plus the fact that

since we lived here in Southern California where there's so much Mexican food, that I imagine those two reasons were probably some of the reasons they went there, but I don't know other than that. I know they had a wonderful time, because Pat has told me on several occasions what great fun they had on their honeymoon in Mexico.

ARENA: Finally, I believe you did mention having had direct contact with the Nixons through shopping in their grocery store, although the President was not in the store at this particular time. Just to be sure, you did not have any contact with him when there was the grocery store that was in operation before the war? I believe we said that you did not have any contact with that grocery store, where he had worked, himself, part time?

RYAN: Well, the parents still owned it and Don [Francis Donald Nixon] was running it, and the parents both worked in there, and occasionally we'd go in there, but it wasn't till after the war that we stopped in there regularly. And Don was running the store there. One time, our smallest boy--we left him there and started home, and we got about half way home and missed him and went back, and we thought he'd be crying and everything, and he was just crawling through the aisles, just unconcerned.

ARENA: He was very much at home in the Nixon grocery store.

RYAN: Yes.

ARENA: Is there anything that you would like to add that I have not raised in this interview, Mr. Ryan? Any incidents that might come to mind that you would like to bring out?

RYAN: Well, I don't believe so, I've enjoyed talking about the President and Pat. I think they both had quite parallel childhoods. I think they had to work hard, both of them, and they worked hard in college, and they worked their way through, both of them, and I think they're an ideal team, personally, and I think events have borne that out.

ARENA: Thank you very much. As I said, in a brief while, you will receive a typewritten copy of this interview for you to check. Thank you.

RYAN: Okay. Thank you.