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Frank Jorgensen (June 29, 1971)

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. FRANK JORGENSEN

June 29, 1971

San Francisco Area, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview with Mr. Frank Jorgensen in San Mateo County, just outside of San Francisco [California], June 29, 1971. While Mr. Jorgensen did not know the President before 1945, he was an intimate part of the immediate post-1945 political beginnings of President Nixon, and this tape is more for orientation purposes than a detailed political discussion.

Mr. Jorgensen, could we begin by my asking you the very first time that you came into contact with President Nixon, not the full circumstances, but the very first time, and in a general way indicate your contact with him?

JORGENSEN: The first time I met him, or the first time I got interested in him as a possible candidate?

ARENA: The first time you got interested in him would be better.

JORGENSEN: Well, it came about because some of the people in the old 12th Congressional District were looking for a possible candidate to run for Congress in 1946, and his name was brought to our attention through Mr. Herman Perry, who was then vice president in charge of the Bank of America in Whittier [California], and Mr. Walter Dexter, who then was head of public instruction in the State of California, and who, I believe, had formerly been the president of Whittier College, or at least affiliated with Whittier College in some fashion.

ARENA: Since our main interest for this part of the Richard Nixon Oral History Project is to go, not into the

political period, but the period before, it would be very important to know the type of persons who were important people in Whittier; for example, Mr. Herman Perry, who was an important member of the community, as was Mr. Dexter, as you mentioned, and it would help to have an outsider's view, since if I'm not mistaken, you were never a resident of Whittier.

JORGENSEN: No; I lived in the 12th Congressional District that Whittier was in, but I lived over more or less in the west end of the district in a community called San Marino [California], which is a bedroom town for Los Angeles [California]. Through our seeking a candidate for Congress, I came in touch with [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley and Harold Lutz, who was also connected with the Bank of America. I think Lutz was assistant to Herman Perry. We always addressed him as Uncle Herman, because he was a little bit older than the rest of us, and if anybody could really be said to be responsible for Dick Nixon starting in political affairs, you would have to give that credit to Herman Perry. In my opinion, he was the godfather of Dick Nixon and was the one that really brought him to the attention of those people who were trying to find a candidate for the district. There were a number of other people in Whittier that I became acquainted with at that time, but their names--I would have to go back, the [Lawrence M.] Dorns, there were quite a number of people like that--but those names have slipped by me. But basically, becoming acquainted in Whittier, there was Nixon's father and mother, and his brother Don [Francis Donald Nixon]; and this all came about after Dick Nixon became the possible candidate for the district.

ARENA: How about the quality, the personality, from your recollection, that Mr. Herman Perry possessed, say, as a speaker? Was he a jovial fellow? Was he serious? Anything you recall about the man's character and personality.

JORGENSEN: I suspect he was Irish. He had a good sense of humor, although you had to know him pretty well before you would sense that, because he was rather reserved in giving you his friendship, but once you had it, it was a good, solid, warm friendship. You had a feeling of deep faith in this man. He had a fine reputation in Whittier. I'm sure if you check you'll find that he was highly respected for the things that he did for the community.

ARENA: Was he the person in charge of the Whittier community search for a new candidate?

JORGENSEN: Well, I don't know that I would use the word charge. I think he was like the rest of us who were looking around. None of us were politicians. We didn't hold ourselves out to be, but we were not happy with the representation that we had in Congress, and we seemed to find ourselves

coming together with the desire to replace the Democratic incumbent, Jerry Voorhis, and it was through this that we developed leadership in all areas of the district. People came out when they found there was an effort being made; they wanted to join the crusade, so to speak.

ARENA: Did you ever have the occasion to hear Mr. Perry on a platform? Was he a good public speaker, for example? Or would he rather let someone else do the talking, so to speak?

JORGENSEN: Well, he sure as hell could express himself in a board room or small meeting room. I've never heard him on a platform before a large audience, but I suspect he would be able to express himself very well.

ARENA: And your recollection of the other name you mentioned, Mr. Dexter, Walter Dexter who, as you mentioned, had a connection with Whittier College, and also went on to become Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of California?

JORGENSEN: Yes.

ARENA: What do you recall of his personality and character?

JORGENSEN: I can't give you too much of that. I didn't have the privilege of knowing the man too well. Quite a capable man, I think, in the endeavors he was making.

ARENA: But he was a former teacher, I believe you said.

JORGENSEN: He was a teacher, or president. I think he might have been president of Whittier College for a period of time. I think he was. You can check that out in your research.

ARENA: Did you have the occasion to meet someone like Mr. [Clinton O.] Clint Harris, who was also a trustee and graduate, and really a schoolmate of President Nixon, especially on the football team?

JORGENSEN: I could have, but I don't recall it. I met an awful lot of people during those years, but their names have faded from my memory.

ARENA: Are there any names or occasions that might come to mind that you think might be of value in a search of this type, where we are trying to get at the pre-1945 Nixon? For example, maybe you have met persons who knew the President while he was in the Navy, or during his law career. Are there any names that come to mind?

JORGENSEN: I don't think I can be of much help to you. I've met a lot of people since he's become President and they all knew him so well, either in the Navy or here or there, but I think they probably may have met him once in the course of time and they may have developed in their own mind that it was a warm, deep friendship. No, I can't be of much help to you there.

ARENA: In other words, that would be all hearsay, anyway, anything before 1945.

JORGENSEN: Yes, right.

ARENA: Well, since you do have this recollection of his going into politics for the first time, let's make sure we have it on the record. Would you object to going over the initial phase that deals with President Nixon's entry for the first time--and you were involved in that--into politics? This was around the year 1945, a little afterwards.

JORGENSEN: Well, in a general way, I can give you an outline. Some of us are trying to get together and tie down some things. So far as I know, there is no written history of these campaigns at the time Nixon came in. Quite a number of the generally younger businessmen in the district were seeking a candidate, and as a result put together an informal committee, called the Committee of 100. It was very informal, just anybody that really wanted to attend the meetings, and the idea of this committee was to seek out and listen to possible candidates, to see if we could find one. Generally speaking, the [Republican] political party in the district was more or less dormant. They were pretty well convinced that they couldn't beat the incumbent, or at least some of them said so. We younger men didn't realize that it was impossible. We were ignorant of politics, and so we decided to try to do something. Once we got the ball rolling, we found that the pros were quite happy to join us and tried to take the campaign away from us, but we were all businessmen and we sensed this sort of thing, and so we tried to keep control of it. In the course of searching, the Nixon name came into our sight, through Mr. Perry and through Walter Dexter. He seemed to fit what we were looking for. Basically, we wanted a young man, and we wanted a man who had proved himself in his collegiate work, his educational work, that he was . . .

ARENA: Mr. Jorgensen has promised to continue this tape with several other friends who were among the early recruiters and seekers of someone with the ability of President Nixon. This meeting will be held at the convenience of Mr. Jorgensen and others in the future, and will be continued at that time.