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Merle Marie Lally (August 7, 1972)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MRS. MERLE MARIE LALLY

August 7, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

Mrs. Lally, a Whittier resident, was a patron of the Nixons' grocery store.

The interview began with a discussion of Mrs. Lally's own background. She was born in 1904 in Oklahoma. She came to California in 1922 and was married the same year. She moved to Whittier in 1933.

Her verbatim recollections of the Nixon family follow:

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ARENA: Mrs. Lally, may I ask you to think back to the very first time that you saw President Nixon in your life?

LALLY: Well, I used to go out Whittier Boulevard into Fullerton [California], because my daughter that I have just spoken of who was married in the Friends Church lived in Fullerton. At that time there were no freeways. So we went to the end of Whittier Boulevard on down, I don't even recall the street where Whittier Boulevard ended. But that was the way we got to Fullerton. So coming home I was attracted by this grocery store. Now I don't even recall the name. It might have been Nixon's grocery store. I don't recall that. But I would pull up in front of the store and go in. And Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon, the President's mother, would be there and wait on me. And the President's father [Francis Anthony Nixon] would be in the meat department. And they had very fine

meat. And I was so impressed with the vegetables. They were so fresh, they looked like they had just been grown in their back yard. Then if I had too many things, there were two boys in there which I later found out were Richard [Milhous] Nixon and [Francis Donald] Don Nixon. And they were always so happy and would take my groceries out for me, so courteous. And I was impressed by that because I love courtesy in young people. I didn't trade there every day because it was too far, but whenever I was passing that market I stopped there. Little did I realize that one of those precious boys would be the President of the United States, and I do hold him in high esteem and he is in my prayers daily.

ARENA: May I ask you, just to be sure, if you had heard that the Nixons had that grocery store, or was that purely an accident that you came upon them in that fashion?

LALLY: Just an accident. I'm sort of old-fashioned, maybe Victorian, but I like little things. I like small communities and that market appealed to me. When I was growing up they were called grocery stores.

ARENA: May I ask you to think back over the number of times you saw the Nixons in the grocery store, and just for the record, is that the only occasion? You did not meet her in some organization--Red Cross work--or anything like that in town? It was only in the store where you met the Nixons?

LALLY: Only in the store.

ARENA: Good. Then over the years as you would meet them, how would you describe first, the President's mother, thinking over the numbers of times and also describing the things you saw her do? When you say she waited on you, did you ever see her maybe even doing some of the physical work in the way of putting cans up on shelves? Anything that comes to mind about Mrs. Hannah Nixon.

LALLY: No, I don't remember any of that. I just remember her being behind the counter. At that time you didn't wait on your self like you do in the supermarkets, and I would ask for this and ask for that, but I never saw her unpacking cartons or anything.

ARENA: Did the question of pie baking come up? Did you know that she baked pies and did you buy any?

LALLY: Well, now I didn't know that, because I am quite a cook, or was, and I baked my own pies and cakes and cookies, so I didn't know about her pies.

ARENA: Do you recall ever just chatting with Mrs. Hannah Nixon about anything?

LALLY: No, I was always in a hurry to get home to dinner.

ARENA: I see.

LALLY: And I just went in there and got the groceries. Oh, I probably said it was a nice day or something like that, but I don't remember entering into too much of a conversation. But I just liked to go there.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, how were your bills paid--cash?

LALLY: Cash.

ARENA: It was no question of your keeping an account at the store?

LALLY: No.

ARENA: Do you recall and what do you recall of the personality and nature and the activities, anything that comes to mind, about Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, the father of the young Nixon boys?

LALLY: I just remember he was always busy with the meats, and they were cut, a lot of them were already cut in the case, and I usually asked for something in the case. But that's about all I can tell you.

ARENA: And he would wait on you as far as the meats themselves were concerned?

LALLY: Yes.

ARENA: You would not tell Mrs. Hannah Nixon that you wanted this or that piece but you would be waited on by him?

LALLY: The meat department was on the west and the grocery part was on the east.

ARENA: Was there a little luncheon counter there at that time for coffee and sandwiches?

LALLY: Not to my knowledge. But later on during the war years there was a coffee shop run, I understand, by Don Nixon, and I was in there a number of times.

ARENA: And now you have brought up that young man. What do you recall of Donald? Again, was it just the carrying of groceries, or did he ever wait on you from time to time?

LALLY: No, no, not that I can remember. I got the groceries and maybe they didn't take them out all the time, you know, if I just had a small sack, but they did at times take them out if there were two sacks.

ARENA: Did you possibly in later years ever meet Donald through the Donald Nixon restaurant that he owned?

LALLY: I was at his opening down here on Whittier Boulevard when it opened, the drive-in.

ARENA: How would you describe that experience? Why did you go there, if I may ask?

LALLY: Because the hamburgers were good, and it was a quick way to get a bite.

ARENA: He had a drive-in restaurant as well as a family-type restaurant. You recall the drive-in and the opening of the drive-in?

LALLY: Yes. Now he had a family-type restaurant down on Commonwealth [Avenue] and Orchard [Place] in Fullerton where our son, John McGill and family live. They lived up a block from that, and lots of times when I was down there we would go down and eat at the Nixon Family Restaurant. We have eaten luncheons and dinners there.

ARENA: Did you ever stop to talk with him? Was there an occasion in any way?

LALLY: I don't believe I would know him if I saw him.

ARENA: May I ask you also now to think back in particular about the young Richard Nixon in the grocery store experiences. Did you ever see him doing anything in addition to carrying your groceries?

LALLY: No, I don't. I presume they were helping in the store, but I couldn't say.

ARENA: Do you recall, since you knew about the Nixons from your firsthand encounter at the store, reading about him as the years went on, especially while he was in college and law school and then as a practicing lawyer in the community? Did his name come to your mind?

LALLY: Well, if it was in the Whittier Daily News, of course, I was always interested to read about him. I don't remember too much about him in college, except if I read something. And I was very interested. And I don't know too much about him when he was an attorney, but of course when he was Vice President under [Dwight D.] Eisenhower I was greatly interested.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, and we are not interested in politics per se, did you ever actively support him

in the way of having a coffee klatch or talking to friends, using whatever influence you had in his favor?

LALLY: No.

ARENA: You never engaged actively in politics in any way?

LALLY: No. I am, of course, you know, a Republican.

ARENA: I didn't know that, but it's interesting to know.

LALLY: I am a Republican, but when I was growing up all of my people were Democrats, and my father still can't understand why I'm a Republican. But to each his own. That's what I live by, to each his own. So I've been a Republican since I was old enough to register.

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The interview concluded with additional discussion concerning other Whittier acquaintances of Mrs. Lally.