



2-9-1972

Lowell L. Scaggs (February 9, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

Mr. Lowell L. Scaggs

February 9, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Lowell L. Scaggs. (L. stands for Lawrence) in Whittier, California, Arena interviewing, February 9, 1972. Shall we begin, Mr. Scaggs, by my asking you where and when you were born, to fix this period historically?

SCAGGS: I was born in Riverside, California, January 4th, 1914.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief biographical sketch of yourself; that is, when you moved to Whittier, and just a summary of your own educational background and special training in the area of your electronics or radio work?

SCAGGS: Well, we moved to this general area in 1921. I was in the third grade, and we moved to the area called Los Nietos, California, a small town a few miles south and west of Whittier, however in the Whittier Union High School District. I graduated from the grammar school in Los Nietos [California] in the year 1927, and started at Whittier Union High School in September of that year, graduating from there, however, in 1932. I should have graduated in 1931, but lacking a few credits I carried over and I graduated in 1932. I worked in Los Angeles, California from the fall of '32 until approximately the fall of 1935 for the Pacific Clay Products Company, as a pottery finisher and manufacturer. Then later, I worked for a few months for a hard metal surfacing company at Los Nietos [California].

ARENA: In the town of Los Nietos?

SCAGGS: The town of Los Nietos, yes. And in March of 1936, I went to work for the Southern California Edison Company as a meter reader in the area of Whittier. We had moved to Whittier from Los Nietos in the year of 1933. I worked for the Edison Company until 1938 as a meter reader but discontinued that job because poor health forced a change in type of work, and I was allowed to do office work inside the commercial office until January of 1941 when, due to the health problem, I was unable to continue any kind of work, and at that time I left the Edison Company. The health problem continued to deteriorate until a stabilization period set in around 1946.

From approximately 1948 to 1950 I took a course in radio and appliance repairing through the State Rehabilitation Program which, at that time in this local area of Whittier, was under the auspices of a Dr. J. Gustav White, who was the gentleman I interviewed before I started my course in the field of radio and electronic repair. Upon finishing this course in approximately 1950, I started a small shop in the rear of my home, repairing radios mostly. In the year 1952 Dr. White called, requesting that I join with a group of other disabled persons at a meeting over at Whittier College with Senator Nixon. This was in relation to a bill that was then in Congress relating to the rehabilitation of those afflicted with disabilities.

ARENA: Would that be the last time you have had direct contact with the Nixons--1952?

SCAGGS: Yes, sir, that is the last time I talked directly with him, personally.

ARENA: Would you mind going over some of the aspects of your disability? Correct me if I'm wrong. Is it a question of arthritis, for example?

SCAGGS: Yes, sir, it is, rheumatoid arthritis.

ARENA: And do you mind if I ask you when it first came upon you, and at what point were you confined, as you are now, to a wheel chair?

SCAGGS: It first began in the latter part of 1936.

ARENA: So as to situate this in your educational and biographical background, you were out of high school by this time.

SCAGGS: Yes, Sir.

ARENA: And you had been working, off and on, with some different companies by 1936. So it was after you were a mature person and you had finished your formal education, so to speak, that this came on?

SCAGGS: I had been with the Southern California Edison Company approximately six months when I first noticed it, and it was not diagnosed as such until quite some time later.

ARENA: This might be a coincidence, but do you happen to recall the President ever mentioning a law student who also had been confined to a wheel chair at Duke [Law School]? Did he ever mention this person in any way?

SCAGGS: Not to me personally, no, Sir.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you to back now over this sketch and look a little more into detail at some of the episodes that you recounted in summary fashion? For example, the high school years. As you know, the President graduated in the spring of 1930 and, although you should have graduated in 1931, which would have been just one year behind, you were not there for the full four years with him, as he himself had transferred, you will recall, from Fullerton in 1928. But what I'm getting at is, do you recall, in the way of personal encounters with the President during your stay at the high school--whatever comes to mind.

SCAGGS: My most vivid recollection, and I think most of the class would agree, was that the President was quite a studious person. One recollection of him is that he usually, on campus, was of a very serious nature and as a rule had many books under his arm, notebooks and reference works, and to many of us who were not quite as studious, it seemed to be a rather large amount of books to be carrying, but undoubtedly he put them to good use.

ARENA: Would you have any inkling or any notion that these books might not have been the regular assignment material, but possibly preparation for a debate, or a report, or something beyond the regular classroom assignment?

SCAGGS: That could be very possible. I'm quite sure that would be the case because, as you know, he was in many debates and did study debating extensively, and I would have been not at all surprised had they been not only for his classes which he was attending at the time, but for extracurricular work.

ARENA: Even though you were in different graduating classes, did you happen to ever have any classes with him anyway?

SCAGGS: No, Sir, I do not recall having any classes with him.

ARENA: How about extracurricular activities on the campus, say, in sports, or in debating, or in anything where you were not in a regular classroom?

SCAGGS: No, Sir. I don't believe so, as I worked after school all of my school years until approximately 1930, when I was on the track team for two years, but other than that my sports were quite limited, due to the fact that I did work after school.

ARENA: Do you mind if I asked you where you worked?

SCAGGS: I worked for a service station in Santa Fe Springs, California, after school, for a gentleman by the name of Merl Timmerman. Texaco products were handled by his station. And in the mornings before school, I opened up another service station quite close to my home in Los Nietos and worked one hour before catching the interurban Pacific Electric streetcar to high school from Los Nietos to Whittier.

ARENA: Do you recall if you might have ever attended any assembly, where maybe the President was in charge of the program, as a senior, where he was the student government leader or anything like that?

SCAGGS: I'm certain that I must have, but I do not recall it specifically.

ARENA: Is there anything during the school years, on the campus, whether it's in the classroom or outside, that you do recall that I have not raised? In other words, some activity. Maybe I just haven't put the right question to you?

SCAGGS: No, Sir. I cannot recall any other particular event that would be directly related to the activities of the President.

ARENA: There weren't some special things like, oh, some special dress day, or I understand something dealing with wearing special costumes? And maybe it was the seniors only who had this liberty of wearing this particular dress, including false mustaches and false sideburns.

SCAGGS: I feel I've been remiss in not getting out my old annuals before you arrived to refresh my memory, but at the moment I do not recall any particular event.

ARENA: That's quite all right. We can check the old annuals also. It's your memory that we're mainly interested in. Don't worry about your not remembering everything in the annual. Could I ask you if you had any contact with the President following the high school graduation period? I believe I did mention the Hi-Y Club. Could I go back to that for a moment and ask you if there was any contact there?

SCAGGS: No, Sir. As I recall, I never belonged to the Hi-Y Club.

ARENA: Do you recall that you were approached, especially by Mr. J. Gustav White, to join the Hi-Y Club at that time?

SCAGGS: No, Sir. I don't recall meeting Mr. White until he came to interview me with the State Rehabilitation Program.

ARENA: And this would have been before your meeting with President Nixon by a couple of years--with President Nixon it was 1950, and with Mr. White?

SCAGGS: I believe it was 1952.

ARENA: 1952, that's right.

SCAGGS: I think that was the last time I saw the President.

ARENA: I see.

SCAGGS: I'm not positive on the date, but I believe it was when he was Senator, before he was elected Vice President.

ARENA: And your first contact with Mr. White?

SCAGGS: This would have been approximately 1948 or '49--1949 I believe. I'm not positive on that date either.

ARENA: The point I was getting to was, even though you were not a member of the Hi-Y Club, were you aware of it?

SCAGGS: Oh, yes, I was aware of it. I had heard of it.

ARENA: You were aware of it. And was it, again, your need to work that prevented you from being a member, or possibly some athletic commitments, sports?

SCAGGS: Yes, I'm positive that it was my work that prevented any of my extracurricular activities, both in sports and any of the club activities, because I worked after school, immediately after school, each day, Monday through Friday and, of course, sometimes on weekends, and would at least have had no chance to train for any of the activities, such as football or baseball, and therefore could not go out for them, and it was not until 1930 that I was even able to go out for the track team, which is the only intramural sport that I received a letter in.

ARENA: Was there anything in the way of contact with the President through any of the other service clubs or groups, between the period that he graduated from high school, 1930, and

the time he left for Washington in 1942? What I have in mind are organizations like the 20-30 Club, the Lions [Club] or any of those service clubs. Was there any contact with the President in that connection at all?

SCAGGS: No, Sir, I'm sorry to say I did not belong to the 20-30 Club. I had many friends in it, but I never joined.

ARENA: Do you recall ever attending any of the plays, either on the high school or college level, which might have been open to the public, even though you did not attend Whittier College or the Community Players, who put on plays in Whittier? Did you ever see the President in that status, as an actor?

SCAGGS: No, Sir, I did not see him in anything of that nature. I only recall being in one community play. I believe it was a community play operation, in which some of the local high school talent participated, and I was there as a guitar player, more or less as background for a Spanish dancer, rather than for the actual music itself. They had an orchestra for the actual music, but I was more or less a prop. However, I did play the guitar, my playing was for the dancer's benefit.

ARENA: Do you recall, speaking of music, that the President played the piano, and was a member of choirs here and there, including the one of the college? Was there ever any contact with him on that level, musically?

SCAGGS: No, I don't recall any. I recall the fact that he did these things, but I don't recall personally ever participating or being in any of the activities with him.

ARENA: And just to be sure, you don't recall possibly, the Latin Club of Whittier High School, in which there would be some sort of annual banquet of the members of the club, and he played the piano at one such banquet. That doesn't come to mind by any chance?

SCAGGS: No, Sir. I did not take Latin, and consequently did not belong to the Latin Club. Spanish was my foreign language.

ARENA: Do you recall who your Spanish teacher was? Could it have been Colonel Earl Chapman, now retired, by the way?

SCAGGS: No, my Spanish teacher was a lady by the name of . . .

ARENA: Not Mrs. Holt, Edith Holt?

SCAGGS: No. Although I've heard the name. I did not have her for a teacher.

ARENA: It could come to you later. No problem.

SCAGGS: I'll try to remember later.

ARENA: And if you do, fine. And do you recall, in any way, that the President ever had Spanish, from your own personal observations or recollections?

SCAGGS: I do not know whether he took Spanish or not.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you to think back to that period of 1952, the last time when you met the President personally, and recount as much of it as you can, bearing in mind that we're not interested in politics, but the direct contact with a man, who not only was the state senator, but someone you had known personally, although, as you say, on a limited scale, but you had known him personally, you had gone to the same high school; bearing that in mind, what did come up in the conversation between you and him?

SCAGGS: To recall the Spanish teacher's name while I think of it, it was a Miss Freeland.

ARENA: You don't recall the first name.

SCAGGS: Vina E.

ARENA: Do you know if she might still be in this area?

SCAGGS: I believe she passed away a few years ago. And to reply to your other question, there were approximately, as I recall, a half dozen or so of us that were disabled by one thing or another, that met that particular day in the lounge of the college when Senator Nixon came, and we were all greeted by him. There was a discussion of the bill between the senator and ourselves, and we tried to put over the point--as I recall my particular part of it--that we were not looking for charity as such, but merely for an opportunity to obtain ways and means to make us productive once again, and he seemed to wholeheartedly agree with this philosophy, and there was a local photographer present who took several pictures of each of us with Mr. Nixon and some group pictures, as I recall.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if you have any of those yourself?

SCAGGS: I do have, yes, Sir. I have one on the wall of my room at the moment. The pictures came as quite a surprise approximately, I would say, six weeks after we had met the senator. We each, as I recall, received one or two autographed pictures from him, which, as I say, to all of us was a complete surprise.

- ARENA: Do you recall that the story accompanying the pictures did take place? Did newspapers give this coverage, possibly the next day in the local newspapers or Los Angeles [California] newspapers?
- SCAGGS: I don't recall seeing anything in the local newspapers. There may have been, but I do not recall seeing it.
- ARENA: And do you remember some of the things in the way of conversation, ideas, names that might have been exchanged between you and the President at this time?
- SCAGGS: No, as I recall, it wasn't a very long meeting. He paid interested attention to each and every one of us, and by the time he made the rounds it had consumed a bit of time, what with the picture-taking and so forth, and so I don't recall any specific discussion of the bill, other than the things I mentioned earlier.
- ARENA: Do you recall if his wife, Mrs. Patricia Nixon, was with him at the time by any chance?
- SCAGGS: I do not believe she was. We did not see Mrs. Nixon at the time.
- ARENA: Do you recall how you, personally, arrived, transportation-wise at the college? Were you to get there on your own or with a friend?
- SCAGGS: Yes, my wife picked me up in our own car and took me over and was there at the interview.
- ARENA: Was the objective, if I may ask, of the group, including Mr. White, to acquaint the President--at that time Senator--with this situation, of which he knew little or nothing and, if this is the case, how did he seem to react to gathering information about that situation?
- SCAGGS: That was my understanding of it, that the bill was to help rehabilitate those who could be rehabilitated and make them productive again.
- ARENA: And this was a bill that would have gone through the federal government?
- SCAGGS: That is my understanding of it, yes, and I never knew much about the bill precisely, but from what I gathered from Professor White, that was the nature of the bill. And the President at the time, as I recall, seemed enthusiastically to support the bill.

- ARENA: Do you recall, in the way of his presence, that he listened or did he seem to talk constantly--if that comes to mind, whether he did both, or was there something pronounced in the way of his action?
- SCAGGS: As I recall, he was very attentive and very inquisitively interested in the bill, and I know those of us afterwards could not help but feel that he was interested in the particular bill.
- ARENA: Do you recall that he, in any way, brought up to you or to anyone else in the area--and you might have overheard this--brought up his father's arthritic condition?
- SCAGGS: I do not recall that he did. It's been twenty years, and my memory is not serving me as well as I would like it to.
- ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if there was ever any follow-up, either at that point or later, by way of correspondence between you and the President?
- SCAGGS: No, Sir, I don't recall any correspondence, other than the sending of the pictures to each of us.
- ARENA: And these pictures came from his office.
- SCAGGS: They did, Sir, yes. They came from him, personally, and we were all very pleased and pleasantly surprised to receive them.
- ARENA: Do you recall that Professor White, maybe, kept you advised as to how things were going, or if he kept in contact with the President at this point?
- SCAGGS: I'm certain that he did, but I have no absolute proof that he did. I don't recall discussing it with Mr. White.
- ARENA: Having known the President, although at a distance, having known him before, would you say that you were surprised by seeing him again, now as a U.S. Senator, after seeing him mainly as a high school student? Were there certain traits that he had now that he did not have before? Did he seem to have a personality in general, and traits in particular, that very clearly stamped him of the high school era, when you saw him?
- SCAGGS: He seemed to me to still have the intense interest in any particular project that he had in high school. He seemed to have that same intense interest in a given subject when discussing that certain subject.

ARENA: Did he, by any chance--of course, I'm not sure you would remember this, or that anyone would, but--in view of what you said about recalling him with books and papers, did he have a bunch of books and papers with him on this occasion in 1952?

SCAGGS: I do not recall that he did in the interview in 1952. I do not believe he did.

ARENA: Would you recall his dress by any chance, or the overall effect? Did he seem to be conservatively dressed? Did he have no suit on, but just an open, say, California-type shirt? Does that stand out in your mind in any way at all?

SCAGGS: Yes. It's very clearly shown in the picture I will show you before you leave. He had on a dark suit, conservatively dressed, and in the picture with me, he is sitting there on the arm of a divan, discussing the parts of this bill with me when the photographer took the picture.

ARENA: Going back to the association with Professor White, do you recall to what extent your experience at Whittier High School and your experience with Professor White enabled you to make this sort of a change? What I'm getting at, I guess, really, is, here you had to, in a way, reshape your complete life. You had been trained for a certain area, and because of this physical disability you had to take on another new area. I would just like your own comments or recollections on that, what must have been, to say the least, a very challenging period for you.

SCAGGS: Yes, it was. After 1946, when the pain began to subside and I began to take an interest in things, that is when I became interested in trying to do something in the nature of radio or something that I could do. Fortunately, my hands were not affected as was the rest of my body, and I am able to do bench work. I've always remembered one quote that Professor White made at the time he was interviewing me, and that was, "If you find you have a lemon, make lemonade." And that has always, more or less, stuck in my mind.

ARENA: In other words, there is always a way of finding out what your skills are and the idea is to find out what they are and do something with them. That's the point that he was trying to make.

SCAGGS: He was trying to get over the point that, regardless of what you have, to make the best out of it that you can, and apparently that was a pretty good philosophy. It's

worked fine for me, let's put it that way, and I've not been able to make much in the way of money, but have been able to help us get by, let's put it that way. My wife is employed and has been continually, but what I make helps some.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you about the reaction, say, of your neighbors or the community? One of the problems, I would imagine, with making such a stark change as this would be the attitude of your neighbors and friends. Did that call for any special adjustment on your part?

SCAGGS: Yes, it did in a way, I guess. However, we've been fortunate to have some very nice friends over the years that have been true friends. I don't know if I understand exactly how you mean the question.

ARENA: Well, I guess I'm getting at, in a way, the attitude of the town or the people who made up Whittier at the time. Did you find that they were an understanding people or an understanding community for this sort of thing? I'm thinking of cases where children in particular, but maybe adults, can be very cruel to people who are afflicted as you were, and I was just wondering if you had any sort of a problem like that, not only so much as to understand you, but to understand the community itself.

SCAGGS: No, they seemed to be helpful. One of the local merchants, a Mr. [Rolland E.] Dockstader, a local appliance dealer, has furnished me his repair work since 1957, his small appliances that I can handle. He brings them to me, I repair them, he picks them up. People have been very, very helpful, and I can say the same, I'm sure, for at least two of the other persons who were at the interview that day. A [Daniel] Danny Clingbiel, who has since passed away, he and his wife, as I recall, made artificial flowers and things of that nature, beads and so forth, and they had a very thriving little business that helped them quite a bit. He was one that was there that day, and also two brothers who were handicapped. I do not recall their names, but they had an electric razor repair shop at the corner of Broadway and Washington Boulevard. As I recall, they were there that day. There was one other person there. I cannot remember what his business was. He was from the Montebello [California] area, I believe.

ARENA: Do you recall that, prior to the period 1952, that there was anything in the way of federal government cooperation with state governments, especially on rehabilitation, that you knew about, or that you knew for sure did or did not exist?

SCAGGS: No, Sir, I did not. I did not know whether there was anything of that nature existing or not.

ARENA: In other words, you're not sure whether Senator Nixon at that time, 1952, was promoting or cooperating with a bill that was wholly new or that was taking a look at an old problem, from the standpoint of the federal government?

SCAGGS: I really do not know, Sir, because I really was not too familiar with the details of the bill, except through Professor White, that the bill did exist. As to the basic fundamentals of the bill, I did not know just what they were.

ARENA: Do you recall what the purpose of the interview was, from your standpoint and that of Professor White? In other words, the President's view, of course, was to gather information, because he was going to have to do something with the bill--vote for or against it--but do you recall how your role was to fit into the overall picture?

SCAGGS: As I recall, it was to attract attention to the fact that the bill was to be acted on soon. The gathering of the group was to have been more or less in the nature of publicity for the bill as I remember.

ARENA: Without going into politics as such, but from the standpoint of overall knowledge of attitudes regarding the Republicans and the Democrats, was it in any way a surprise to you that a Republican senator was participating in what, today, we might call a welfare bill? Did that thought enter your mind in any way at all, and in a way surprise you, if you had any awareness that there was this idea that the Republicans had certain attitudes on welfare bills, and the Democrats had a certain attitude, and so forth?

SCAGGS: No, Sir, I can't recall that that entered my mind at all.

ARENA: In other words, you weren't necessarily surprised that: one, it was a Republican senator that was interested in this bill; and two, that it was the former young man by the name of Richard Nixon. That did not come as a surprise, in a political sense.

SCAGGS: No, Sir, I can't say that it did.

ARENA: As this interview is coming to a close, could I ask you if you recall anything in the way of your direct contact with President Nixon, from the beginning to the present time, anything that I have not brought up in this interview now, or any comments that you would like to make about any aspect of the man?

SCAGGS: Well, Sir, to the best of my knowledge, we've covered it rather thoroughly, and I don't recall any specific instance or anything that would be of an interesting nature that would add to the interview. I believe we have covered it to the best of my ability.

ARENA: I certainly appreciate your welcoming me into your home and allowing me to have this interview with you, Mr. Scaggs.

SCAGGS: Thank you, Sir, for calling. It was a pleasure.