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Alton Tice (May 25, 1971)

C. Richard Arena
Whittier College

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. ALTON TICE

May 25, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: Alton, when did you attend Whittier High School

TICE: I started in February of 1936. We were the last mid-year class to go through Whittier High. We graduated four years later in 1940--February of 1940--that was the last of the mid-year class groups. All the others were going the full year, coming in September and winding up in June.

ARENA: I see, you actually began in February of 1936.

TICE: Yes, we began in February of 1936.

ARENA: I see. And from what school had you come?

TICE: Well, let's see, I came from John Muir [Junior High School]. That was an intermediate school--seventh and eighth grade. That school was damaged by an earthquake and has been torn down. It was on the corner of Whittier Avenue and Hadley Street, and now has been replaced by a parking lot for the Whittier Union High School and by tennis courts.

ARENA: What do you recall in the way of personal contact of any type with Mrs. Richard Nixon, who was a teacher at the Whittier High School during the period you were a student? Exactly what was your connection and contact with her during this entire period?

TICE: My connection was very short but very memorable. Somewhere during this four-year period, and I believe it was the senior year, she was class advisor. Now, I was class president . . . [Interruption]

ARENA: Excuse the interruption of the grandfather's clock. Would you mind going over again what you just said?

TICE: Well, my knowledge of Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] was just for a short time. She was on the Pep Committee and even though I was class president three out of four years, my senior year I did not run for the presidency and so I didn't have any real close connection with her that year. I don't know whether she was class advisor before that--at least I hadn't bumped into her until my senior year and for some reason I was selected to give the welcoming address on graduation night. And so I had prepared a talk which I reviewed and gave as a rehearsal for graduation. And she very diplomatically and politely had a number of suggestions to make that were very good--in fact, she practically rewrote the talk for me.

ARENA: Do you recall--excuse me--that you delivered it orally to her, or did she just make these corrections on the basis of the written welcoming address?

TICE: No, I think she made the corrections on the basis of the verbal rehearsal and then we put it down to writing, and she, I'd say, practically rewrote the talk for me, and it was a beautiful job. And, even though I had had public speaking in high school and had been class president, I had done a very poor job on it really, without realizing it. And so by the time we got through working it over, I had a beautiful talk!

ARENA: Would there possibly be a copy in your possession or anywhere of this talk, in view of the fact that she played such a strong part in forming it?

TICE: No, there is no written copy and the only thing I could do would be from memory. I can remember the opening paragraph, and it went something like this: "Friends of the mid-year class of 1940, we welcome you to our graduation. It is you, our parents and friends, that have made this possible--this night possible. Our plant has grown from such and such to such and such" and from there on I have forgotten what the rest of it is. But it was beautifully done.

ARENA: Could you recall in any way precisely what you had emphasized or what you had in mind and what basic changes she had made? Had you spoken, maybe, to the class more than the parents? Can you recall any of the possible corrections or additions in particular?

TICE: No, I can't. All I can say is that I remember that after she pointed out what she thought should go into the talk, there was such a big difference that I completely gave up any ideas I had and went right along with what she had to say.

ARENA: At this time you were a young man--you were a graduating senior. And from all accounts we understand that Mrs. Nixon, at that time Miss Pat Ryan, was a very beautiful, young, new teacher. What recollections do you have of that over-all situation?

TICE: Well, yes. There were two high school teachers that came in. Of course at that age, if there is a four or five year spread, you think of them as being very mature, you know, teachers, and much older than you are, even though there is only four or five years difference in your ages. But she and a Miss [Daria] Charles--now as I remember Pat was sort of on the light-haired side, maybe even a blond, and Miss Charles was sort of on the dark-headed side. But she was a very attractive girl, and I think most of the boys thought that she was really somebody they would like to know a little better. But I didn't have her for any classes.

ARENA: Is it your recollection that she started teaching there around 1928 or thereabouts?

TICE: No, no. She would have come in, I would guess that she came in while I was there, so she would have come in around 1936 or 1940. Somewhere along there.

ARENA: But you don't recall that she had started back in 1928?

TICE: No, not that early. I don't think so.

ARENA: I see. The other thing I had in mind, if she was a new and young teacher, did she seem to you nervous as a new teacher or possibly not sure of herself?

TICE: Oh, no. She seemed to be very knowledgeable as to, you know, her way around, what she thought would be right. And I think as an adviser to the Pep Committee for the student body, she must have had some background or some demonstrative ability, otherwise they wouldn't have put her on this committee.

ARENA: Was that a volunteer job, do you know, or something voted on by the students?

TICE: No, I would guess that it was more or less of an assignment, but I think that it would be pretty much what the students wanted, because I know when I was there they hadn't had a revision of the Constitution for many, many years for the student body, and I was part of the class that worked on that I guess for a while year. And so, the students were kinda running the show and my guess is, of course, that the principal or somebody else probably made the final appointment, but they probably selected her as one of the people they would like to have on that committee because she worked well with students.

ARENA: How would you describe the Pep Committee, its functions and purposes and operations?

TICE: Well, not having been on it, I can just do it from an outsider's standpoint, but they were the ones who planned all the social functions.

ARENA: Excuse me, but when you say they, was it composed of boys and girls?

TICE: Boys and girls--right. They planned all of the social events for the school, you know, the dances . . .

ARENA: Excuse me, did the cheer leaders belong to that group also?

TICE: I think the cheer leaders would belong to it and the student body officers would belong to it and the primary leaders in the school would be those who would belong to the Pep Committee, and they would be the ones who planned all of the rallies for the various games that were taking place--football, basketball and so on--school dances, you know this sort of thing where the student body was involved.

ARENA: You probably recall and I am sure you have read Mrs. [Pat] Nixon was interested in acting. Do you recall ever seeing her in a play during your high school period or at any time in the community?

TICE: No, I didn't see her, except that it seems to me now that you mention it that she was active in the Community Players in Whittier. And as an interesting sidelight, if you haven't contacted anybody in that particular group, I would guess that Monte Wicker and Jean Heck, wife of [Donald] Don Heck, were active about that same time that she was there.

ARENA: No, I have not contacted anyone and I appreciate that information. Thank you. Would you describe also, Alton, since President Nixon himself was a student before you, of course, because his period at the school was between 1928 and 1930. He graduated in 1930, having transferred from Fullerton High School. And as you know, he was interested in high school offices too, having run against a young man by the name of [Robert] Logue, whom I hope to interview, who did defeat President Nixon for the office of president for his class. How did this operate while you were there, so I would have possible interesting comparisons to see if there were any changes? How were the campaigns conducted, et cetera?

TICE: Well, usually you would have someone who would sponsor you as an officer of the class.

ARENA: Would that be a member of the faculty?

TICE: No, usually this was a member of the class itself. And then they would make a nomination of you as an officer of the class. And there might be two or three people who were running for president and two or three people running for secretary and so on, and would finally get it down to the ballot point and then vote on it in that way.

ARENA: Did you get the impression from your recollection that the students did take this seriously? As you know on the college level there is a tendency for students today not to engage in the voting and in the school offices. Was that the case in your time at your high school?

TICE: No, it was entirely different. I think everybody was interested in the candidates that were running for office and there was never any of the--the thing that I have just bumped into recently of students running for office who are just making a farce out of their running for presidency or whatever office they are running for. I didn't realize that this even went on in high schools or colleges. But I just became aware of this within the past month that in one high school--in fact in Corona Del Mar High School where we're living--that two or three of the candidates for student body president were making a farce out of the thing. They were up there eating bananas and apples and supposedly trying to be funny about what they were doing, you know, and this sort of thing, with maybe a couple or three serious people who were running for the student body president. So, no, this is a very serious thing and I think everybody had their speeches that they made and what they would do as far as representing their class or representing the student body and so on.

I can remember one year that we had a chap by the name of Miller elected student body president who was a Dunkard. By Dunkard, he would be sort of of the Amish religious sect, and he won this--a very scholarly fellow. Did a beautiful job of presentation in his running for student body president, against a topnotch man but they voted him in as president. And then I think about a year later that when he came up to run in September, he wound up having to resign. We didn't know the full story, but we felt that it was probably due to the fact that he felt he was not in a position because of his religious beliefs to attend school dances and so on. So this is the type of thing that we had at Whittier High School when I was there.

ARENA: Was it your impression in thinking back also that it wasn't, or was it, a question of popularity, someone who grew up in the community and everyone knew even before he went to high school. Or could an outsider come in on the basis of his appeal and possibly maybe at high school assemblies where all the students were together and the candidates presented their programs at one time and could be exposed on that level? In other words, I am wondering, was it a popularity contest? Was it a question of the student selling himself at that time?

TICE: It definitely was the situation of a candidate selling himself at that particular time. I do feel that probably personality, background, the fact that they maybe had been around for a long time and this many times was a deciding factor, but still I think that the students were very fair as in the case of this chap, Miller. It would be rather unusual for someone who with sort of a white collar, with wavy hair and with glasses--a very scholarly individual--who had not been able to participate in school dances and functions like maybe the usual student would do to be elected as student body president. Yet this chap was, and I think he did it solely on the basis that he had a lot to say and people respected what he had to say.

ARENA: Do you recall, Alton, at that time while you were attending, what the limits of the Whittier High School student body entailed? In other words, would there be more than students just from Whittier? Would it have included East Whittier and so forth?

TICE: Well, at that time, as I recall, I don't believe that there were any other high schools in the district and we took in students from the surrounding territory--East Whittier, a lot of them from Pico Rivera, from South Whittier, Norwalk, but not down as far as Downey, but Norwalk definitely, and Los Nietos, North Whittier Heights. I don't think we had La Habra, but it did cover a big territory.

ARENA: Do you recall the size of your graduating class?

TICE: Well, the size of my graduating class was only about forty I would guess--forty to fifty--because we were mid-year. But the student body at that time was about two thousand, so if we divide that by four, the average class would run somewhere around five hundred students, so we probably had about five hundred graduating in June and forty or fifty graduating in February.

ARENA: I see. And the high school did include four full years in the one building--9, 10, 11 and 12.

TICE: Yes, that's right.

ARENA: I believe you have brought some yearbooks that include pictures of Mrs. Richard Nixon. Possibly we could turn to some and see what some of the captions or some of the--if anything--descriptive phrases about her are. Alton, what is the name of the annual?

TICE: It's The Cardinal and White, that's after the red bird, which is the Cardinal red bird insignia that Whittier High has used over the many years.

ARENA: And this annual is dated 1940 and it does have a picture of Mrs. Richard Nixon, only there, of course, she is Miss Patricia Ryan. Would you indicate what it does say about her?

TICE: Well, let's see, under "Supervised the Work," it shows her picture and then shows that Miss [Pat] Ryan was teacher of stenography and everyday business and typing.

ARENA: Thank you very much, Alton.