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William G. Ryan (October 19, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. WILLIAM G. RYAN

October 19, 1972
Northridge, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. William G. Ryan. G., middle initial, stands for George. We are in Northridge, California, the residence of Mr. Ryan. Today's date is October 19, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Ryan, may we begin by my asking you, in order to get a little background on yourself, exactly where and when you were born?

RYAN: I was born in Ely, Nevada, on January 31, 1910.

ARENA: And would you state your relationship to President Nixon.

RYAN: I'm a brother-in-law.

ARENA: And give an idea of your educational background, please.

RYAN: I've had two years of college.

ARENA: Was there a particular area that . . .

RYAN: General subjects.

ARENA: And would you mind giving an idea of your work to date, since you left school?

RYAN: Since I left school, I first learned to be an electrician as an apprentice. Then, of course, I joined 20th Century Fox Film Corporation, was an electrical technician there before the war. I went into the service and spent three years at Pearl Harbor [Hawaii].

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask what branch?

RYAN: I was a chief, Navy. And then after that I went back to 20th Century Fox. All told, I've been there for thirty-five years. And my present position now is foreman of electrical fixtures and effects.

ARENA: Thank you. Mr. Ryan, do you mind if I ask you if you remember the very first time that you ever saw President Nixon face to face, and whatever you remember about the incident, and take as much time as you like.

RYAN: I remember that my brother Tom [Thomas S. Ryan] and, of course, Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon], my sister, lived on the ranch, and Pat went away to Whittier [California] to teach school. She used to come and see us every Sunday. Well, pretty soon she started missing a Sunday or two. Then, finally she did come, and she brought the President with her, and that was the first time that I met him. I could tell then that the man was going to go a long way, because he was pleasant, he was eager, he liked to know different things around on the farm, although he had come from farming country in Whittier, but he was still interested in what we were doing.

ARENA: Was there any difficulty from the standpoint of his being --correct me if I'm wrong--a lawyer at the time, and one who had finished law school in 1937? Was there any difficulty in holding a conversation? Did he seem to be, we'll say, too educated at the time?

RYAN: I knew that he was really well-educated, but he didn't appear to use the words that weren't understood by the ordinary layman, and I could tell at the time that I talked to him that he didn't know too much about automobiles, but he knew a lot about law and humanity, at that time.

ARENA: From the standpoint of meeting him over the years, do you recall other experiences, other contacts? I'm thinking of the experiences of meeting with members of his family, the experiences of continuing to meet with him. We'll take it from the standpoint of being in Whittier and then, say, in your own home. We'll begin by asking you about the first time you did meet some of the other members of his family, and what you recall about his mother and father, especially in the early period.

RYAN: To begin with, as Pat started and was going with Mr. Nixon, she became engaged to him, and it was kind of a blow, for that instant, to me, to think that we were going to lose Pat, because we had always had her. And then, after we were invited up to the [Francis Anthony] Nixon's home and met the Nixons, I could tell right then that they were a lovely family, and in their accepting Pat into their family I sure felt grateful. And I always . . .

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, on the question of losing Pat and the idea of her getting married, do you recall the first time that information came to you directly, or was it something you saw in the air or felt before it was officially announced?

RYAN: No, I didn't feel it in the air. As I said before, I only felt that the visits were becoming fewer and fewer, and then I knew at that particular time that she had fallen in love with Mr. Nixon because of the things that she told me about him, of his work and the people he was defending, and she was very interested in what he was doing at that particular time.

ARENA: Would you want to describe, from your own recollections, the impressions of Mrs. Hannah Nixon, the impression you still have of her, the President's mother?

RYAN: The President's mother, I can always remember her as a real lovely person, a hard-working, very honest, very determined and very religious person. She worked hard there in the store, in the baking part, in the making of the pies, keeping the home up, and church work, and so on. I can always remember her as being very industrious.

ARENA: How was she from the standpoint of, not being easy to get along with, but from the standpoint of sociability, conversation? Did you feel at ease in her company? Let me put it that way.

RYAN: Yes, I really did. I really felt at ease in her company. I felt more at ease in her company than I did in Mr. [Francis Anthony] Nixon's company.

ARENA: That would be the next question. What do you recall about Mr. Frank Nixon's personality?

RYAN: From what I remember, he was pretty set in his ways, as far as building things were concerned. He had a certain idea of, maybe, building a chimney or building a fence, or something like that, and he had a way about it that he had learned the hard way.

ARENA: On this question of being handy with tools, and so forth, the President himself has touched upon his lack of mechanical ability. I'm just wondering if you had any occasion to witness any aspect of that. Were you with him when there was a flat tire, we'll say, or where there was any work around the house? Did you visit the President and your sister when they were living in Whittier, and so forth?

RYAN: I had visited them, but I have to get back to what I started to say, that when I first met him, Pat had always

said that he would make a better lawyer than he would a mechanic, and I knew at that particular time that he wasn't mechanically inclined. And I further knew that at one time Pat, after they were married, came out to the ranch to see us on a Sunday morning and brought their car. It needed some little fixing done. She said, "You know, Dick can't even see what to do on this car. See if you can do what it needs." But he knows plenty about the law.

ARENA: From your recollection of both Mr. Frank Nixon and Mrs. Hannah Nixon, recalling their personalities--I realize that you did not meet the President until he was a grown man--but taking that into account, could you say that there are certain personality traits, certain characteristics of the President that seem to come from the mother's side and her way of thinking and doing things, and also certain things that came from Frank Nixon, or is that too difficult to really pinpoint?

RYAN: That would be very difficult for me to pinpoint, because I wasn't around enough to know that.

ARENA: Of course, the President has two living brothers. One is Donald [Francis Donald Nixon], the other is Edward [Calvert Nixon]. I wonder what you recall about their personalities and how they fitted in the family during this period, '38, '39, the period when the President and your sister were first courting.

RYAN: I remember that Don Nixon managed the store after the elderly Nixons more or less turned it over to him, and he started to modernize the store. He made it larger, he put in a coffee and pie lunch stand, the first freezing units so that farmers could bring in their foods, like strawberries and the different things, fowl and so on, to be frozen for their lockers when that first started, and he really built it up. Do you want me to talk about Eddie at the same time?

ARENA: Suit yourself, whatever is more convenient.

RYAN: I remember more about Eddie, because Eddie was much younger, only eight or nine when Dick and Pat were married. And I know Pat used to haul Eddie around every place. She'd bring him out to the ranch, and say, "Boy, he is a smart little thing, that kid." So she more or less watched him grow up.

ARENA: What do you recall about him from the standpoint of when he did get out to the ranch, did you have to keep an eye on him? Was he getting into things he shouldn't have, and so forth?

RYAN: No, he was never there that long, and usually we were all busy doing some particular thing and, although he didn't do any part of that, he was more or less quiet. He didn't enter into anything that we were doing down there too much.

ARENA: From the standpoint of your visiting Whittier, I'm wondering what, if any, impressions you had of the town; had you been to Whittier before you met the President, and what you thought of living in a community like that? As you know, it was founded by the Quakers. I'm just wondering if you had any special notions of what the city was like, and then when you got there, if it surprised you, or if it did seem to be what you thought it was.

RYAN: Whittier was one of the largest of the towns that were right around close to us, and we used to have to go to Whittier at times for supplies, such as a certain kind of an automobile dealership supplies, or to have some certain kind of mechanical or machine work done on an automobile or on a pump, or something like that, and the town was very beautiful, very quiet, and you could tell, it had quite a few churches there, and it was always called Quakers.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, from what you had read about the Quakers in your history books, and everyone knows that William Penn founded the first Quaker colony in Pennsylvania, and all that. From what you had read, and from your own ideas of the Quakers, were you surprised when you actually met a Quaker family that intimately, or had you known a Quaker family like that before?

RYAN: No, I hadn't really known a Quaker family like that before; that part didn't bother me, really. I didn't think too much about it, other than the word was something different than I was used to, because Pat and my brother and I always went to the Methodist church. And Quakers were a religion that there weren't too many of. Then as years went on, even Mr. Herbert Hoover was a Quaker, and the people accepted him and he became President, so it didn't bother me about a Quaker being elected to office.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, as an historian I can't help but ask it, did you at any time feel uncomfortable, were you at any time made to feel uncomfortable when you were in the presence of the President's family, not belonging to his same faith, especially his immediate family, his father, mother and his brothers? Did you ever feel uncomfortable in any way?

RYAN: Not in any way whatsoever, never.

ARENA: Again, if this isn't too personal, I don't know if you became aware at that time--of course, we now know through the books that have been written about the President--his father had been a Methodist before the marriage, and I'm wondering if that came up in any way during this early period, the fact that the father had been a Methodist?

RYAN: Not that I know of, no.

ARENA: Did you happen to meet any of some of the other close relatives of the President? I'm thinking in particular of his aunt, Rose Olive Marshburn and her husband, Oscar Marshburn, and any of the other close relatives who from time to time may have lived with the President and his family, cousins, for example, or children of some of these relatives, or did the distance that separated you make that unlikely?

RYAN: Well, I never met them before the President, Mr. Nixon, was in politics. Then we met at some of the meetings and some of the rallies, conventions, Inauguration, so on and so forth, but other than that we didn't associate together. We're friendly, but we didn't visit.

ARENA: Just to be sure, had you ever attended any of the family reunions, when the Milhouses would get together sometimes in the home of the [Oscar] Marshburns, who lived in the President's mother's home of Whittier, the one called the Milhous ranch? I don't know if you are aware of that area now. It's where Painter [Avenue] and Whittier Boulevard meet. I just wondered if you ever got into any of those family reunions.

RYAN: No. The only real family reunion was when Mr. Nixon was Vice President and he had just been elected, his parents gave him a reception out at Whittier and most of the family was there from both sides, kids and all.

ARENA: Did you ever have any occasion to see the President perform? He did know how to play the piano. He had, also, singing ability. He used to appear in the college glee clubs, and things like that. I wonder if, on any occasion, you recall seeing him either singing or playing the piano or any other instrument.

RYAN: No.

ARENA: Were there ever any occasions where you may have been at athletic events together? I'm thinking of a football game, or anything like that.

RYAN: Not together. I have been at football games when the President (or Vice President) was there. The Rose Bowl game, we were there. No, you know, we sat two rows apart. But I do know from all my conversation with him, if we ever talked about sports, and so forth, that he was really very sports-minded. When he was still courting Pat there was a Rose Bowl game between Duke University and USC [University of Southern California], and of course, Pat was from USC and the President was from Duke University and USC beat Duke, and that was a blow to Nixon. And I always kidded him about that and his coach, Wallace Wade and the Blue Devils. He always took it very graciously and he was very sports-minded. He said, "Well, some are won and some are lost, but we always try hard."

ARENA: Do you remember, Mr. Ryan, what year that was, that game?

RYAN: That was about 1939, I would say.

ARENA: They were not married yet, then, of course.

RYAN: No.

ARENA: Do you recall that possibly you may have ever seen any Whittier College football games, as you were growing up in the area? I'm thinking, for example, that the President appeared from time to time off the bench, but mainly on the bench, and did you, even accidentally, see your future brother-in-law?

RYAN: I may have accidentally, but I didn't really recognize him at that time. I never remembered the name, if it had ever been spoken.

ARENA: Do you recall any occasion where your school, and either Whittier High School or Whittier College got together? I'm just wondering if possibly you had any notion of what the educational system of Whittier was like, itself, especially the high school, where your sister had become a teacher; as a matter of fact, was teaching, as you know, when she met the President. Had there ever been any accidental contact between you and the Whittier school system before then?

RYAN: No. The only contact that I've ever had is that from my high school, the principal and the assistant principal from my high school went to Whittier the year that we graduated. And then, of course, Pat got a job there and worked there. She had her own classes in the subjects she taught, plus she did outside activities, like the yell leaders and so on, and she had advanced them to where they did different formations than they had ever had before. They were very beautiful, and I've gone to some of the high school games just to see her groups perform.

ARENA: Was it your impression as you were growing up and from time to time would see Whittier, for whatever reason, that Whittier was a well-to-do town, or just a town like any other average town in Southern California? I'm just wondering what your notion of Whittier was like as you were growing up yourself.

RYAN: It seemed to be, in my impression, a well-to-do town. In other words, they had orange groves, they had packinghouses, they had farming, and it was always very well kept, it was clean. And there was a difference between farming in Whittier and maybe farming in some other locality.

ARENA: Correct me if I'm wrong, but Whittier, especially during the period up to about World War II, was strict from the

standpoint of not allowing, and certainly trying to discourage, saloons, movies, night clubs, and so forth. Was that something that made Whittier stand out, or was that fairly common in other communities, including your own where you grew up? Did that give Whittier any sort of special flavor, from the standpoint of those who did not live there?

RYAN: Well, I knew it existed, but at that particular time I was more interested in going to a movie than going to a town that didn't have a movie. It didn't impress me too much.

ARENA: I'd like to finish by asking you, from the standpoint of remembering the President as he was a young lawyer and as he is now, and without going into politics per se, from the standpoint of if you were in a situation to see him, we'll say, before the public, maybe without going into any names, but if you saw him in a courtroom, in a court situation or any occasion, and as you see him as we all do today, to what extent do you think he has changed, to what extent do you find in him the same qualities that you recall when you first met him? I realize that's a very involved question, and maybe too difficult, but I appreciate your trying to make a stab at it, anyway.

RYAN: Well, if I get you correctly, I believe when I first knew Mr. Nixon, he was starting out as a lawyer in Whittier, he took some of the cases that he knew that nobody else would take. He tried to defend those people to the best of his knowledge, tried to give them a break, and along with it to show them a clear way. Also, later on when he was in the Navy in the South Pacific, he had a job of his own, plus he would defend the Navy boys that had gotten into trouble, and they would come to him for advice and for their defense, and he would do the best that he could at that particular time for them. Now, as I see him today, I still feel that he's still doing that same thing for everybody. He can't do it personally for everybody, but everything that he does, he tries to do for the majority, for the masses, the best for everybody.

ARENA: Was there any intimation, when you knew him before the war especially, that he might choose a political career, or did that come as a complete surprise to you later on?

RYAN: Well, naturally, it was a surprise, because I just felt he was going to be a lawyer, and I felt that he would probably be a lawyer in Whittier until he maybe wanted to move on to some other town, or a larger town. I looked for him to be the family lawyer for a long time to come, which it turned out to be different.

ARENA: Mr. Ryan, is there any subject, or any question or topic I have not brought up, that you would like to take up at

this point yourself? Any subject that you think should be gone into?

RYAN: No, I don't really think so.

ARENA: Then I want to thank you very much for your hospitality and allowing me to interview you in your residence, and in your answering all my questions so frankly and fully. Thank you very much.

RYAN: Well, thank you. I certainly appreciate you coming over.