



4-10-1972

Ralph Anthony Veady (April 10, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview

with

MR. RALPH ANTHONY VEADY

April 10, 1972
Bellflower, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview with Mr. Ralph Anthony Veady, in Bellflower, California, Arena interviewing. Today's date, April 10, 1972. Mr. Veady, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

VEADY: May 19, 1908.

ARENA: And would you mind giving a brief description of your education up to your college years?

VEADY: Well, mostly Lincoln High School, Los Angeles. That's where I went through four years and then from there I went to Whittier College.

ARENA: What year did you graduate from high school?

VEADY: 1928.

ARENA: How is it that you did choose Whittier College?

VEADY: Well, Sir, let's see. I had a good friend there at one time, Joe Bosio. He graduated and went there ahead of me. I, not having the money for the tuition, I worked a year at the Jonathan Club as an elevator operator and saved money for my tuition to go to Whittier College where my friend was. I worked at the Jonathan Club. He went on to college and I went a year later.

ARENA: And you did not graduate from Whittier College, and of course that ties in with your accident. Would you mind giving a description of just what was entailed in your accident?

VEADY: Well, being a man who had to earn his tuition to go to college, I still needed money to keep in college, so I saw a notice on the bulletin board of a ranch hand needed, which was close by in Santa Fe Springs [California], and so I went down there and applied for a job and was hired to stay on the place and kind of take care of the ranch. And that's where the accident happened, after a few weeks, or something like that, on the ranch.

ARENA: And would you mind saying what that accident was, Mr. Veady?

VEADY: Yes. I was engaged in taking care of the place. The hired hand brought the tractor in and told me it needed repairing and I, being more mechanical minded, doing a little bit of everything with mechanics, I decided to repair the tractor. So the tractor was on the ground and I started it up and backed it up on the platform so I could get underneath to repair it.

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There enters a discussion of Mr. Veady's accident and his own physical disability resulting therefrom.

Mr. Veady's recollections of his association with the President follows:

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ARENA: Then did you resume your regular Whittier College education the following fall of 1930, which would have been the President's freshman year?

VEADY: That's it, yeah. I returned the next year in the fall and stayed on the campus with a Chinese-Hawaiian boy as my roommate at that time. In that particular class, I was treasurer of the class and Nixon was president of the class.

ARENA: This would have been the freshman year class.

VEADY: Yes.

ARENA: What do you recall of the President's reaction, and anything that might have come up between you and him regarding your accident, regarding this tragedy?

VEADY: Well, I know that was something they didn't talk much about. This was something they thought an awful lot about. Anyone, they would never mention it. They had admiration, but they kept from talking about it, because they didn't know how to handle it.

ARENA: Were you, possibly, a member of the President's society, the Orthogonians?

VEADY: Yes, Orthogonians, and Cosmopolitan organization at that time.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you regarding the President's own reaction if you recall? How did he react to your accident? Did he try to, we'll say, bolster your morale, or did he try to go on as though it was. . . . He tried to act naturally? Do you recall how he did react to you?

VEADY: He was very friendly. Anybody and everybody refrained from talking about the handicap. They didn't even want to mention it to me, to let me know, in other words. I think out of their good understanding and their wise choice, they didn't bring it up. Nobody brought it up. They saw it there, but they didn't want to bring it out any more. They didn't want to discuss it. In other words, why discuss a thing that a person is carrying. If he's carrying it well, why, then why discuss it?

ARENA: Do you recall that there were any complications about your returning to college because of your handicap?

VEADY: No, there wasn't a thing. They seemed to be more or less glad to have me there. There was nothing whatsoever said about it.

ARENA: During the complete time that you were at Whittier College, did you have any classes with the President?

VEADY: As I remember, the speech class, Professor [Eugene] Knox-- I'm sure it was Professor Knox that we had the speech class together.

ARENA: What was the class like, and do you recall: one, the professor's methods of teaching speech; two, do you recall the President and his contribution in the class at the time?

VEADY: Let's see. I would say Professor Knox. I'm almost sure that's the name.

ARENA: That could be checked with the yearbook anyway. It would have been the freshman year too, 1930-31?

VEADY: Yes. Oh, sure, when I came back the second time. The first time I was only there a few weeks or a month or so, maybe a couple of months, I don't remember. But the second time I was there a whole year. Well, in this class Professor Knox would speak with a great pantomime, with expression of hands. When he'd say to speak with gesture, like "this vast dome of the heavens,"

he would use his hands to, like spreading the vast dome of the heavens. Nixon was there absorbing all this teaching, and Nixon was a leader there in that particular class. He was good at it.

ARENA: Do you recall that the class also took up the subject of debating, or was that not a part of that course?

VEADY: As I remember, there was debating in the class.

ARENA: Do you recall whether you, yourself, participated in any debates as did the President?

VEADY: I don't remember participating in the debates, but I'm sure that President Nixon or Richard Nixon at that time took part in the debating. It isn't too clear.

ARENA: Were there any other courses you may have had with the President while you were a student at Whittier College?

VEADY: I can't quite pick anything else out, other than we had our pictures taken in the freshman class, and he was president of the class and I was treasurer of the class.

ARENA: What do you recall about your campaign strategy and the actual campaign itself, when he was running for president and you were running for treasurer of the freshman class of Whittier College?

VEADY: Not too much. There was not much campaigning. It was just amongst the class students. They just voted him as president, and I guess being a leader, that's why they voted him as president. And then, I don't know who was secretary, but they chose me as treasurer of the class.

ARENA: Actually what were your responsibilities, and did you meet with the president in any sort of executive session during that freshman year?

VEADY: Yes, the class executives would get together, the treasurer, and secretary and president, talking over class problems.

ARENA: And what do you recall about his leadership qualities at that time? For example, did you have confidence in him as a leader of the class? Did he give others a chance to speak at the meetings? How would you describe him as the head of your executive group and government?

VEADY: He seemed to stand out as a leader. That's why he was chosen class president. And probably president of other classes after I left. I was only there a year. But then,

he was chosen for the part because he acted the part. He was more of a leader from the beginning as I can see it.

ARENA: Did you ever have any contact with the President outside of the formal classroom or extracurricular activities; for example, maybe attending football games, maybe attending religious services together or anything like that?

VEADY: Well, we went to a football banquet. He was there. I went with my artificial legs on. And for weeks and months ahead of that time I practiced dancing with a friend in the neighborhood, and I chose a girl in the college there, Harriet Aiken. She was a college student there. She agreed to go with me, and I danced with her practically most of the evening and got along fine. I didn't talk with Nixon there. I'm sure he danced with my girl friend. We were acquaintances, but we weren't just buddy-buddy friends.

ARENA: Do you recall how you went to the dance? Who supplied the transportation?

VEADY: I took my car. I learned to drive my car.

ARENA: This was while you were at college?

VEADY: Yes. Let's see. I had a little red Ford that I fixed up to drive with my hands. Each pedal was extended; in fact, I extended them myself. I did these things myself. And I'd sit in there, and I'd work the reverse and low and the brake with these hand levers that I made up. This particular car was what I drove back and forth from El Serrino to Whittier College the first part of my semester.

ARENA: Did you ever get to meet any of the President's relatives, the members of his close family? I'm thinking of his parents, his brothers?

VEADY: No. I didn't have that much of an acquaintance with his relatives.

ARENA: Did you ever attend any of the school functions, such as the school chapel or any other religious functions where he may have been present and possibly a speaker?

VEADY: I attended the chapels. I can't remember him being the speaker, but I'm sure he was in the chapel as well.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you where you lived during this period of your college life?

VEADY: Let's see. The latter part of my second stay at Whittier College. . . . The first part I stayed at the dorm, and

the latter part in a home close in that neighborhood near Whittier College. The people where I had my accident on their ranch, they provided this room with this elderly lady for me to stay in this place, being a little cheaper to stay.

ARENA: Before we do leave Whittier College, is there anything that I have not mentioned or brought up in connection with your stay at college and your contact with President Nixon?

VEADY: Well, I can't say any more than what I can see in my past mind.

ARENA: You didn't belong to other organizations that he belonged to. We've mentioned the Orthogonians; we've mentioned school government. How about any singing groups or choral group situations?

VEADY: No. I didn't get around that much with the artificial legs on, so I can't remember any others.

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ARENA: Any other thing you want to say regarding your activities during this period?

VEADY: Of course, in the meantime, when I wasn't in college any more, when there wasn't any more money to go to college, I had to get out on my own, and then I lived in El Serrino [California], went back to El Serrino, and I took up watch making with the State Department of Rehabilitation. They gave me a course.

ARENA: Do you recall coming into contact with Professor J. Gustav White?

VEADY: I knew . . .

ARENA: Did he give you any leads about getting State aid for that purpose, for education?

VEADY: I can't quite recall that, but I knew Gustav White.

ARENA: Were you aware that he did contact President Nixon while he was a senator for aid from the Federal Government and the State Aid program?

VEADY: No, I wasn't aware of that.

ARENA: Were you aware that there was anything like that at the time?

VEADY: No.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how you did get the pay for your watch-making education?

VEADY: The State Rehabilitation Department in Los Angeles [California], they loaned the tools and paid the tuition for your training. And then after, years afterwards, why then you paid that back to the State, which I did. And, of course, you're glad to do it. You're on your own then.

ARENA: Was there any particular person, a student or faculty member or administrator whom you found of extra assistance, we'll say, psychologically, physically, to you while you were on the campus at that time?

VEADY: Who was the president then?

ARENA: One was Walter Dexter.

VEADY: Dexter. Dexter at that time wrote a book, and I used to sit with him in the cafe, and he autographed his book for me that he wrote. Then, of course, I would talk with Nate George, eating at the cafe there, and different fellows. They would be very friendly, never mention a thing about my handicap or to make me depressed in any way. They accepted me as an equal without the legs, which was very good, very intelligent of them not to mention it, because a person knows about his handicap. He doesn't have to be told about it. I can't remember some of the names. We'd have our little sessions together, talking. Sometimes we'd talk to way, way late, with the different fellows in the dorm--wee, small hours--bull sessions, we called 'em.

ARENA: Would these be with the Orthogonians, of which he was the president, or those plus other groups?

VEADY: Plus other groups I would say, yeah.

ARENA: Did you ever come into contact with President Nixon once you had left Whittier College?

VEADY: Yes, when he was running for different government positions. I had pictures taken with him down at Lakewood [California] when he was there talking to a crowd. That's one of the pictures I have on the wall. And I had my picture taken with him at a Homecoming in Whittier at our clubhouse in Whittier. These are the two times that I had pictures taken with Nixon.

ARENA: Am I correct in assuming that you said that the President did play a part in one of your special programs, "This is Your Life?"

VEADY: Yes.

ARENA: Would you summarize what his part was, Mr. Veady, and what he said?

VEADY: Yes. Yes, he spoke from Washington on the "This is Your Life" program when I was on television. And he gave quite a speech, praising me and telling what an example I was to my fellowman for going through life and doing undauntedly the things and being an inspiration to others.

ARENA: Excuse me. About when did that program originate? I realize that it probably had re-runs?

VEADY: Yes. I would say about ten, twelve years ago now. He was Vice President, whenever that was. He was Vice President with [Dwight David] Eisenhower at that time. They showed his picture on the film on "This is Your Life." Then they gave his words, his speech, or whatever you want to call it in my behalf, and wished me a lot of luck and to continue in my success in life.

ARENA: This might sound like a hard question, but as an objective historian, it should be asked. When you were running for office in Whittier College, along with the President, would you say that he took advantage of your predicament to gain votes by sympathy, or was that not a factor?

VEADY: It was not a factor whatsoever. He was a leader in his own right and never, ever, in any way or with any words did he ever take advantage that way. He's too much of a man of principle, and we just got along together, just like it was natural to have the positions we got into.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you to assess the President as you recall his personality, his character and his nature, while you knew him on the Whittier College campus?

VEADY: I would say he was a man of principle. We never discussed my handicap, because, like I say, he was smart enough to know that I knew I was handicapped. And he looked like a young fellow at that time, what age he was--nineteen or twenty, whatever it was--like he was headed some place. He didn't know himself, I guess, where he was headed, but he was born with that trait. He wasn't a goof-ball type of kid at that time. He was serious minded, and I guess brought up on the ranch. He knew what it was to work. His folks were ranchers. He wasn't one, as I knew him, for a lot of horseplay. He was there in college for serious business and to learn, just like he was chosen for his particular job and he went along with it, not even being able to help himself NOT to go along with it.

ARENA: Was it your impression and recollection that he sought offices while he was on campus, or did the offices seek

him, so to speak? Did he campaign BEFORE he campaigned in a sense? Did he ask people to nominate him so he could run, do you recall that clearly one way or the other?

VEADY: No, he didn't go that way. He was chosen. He didn't ask people to vote for him. He stood out to where he was chosen to become an officer, not that he wanted to be any particular office holder.

ARENA: Finally, do you mind if I ask you, if it isn't too personal: As the President was brought up from fairly strict Quaker parents, did he try to influence you along any religious lines?

VEADY: No. I didn't have any particular vices at that time. I didn't smoke, I didn't drink, and that's probably one reason I went to Whittier College, being more of a Quaker college. And that wasn't brought out. It wasn't needed in my particular case, so it wasn't brought up that way at all.

ARENA: As this interview comes to a close, Mr. Veady, is there anything that I have not brought up concerning your personal contacts and recollections of the contacts with President Nixon that you would like to bring up yourself? Maybe I haven't raised the question and you can think of some topics that should be.

VEADY: Well, I'm sure there's more than what I've said, but I want to be truthful about it, and I don't want to say more than what is truthful. So, I can't see back that far. When I speak, I have to see it. As I'm recollecting back, I have to see back that far with my mind's eye or my subconscious, and I can't see anything that. . . . I don't want to make it sound more when it isn't so. And even though mine is so little in regard to the President, I'm sure it's truthful what I say, but I don't want to gloat over it. So, like I say, I'm sure there's more, but I can't recall back that far.

ARENA: Mr. Veady, you were discussing a moment ago the fact that you did meet the President's mother. Would you mind going over that experience again and what you recall of her character, her personality?

VEADY: Yes. When he was over at Cerritos [California] and was in the auditorium giving a speech, I sat beside his mother in the auditorium in the front row, listening to his speech and talking to his mother. In fact, we had quite a conversation together since she knew that I knew him and we went to college together. I was waiting to shake hands with the President afterwards, there being such a crowd there. But talking with his mother, she was very friendly, very happy and gay, very happy and very concerned about her boy.

ARENA: Do you recall about when this took place when you were at Cerritos?

VEADY: Let's see. It was his speech at Cerritos. I went to hear his speech. I can't recall whether he was running for President. I think he was running for President against [John F.] Kennedy at that time. He wasn't elected this particular time. But then, that's about all I can recall.

ARENA: That's fine. I want to thank you for allowing me the privilege of this interview, and for your answering all of my questions so fully and frankly, and I speak for all historians in thanking you.

VEADY: You're sure welcome.