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Stephen J. Schatz (December 3, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MR. STEPHEN J. SCHATZ

December 3, 1971
Santa Rosa, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Stephen J. (John) Schatz of Santa Rosa, California. We are now in Santa Rosa, California, Arena interviewing. The date is December 3, 1971. Mr. Schatz, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

SCHATZ: I was born on December 13, 1889, in Montgomery, Minnesota.

ARENA: When did you first come to California?

SCHATZ: I came to California on March 4, 1920.

ARENA: Do you recall the occasion for making that move?

SCHATZ: Yes. Formerly, when I was teaching in college, I was informed after the Armistice was signed that I would have to wait until the following fall to go back to teaching. And in the meantime a friend of mine said that I should take a job selling groceries. So he got me a job in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And while I was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Calumet Baking Powder people came over and wanted to get someone to go west. And they transferred me to Denver [Colorado] and from Denver to Salt Lake City [Utah], and then from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles [California]. In the meantime, instead of getting ninety dollars a month I was getting from two hundred, and when I had been with the Calumet Baking Powder Company I got three hundred dollars a month and all expenses.

So when I was in Los Angeles I began working for Johnson Carvell Wholesale Brokerage house and was selling groceries. And while I was selling these groceries I became acquainted with Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, who formerly was the conductor on the Pacific Electric [Railway]. He opened a grocery store on Greenleaf Avenue in Whittier [California], and many times we were talking about the different things he was doing. First of all, I will say this: There wasn't a better soul on earth than Frank Nixon. For instance, if you came into Whittier and you didn't have a job, with your family, he would give you credit and allow you to get all the groceries you needed to eat, and then he would say, "You will pay me when you get work." And he had lost very little money.

So, on another occasion, I happened to be in the store and we got to talking, and I saw the little boy who is now our President, about twelve years old. And he said, "I have to send this little ruffian to the Quaker school in Pennsylvania to my brother and see if I can make something out of him." I asked him if he thought he could change a spoiled egg into a good one. "Well," he says, "I can try."

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After some discussion of Mr. Schatz's personal background, the interview returned to a consideration of Francis Anthony Nixon:

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ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you the very first occasion that you met Mr. Frank Nixon and the Nixon family?

SCHATZ: I met him in the end of the year 1920.

ARENA: And at this time he was the motorman that you speak about?

SCHATZ: No.

ARENA: What was his job?

SCHATZ: He had already opened a grocery store; and he had told me, himself, that he was a motorman on the Pacific Electric [Railway].

ARENA: He had been a motorman earlier?

SCHATZ: That is, conductor.

ARENA: I see.

SCHATZ: Yeah, conductor. Then he got a little disgusted with it, so he decided he'd open up a grocery store, and then, of course, he had that store. And just as I

said a moment ago, if you came into Whittier, and you needed food and had no work or had no job, Frank--I'll say, "God bless the man"--was surely a WONDERFUL individual. He'd say to you, "Doctor, seeing that you're not having any work, we will furnish you with the groceries, and afterwards you pay me when you get a job." And he lost VERY LITTLE MONEY. He had one of the most REMARKABLE reputations of any human being on earth.

ARENA: You, as a matter of fact, did business with him, yourself, Doctor? Would you mind telling us what kind of business and how often you would see him, and how your relations were, both business and personal?

SCHATZ: I did. Well, I'll say this: Every month I called on him, taking orders for what Mr. Nixon needed, and then added to that, Frank would always be open and welcoming you with open arms and very courteous and very polite, and very congenial. You could work with the man. It was a pleasure to work with him. And he would always be honest with you. That is one thing we must give the gentleman a lot of credit for.

ARENA: Let me ask you this: How wide was your territory? You're comparing him with about how many other men that you dealt in business with? When you say he was outstanding, outstanding among how many other businessmen, more or less, that you dealt with?

SCHATZ: Oh, I would say somewhere in the neighborhood of 140 or 150 different people that I dealt with, and had a regular route; that is, to go the whole thing.

ARENA: About how many others could you say the same thing that you're saying about Mr. Frank Nixon?

SCHATZ: There was, possibly, at least a half a dozen or more that you would say were that way. But they did not compare with Frank. They did not compare.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if your business relations with him were on a cash or account basis, where he would pay you by signing a check at the end of the month, or was it a COD [cash on delivery] basis?

SCHATZ: It was open account. And each month whenever the bill was presented there was no question about you getting your money.

ARENA: And just what was it that you dealt in at that time? What things did you sell to him?

SCHATZ: Well, I sold different items, like malted milk and canned milk and Eagle milk, and those different items, and caramels for the store, that he would use, and I

was also selling oils, cooking oils, and starches and those different items.

ARENA: I notice that now you also represent a footwear line. Did you also handle shoes, and did he sell shoes in the store then?

SCHATZ: No.

ARENA: Would these have been personal items, or you had nothing to do with shoes then?

SCHATZ: No, I had nothing to do with that at all. It was on my own, after '48 when I was told that I was too old and they put me off of my job, I took on shoes and clothing and was selling them on my own on a commission basis, let us say.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you ever were invited to eat with the Nixons, or stay over night, or how would you handle your visits to the community?

SCHATZ: Well, I called on the grocers there, and of course when I would get through with them all, like say for instance, I came in to Frank [Nixon] and took his order, I'd go over to the other boys and take their order, about anytime as far as I was concerned. We just had personal relations in our dealings.

ARENA: Do you recall about how many grocery stores, or stores similar to that type you dealt with in the Whittier area?

SCHATZ: Oh, there were about nine of them there.

ARENA: How would you size up the Nixon grocery store in comparison with the nine others, in the sense of volume of business, and condition of the store, and overall business arrangements?

SCHATZ: Well, frankly, I'd say this: He had a very nice, large store, and his congeniality as well as his personal (well, let us say) solicitude for your well-being, and he would have people that recommended you or anyone else to deal with him. And that is the way Frank had increased his business by leaps and bounds, and he was making good money.

ARENA: Did you talk about him, or hear things about him, from neighbors and customers and other businessmen, in addition to forming your own opinion on your own direct contacts? What did you hear, if anything, from the neighbors, the business people and customers, about Frank Nixon and the store in general?

SCHATZ: Well, I can say this: Frankly, I've talked to different people that told me their conditions when they came to Whittier. Not only that, but I'd heard also, several of the grocers telling me that he had the finest reputation in Whittier. They said that everybody talked highly about Frank Nixon. And I will say that, too. He was certainly a WONDERFUL, WONDERFUL human being and, above all, God bless the man. I used to love him, just on that account.

ARENA: Were you aware, Mr. Schatz, that he was a Quaker? And would you mind discussing how it was, conducting business with a Quaker businessman, if it was special in any way?

SCHATZ: Well, I'm going to say this, Doctor: I would not, I never did, hold any animosities or any bitterness towards any man, regardless of what church or what religion he adhered to. As long as the man was upright and honest, what more should we say? What do I say? Just like they've always asked people, they say, "What church do you go to?" I say, "Well, that's fine. You can go to any church you want. If you believe in a Creator. If you believe that that Creator will take care of you. If you believe in his own, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,'" I said, "You cannot go to work and go wrong."

ARENA: I see. Were you aware that Mr. Frank Nixon did not like, and absolutely forbade, his own sons to smoke and drink? Were you aware of that at the time, and did that cause any problems in the sense that, did you deal in tobacco yourself, and maybe lose out on a customer because of that?

SCHATZ: No, I never heard him complain in that regard, never heard him say. Not only that, when we come together, we talked about conditions in general, about well, let us say depression, or whatever it was, where there were several, possibly, unemployed. As a rule, he was very accommodating, and a very generous individual. He had a heart as big as himself.

ARENA: Do you recall that when you did have these conversations and they were about the economic conditions and the political conditions, just how he conducted the conversation? Were these easygoing? Did he tend to get excited? Was he excitable? How much of that do you recollect?

SCHATZ: Well, honestly, I never seen the man flare up in anything. And as far as it was, he was just like myself. I always said, "We are all children of the same God, the same Creator."

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did you discuss religion with him?

SCHATZ: No, never.

ARENA: Once you had that understanding, there wasn't anything further.

SCHATZ: There was nothing further, exactly.

ARENA: Were you aware that he was a Sunday school teacher, around that time?

SCHATZ: No, I wasn't.

ARENA: How would you describe the way in which the store was run, because I understand Mrs. Hannah Nixon was always around, and the boys would help around there--the President, Richard Nixon, and his other brother, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon]. Do you recall these very clearly in your mind? The wife, Hannah Nixon; the sons, Richard and Donald, and what they were doing?

SCHATZ: Well, I would say this: Frank would want certain things done, and he gave instructions, and they were done just according to his own desire, and you never seen him flare up or blow up or, what you might say, show an angry trend of any kind. He was always very humble, very respectably so.

ARENA: Was he firm, though, when he had his own point to make, or his own view?

SCHATZ: Well, he would say--now like, Doctor, I'd say to you, "Doctor, I want you to clean that up over there." And he would say it in what we may call an emphatic voice, but not with what we may say any rage or anger or flare-up, or anything of that kind. He was very meek and mild.

ARENA: And Mr. Schatz, just to get the overall picture of your direct contact with the Nixons, roughly, how long did your business association with him last, from the beginning of the late twenties, try to recollect the year, if you don't know exactly, about the year you first started doing business with the Nixon grocery store, and the last time you did?

SCHATZ: Well, that ended in 1928, when I was changed to another territory.

ARENA: To help you fit this in with the President's own age, in 1928 he was two years away from graduating from high school. In other words, he was still of high school age. Do you recall what the President was doing in particular in the store at that time? Did he wait on customers?

Did he work in a particular section of the store? Do you recall speaking with him, personally, and discussing anything at all?

SCHATZ: No, because, I'll tell you why. When he was in school, I was never there, or never seen the boy there, except a couple of times.

ARENA: You would usually be there during the school day hours.

SCHATZ: School day hours, yes. And I don't recall, but I believe once or twice I may have said to him, "Good morning," or whatever it happened to be, but more than that, nothing.

ARENA: Do you recall, when you did see him, and you saw the other brother, Donald, do you recall that they had different personalities, and in what way?

SCHATZ: Yes, I could see that Donald was more like his father. He was always more meek and less aggressive, while the opposite of it was Richard. He was aggressive. He was a little bit outspoken, too, may I say that.

ARENA: Even though you were there, as you say, not very often, did you ever see the boys get into any arguments?

SCHATZ: No, I didn't. That I must admit. I wasn't there to see them get into any quarrels or fights or anything of that kind.

ARENA: How about Mrs. Hannah Nixon? What do you recall of her, firsthand?

SCHATZ: Well, frankly, I used to come in and when I seen her I'd say, "Good morning, Mrs. Nixon," or whatever it was, and she'd say, "Good morning," and she was very calm and not very outspoken, or anything of the kind, just a plain, ordinary individual. She may have asked you a certain question, or you might have asked her a certain question, and she gave you a very short, plain answer.

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The interview continued with a discussion of the wholesale grocery business in general in the Los Angeles, California, area, and changes in Whittier, California, in the twenties. The last topic developed into the following dialogue:

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SCHATZ: Well, there's one thing. When that oil boom came down there, there were several people moving into Whittier, getting work in the oil fields. And whilst they were

getting work in the oil fields, I would say this for Mr. Nixon: If the boys had a family and children, he would supply them with groceries on credit, naturally, and they would pay him after they had earned the money. Oh sure, there was a few dishonest ones among them, but not many.

ARENA: Well, then, one main point here would be the fact that the new oil business meant new business for the Nixon grocery store, that you recall.

SCHATZ: Yes, it did.

ARENA: And was that reflected in that he ordered more things from you; would that be the way you could recollect that?

SCHATZ: Yes.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you this concerning this payment on credit? Was there ever any occasion--I think you answered this, but I just want to be sure--where he did not pay his bills owing you, at any time, in all the years he did business with you?

SCHATZ: Never. That man was, just like I said, as honest as a gold dollar, for that matter.

ARENA: Now, on the question of the discovery, and the rapid business in oil, if I'm not mistaken, was that in Santa Fe Springs [California], next door to Whittier?

SCHATZ: Right.

ARENA: Do you recollect Mr. Nixon ever mentioning to you that he had had the possibility of having invested in some of that land? Did that question ever come up, do you know?

SCHATZ: No, he never discussed anything of a personal nature. I must give him credit. Like I say, I'm not a mind reader. But he never said anything, but he was busy, and that man was as busy as anybody could be with the store. And I'll tell you, believe you me, I've had more than one family tell me, that is when they were in the store, how they happened to get groceries and things, that they wouldn't have EATEN, if it wasn't for Frank Nixon. And that's a wonderful reputation.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, to be sure about this idea of personal matters, you may or may not know that he had a son around that time who was very ill with tuberculosis, and his name was Harold [Samuel Nixon], and he was the oldest son, and he died around that time. And I'm just wondering

if you happened to see or notice anything about that matter, that he had this very sick son, who died with tuberculosis?

SCHATZ: I heard a little of it, but I truthfully didn't know, but I heard that that boy was down with tuberculosis. But as far as that was concerned, there was very little said about it, very little. In fact, you'd hardly hear ANY comment on that.

Of course, sickness, I don't care where it is, of that nature, is not very pleasant, let us say. It creates a lot of unhappiness; you know that as well as I do. For instance, if you've got a son or a daughter, or whatever it may be, and you lose 'em through death, that's through transition. Of course, we know, and we all believe it, that we don't die, our soul goes on from there, and we'll get our reward on the other side. And if we don't take and live rightly and don't live an upright life, well, we might be unfortunate and they'll tell us we're going to go to Hades, but I don't believe it. I think to myself that the Creator is not that kind of a cruel individual. And however, I know this, that when that boy was sick, Frank never even as much as showed that he was disturbed by it, or anything of the kind, though underneath, deep within his heart he felt it. But he never mentioned it, he never talked about it, he never said a word about it, so you can see for yourself that it was quite a blessing, too, because the less you talk about those things, unless you want to talk them OUT of your system and get them out of your subconscious mind, the better it is not to talk about them; because if you implant them too deeply in the subconscious then it's a turmoil, or maybe it's a curse on you and me for the rest of our lives.

ARENA: Mr. Schatz, you know better than I the amount of business that rural stores--and that was a rural grocery store, definitely--handled as compared with, we'll say, the city stores. They depended on people like you coming out. And do you mind if I ask you, thinking back to that period, was that a hard life that you led? In effect, you were a traveling salesman, putting it very bluntly. Was that a hard life? Would you have done something else, or did you do it because you enjoyed it?

SCHATZ: Well, frankly, I didn't look at it as a hard life. I looked at it as a pleasure, from this point of view: When you know, you realize, that you are doing good to your fellow man, helping; that you're not only helping him, but you help yourself, because if we send out good thoughts, good wishes and everything else to one another, we get 'em back a hundredfold.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, if it isn't too personal, was that your philosophy at that time, a relatively

young man? Did you feel that way? Did you feel that in talking with Frank Nixon, that he felt the same way--I don't know what your religious beliefs are, of course--but did you feel that you and he had that same attitude toward life?

SCHATZ: Yes, we did.

ARENA: Maybe that's one reason why you and he got along so well.

SCHATZ: Yes, because there was that harmony that existed.

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The interview continued with personal recollections of Mr. Schatz, not directly related to the Nixons, and then ended with this discussion:

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ARENA: All right. Let's leave that for now, and I think that there's one more question that you would be the right person to ask, since you have this background in educating foreign Americans, those who were becoming U.S. citizens and those who were trying to learn English. Around that time, there were people from different parts of the world settling in Whittier, some from Mexico. In the case of Whittier, there were some from Spain, the Basques, for example, and so forth. Did you come in contact with any of these persons, and know for example, how they and the Nixon grocery store got along? Do you know, for example, if there was any language problem? Maybe you were in the store at the time. How did the Nixons deal with people who didn't speak good English, or who could hardly speak it at all?

SCHATZ: Well, to my own recollection, I would say this: That I never seen anything there but Frank would point out the things for them and . . . [Laughter]

ARENA: You recall his doing that. And you recall people coming in who didn't know English.

SCHATZ: They'd point out this, you know, but they would say, "Yeah, yeah, si, si," and that would come out quite frequently..

ARENA: Do you recall ever, under any circumstances, that any fun was made of these people by any of the Nixons, at all?

SCHATZ: No, it wasn't. They were courteous to everybody. That you must say.

ARENA: You mentioned a moment ago, too, that the Nixons would carry people on their books. Do you recall that they would carry these people, as well?

SCHATZ: Yes, if they would want and needed help, yes. Frank Nixon would give his shirt away to help a person.

ARENA: Mr. Schatz, I can't think of any more questions that I could put to you that you have not answered very honestly and very frankly, and very fully. Maybe you could think of something that I haven't touched on that deals with your direct contact with the Nixon family. You might think of something, or the community of Whittier, in which the President grew up. Maybe you happened to be there when there was some particular holiday, for example; anything at all that I haven't brought up that you would like to bring up now.

SCHATZ: Well, I'll tell you frankly, it's just like everything else. You had six days a week that you were going, calling on the trade. And you know that, even if there was something, well, maybe, like you say, I'd go out to the [Santa Fe] Springs there, when they were taking and bringing in the oil. And outside of that, I'd always say, "There's one day of rest. Thank God I've got that."

ARENA: And just to make sure, I assume that on that day of rest, Sundays, you never did business with the Nixon grocery store.

SCHATZ: No.

ARENA: Do you know, as a matter of fact, that it was closed on Sundays?

SCHATZ: Well, I would surmise. Because I think he would keep it closed [on Sundays].

ARENA: But as far as YOU were concerned, you never did business with him on Sundays?

SCHATZ: No.

ARENA: Well, Mr. Schatz, I really can't thank you enough for your cooperation and helpfulness in giving history this record of your firsthand experience with the Nixon family. Thank you.

SCHATZ: Well, it's a pleasure, and not only a pleasure. I hope it'll do good. And I hope that little rascal will get back again.

ARENA: Thank you.