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Robert Franklin Milhous (October 23, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT FRANKLIN MILHOUS

October 23, 1971
Bakersfield, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Franklin Milhous in Bakersfield, California. Mrs. Milhous' maiden name is Lura Halfhill. The date is October 23, 1971, Arena interviewing. Shall we begin, Mr. Milhous, by my asking you exactly what is your relationship to President Nixon?

MILHOUS: First cousins. My dad was just younger than his mother. My father's name was Ezra Charles Milhous.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you where and when you were born?

MILHOUS: I was born in Whittier [California] in the old Milhous home on Whittier Boulevard, November 9th, 1910.

ARENA: Do you recall whether it was a question of a midwife helping during the birth, or doctor?

MILHOUS: Yes. I believe Dr. [Homer G.] Rosenberger was the doctor. and Aunt Martha Milhous Gibbons, who was a trained nurse, assisted him. She was just older than Aunt Hannah Nixon.

ARENA: Where did you get your early schooling?

MILHOUS: On a ranch.

ARENA: Which ranch was this?

MILHOUS: My dad's. That was before school days.

ARENA: You could ride a horse before you went to school.

MILHOUS: When I was three years old they sent me six miles on a saddle horse by myself.

ARENA: Was your father a horse raiser and breeder? So you've been around horses pretty much your whole life.

MILHOUS: Yes. My whole life. I've been a cattle buyer, sheep buyer and horse trader.

ARENA: How long have you been here in Bakersfield, Mr. Milhous?

MILHOUS: We've lived here about thirty-one years.

ARENA: You know Bakersfield just about as well as you know Whittier.

MILHOUS: I know Bakersfield better than Whittier. I worked for a trucking company for about twenty years and I've done quite a bit of traveling, soliciting business from one state to the other; California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah and Arizona.

ARENA: How much contact can you recall having personally with President Nixon while he was growing up? For example, did you see him in the store? Did you see him visit in the Milhous home during the annual get-togethers? In general what can you say about your personal contact over the years with your cousin, President Nixon?

MILHOUS: When we lived in Lancaster [California] the Nixons would come up and the boys would stay with us part of the summer. In fact, the bicycle I learned to ride was Richard's.

ARENA: By bicycle you don't mean a motor bicycle?

MILHOUS: No. They didn't put motors on them in those days.

ARENA: You recall having the boys up at your place then in Lancaster, and what do you recall of the President's action, behavior, interests at that time?

MILHOUS: We had a reservoir and we would go swimming. Of course we had lots of horses, mostly work horses. I recall on one occasion when all the boys were swimming, Richard went to the house and when he came back out he said, "Bob, Uncle Ezra said for you to hook up Queen and Fanny and Hobble Dan to the Wagon." Dan was a stallion we kept hobbled. We used to keep him hobbled so he couldn't get around so fast. Richard thought the stallion's name was Hobble Dan, but my dad meant for us to hook up Queen and Fanny to the wagon and then to put hobbles on Dan. Richard was a city boy and we were farm boys, and to us this sounded very funny.

ARENA: Do you recollect that this reservoir where the boys did their swimming, was it a private one or was that a part of the state government?

MILHOUS: No, it was on our ranch for water storage. We would run the pump twenty-four hours a day and store the water, and then let it out to irrigate with in the daytime.

ARENA: Do you remember more or less the dimensions?

MILHOUS: The reservoir was probably four hundred feet in each direction and about five or six feet, with weeping willows all around it.

ARENA: Did the boys have bathing suits on all the time?

MILHOUS: No. What do you think a boy would be wearing a bathing suit for? I don't think we ever owned a bathing suit when we were growing up. We would leave the house on a run, each one trying to see who would be the first one in the reservoir, and the clothes would be strung all the way from the door to the reservoir.

ARENA: I have a feeling they enjoyed themselves?

MILHOUS: Right. It would happen three, four or five times a day. We would all decide to go swimming and maybe the first pair of britches would come off as we went out the door.

ARENA: This was before the time of the President's youngest brother Edward Nixon?

MILHOUS: That was before Eddie. This was back in 1924. I was about fourteen at that time.

ARENA: Richard Nixon was born in 1913 so he was three years younger.

MILHOUS: He was born in 1913 on January the 9th. So just a little over two years, actually. His birthday is on the 9th of January and mine's the 9th of November. So I'll be sixty-one the 9th of November and he'll be fifty-nine in January.

ARENA: What else did you fellows do for fun up there? Any hunting or baseball or sports? Were there not enough youngsters around for that?

MILHOUS: We were too far-scattered for that. We had horses to ride and we chased coyotes.

ARENA: How would you chase coyotes?

MILHOUS: Get on a horse and ride out through the sagebrush and find a coyote and run just as fast as the horse can run right after him. The coyote may run into a sagebrush now and then looking back at you, but the coyotes were thick in the country at that time. I've whipped them off of our dog with the horses, riding bridle reins many times. Coyotes are pretty smart. They run in packs, five or six of them in a bunch. One coyote would try to chase the dog out and the other ones will run in and catch him from behind.

ARENA: Were you expected to do chores around the farm?

MILHOUS: Yes, it wasn't just chores. I worked on the hay baler at that time, baling hay and leveling land also.

ARENA: How much land was involved at that point? Was your father the owner or the manager of the property?

MILHOUS: Neither one. We had forty acres rented where we lived and then he contracted. My dad was a contractor and he leveled land with horses for different people. He improved land.

ARENA: Excuse me. You said he leveled the land by horses or he leveled it for horses?

MILHOUS: No, he leveled the land with horses to plant crops like ALFALFA. He used buck scrapers, where today it is done with caterpillars.

ARENA: This was virgin land at that point?

MILHOUS: That's right. It was virgin land covered with sagebrush. We would take a railroad iron three-feet long, put four horses on each end of the railroad iron and clear the brush off and drag it. We would pull the sagebrush out by hand and then take a hay rake and rake it up in piles and burn it to get it out of the way. Then we would go in and rake the ground up and level it.

ARENA: Were you ever involved, or any of your parents or any of your relatives, in actually claiming some homestead land?

MILHOUS: No. Not us.

ARENA: Is there any reason you can account for the evident love of the land of the Milhouses? After all, you could have moved to the city as well as the country and yet the love of the land seems to be so strong. Certainly you're a good example of that, working with animals, with livestock as well as with farming. Is there any particular reason for that?

MILHOUS: No. Some of us just like livestock and farm living.

ARENA: The hard work that's necessary on a farm discourages so many. Evidently it didn't discourage you and others like you. You enjoyed it.

MILHOUS: We enjoyed it, yes.

ARENA: Was that always? As a youngster when you had to get up early and do this heavy and regular work, looking back, did you I won't say enjoy it but did you think, boy, if I could get out of this someday, did that ever cross your mind?

MILHOUS: Never.

ARENA: You just took it as a natural thing.

MILHOUS: When I was nine years old my mother [Lima Hudson Milhous] and I milked forty cows by hand. Before I'd go to school, I'd get up at 3 o'clock in the morning and get the cows. We would milk the cows, separate the milk and feed the pigs. This was all before I'd go to school in the mornings.

ARENA: I'm sure that was the case with some of the other boys and girls too.

MILHOUS: Some of them, yes.

ARENA: What school did you attend as a youngster?

MILHOUS: A good many schools.

ARENA: Because of this moving around that you did?

MILHOUS: Yes, my dad's work as a contractor involved lots of moving. I started in the first grade at Harmony School.

ARENA: Where is Harmony School?

MILHOUS: Between Porterville and Woodville [California]. I went there for two years. The next year I went to Harmony and Surprise [School]. Lura, my wife, also started to Harmony that year. The next year I went to Surprise, Harmony and Sunnyside [School]. Sunnyside is where Richard Nixon went when he was staying with the [Harold] Beesons. I went there part of the year, then we moved to Woodville. In the fifth grade I went to Buena Vista [School] near Tulare [California]. The next year I started at Manzanilla [School] near Hanford [California]. Then back to Harmony where I finished up the sixth grade and started the seventh there. Then we moved to Delano [California] and I went to Columbine School part of the time when I wasn't working.

Then we moved to Lancaster and I went the whole year to Roosevelt School and graduated there. I went about five or six months to high school in Lancaster, but that was the end of my schooling. I went to work. I had to outrun the truant officers most of the time. I'd stay out on one grading job and level there and work until they would get close to me, then I'd move on to another job.

ARENA: How would you get along with the teachers as the result of this moving? Was there any special problems because of that? No problems there?

MILHOUS: NO problems.

ARENA: Were you at Sunnyside where they had more than one grade in the same room, as when President Nixon attended? Where there was something like sixth, seventh and eighth grades together?

MILHOUS: Yes, there were two or three grades in each room. I went there two or three years before Richard Nixon.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, how about your Sunday School lessons and attending services, as a result of all this moving around?

MILHOUS: We went to Sunday School at Lindsay [Californial] for a while. Not too much when we got older. We went to Sunday School at different places in Imperial Valley [Californial] but never very much.

ARENA: How about your father, Ezra?

MILHOUS: Very, very religious.

ARENA: Even with this moving around. Would he say grace at the meals, for example?

MILHOUS: In later years, yes, but in early years I don't remember.

ARENA: Even with this moving around did he find it possible to attend these annual get-togethers at the Milhous home in Whittier?

MILHOUS: Yes, we always attended the family reunions.

ARENA: Do you recall them very clearly?

MILHOUS: Yes. I remember one especially. It was in a park somewhere in Whittier and they counted over five hundred people present. I was about twelve years old, I guess, at the time. At Christmas as long as Grandmother [Almira Burdg Milhous] was alive it was always a must to be there at Christmas.

ARENA: If you were up in this part of the state or up further in Lindsay it must have been a problem.

MILHOUS: Well, it wasn't too much. You could drive down there in ten to twelve hours over the old Ridge Route. Then later on, of course, we lived near Lancaster and Elsinore [Californial], which was closer to Grandmother's.

ARENA: Now do you remember any other periods of time such as the one you mentioned earlier where they used to come up and visit you in your place at Lancaster? Do you remember another period where there was quite a bit of contact with the President? Were you, say, spending any time at the store? Did you ever help out in Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon's store?

MILHOUS: No. I never did. My younger brother, Charles [Eric] Milhous, did, but I never helped out in the store. I used to get jealous because Richard and Harold Nixon would go out and caddy at the East Whittier Golf Course and they would get four or five dollars for it, when I'd work all day for four dollars. They could caddy for two or three hours and pick up a five dollar bill.

ARENA: What do you recall about Mr. Frank Nixon, the President's father; his personality and your contacts with him?

MILHOUS: Well, he was always a rather gruff sort of a man. He was good, but he'd scare the dickens out of the kids with his gruffness. He'd growl like a bear. He didn't mean half of what he growled about.

ARENA: How about his tendency to discuss politics with a lot of enthusiasm?

MILHOUS: Oh, boy. Yes, that's right. He was quite a politician. He'd really stand up and argue, too.

ARENA: Do you recall any arguments with him?

MILHOUS: No. I wasn't old enough to argue politics. Girls didn't even worry me then and you know girls usually worry boys before politics.

ARENA: How about the personality of the President's mother, Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

MILHOUS: She was a wonderful person and she had a personality that everybody liked. She was kind and warm-hearted and you never saw her when she was out of sorts, that I can remember.

ARENA: Did you ever hear the comment that she was always the peacemaker around Mr. Frank Nixon?

MILHOUS: Right.

ARENA: How about the idea that she worked quite hard?

MILHOUS: She worked hard, real hard, all the time. She used to bake pies at night, then sell them in the store; worked in the grocery store all day long, besides keeping her house and raising her family.

ARENA: The illness of Harold [Samuel Nixon] brought extra expenses and I understand that was part of the problem of her having to work extra hours, too.

MILHOUS: It probably did. Of course, the financial end of it I didn't know. But it naturally would have brought in a lot of expense.

ARENA: Now you say you have traveled to Texas. What's the furthest traveling you've done, Mr. Milhous? Would I be correct in assuming that of those of your age that you've done maybe more of the traveling and moving around than the average Milhous?

MILHOUS: Yes, I've traveled. I've worn out seven or eight cars. About a hundred and twenty thousand miles on each. It was mostly in California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah and Arizona. I made one trip in 1950 to Allentown, Pennsylvania to pick up a new truck for the company. That was the only time that I was ever that far East. Then I've been down to Texas a couple of times. Been down into Mexico buying cattle, down as far as Hermasillo.

ARENA: Any notion where President Nixon got his interest in Mexico? You know he went there and drove, as a matter of fact, on his honeymoon. Any idea where he might have gotten his interest in going to Mexico?

MILHOUS: I don't know. That was before I started going down there.

ARENA: How about the language problem; how's your Spanish?

MILHOUS: I never studied it. I just picked it up working with Mexicans. I've worked a regular crew of Mexicans and not one of them could speak English. I was just a kid at that time, eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old.

ARENA: Probably the roughest years for the farmer in your lifetime and mine were the depression years, the thirties. What do you recall about them, and when they say they're rough, how so, what did that mean?

MILHOUS: Land that was selling for as much as five hundred dollars an acre dropped down to about fifteen or twenty dollars an acre before the depression was over. Lots of people lost their farms. At one time I worked for a dollar a day and my board. I milked six or eight cows and drove a team of horses all day for a dollar a day, that was in 1931.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, do you recall ever feeling that during those years you were going to starve to death, that you would not get enough money or work or enough food?

MILHOUS: No, we lived on beans and potatoes, but never worried about starving to death.

ARENA: Did you come in contact with people who lived in the city who didn't have work and of course didn't live on the farm?

MILHOUS: We didn't have much contact with people from the city.

ARENA: Or possibly any relatives who needed help that were living in the city.

MILHOUS: Not that I know of. I guess there probably were, but you know we were busy taking care of ourselves. I know that I've worked all day for an old rooster and I worked a week for a hog to butcher for meat for the family, and we lived in the country where there was plenty of fruit and vegetables. I was never out of a job for long.

ARENA: Mr. Milhous, do you mind if I ask you if you ever did cowpoking, were you a cowboy somewhere along the line?

MILHOUS: Yes.

ARENA: And where was this?

MILHOUS: Up and down the Imperial Valley.

ARENA: Did you ever enter any rodeos, ride broncos?

MILHOUS: I rode some but not as exhibition, just on the ranch.

ARENA: Did you ever have any serious spills or hurts working with animals all these years?

MILHOUS: NO. I've been bounced around a little bit, not hurt too bad, no broken bones, but I've been bucked off, walked and stomped on.

ARENA: To what extent did you have any formal education about farming or about looking after animals, or is all your experience firsthand and from your folks?

MILHOUS: Firsthand. From my dad, or what I learned working for other farmers.

ARENA: Do you recall your father or grandmother or any of the older relatives working on you, so to speak, to get a college education?

MILHOUS: Yes.

ARENA: What happened?

MILHOUS: They wanted me to go on to high school and go on further. In fact, my teacher told some of my aunts when I was going to high school in Lancaster that I should go on through school and be a veterinarian. I've done a lot of veterinary work, I can do it yet.

ARENA: Thinking back, and if it isn't too personal, why didn't you want to take that advice?

MILHOUS: Money.

ARENA: Would they have helped you through college? Thinking back, could you have gotten the money if you wanted to go?

MILHOUS: Well, might have, never even entered my mind. We were a big family and I was the oldest one and they needed my help and I knew that. I didn't ask them, I just knew that they needed it, and I worked and my paychecks came home.

ARENA: How large was the family?

MILHOUS: Ten of us. A lot of mouths to feed.

ARENA: Was there ever anything like using your other cousins as an example for you to follow? Look how so and so is doing, why don't you get up and do it? Was that type of encouragement or persuasion used?

MILHOUS: Never brought up.

ARENA: In other words, your father didn't worry you. He tried to get you to go, as well as some of the elders, but once they saw that you didn't want to do it, there wasn't any special problem?

MILHOUS: No problems. They never forced it too much. It was up to me.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you've ever been active in politics yourself, ever run for any office or anything like that? Any desire?

MILHOUS: No desire. It's wonderful if he likes it.

ARENA: That's probably the answer. He likes it. It's a question of whether or not you like to do it.

MILHOUS: That's right. It's just like anything you do. I'll tell you, you cannot fulfill a job, I don't care if it's just digging a ditch out here, if you don't like to do it. You cannot do it right if you can't put your heart into it.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, from your overall experience of the family--you say there were ten right in your own--was politics common or uncommon an interest among the family?

MILHOUS: Very uncommon.