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## Charles Eric Milhous (July 17, 1971, first interview)

Edward C. Nixon

Oral History Interview

with

MR. CHARLES ERIC MILHOUS

July 17, 1971  
Turlock, California

By Mr. Edward C. Nixon

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

NIXON: The date is July 17, 1971, in Turlock, California, where Charles Eric Milhous lives. We're at the Cunningham School, where Charles works right now. Charles, we've been chatting here for a while about the old days in Southern California, and you mentioned Lancaster [California] as being a place where your folks lived about the time. . . . Maybe that was about the first time that you really got acquainted with my brothers. Is that right?

MILHOUS: That is right. We spent three years there, and one summer they came up, Harold [Samuel Nixon] and Richard [Milhous Nixon] and Don [Francis Donald Nixon], and we had a real good time together, riding horses and hunting and swimming. We had the old swimming hole, where we'd pump the water up at night and the reservoir was full in the morning, and the first thing we all would do is go out and jump on what we called the discharge pipe, which was the pipe that put the water into the reservoir. We didn't have a diving board, but we had one glorious time there about sunup in the morning, all of us in the full reservoir of water. And that was along about 1925, '26, right in there somewhere.

NIXON: Knowing the temperature in Lancaster, I'll bet you didn't wear any clothes, did you?

MILHOUS: No, we didn't need clothes, because the weeping willows hung down real low around the bank, and we didn't have close neighbors, so everything worked out real fine for all the stag party.

NIXON: Yeah. Was the water cool?

MILHOUS: The water was cool, just the right temperature. Just give you a real thrill when you get it, you know, in the morning. The days were warm, and at that time in the morning it felt real good.

NIXON: How old was Harold at that time?

MILHOUS: Well, Harold was around twenty years old.

NIXON: Around twenty.

MILHOUS: I think around twenty, because he did the driving. He drove up. Of course, in those days people drove younger.

NIXON: So Don was then, maybe, fourteen or so?

MILHOUS: I kind of hesitate about telling ages then. I can tell, though. Richard is one year younger than I am; Don is about two and a half. I'm sixty.

NIXON: Were you born in 1912?

MILHOUS: I was born in 1912, so I was about fourteen at that time, and Richard was about thirteen, right in there, and then Don was younger; then Harold wasn't more than about sixteen, was he?

NIXON: About sixteen, I guess, yes. He's about the same age as your oldest brother, isn't he--Bob?

MILHOUS: Yes, I think he's a little older than Bob [Robert Franklin Milhous].

NIXON: So those years were in the twenties, and your folks lived in Lancaster.

MILHOUS: Yeah, '25, '26, somewhere in there.

NIXON: And soon after that they moved into the Central Valley, did they?

MILHOUS: Yeah, and from there we went to Lake Elsinore [California]. We were there a year, and then we went to Imperial Valley [California], and that's where Elizabeth [Hannah Elizabeth Milhous] was born, my youngest sister. And of course, we stopped over in Whittier [California]. In between we were there at Whittier one summer, at Grandmother's [Almira Milhous] old house, and we saw quite a lot of your folks.

NIXON: Elizabeth is now Mrs. Truman Reeves; is that right?

MILHOUS: Yes.

NIXON: And she's about my age.

MILHOUS: Yes.

NIXON: Where do they live?

MILHOUS: At Stockton [California].

NIXON: I want to record all those. Bob [Milhous] lives in Bakersfield [California].

MILHOUS: Bob is in Bakersfield.

NIXON: Bob lives in Bakersfield. Then Oliver [Griffith Milhous]?

MILHOUS: Then the next one would be Phil [Phillip Lawrence Milhous]. He's at Grass Valley [California], too. And then Oliver, and Oliver is the one that has the school for boys at Grass Valley.

NIXON: Right. And then you.

MILHOUS: Then comes Jane [Bernice Milhous].

NIXON: Jane is older than you; okay.

MILHOUS: Jane is the RN [registered nurse] and lives at Healdsburg [California], Mrs. [Charles] Barr. And then Alice [May Milhous] is next in line.

NIXON: She's Mrs. Eugene Needham.

MILHOUS: Eugene Needham, and they live at Fortuna [California]. And the next in our family would be Jesse [Calvin Milhous], and we lost him in Arizona. He got killed in Arizona.

NIXON: We'll get each one recorded here in line; that's good.

MILHOUS: And then Calvin [Burdg Milhous] was born when we lived in Lancaster, 1926, 1925. He lives at Grass Valley.

NIXON: And then [Hannah] Elizabeth.

MILHOUS: I left Bill [William Theodore Milhous] out.

NIXON: Oh, Billy; where does he come in?

MILHOUS: Billy's before Calvin.

NIXON: He's older than Calvin.

MILHOUS: Yes.

NIXON: After Jesse.

MILHOUS: Billy should have been right after Alice; I'm sorry.

NIXON: After Alice, okay.

MILHOUS: Yes, Alice, then Bill; then Jesse was next, and then Calvin and Elizabeth; that's the order of the family.

NIXON: Okay. Very good. All right, now to go back to this thing here we were just starting on. The time of the Lancaster episode and period, was that about the earliest that you remember any of the Nixon boys?

MILHOUS: Right. Your folks came up when we first moved up there, and we had a picnic out there. The house was small, and so we all ate out under the shade of the trees on the edge of the alfalfa field. Arthur [Burdg Nixon] was young then. I remember him very well then. Yes, I remember him very well. You drove the. . . . Let's see, I can't remember. It was a big car that your folks had. They took us on a Sunday trip up there, on a picnic and we had a real good time. Arthur was just a little fellow, five, six years old, maybe. And then we moved on down south further. And like I say, then after I was married, 1934, we went down to work in the grocery store for your folks.

NIXON: 1934 was when you came down there.

MILHOUS: 1934. Barbara [Alice Milhous] was six weeks old. And at that time Donald and Richard were both at school. Donald went down there to be with him for a while. He was finishing high school. Then Don came back before Richard finished. I had gone down there and your folks had hired me to help them in the store, and I was working in their little store across from the East Whittier [Elementary] School. When Don came home from school, I remember him getting out of the car and coming in, and I hadn't seen him for quite a while. He'd grown up since I'd seen him. So then we worked there in the little store for about a year, and they closed it and built some houses, and went down to the big store, and there we worked with Don and your mother [Hannah Milhous Nixon], your father [Francis Anthony Nixon], and Lyle . . .

NIXON: Lyle Brumfield.

MILHOUS: Lyle Brumfield, and occasionally some of the Starbucks would help us out, Mrs. [Gladys] Starbuck, and Mildred Sullivan. Mildred worked quite a little bit there in the store.

NIXON: What age was John Starbuck, do you recall?

MILHOUS: John. . . . He worked in the store some, too, when he was going to college, and I think shortly out of college was when he went into the service.

NIXON: The Army Air Corps.

MILHOUS: Yeah, and he became a good aviator and he worked up quite fast, and pretty soon he was flying, carrying the wounded out of Europe into England; and as I remember it, he went down in the fog with a whole load. A real fine fellow, John was. He must have been about twenty-one, or something in there, and he worked in the store.

NIXON: Yes. You said that Barbara was about six months old when you came down there.

MILHOUS: Six weeks.

NIXON: What time of year was it when you came down?

MILHOUS: She was born in August; it would be the fall. . . . November, let's see, does that add up?

NIXON: About the first of November?

MILHOUS: Yeah, somewhere right in there, of the year she was born.

NIXON: 1934. Those were the depression years. You were newly married, had a young baby, your first-born. What did you think about when you first came down here?

MILHOUS: We liked the country and liked the people, and we were like everybody else, trying to find some way to make a living. Your folks were good enough to hire me, because I had had no experience in a store and I was quite timid. And your mother said, "Well, now, you can just stock up for a while. You won't have to wait on anyone." And then pretty soon, in a few days, your dad probably said, well, this isn't going to work, so he said, "Charles, you're going to have to go out and wait on people." And that was the best thing that ever happened to me, because I got brave enough to go out and start

waiting on people. I really was timid about it, and it worked out real fine. I never had any trouble once I broke the ice and started waiting on the public. When he told me I had to do it, that was the best thing that ever happened to me, because I was an old plow boy and I just didn't understand, but it worked out real fine. I worked for them for several years there, and I was real happy to have the job.

We lived in Aunt Martha's [Milhous Ware] little house part of the time, because when they closed the little store down they built a living quarters for us in the little store, and we lived there for about a year, and it just didn't get going like it should have, so your dad closed it down and they built a house in there and made a rental out of it, and then we went back to Aunt Martha's and worked the store; and I remember so many times, your mother--we'd be filling orders and we were behind--would say, "Charles, go out and eat with the boys so we can get these orders out." Well, it worked fine. I got free food, and we had a good time. And I remember on one occasion my brother Bob came by with a load of hay. He stopped in to see us. It happened to be about lunch time, and Richard was there and Don, and she says, "All you boys go out and eat together." And we did. I remember, we went out there and had a good meal and then we went back to work, but it worked out real well. But that was one time we got together and had a real good chat. There was a joke that my brother Bob remembered. I don't know whether he still remembers it or not; he used to tell it about Dick, but I don't think I should tell it--about the horses, hobbling the horses. My father and mother were out in the . . .

NIXON: What is hobbling the horses, by the way?

MILHOUS: Hobbling the horses is tying their feet together so they can't run.

NIXON: Oh, I see.

MILHOUS: They put straps and chains on them so they can't run. My father [Ezra Charles Milhous] had a stallion, and in order to keep him from being mean to the other horses and the young colts, he used to hobble him. Well, he worked him, also. And Mom [Lima Hudson Milhous] and Dad were out in the field. I think they were cleaning the ditch, or something. They sent word up by Richard, he went out there, and they told him to tell Bob to hitch Dan and old Maude to the wagon to come out and get the hay. (It wasn't hitch Dan; it was another one.) But he said that Dad told him to hobble Dan--hobble Dan and hitch two others to the wagon, I have forgotten which ones. So he came up there and he says, "Your father wants you to hook Hobbler Dan and Maude to the wagon"--hitch Hobbler Dan and Maude to the wagon. He thought that Hobbler Dan was the name of the horse, see? He wanted to hobble him so he wouldn't chase the other horse around. Of course, Richard told it in all seriousness. He thought Hobbler Dan was the name of the horse.

NIXON: Sure; just like I asked, what does hobbling a horse mean.

MILHOUS: So that's just something that Bob used to get a kick out of. So many things have happened since then that I know Richard wouldn't remember.

NIXON: Bob and Harold were close to the same age; you and Dick were pretty close to the same age.

MILHOUS: Yes, within one year. My birthday's the 16th of January, Richard's is the 9th; like from the 9th to the 16th would be a year's difference in our ages.

NIXON: Charles, this kind of recollection is what we're trying to get. You wondered about my going through your brothers and sisters. The reason I want that, I'd like for Dr. [C. Richard] Arena to get acquainted with the family in every respect that he can. That kind of thing would be preserved, but the rest of it maybe wouldn't.

MILHOUS: Yeah.

NIXON: So he'll listen to this tape now, just as he is probably going to do, and he'll hear this aspect of the story; and you've mentioned a story that Bob might tell. Well, if he goes down there and talks to Bob, that's something that he can ask him about, if it's in here, see?

MILHOUS: You can take any part of it you want to. And like Alice, she worked in the house there so much for your mother, and Jane did some, too, but Alice was with them longer. She went on to school from there, you know.

NIXON: Alice lived in Southern California quite a while.

MILHOUS: Yes; she was there quite a long time.

NIXON: I can remember Jane baby-sitting.

MILHOUS: Yes, Jane and Alice. Your mother had them all at different times. So I don't know. . . . Like I say, as far as Richard is concerned, he had already gotten out of school and he was on his own then. And the thing that I remember is the summer that they came up to Lancaster with us, and I'm not too sure it wasn't two different times.

NIXON: It might have been.

MILHOUS: I know it was, because one time we lived over at Lancaster on the dry lake. We all slept outside, and Don was there at that time, I remember. He was the



younger of the bunch. And there was one time that Lyall Sutton and Ray Mitchell came up, and I'm not sure that they weren't all there at one time. And the idea was to rabbit-hunt. There was lots of jack rabbits up there, see, so the guns were brought, and at night we'd go out and rabbit-hunt. One time we lived on dry lake, and the next time we lived over on what we called the Rector place. That's where they had the big swimming pool. But as I say, it's been so long ago I can't remember when the different ones came up. I'm not sure that they weren't all there at the same time. Of course, we're all cousins; Lyall would be a second cousin, or however you want to figure, one cousin once removed, and Ray Mitchell, too.

NIXON: Lyall Sutton, Ray Mitchell.

MILHOUS: Lyall Sutton's mother [Ada Ware Sutton] was--let me get this straight now--Ware, yes.

NIXON: She was a Ware, wasn't she?

MILHOUS: Yeah, she was a Ware, and so was Ray Mitchell's mother, they're first cousins. Elsie Mitchell was Elsie Ware [Mitchell].

NIXON: Auntie [Martha Jane Milhous] Ware was a Milhous . . .

MILHOUS: . . . and your mother's first aunt.

NIXON: Right.

MILHOUS: I have to think back, sometimes. Time goes by.

NIXON: Well, I'll tell you, this is going to work out fine.

MILHOUS: And Russell Street, as we remembered it, and East Whittier Boulevard are not the same at all anymore.

NIXON: No.

MILHOUS: People would hardly believe that it could change that much.

NIXON: What I'd like to do next is. . . . I won't do it today because of the way time's running, but we should try to go back and go down the boulevard, and remember all the folks that lived there, and try to remember what it looked like, where the trees were and where they weren't.

MILHOUS: Yeah.

NIXON: Murphy Ranch, Leffingwell Ranch. You remember the park across the corner there at Santa Gertrudes Avenue?

MILHOUS: Yeah, it's all wiped out now, just gone.

NIXON: It's gone for the shopping center.

MILHOUS: It was a pretty place there.

NIXON: Beautiful place. Harry Schuyler used to live in there.

MILHOUS: Yeah. I remember even further back. We used to go down to Grandmother's in the summertime, you know; and your father had the old. . . . He had something before your time. He had an old pick-up-like deal; I forget what kind it was, and it had an exhaust horn on it. If he wanted to pick up somebody at Grandmother's he'd pull that old exhaust horn. That was something you couldn't do now at all; you could hear him about a half mile down the road when he was coming. He'd be in a hurry to leave something or pick somebody up, but he'd blow that old whistle. And they went to market in that, too, years ago. Of course, Dick remembers it, and Don remembers it, too, probably; no doubt.

NIXON: With the exhaust whistle on it?

MILHOUS: The exhaust whistle, and boy, you could hear him comin'! He was always in a hurry, you know, and he'd pick up somebody or come in there. I remember that. Those things were shrill, you know.

NIXON: Sure.

MILHOUS: We used to have 'em years ago on the old cars. They won't let you have 'em any more.

NIXON: Some people try to do it every now and then. You can remember then, too, I suppose, Grandmother [Almira] Milhous' house and visiting there many times, too, huh? The Christmas reunions?

MILHOUS: Oh, yeah. I was born there.

NIXON: You were born there?

MILHOUS: Yeah.

NIXON: Is that right!

MILHOUS: Bob was born in Grandmother's old house; I was born there, and also Calvin. We lived in Lancaster, why, the folks went down, and Calvin was born in that house, too.

NIXON: Harold was born there.

MILHOUS: Harold was born there?

NIXON: I think so.

MILHOUS: He probably was. In those days the doctor came to the house. Our daughter was born at home; Barbara was, too. But yes, I don't know how many children were born in that house. I was there when Hadley Marshburn was born. I remember, Aunt Olive [Rose Olive Milhous Marshburn] was up in the front room and I didn't know what was going on. They were having quite a time, I think, with him, but I remember that very well. And I got a good picture of the old house not long ago, because. . . . On a colored slide, you know; it turned out real good.

NIXON: Incidentally, I've got a good one of you up there at Oliver's place.

MILHOUS: Did you?

NIXON: Alice took it of us.

MILHOUS: We got one from someone, and we got a trash can in it, I noticed. That turned out real good. You sure tower over me in height; I felt like I was a dwarf, standing beside you there. It was just that neither one of us was standing up straight.

NIXON: We're getting old, aren't we?

MILHOUS: I'm glad that you posed with Dad, because at the time his mind was so poorly, and I know he got a thrill out of it when you posed with him.

NIXON: You know, I went back in there later, when they went through, and the girls, and we stopped in at the hospital and saw him, but I don't think he--oh, yes, he did--he remembered me.

MILHOUS: He remembered you. He told me. . . . I saw him about three weeks before he passed away, and I walked in and talked to him. And I shook hands with him when I left, and we shed a few tears, both of us, 'cause I thought it would probably be the last time that I would see him. And he said he remembered me, which I was happy about, but I had my doubts.

NIXON: Those are hard times, when they get like that.

MILHOUS: Yes. Like, I saw your mother that way, too, the last time I saw her. She said she remembered us, and I believe she did, maybe. Martha [Milhous Gibbons], we didn't make it in time. We saw her in the hospital and she was too far gone when we saw her. Yes, it's real rough.

NIXON: But it comes to all of us, one way or another, one time or another. So the thing that we can do while we're like we are is to remember things the way they were, so that our children can see it a little more clearly than we were able to.

MILHOUS: That's right.

NIXON: That's a good idea. Enough for this? You could go on, couldn't you? A lot of things to remember.

MILHOUS: Yes, I think back--a lot of things. Whether they'd want 'em or even consider 'em is something else, but those days were some days. Just like, some days we'd have so many orders we thought we never would get 'em filled, and other days would be slack days, and those days we'd have to get out and see if we could find a few new customers, go down the road and . . .

NIXON: You used to deliver in those days, didn't you?

MILHOUS: Yes, most all delivery.

NIXON: Take orders by phone. I can remember filling orders.

MILHOUS: Yes; people would. . . . You'd forget something. . . . I remember leaving a pie out of an order one Saturday night, we were rushed. And so I took the car and took it to them afterwards, because those good pies your mother used to bake in the store, she always sold 'em out. They had orders for 'em and they were disappointed if they didn't get 'em, so this one lady, I took the pie clear over the hill to her, and there were some of them who were real good customers, and you just didn't do wrong. And like your father said, "Well, it's only a spool of thread, but I guess we'll have to take it there." It was left out, you know, and these things happened right along. That's how they kept their customers. But we always managed some way. Sometimes it looked like we weren't going to make it through the day, but some way or another they managed. Your mother worked so long afterwards, and so did your father a lot of times, winding things up. But they made a go of it. There was a lot of people during those times weren't making a go of it. Businesses failed and ranchers failed, and they stayed right in there. Had a lot of credit on the books, and some of it they NEVER got.

NIXON: There were a lot of people who failed who worked just as hard as my folks did, too, though, and they felt that, that they were just fortunate and they were going to try to help everybody who wasn't as fortunate.

MILHOUS: Well, one thing, they trusted the Lord, and I think this is back of a lot of it, because . . .

NIXON: It's got to be behind some of it, doesn't it?

MILHOUS: It sure has. Like, God, how great Thou art. It's a great thing, and without some faith we don't get anywhere. We have to have faith in what we do and faith in ourselves, and in God. It comes right back to it, any way you look at it.

NIXON: You're presently the custodian here, aren't you, of the Cunningham School?

MILHOUS: Yes.

NIXON: How many more years?

MILHOUS: Eighteen months, seventeen months. I've got the months counted. I'm retiring the 12th of December.

NIXON: Then what are you going to do, Charles?

MILHOUS: Oh, that little place down there's four acres, and I think I can keep it up then.

NIXON: I'll bet you . . .

MILHOUS: I can keep it up then, yeah. I'm counting the months now. I'll have twenty years in the 12th of December. I think I've got it. . . . I'm not rich, but I'm going to be able to live in comfort without working any more than I want on the place.

NIXON: Whatever you get, you will have earned it fully, I know that.

MILHOUS: It's been hard and rough, but like I say, you got to have faith in what you're doing. It hasn't been easy, but we have four acres there and it's all ours, and we figure if we can keep it that way. . . . We make a little on it all the time, and with our retirement and with our savings, why . . .

NIXON: You're all right.

MILHOUS: We can't live it up like some people, but we can live as good as we've been living, or a little better, so . . .

NIXON: You know, I went into that house--and my mother always commented on this--the way Lucile [Amy Lucile Halfhill Milhous] could keep up a house. That place looks like you've got it up for sale. There's not a speck in it.

MILHOUS: She's a pretty good housekeeper, with what she has to work with. She doesn't have everything to work with, but with what she has to work with, she's a pretty good housekeeper. Like I say, there's room for improvements every place. Like around our place; we had some compliments, and I said it would be a lot better if I had more time. But I have been putting in forty hours a week for the last eighteen and a half years, and the four acres I keep up. . . . We're diversified. We have almonds and plums and some peaches, and steers running under the almond trees too much. Like my son says, "Why don't you quit being diversified; just get one project and stay on it?" But I don't know; I like it that way.

NIXON: Makes life interesting.

MILHOUS: Yeah. I figure that I can work, maybe three or four hours a day and kind of enjoy myself, I hope, after this is over. This school is quite a challenge. You have the responsibility of it. It's a two-million-dollar school, and the trustees make a tour around here when school starts, to see how well you've kept it up, and . . .

NIXON: It's got to be right.

MILHOUS: Yeah.

NIXON: But you would, anyway; I know that. You think about your work.

MILHOUS: We try, but . . .

NIXON: Well, Charles, I'm cutting into your lunch hour, and . . .

MILHOUS: That's all right.

NIXON: . . . it's been great to have it.

MILHOUS: Doesn't matter at all.

NIXON: We'll carry on later.