



7-18-1972

Caroline Phillips Stoel (July 18, 1972)

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Recommended Citation

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Oral History Interview

with

MRS. CAROLINE PHILLIPS STOEL

July 18, 1972
Portland, Oregon

By Evelyn Dorn

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

DORN: This is an interview with Caroline Stoel of Portland, Oregon, on July 18, 1972, Evelyn Dorn interviewing. Mrs. Stoel is the former Caroline Phillips. Mrs. Stoel, would you please tell me where and when you were born?

STOEL: I was born in Lexington, North Carolina, in September 1914.

DORN: And would you give me a brief resume of your education and your career to date? Did you practice law yourself?

STOEL: Yes, briefly with my father before I was married, for approximately a year, in Lexington, after I graduated from law school.

DORN: And where did you go to school?

STOEL: I did my undergraduate work and my law school work at Duke University. And I was educated in the elementary and high schools of Lexington, North Carolina.

DORN: It was unusual for a girl to attend law school in those days I expect, and how was it being a girl in a law school like Duke in those days? How many girls were there in your classes at that time?

STOEL: Well strangely enough, there were five girls in the class and it was fairly easy for girls to get into law school in those days. The problem wasn't so much acquiring the

education as it was finding a job when we were through. We found that there was very little discrimination as far as being allowed to enter law school was concerned. If you had the grades and qualified, they were very happy to have you. But afterwards, finding jobs was more difficult.

DORN: There weren't any special conditions or problems for you while you were there?

STOEL: No. The girls in our class were well received and well treated. Our classmates were very friendly. Sometimes I think they regarded us as being there perhaps not for serious motives [Laughter], but we enjoyed that part of it, too.

DORN: In the study of criminal law did you ever have any embarrassing problems or situations? One of the girls that we have interviewed who was in your class said that she blushed easily and she was always a source of amusement among the others. Did you find any problems like that?

STOEL: Well, yes. We had one professor who had lots of fun teasing us, and I can remember he used to give me the cases involving miscarriages. Nowadays I'm sure most girls wouldn't mind at all, but in those days we were easily embarrassed by such things.

DORN: Do you recall when you first met the President and will you tell me about it?

STOEL: I can't remember any particular moment that stands out in my mind. He was just one of the members of the class and gradually, because we were a fairly small class, we all knew each other very well. We heard each other recite, met after class in the library and in the dining hall.

DORN: And you were in some of his classes perhaps?

STOEL: In the freshman year we were all in the same classes.

DORN: Did you go to Duke on a scholarship as so many of them did?

STOEL: I had financial help beginning my second year. Most of the scholarship money went to people from out of state, because the object of the scholarship program was to attract people from other states in order to build Duke into a national law school. There were always plenty of applicants from North Carolina. But after the freshman year I had a job working for professor Charles Lowndes, helping him in his research.

DORN: Did the President ever discuss with you the idea of girls being in the law school at all?

STOEL: No, I can't remember that we ever talked about that.

DORN: How about the President as a student in general? Do you recall his academic ability in school? Did you consider him extra bright or was it a self-demand and he really worked harder at it?

STOEL: I was very much aware of Nixon's scholarship because he and I were competing for number three place in the class. And the third place in that class was rather important. Because of the small number in the class, only the top three would belong to a society called the Order of the Coif, which is equivalent to Phi Beta Kappa in undergraduate school. There was a brief period in which we were tied and there was even some question as to whether I might not come out ahead of him. But then I started dating my husband, and I'm afraid after that I didn't work as hard as Nixon did.

DORN: I see.

STOEL: He probably would have beaten me anyway, because he was very competitive. But because of our close standings, I feel our intellectual ability was not very far apart. That is perhaps why I've never considered Dick a brilliant man with a brilliant mind. I think of him rather as a very intelligent man with a good mind, and one who wants to make the most of all of his abilities. And I always admired him for these qualities.

DORN: He was probably very self-demanding.

STOEL: Very self-demanding and very well disciplined, extremely well.

DORN: I'm sure he got some of that from his early training with his parents at home, because things had to be done and done orderly. He went to school and he came right home from school to help stock the grocery shelves and that sort of thing, so I am sure that that came from his parents--some of it from his parents.

STOEL: Well, also I think if you have talked to other members of the class you know that most of us were more or less this way, much more so than young people are today. It was during the depression and we realized we were privileged to be in law school.

DORN: Yes, indeed. This was during the depression years and students probably felt the impact of the recession. Do you recall attending any social affairs where the President was present?

STOEL: I remember one quite clearly. Every year we had a law school dance. I think the first one we had Nixon didn't go to--he wasn't particularly interested in dancing.

Actually he didn't spend much time with that sort of thing. But the boys persuaded him that he should go in our second year, and then they came to me and asked if I could find a date for him. So I called up my home town and one of my very good friends came up to spend the weekend with me and she attended the dance.

DORN: So you did double date.

STOEL: It was a very amusing evening.

DORN: You did meet your husband at Duke, right?

STOEL: Yes.

DORN: Did you become engaged while you were at Duke?

STOEL: Yes.

DORN: Did you marry while you were there?

STOEL: No, we married a year later. My husband came out here and found a job and after he was more or less established, within a year, we were married.

DORN: I see. And then you came out here, of course.

STOEL: Yes.

DORN: Do you recall the President doing any part-time work at the school?

STOEL: Yes. I can't remember just what his job was. I think he was an assistant to one of the professors just as I was, but I'm not sure which one it was. And I am certain there were other things he did to earn money. A number of the boys worked. His roommate worked selling programs for football games.

DORN: Was that [William R.] Bill Perdue?

STOEL: Bill Perdue, yes. And some of the others furnished transportation to students to go to boarding houses to lunch and that kind of thing.

DORN: Now, in the area of extracurricular activities, was there any chance to do anything in the theatre? Was there any acting at all? When he was in Whittier he belonged to the Community Players and that sort of thing. Was there anything like that that went on at Duke or were you all too busy studying?

STOEL: There was indeed, but it was mostly for undergraduate students, and I am not aware of any law students who were involved in that. There really was not time for that kind of extracurricular activity.

DORN: Do you recall Richard Nixon ever discussing his religion with you? He was a Quaker.

STOEL: Yes, I know he was a Quaker, but he never talked to me about his religion.

DORN: And you don't know anything about whether he went to chapel or anything like that?

STOEL: No, I don't. He lived off the campus, he and Bill Perdue, and I seldom saw them on Sundays.

DORN: Even after he married in Whittier [California] he taught a Sunday School class of young adults and, of course, his Quaker mother was very influential in his attending Sunday School and church as a child, so I just wondered about when he got away from home. How did the President get along with his subordinates, the faculty and the administration and all? So much has been said about him being a loner or being aloof. Did you feel that he was this way?

STOEL: No, not at all. He was just one of the group, I always felt. He was a serious student, but we certainly had a number of serious students in the class and this didn't really set him apart at all. I'm sure that I don't know as much about that as some of the boys do, because there was a relationship between the boys from which the girls were excluded because we went home to our dormitories at night. [Laughter]

DORN: Yes. We interviewed Mrs. Foley, who was Sigrid Pedersen, and I think she said she lived in the same dormitory as you.

STOEL: Yes.

DORN: And that you had to be in by 10:30.

STOEL: That's right, so we didn't have much chance for night owl bull sessions and similar get-togethers that the boys had.

DORN: When he was with the faculty or professors, did he seem comfortable with them?

STOEL: Oh, yes. He always had a great deal of self-confidence and when he spoke up in class he answered firmly, and he could defend his position well when he was called on.

DORN: One of the hard things for him when he went to Washington, was the press said that he was insincere. Did you ever feel he was insincere?

STOEL: No, I never felt in law school that he was insincere. He was a very forthright, honest, hard-working, young man. And I've not really known him since personally. I've always had the feeling that in politics he has done what was necessary, not with the feeling that he was sacrificing his integrity but with the knowledge that certain things had to be done if you expected to achieve anything; and that to try to achieve political goals without going through this procedure, whatever it might be, was simply unrealistic and would be foolish. There was a very interesting article in the Wall Street Journal a year or so ago which I happened to read. The writer said it was his belief that the reason people feel they don't know Nixon, that he is a loner and that he is apart from other people, is the fact that he has learned his trade the way a surgeon learns to use his tools, and that the things he does are not necessarily his natural actions but rather things he has learned as essentials of his profession. I thought that article contained one of the best analyses of his character I have ever read.

DORN: Yes. That's the first time we have heard this, but I think that's very well put.

STOEL: That is much the way I feel about him; that he holds himself aloof and only those closest to him know the real Nixon. In order to fit himself to his work, he keeps his personal attitudes and inclinations in the background.

DORN: Of course there were pressures on the students and I expect the faculty had to be demanding. Was there a bulletin board that was put up to how the students' grades so everybody could see it?

STOEL: I don't know. I really can't remember that, though it is possible. I think we all knew about where we stood. The top people in the class, of course, were chosen for the Law Review and in that small class, I think, there were only seven or eight of us on it, so everybody was aware who the top students were.

DORN: I see.

STOEL: And, of course, Nixon was in that group.

DORN: Was there any indication in law school that he was interested in politics at all?

STOEL: I was not aware of this, but I have heard from several of our classmates that he was. They knew that he was a debater in undergraduate school. I was not even aware of this. I certainly wouldn't have picked him out as one of the members of the class who would probably be a good politician.

DORN: Were you surprised when you heard that he had?

STOEL: Yes, I was really quite surprised.

DORN: I think I asked your husband about the law firms in New York who would interview the top students in schools, and I wondered did you ever feel or did you ever hear that he might be interested in going into a law firm in New York, or do you think he wanted to come back to California to practice?

STOEL: I believe I heard that he wanted to go to a firm in New York. I think he went up with some of the others during spring vacation before he graduated to interview. Now I may be wrong. Someone may have told you something different, but I think he did.

DORN: No, most people say that he went up there. Some say that he wasn't successful or didn't take anything. But he did come back to California and, of course, we were delighted to have him come back to California. What contact, if any, have you had with the President since your school days?

STOEL: Almost none.

DORN: Did you attend the reunion though, 35th reunion?

STOEL: Yes, indeed. I certainly did.

DORN: I wondered about that reunion. How did you feel about his attitude toward these friends today as compared to when he was in school?

STOEL: Well, I think he was quite formal that evening, and necessarily so. As you remember, it came at a very critical time.

DORN: In May.

STOEL: When the decision was made to bomb the dikes in Vietnam. There was a lot of mixed feeling among the group about this decision. In spite of all the tension he was very pleasant and very cheerful. His talk and those of the others were non-political and of a reminiscent nature. Before dinner he came into the room and greeted us in a receiving line and he had a word or two to say to show that he remembered each of us--he would recall a certain little thing. After dinner, following the taking of the

class picture, he stayed around for ten minutes or so and talked to people informally. Then he excused himself but told us to stay and dance or talk as long as we wanted to.

DORN: Did someone get that reunion together and ask to go to the White House? Was he instrumental in getting it together?

STOEL: Oh, I think he did this on his own. My understanding was that he notified three members of the class to send out the preliminary notices, but that it was his idea and his plan. He had already entertained his undergraduate class a couple of years ago. I remember reading about that, and I think he planned this reunion as a similar occasion.

DORN: What about Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Pat Nixon? Of course you have met her. When did you meet her for the first time?

STOEL: I met her for the first time when he was campaigning for Vice President, I believe, and he spoke here in Portland. I went up on the stage afterwards to greet him and he introduced me to her.

DORN: I traveled with him during that period when he came into Portland campaigning for Vice President. I traveled 25,000 miles with him. Did you ever meet his parents?

STOEL: No, I never met his parents.

DORN: His mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon] and father [Francis Anthony Nixon] and his young brother Edward [Calvert Nixon], who was about eight or ten then, and his 88 year old grandmother, Almira Milhous, drove across the country for that graduation. She was a great influence in his life. We have come across many wonderful letters that he wrote her and she wrote him, and those, of course, will go in the Nixon Library. So she was quite an influence in his life. Now I know that you have four children and that you must be very proud of them. They all have professional lives.

STOEL: Thank you.

DORN: Do you want to tell me a little something about them, their names and what they are doing?

STOEL: My oldest son, Tom, Jr. [Thomas B. Stoel, Jr.], attended Princeton University and graduated from Harvard Law School. I think he was fourth in his class. Then he received a Rhodes scholarship and he went two years to Balliol College at Oxford [England], where he received a doctorate in law. After he returned he clerked two years for Justice [John Marshall] Harlan of the U.S. Supreme Court and since then he has been in Washington.

He served on two Presidential committees. These were not political appointments. Nixon was not aware of who he was until after his appointment. He worked under George Schultz and Mr. Schultz liked Tom. Since then he has been with an environmental law firm in Washington.

My older daughter, Carol [Stoel], is a linguist. She says people always ask her what that is. She is actually with the Linguistics Department at Stanford University and she speaks three or four languages. She was graduated from Smith College. Right now she's doing work with Spanish-speaking American children, trying to reach an understanding of their language problems and to devise better ways of teaching them. She plans to use this material as the basis of her doctoral thesis.

DORN: Is she in California now?

STOEL: Yes. She is working at Stanford. This summer she will be in Mexico working with children there.

DORN: We certainly need that.

STOEL: My youngest ones are twins. The boy, Peter [Stoel], was graduated from Duke in 1970. He is working on his doctorate in environmental science at Portland State University. And my younger daughter Polly [Stoel] is a teacher in special education. She was graduated from Scripps College.

DORN: That's wonderful. Aren't you proud of them.

STOEL: Yes, we are.

DORN: Well, I would think so. Can you think of anything else that I have missed that you might like to add to this important interview? Dr. [C. Richard] Arena is the director of this project. This is a two year project through the [Richard] Nixon Foundation, and Dr. Arena has been in Washington, New York, and down in North Carolina and different places and has interviewed I would say about fifteen of the Duke group, and it's very interesting to get the different reactions; but they all seem to admire the President greatly.

STOEL: Well, we were a very close knit group, I'm sure you have heard again and again. I think there were only twenty-five of us who finally graduated and it was as though we lived together for three years.

DORN: Yes. I tried to get an appointment with Justin Miller and he wanted so much to offer but he was very ill, and he said, "I would like so much to do it but I just can't. I'm just not up to it." So I was sorry that we missed him.

STOEL: Actually Justin Miller was not there much of our time. He had been sent to Washington. Dean Horack who is now dead was acting Dean.

DORN: We interviewed his son.

STOEL: Several of our professors, who of course knew Nixon well, attended our White House reunion.

DORN: I certainly appreciate your giving this time. It was very interesting.

STOEL: You are very welcome. We all have been very fond of Nixon and we realize that he has a very hard job to do.

DORN: He has the weight of the world on his shoulders, doesn't he? Thank you again very much.