



10-20-1971

Claren Cook Morris and Richie Morris (October 20, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Second Oral History Interview

with

MRS. CLAREN COOK MORRIS
MR. RICHIE MORRIS

October 20, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #2 with Mr. and Mrs. Richie Morris. Mrs. Richie Morris is the former Claren Cook. The interview is being held in Whittier, California, October 20, 1971, Arena interviewing. Let's begin with the general question, I'll ask Mrs. Morris first, when and where was your first connection with any of the members of the President's family, the immediate family, such as Hannah Milhous Nixon, [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, President Richard Nixon himself, and any of the boys? What do you recall is your earliest meeting with any of the members of that family, including the parents, Almira and Franklin Milhous? Mrs. Morris?

C. MORRIS: Well, my earliest intimate connection with her [Mrs. Hannah Milhous Nixon] was when she started to Whittier Preparatory school, Academy in other words, and we were in the same classes, mostly. We went through the academy and graduated at the same time. She was married soon after that and moved to Yorba Linda. Her husband was the conductor of an interurban streetcar from Los Angeles to Yorba Linda, so I saw very little of her during her days out there. But our younger days were spent very closely together. There were very few students at Whittier Academy at that time. We both lived out in the country. I had two miles to go and she had a mile to go to get to the college, so we did a lot of that together, particularly coming home from night entertainments that we had once in a while. It was awfully dark, dusty and full of ruts, Whittier Boulevard. We called it the County Road then.

ARENA: Would that be the present Whittier Boulevard?

C. MORRIS: Whittier Boulevard. And we had lots of fun, but we had to make it all ourselves, and we were called down, definitely, by the powers that be at the college, if we sidestepped one step out of the ideals of Quakerism, such as the playing of a few games of cards. We couldn't dance, which we did sometimes, and heard from it afterwards. You can imagine what kind of dancing it was. But we did have lots of fun, and everybody had a pretty good sense of humor. We played lots of tricks on people. But they were very, very strict at the academy as to our behavior.

ARENA: I wonder if I could tie in this strictness of behavior with something that has come up recently in other interviews. For example, some of those who went to Whittier College at the same time as President Nixon have mentioned that dancing was brought on the college campus during his period, and he graduated from the class of 1934. In other words, this was breaking new ice. Certainly, that was not tolerated when you went, dancing on the campus. Do you recall what the reaction of the community was when President Nixon and some of the other interested students began to talk about having dancing allowed on the campus?

C. MORRIS: Well, I wasn't closely connected with the college at that time and I really don't know. They used to put on some plays that were criticized. They were apt to be Shakespeare's plays, but sometimes they were very severely criticized by the public at large.

ARENA: Do you think that was because some members of the church were in agreement and disagreement, or was there a more or less standing, all-around rule about no card-playing, no smoking, no theaters and no movies, and it was that sort of a situation, where to allow dancing was to break one of the long-standing regulations that go back to your time, when you and Mrs. Nixon were going to the Academy?

C. MORRIS: I so well remember one time, when the president of the college was going east for a week, I believe. Once before when he was gone, a friend and I had a card party, and we taught one of the dear Quaker boys to play cards, and that was about as big a sin as we could have performed at the time. I met him when he was ready to go the next time, and he said, "Now, I don't want to come back and find out that you have been having card parties." Although they had no connection with the

college whatsoever. They were in our own homes and our own parents [were there], but it was just a very, very strict rule there, apparently.

ARENA: From your recollection of Mrs. Hannah Nixon, bearing in mind that it was her son who campaigned on campus to bring dancing onto the campus, would you say that she was the type of person who would not be too super-strict, and you weren't surprised that it was Richard--or would you say that you WERE surprised that it would be her son--that brought about this kind of change?

C. MORRIS: Well, I was always very happy when the changing of some of those strict rules was allowed to take place, because it was a pretty monotonous deal not to be able to do anything but just go to a little college and study all the time.

ARENA: What did the girls and boys at that point do for dancing? It is my understanding that dancing did take place somewhere.

C. MORRIS: Well, they had a literary society, it was called, which met on Friday evenings once a month at the college. It was called the Athenaeum Literary Society. There was a big piano in the study hall and there was room enough up around the platform, where the person who had charge of the study hall that day sat and watched us to see that we were studying. And we could dance around there. There was always somebody who could play the piano a little, and you can imagine what kind of dancing it was. Nobody knew how, but we thought we were really doing something. And we thought it was a lot of fun. And I never could see the harm in a little dancing. So when it really became one of the activities of the college, I was very glad to see that they were broadening out that much.

ARENA: If I could bring up another subject for a minute that you touched on regarding Mr. Frank Nixon, the President's father, you say that he was a conductor on one of the local inter-urban cars. Would you say as much as you can about that? Did you see him in the car? Did you ever go on that particular car, and do you recall his personality as a young man in those days?

C. MORRIS: No. That ran from Los Angeles to Yorba Linda, and there was no way of people getting into Whittier but by coming with the horse and buggy, and we saw very little of the Nixons at that time, so far as I knew. Our real close friendship just ceased right then. She was busy out there, and I was busy, too. Times were

pretty dull, as we would call them now. When I see the things that go on up there now, I have to hold my breath to think that it's the same institution. Our clothes were very plain, mostly made by us, and if the sleeves wore out, they had a new pair put in at Christmas, and you went on the rest of the year with the same dress. Times were pretty hard in Whittier at that time. The orchards hadn't begun to pay very much. My father was a doctor and he had a pretty hard time unless he could ever collect any doctor bills. That is very fast in my memory.

ARENA: Since Mrs. Nixon and you had gone to school together and before she got married, do you recall that she had gone on dates with other boys, and possibly with you on double dates? Or from your recollection, was Mr. Frank Nixon her first date, and if I can be so blunt, her first love, from your own recollection, Mrs. Morris?

C. MORRIS: I don't recollect that at all, because I went on to school and she didn't. So far as having dates with boys at that time, we went together as a group, and it was quite a surprise when we found out that Hannah was getting married. And she was very happily married, I think, and she certainly made the best of it. She was a hard-working person, always had been, and went right on.

ARENA: When was the first time you saw Mrs. Nixon after you came back from college yourself? Do you remember when it was that you did come back to the Whittier area?

C. MORRIS: Well, I tell you, really I don't know, because we weren't interested in the same people or the same things at that time. I always heard of her, or kept track of her all the way through and saw her on occasions, but so far as any particular occasion is concerned I just don't remember.

ARENA: Do you recall ever visiting their store when they came back from Yorba Linda in 1922? Frank Nixon had a store and gasoline pumping station then, and of course, by now President Nixon was born, in 1913, and he was a youngster in 1922.

C. MORRIS: Well, I remember that very well, and she still continued to work hard. She made homemade pies to sell, and she always commented on what a good boy he was to help her. He ran all her chores, or errands for her, from the house to the store, to bring the things she needed, and hung around very close to her

while she was doing all of this, and took the things back to the store to sell. But he was apparently like his mother, and he knew what it was to get some work done. But we lived pretty far apart, you know. That was about five miles out there. So I don't know just how far it is, but anyway, we didn't have automobiles running in every direction at that time. And my interests were very different from hers, so . . .

ARENA: Do you recall the first occasion when you did begin to notice Richard, as a little boy or as a boy in high school or college, or coming back from law school? Is there an occasion in which he begins to really stand out in your memory right now?

C. MORRIS: No, there really isn't. See, they lived in East Whittier and we lived in Whittier, and as I say, I always kept track of her and the family, but so far as being intimately associated, no, we were not.

ARENA: You don't recall, possibly, attending any of the college plays, or community theater plays in which Richard acted, or took roles.

C. MORRIS: I can't say that I do. I undoubtedly did do some of that; however, I was busy along quite other lines myself about that time. We were married and had our own circle of friends and entertainment, and only in a general way did I keep track of them.

ARENA: How about the parents of Hannah? Franklin, her father, and Almira, her mother? Did you come into contact with them in church, the First Friends Church, of which I assume they were members?

C. MORRIS: Yes they were, and he sang in the choir, and they were very good Quaker people, still very strict in their ideas of what should be done and what shouldn't.

ARENA: There really is very little information on Franklin, and anything you have in the way of recalling anything about him, in church, on his farm, in the city, would be very much appreciated, Mrs. Morris.

C. MORRIS: Well, I could tell you something that was funny, but I don't want to put it down in black and white. Franklin--Frank, we called him, was bald-headed and he wore a wig, and in that day, that was SOMETHING to talk about, and there were lots of funny things that happened in regard to that wig. He thought he was

fooling people, but he wasn't. And it didn't look like the wigs do today. It was a very homely bit of adornment.

ARENA: It was a subject that would not be brought up in front of him, as it would be today.

C. MORRIS: Oh, mercy, no.

ARENA: People kid about it, of course.

C. MORRIS: Oh, no.

ARENA: Do you recall that he ALWAYS had one, as far as you can remember?

C. MORRIS: As far as I know.

ARENA: He might have been bald at an early age?

C. MORRIS: I don't know a thing about it. I couldn't ever ask anything about it because you just didn't talk about those things.

ARENA: Was he an easy person to talk with, other than from that standpoint? Do you recall his . . .

C. MORRIS: I was always a little afraid of him. He spoke few words, but what he spoke he meant, and . . .

ARENA: Did he do anything in the community in the way of politics or service organizations or church activities, other than directly relating to Sunday services? Did he belong to any committees that did anything in the community?

C. MORRIS: I don't imagine he did, although I can't say. That's something I just didn't know anything about at the time.

ARENA: Do you recall ever visiting Hannah in her father and mother's home? Do you recall the home itself?

C. MORRIS: Oh, my, yes.

ARENA: Would you describe it as much as you can?

C. MORRIS: Well, they had a lot of children. The furnishings were very plain; a lot of it they brought from Indiana. He had been a nurseryman there and he had his own lumber, and they brought some ready-made doors, which are still in the family. I remember a great

big chest which stood in the hall upstairs, which contained lots of clothes that they put in there when they were washed, and they went in there and picked out their own clothes.

ARENA: It was a well-managed home.

C. MORRIS: It was a very well-managed home, but very plain and substantial. They had a piano, and one of the older girls [Mary Alice Milhous], a girl by a former wife, was quite musical and she gave music lessons, I think, but I can't be sure about that.

ARENA: Mr. Morris, did you want to add to anything?

R. MORRIS: No, I don't have anything to add to that. That was all, really, up until the time she got through with the Academy. Shortly after that-- I can't remember, two years you had in college--and then we were married, that was in 1908.

But in speaking of Mr. Milhous' experiences in Whittier and so forth, they were very scarce, as his interests were all in East Whittier. The town didn't register much in his estimation, outside of the church.

ARENA: Mr. Franklin Milhous?

R. MORRIS: Mr. Milhous. They called her Allie.

ARENA: And what was her personality like, Mrs. Almira [Milhous]?

R. MORRIS: Well, she was very sweet and quiet, and let the other fellow do the talking and arranging, and so forth.

ARENA: Was there anything like a temper on the part of Mr. Franklin Milhous and a kind of soothing personality and quiet personality on the part of Mrs. Milhous? What I'm trying to see here is if the daughter, Hannah Milhous Nixon, closely resembled Mrs. Almira Milhous, if there was any similarity, even in a situation where Frank was a very enthusiastic person, and Hannah was quiet and always working, and I was wondering if there was any similarity in the Milhous side.

C. MORRIS: The thing about him was that when Father spoke, that was that. Even Hannah, who quite largely, it seemed to me, ran the house, if she could get things by her father everything was okay, because he was very, very strict, and when he spoke, that was that.

ARENA: Do you recall the type of family reunions that were held in the Milhous home, and whether you

ever happened to be there at the time? I understand that annually all of the family would get together.

C. MORRIS: I imagine, but no, I was never there. In fact, our ways didn't cross.

ARENA: And you met Hannah through circumstance, through school, actually. Would that be an accurate way of putting it?

C. MORRIS: Yes.

ARENA: Through circumstances.

C. MORRIS: We had different interests, different groups of friends, but they were always at church, that's for sure. The father and mother were, anyway.

ARENA: You say that Mr. Franklin Milhous did sing?

C. MORRIS: Yes.

ARENA: Did Mrs. Milhous do anything in particular in addition to . . .

C. MORRIS: She was very, very quiet, and I think her activities centered around her family and things at home. I don't recall anything about their activities in the church other than his singing, and I know that they didn't do the things that the church didn't believe in. They were very strict about that.

ARENA: And as far as you know, the daughter, Hannah Milhous Nixon, pretty well followed in their footpaths from the standpoint of remaining faithful to the church?

C. MORRIS: I'm sure she did, but then she was out in the East Whittier church and I was in Whittier, and it was an awful long way apart at that time because of transportation and telephones.

ARENA: There were no telephones then, though.

C. MORRIS: No. When we moved out there where the Chinese restaurant is now on Whittier Boulevard we had a telephone put in, and that was the farthest east of any telephone, and people used to stop in there and use the telephone to telephone somewhere else, because for a long time that was as far east as the telephones went. Otherwise it was just used for around Whittier. It's hard to think of Whittier being that kind of a place, but it was so.

Mr. Milhous had this nursery in the east, and when he came out here he brought the man who had helped him with the nursery there. He brought him out in a carload of trees that he thought would be fine to put on this place that he had bought. And didn't one of them live, as I remember. They weren't adapted to California soil or climate or anything, which was a great disappointment to him.

ARENA: Was that within the first year, and therefore he lost those trees?

C. MORRIS: I imagine so.

ARENA: What type of people were his customers, local, or did he do quite a bit of traveling?

C. MORRIS: Well, now, I don't believe he had a nursery in Whittier. Did he ever have a nursery in Whittier, Frank Milhous?

R. MORRIS: Yes, he had a nursery in Whittier, and he imported from the nursery in Indiana, John Morris, who was no kin to me, that married your older sister, and he worked here in the nursery for Mr. Milhous. That's how John Morris happened to be here.

ARENA: He also brought some other relatives, brothers, that you may or may not know of.

C. MORRIS: Well, the man who later became my brother-in-law's brother came out here, but he didn't stay in Whittier much. I don't know what became of him.

ARENA: Am I correct in saying that the Milhous ranch was located where the Quad [Shopping Center] is now, that intersection on the other side of Painter [Avenue] and Whittier Boulevard?

C. MORRIS: That's right.

ARENA: Do you recall how many acres that included? Would it be about the same amount that occupies the Quad?

C. MORRIS: They didn't have much acreage there, did they?

R. MORRIS: No.

C. MORRIS: As I remember it was three acres, but I could be as mistaken about that as could be; I don't know.

R. MORRIS: But he went into the citrus and walnut culture after he came here and forgot the Indiana trees.

He took over what would grow in California and he continued on with those for quite a while.

C. MORRIS: I suppose that was their living. I don't have any idea. I don't have any recollection of that at all.

R. MORRIS: That was right.

C. MORRIS: They lived some way. Pretty good-sized family.

ARENA: Was it one of the largest of the families of Whittier, or was it normal to have that many children?

C. MORRIS: Well, there were some big families. There were five children in our own family, which is quite a family now. Mr. Milhous had been married before. He was married to this Allie who was here, and there were two children and they lived around Whittier for quite a while. They were more interested in musical circles, and so forth.

ARENA: Was the idea of frowning on dancing carried over into the playing of the piano and that sort of thing, and what was the Franklin Milhous situation on piano playing and other musical instruments like that, at home or in the church itself?

C. MORRIS: Well, they had lots of music at home. I don't remember whether there were any other instruments there or not, but Jane [Milhous] was the one who took care of the musical end of it, mostly.

ARENA: What is your recollection of Jane Milhous, now Mrs. Beeson?

C. MORRIS: Well, she was kind of like her mother, a very sweet, good-natured person that loved music.

ARENA: You don't recall attending any classes with her?

C. MORRIS: No. No, she was much younger than I was.

ARENA: Do you recall any particular role that she played in the church as a result of her musical ability?

C. MORRIS: I imagine she did, but I just really don't know.

ARENA: Your First Friends Church, which is now located on the corner of Washington Avenue and Philadelphia Street, is that where it has always been

located, and is that the one that you and the Milhouses attended in Whittier?

C. MORRIS: Well, now, that's the only place I remember them, is right there.

* * * *

The interview continued with a discussion of Quaker religious life in Whittier, and then the following verbatim dialogue occurred:

* * * *

ARENA: Is there any other question or any other thing that I have not brought up concerning the Milhouses or Nixons at this point, that you would like to bring up?

C. MORRIS: Well, I really knew very little about the Nixons. That all happened out East Whittier way.

ARENA: Were you surprised when Hannah did marry Frank, who was a Methodist at the time?

C. MORRIS: Well, I was familiar enough with the family that I was invited to a personal shower given by the woman that Frank worked for. He was a ranch hand at that time, and she had a shower for him. I had never met him before. But it was a personal shower, given by Mrs. [Chris] Judson, and I remember very well. . . . Judson Street down there in Whittier is named for the family. It was quite difficult to get down there. We had to go with the horse and buggy, you know, to get down there to go to the shower. And he came in and we met him and that's all there was to that.

ARENA: Do you recall some of the gifts, or the way in which the shower was conducted, in those days?

C. MORRIS: So far as the shower was concerned, it wasn't too successful. The woman herself didn't know how to entertain people of that age; there was no entertainment provided. I think we had a glass of lemonade for dessert, and I remember being very choosy about picking a nice pair of socks to take as my gift. Oh, dear, I don't remember who was there, or anything about any of the rest of it. It was a very exciting shower.

ARENA: How about the shower for Hannah?

C. MORRIS: Now that I can't recall.

- ARENA: Is it still the custom to have showers for men today?
- C. MORRIS: I don't know. I went to a shower for Hannah. Sadie George had a shower for Hannah, but it would be quite a different shower than the one was for Frank.
- ARENA: Mr. Morris, is there anything you would like to add or comment?
- R. MORRIS: That is all. She would know that so much better than I.
- C. MORRIS: This all took place before his time, I think.
- R. MORRIS: Well, no. The church wasn't built until 1917.
- C. MORRIS: Well, the church that's here now . . .
- R. MORRIS: The one before that was built when I came here in 1905, which had moved up from that little church at Comstock [Avenue] and Wardman Street. They sold that church and some other denomination occupied that.
- C. MORRIS: There was, later, a Methodist church and it was quite popular. There was a little feeling as to who was going to get who, if somebody new moved into town; worked pretty hard to get members.
- ARENA: I believe the dates run like this: That Frank Nixon came here in 1905 or 1906, was married in 1908, moved to Yorba Linda in 1910, and young Richard was born there in 1913, of that I'm sure, that he was born in Yorba Linda in 1913. So the period of the courtship and the marriage and the moving was somewhere a few years before 1913. And then he definitely moved back into East Whittier in 1922, to kind of place the period in your own mind. And you mentioned something about 1910, coming to Whittier yourself, Mr. Morris? Was it 1910 that you came to Whittier?
- R. MORRIS: Oh, no. 1905.
- ARENA: It was around the time of Frank.
- C. MORRIS: We were married in 1908.
- R. MORRIS: The thing that enters into your inability to follow the life of Hannah that he questioned you about, was that period we spent in Berkeley [California] from 1910 to 1913.

ARENA: That's right.

R. MORRIS: I think that's the reason she doesn't recall it.

ARENA: Right. Well, is there anything at all that you would like to add before we bring this interview to a close, in any way? Certainly if anything comes to mind, don't hesitate to let me know, and I thank you very much for your kindness.

C. MORRIS: Well, I'm sorry we can't give you more definite You know, they've always just been around, and you just kind of accept that. The things that you remember are things that are very striking at the time, for either their peculiarity or something. I don't have a very good memory, anyway, along a lot of lines. I remember funny things that happen, but not there, particularly.

ARENA: Do you remember, possibly, a humorous incident involving Hannah Nixon in school, or something humorous involving any of the Nixons, Milhouses or church or the community?

C. MORRIS: Well, I can remember something that was awfully funny at the time. I think I told you about this before. I don't know if I want this to go down in black and white. Anyway, this wig caused quite a lot of excitement, because it was not done in that day and age. I was staying all night with Hannah, and we got in and she had to go in and report to the folks. They were in bed. And hanging in a red bandana handkerchief on the four-poster bed was his wig, all done up, and he pulled the covers up over his head so fast that. . . . He thought he was fooling everybody. That's the funniest thing I can remember; it impressed me so.

ARENA: I think something like that would impress anyone. I thank you very much.