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Helen Wood Neushutz (September 29, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT

Oral History Interview

with

MRS. HELEN WOOD NEUSHUTZ

September 29, 1972
Seal Beach, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is an interview with Mrs. Helen Wood Neushutz. The husband of Mrs. Neushutz, now deceased, was Fred Ernst Neushutz, the name Neushutz being of Swiss origin. We are in Seal Beach, California, Leisure World, September 29, 1972, Arena interviewing. What follows is a brief resume compiled by Mrs. Neushutz on her precise relationship with the President's family. [This resume is appended to this interview.]

And the idea of more truly intimate stories being told is precisely why I am here, as you know, Mrs. Neushutz. First may I ask you, from the point of identifying yourself even more closely to the President's family, where and when you were born?

NEUSHUTZ: I was born in Ohio, February 5, 1891, which makes me past eighty-one years of age now.

ARENA: And may I ask you from the standpoint of this article . . .

NEUSHUTZ: I just wrote this because so many people thought I was a relative and I'm not a relative, and yet I don't know how to explain my connection.

ARENA: I think this does an excellent job. And may I ask you, about when did you write this? I am wondering how up-to-date it is, in a way?

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, it's up-to-date. It's only been a couple of months since I wrote it.

ARENA: I would like you to go into your English background. Was your father born in England, or is that even further?

NEUSHUTZ: No, it was away back beyond that. I go back about five generations. I have six generations of marriage licenses all in direct succession.

ARENA: And would these marriage licenses be all-- if it isn't too personal--with the Quaker Church?

NEUSHUTZ: Absolutely.

ARENA: Then I would be correct in assuming that you are a birthright Quaker?

NEUSHUTZ: You are very correct.

ARENA: May I ask you, from the standpoint of your earliest recollections, just to be sure, if the incident you mentioned is the very first one, not only when you had met members of the President's family, but the first time you had ever heard of them, or had you heard of the Milhouses or Nixons before you actually met Elizabeth, [Milhous Harrison], as you describe here?

NEUSHUTZ: Yes, I had heard of them, which rolled right off my young shoulders, but my parents often spoke of Uncle Amos and Aunt Mary Griffith, and they also knew that [Franklin] Frank Milhous and Almira [Milhous] lived in Whittier, as well as a lot of other Quakers that they knew, and Aunt Mary and Uncle Amos lived with us for some time, I don't know, maybe a year or two at one time, while my aunt was lecturing on the Chautauqua circuit.

ARENA: May I ask your aunt's full name, and on what subjects did she lecture?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, I haven't the slightest idea. I was a little girl, but her full name was Mary Wood Griffith. She was my father's aunt, my great-aunt.

ARENA: May I ask you if you recall why your parents decided to move to the community of East Whittier?

NEUSHUTZ: They moved to Whittier [California].

ARENA: I see, not East Whittier proper.

NEUSHUTZ: No, no. They came to Whittier because of a lot of friends that they had met when they were in Lawrence, Kansas, for some little time. There were families in Lawrence, Kansas, who had moved to California at the same time my parents went back to Ohio, and they knew them and they knew of this connection with the [Franklin] Milhous family who were in Whittier. It was a Quaker community and they were long-time Quakers, and I guess that was it.

ARENA: As a regular church of attendance, may I ask you if you and your family attended the First Friends Church of Whittier or the East Whittier Friends Church?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, both.

ARENA: And about equally, because you would go back and forth?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, my husband and children and I attended the Whittier church most of the time.

ARENA: And by the Whittier church, you mean the First Friends Church?

NEUSHUTZ: The First Friends Church of Whittier, but we were members of the East Whittier Friends Church because we lived out there after my father died. We moved to the Wood home in East Whittier and lived there for some time and took our membership to the East Whittier church. Then when we went back to Whittier to live, we took our membership back to Whittier, and that's where my membership is now.

ARENA: I was just going to say, your membership is in the Whittier First Friends Church. The President's church is the East Whittier church.

NEUSHUTZ: That's right.

ARENA: But of course, as in your own case, his relatives and his parents have been members of both. I am thinking of young Hannah [Milhous], where her father, Franklin Milhous, was connected with the First Friends Church.

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, yes.

ARENA: And her sister, Mrs. Rose Olive Marshburn, whom you mentioned before the tape, is presently a member of the First Friends Church of Whittier.

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, yes.

ARENA: I wonder if I may ask you, from the standpoint of your own background, if you recall what your father's occupation was when he did reside here in Whittier?

NEUSHUTZ: He was a merchant in Ohio, and he practically retired when he came out here, but he got this ranch in East Whittier and he was a rancher.

ARENA: Do you recall that he had had any experience in ranching?

NEUSHUTZ: Never.

ARENA: From whom did he learn his ranching?

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, from friends in the community. I remember Frank Milhous telling him, he said, "Well, Fred, you got a good ranch. It's a good ranch, but why did you go so far out?" It's in the city limits of Whittier now.

ARENA: Just to be sure and for the record, was the common way of addressing the President's grandfather, Franklin Milhous, Frank?

NEUSHUTZ: Yes.

ARENA: That was used more commonly than Franklin.

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, yes, you hardly ever heard Franklin at all. Frank and Almira.

ARENA: I just want to emphasize and make it clear, you do recall that one of the advisers of your father was the President's grandfather, Frank Milhous?

NEUSHUTZ: That's right.

ARENA: I would like to amplify as much as you would allow, these early experiences with the President's family, and going to the earliest relatives of his that you do recall, I understand that even his great-grandmother lived with the Milhouses, Franklin and Almira, and her name was Elizabeth [Griffith] Milhous.

NEUSHUTZ: She didn't live with them, Elizabeth [Griffith] Milhous. Old Grandmother Milhous is what we used to call her.

ARENA: I see.

NEUSHUTZ: She lived about three houses from my father on Russell Street there.

ARENA: That is, she lived alone and not with her son and daughter.

NEUSHUTZ: She lived alone. My parents' house and then the next house up was a daughter of old Grandma Milhous, and then the home of old Grandma Milhous. Then they had a little guesthouse or something. I don't know what you would call it; I think it was only two or three rooms, a little house there, and she said we could have Aunt Mary and Uncle Amos [Griffith] come and live there. Well, that was fine. Aunt Mary and Uncle Amos Griffith came and lived there, but they had no visible means of support. So [Francis Anthony] Nixons furnished them with groceries and the Milhouses gave them something and we did something. Altogether the Milhous, Nixon, Wood families support the old couple in the old house next to Grandma [Elizabeth Griffith] Milhous. And old Grandma Milhous' brother was Amos Griffith.

ARENA: I see. From where had they come, Amos and Mary? Where did they originate before they came to California?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, Mary Wood was from Ohio, and I think Amos Griffith was from Indiana. I don't know. That's too far back for me. That's two generations back. I'm not sure where they met and married, or anything like that, because I was just a little girl when Aunt Mary was around.

ARENA: I understand when the President was growing up there were Milhous family reunions in the home of Franklin and Almira Milhous. Although these were families and you were a distant relative of the family, I wonder if you were close enough though that you could attend some of these and recall any of the Milhous family reunions?

NEUSHUTZ: I was there once. I think Elizabeth [Milhous Harrison] wanted me to come on in, but reunions didn't mean much to young girls at that time. We couldn't be bothered. But she had to be there, as I remember, and she said, "Well, come on. We'll go in for a little while and then we can get away." But I don't remember anything about it. I do know they are a very close family, and I do know when that family gets together and prays there's no getting away from it. It's the most wonderful praying you ever heard.

ARENA: The next connection I would like to have you try to recall in the President's family were his actual grandparents, and we'll begin with grandmother Almira [Park Burdg Milhous] first. Whatever comes to mind

about her, her personality, her appearance, her working, either at home or outside of the home. Anything that comes to mind about Grandmother Almira, BECAUSE, and correct me if I'm wrong, she lived on through the President's college years and attended his law school graduation in 1937 and, therefore, had quite a bit of association with him. She died in 1943. Anything you can say about her would be very helpful.

NEUSHUTZ: Well, my earliest remembrance of her is the day I went home with Elizabeth [Milhous Harrison] for dinner in 1911, and I thought, isn't she a cute little trick? She was small and very active, very quick in her actions and here I was, practically a stranger, but I know she did it to make me feel at home. She said, "Helen, get those plates and put on the table, will you?" And "Do this or do that." You know, "Elizabeth, you do this." And she had us doing things, you see, making me feel that I was at home. I didn't sit in the room on a stiff chair by myself. I was out there with the family, you see, making me feel good, which was a great thing with Almira, to make people feel at home. And she was a hard worker, marvelous cook. And I remember hearing about it. I wasn't there when the East Whittier Women's Club was started, but she was one of the first to start a little women's club where the women of the community could get together. They had very little in those days. They couldn't afford anything much and they would get together and sew and have a little club, you know.

ARENA: As you know, that club is still in existence.

NEUSHUTZ: And I'm a member. I've been a member for many years.

ARENA: Fine. While we're discussing women's clubs, one of the clubs founded by her daughter, the President's mother, Mrs. Hannah Nixon, was the Woman's Club in Yorba Linda [California]. I wonder if you have any personal knowledge or recollection of the founding of that--she was a charter member--and possibly if you ever attended any of those out in Yorba Linda?

NEUSHUTZ: No, no. I'm not a Yorba Linda gal. I don't know any of the happenings at Yorba Linda, only when the folks would come in from Yorba Linda.

ARENA: Do you recall Yorba Linda yourself during that period?

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, yes.

ARENA: How would you describe it?

NEUSHUTZ: There wasn't much there to describe. [Laughter] There was a little church.

ARENA: And the home itself? Do you recall the home in which the President was born, which is still in existence?

NEUSHUTZ: Yes, it was just a little cottage; dust, dust everywhere; starting little trees, you know.

ARENA: Did you have the impression at that time that the Nixons, [Francis Anthony] Frank and Hannah, were very poor to be living under those conditions, or was that fairly typical of others that you knew who were members of the family? In other words, do you recall then that they seemed to be a part of the family that were very, very poor or just poor, or just normal, or did you just not think about it at all?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, I think it was pretty normal for the young ranchers who were trying to start out in Yorba Linda. It was poor, I tell you, and it wasn't too good citrus land. I mean, as I remember, there was no boom out there, that's for sure.

ARENA: I realize you were quite young at the time and a lot of this information, of course, has come since then, but were you aware then that the land that was in Yorba Linda, some of it, belonged to Franklin Milhous, just as some of the land in Lindsay, California, belonged to him, as well as the land in East Whittier? I am just wondering if you were aware of that.

NEUSHUTZ: No, I wasn't. I wouldn't know for sure on that. I would imagine it might have been so, but I don't know. No, I was too young at that time to know what belonged to who, and cared less. [Laughter]

ARENA: Before we leave Grandmother Almira, I am wondering, from your own recollection, what particular interests she had in the way of education, and maybe even some particular characters in education, some particular figures in history. Do you recall ever talking with her, or just observing? But thinking back on reflection, did you see her with history books in her hand, with the Bible, and so forth?

NEUSHUTZ: No. I saw her with spoons in her hand and a dust pan and canning fruit and making orange sponge. Wherever you went for dinner they had orange sponge, because they had oranges and they had eggs, and what they had was what they used in those days.

ARENA: What is orange sponge?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, orange sponge is made with orange juice and whites of eggs and gelatin.

ARENA: Someone has mentioned that Mrs. Hannah Nixon, Hannah Milhous, of course, had a little box with indentations or holes from which she would extract little wrapped pieces of paper on which were printed prayers. I'm wondering if you ever heard of or saw such a box?

NEUSHUTZ: No.

ARENA: Or with anyone, not just Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

NEUSHUTZ: No, I don't know anything about that. I guess she didn't tell me about that.

ARENA: I do happen to know that--I'm sure you may know her also, they're related to the Harrisons--Mrs. William Harrison, the sister-in-law of Russell [Earl Harrison, Sr.], has such a box, and I don't know if it's an old one or not, but I know she has such a one. Getting back to the early contacts that you had with the President's family, I am wondering, while we are on the subject of the religious interests and life of Hannah and Elizabeth [Griffith Milhous], her grandmother, do you recall that she preached herself?

NEUSHUTZ: Yes.

ARENA: It has been said that she did preach. What do you recall about it? What she said, how she spoke in public, and so on.

NEUSHUTZ: Yes, I remember that she did. I've heard her preach, but I don't remember anything in particular.

ARENA: Let me say, was she striking? Do you recall that she really held your attention, or did you take it as a matter of course, here is a lady preaching? Or did she have a particular effect, do you think, on you and the audience?

NEUSHUTZ: I really can't say.

ARENA: And just for the record, bearing in mind the fame of her great-grandson as a speaker, was there ever any indication that she had any influence on her daughter-in-law, Almira, or her grandchildren, Hannah [Milhous Nixon] and Elizabeth [Milhous Harrison], and through them have an influence on the President as a speaker? Maybe certain mannerisms, maybe certain methods of speaking.

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At this point, Mrs. Neushutz discusses her ancestry and Dr. Arena reads from her documents going back to 1799. Then Dr. Arena begins to summarize some of the genealogy, in that names mentioned in the documents indicate possible relationships to the ancestry of Richard Nixon.

Following this, Mrs. Neushutz proceeds to recall specific contacts with Richard Nixon:

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ARENA: Since the President himself, as you know, Mrs. Neushutz, is a birthright Quaker, and these documents are living proof of documents that are frequently mentioned but I don't believe seen by the common person, in describing them I want to emphasize the blue seal on the first marriage certificate mentioned and the fact that they are made of sheepskin, and the fact that they have been seen by the outstanding historical library and manuscript collection of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, which has evidence and interest in them.

May I also ask you, in connection with this religious and historical background of the President, a point that the President himself has referred to in his own book, Six Crises, he says he recalls that his mother, Hannah Nixon, had expressed the wish that he would some day go off and be a missionary in Central America. What I would like to ask you is, have you ever heard any reference to that yourself, or do you ever recall talking about that with Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

NEUSHUTZ: Yes, I have. And I also was very much interested in my son. When he was four years old he wanted to be a doctor, and he always was going to be a doctor, and finally he decided he would be a medical missionary. So we decided that my son, Edward [Neushutz], would be a medical missionary and go down there, too, to the same place.

ARENA: In Central America?

NEUSHUTZ: In Central America, yes, but it just didn't happen to turn out that way.

ARENA: Your son is now where, if I may ask?

NEUSHUTZ: He's an M.D. [Doctor of Medicine] in Long Beach [California].

ARENA: If I'm not mistaken, at the last Friends Yearly Meeting of the First Friends Church in Whittier-- or I should say they were the host, at the final session which was held in the Methodist Church, since the main church is not in good operating condition now--the main point is that a part of the proceedings, which I had the pleasure

of attending and taping, reference to Central America and missionary activity that is sponsored, was a part of the proceedings. And I recall that there were some youngsters from Yorba Linda for sure, and I believe from Whittier as well, so someone's dreams are being fulfilled in that regard.

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, yes.

ARENA: On that very point, Mrs. Neushutz, would you want to comment from your overall experience, and elaborate on the point that you first made in your written resume about the religious upbringing, about the religious environment to which the President was exposed, and taking into account a point that has been published, and I'm sure you are aware yourself, that the President's father was a Methodist at first, and it was after marriage to Hannah, evidently, that he became a convinced Quaker. Bearing that background in mind, whatever comments, whatever points you would like to make, descriptions, recollections and personal incidents about Sunday school, about the President appearing in choir, if you recall; anything that comes to mind about his religious upbringing would be fine.

NEUSHUTZ: Well, all I know is he was regularly in Sunday school and church, as was expected of us Quaker children. We all went to Sunday school and church regularly and to the meetings of the church, and he was brought up in religious surroundings at all times by all members of the family. There was never any pull in the other direction, nor was there with myself. You just automatically accepted that as part of your life.

ARENA: From your own personal contact with the President's immediate family, his mother, father and children, do you recall any problems or any complications because of the Methodist upbringing and previous experience of his father? In other words, in a way this was a mixed marriage. I am just wondering if it caused any problems, from your own recollection?

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, no, the Methodist and the Friends churches are very, very similar in their beliefs. There would be no reason to have any dissension there in any way, and he just automatically fell into it.

ARENA: On the question of the similarity of the Methodists and the Friends, would this be generally accurate, or just how would you comment to this: In a way, there might be more complications and more problems where a Friend who was not of the California Yearly Meeting, who did not believe in having pastors. I am thinking of some of the Eastern churches where they don't even allow or permit music

in the church, that there might be more problems where these two Quakers get together, say a California Quaker and maybe a Pennsylvania Quaker, than a Methodist and a California Quaker, as happened in the case of the President's father.

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, very definitely, the two branches of the Friends church don't believe alike at all. They're very different in their beliefs, but the Friends and the Methodists are very similar. But it isn't the Pennsylvania Quakers exactly, it's a branch of the Friends church, as there are branches of all denominations that shoot off in a different direction. No, there would be no trouble with the Methodists and our branch of the Friends church. But of course, I never knew what it was to have the women on one side of the house and the men on the other until long after I was married. In fact, I guess I was past fifty before I ever saw a church like that.

ARENA: Also, just for the record, do you mind if I ask you, do you ever recall any disappointment on the part of the President's parents because he had not married a person of the Quaker faith?

NEUSHUTZ: Oh, no; no indeed. They were very happy with his marriage, as far as I know. I am very sorry I didn't know Pat [Patricia Ryan Nixon] at all before their marriage and very little afterwards. But my daughter-in-law, who was Jacqueline Ellis, was in school at the same time, and I notice a picture in one of the yearbooks, I believe it was, with my daughter-in-law and Pat Nixon standing together having their pictures taken together, with the caption, "The President's wife and an unidentified student," who happened to be my daughter-in-law.

ARENA: Do you recall what this yearbook involved, what school and what year?

NEUSHUTZ: Whittier High School. I don't know what year.

ARENA: Just to be sure now, you are saying that it was Mrs. Richard Nixon, Pat Nixon, who was in the photograph, but in that case she was a teacher?

NEUSHUTZ: She was a teacher.

ARENA: And she would have been teaching between the years '37 and '42, when the President and she both went off because of his work in Washington and later military service. May I ask you where Jackie Ellis is now, and if it would be possible to interview her concerning her recollections of Mrs. Richard Nixon?

NEUSHUTZ: Well, yes, they live in Long Beach. It's my son who's the doctor and his wife.

ARENA: And the full name of your son?

NEUSHUTZ: Dr. Edward Wood Neushutz.

ARENA: And your daughter-in-law's full name?

NEUSHUTZ: Mrs. Jacqueline Ellis Neushutz.

ARENA: I want to thank you very much for taking the time and giving me the hospitality of your home, and especially in answering all of these questions for this historical interview so frankly and fully and clearly. Thank you very much.

NEUSHUTZ: May I tell a little story?

ARENA: Oh, please do. The more the better.

NEUSHUTZ: We were walking up the street one day and Richard Nixon was carrying groceries for me across the street to my parents home there, and to make small talk with a little boy--I knew he was in grade school, I'm not sure what age, maybe ten to twelve--I asked him how their baseball team was doing out at Lowell School. He said, "Well, all right, I guess." He said, "Did you see what Senator somebody-or-other did today?" I said, "Well, no." And he said, "Well, it wasn't good for our country." And I said, "Well, what do you mean, Richard?" And he said, "Well, don't you read the Congressional Record?" And I said, "Well, no, I don't read the Congressional Record." And he said, "Well, you take it, don't you?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, then I'll get it for you."

NEUSHUTZ FAMILY BRIEF APPENDED.

THE TRUE STORY OF MY CONNECTION
WITH THE MILHOUSE - NIXON FAMILIES

-13-

By Helen Wood Neushutz

I arrived in Whittier, California with my parents Fred and Lorena Chambers Wood on the first Saturday in October, 1911. The next day we went to the Whittier Friends Church. After the services many old friends of my parents rushed to greet them and they were having a wonderful time, while I, a recent high school graduate, stood near by, a very lonely, homesick girl. As I was standing there a vivacious young girl ran up to me and asked me to come home with her for dinner. She said her mother had told her I was a cousin of hers. Well, the relationship turned out to be very remote. The girl was Elizabeth Milhouse and her father and mother were Frank and Elmira Milhouse, grandparents of Richard Nixon. Just as we were finishing a good old fashioned farm dinner, a horse and buggy drove up with the occupants Frank and Hannah Milhouse Nixon and baby Harold, all of them covered with dust as the trip from Yorba Linda over dusty roads was quite an ordeal. After cleaning them up and feeding them we all had a nice visit. From that day on our families were very close friends. The relationship, well that turned out to be pretty distant. Hannah's great-uncle, Amos Griffith was the husband of my great-aunt, Mary Wood Griffith. Later this connection brought us even closer together because the Milhouse-Nixon-Wood families supported the old couple for many years.

When the Nixon's came back to East Whittier they settled right across the road from my father's citrus ranch and we saw each other daily. Hannah, several years older than I became like a big sister to me and I could always tell her of my joys and weep on her shoulder when sorrows came. I remember when Harold, their oldest son, contracted tuberculosis. When he failed fast Hannah took him to Arizona to try to save him but the day came when they had to lose Harold, it was a black, sad time indeed. I remember when Richard was born in Yorba Linda and then came Donald and then little Arthur, such a sweet child and a playmate of my son Edward. One day Edward came in and said he could not play with Arthur, I think they were around ten years of age, because Arthur was sick. The next day we were shocked by his death caused by spinal meningitis. A few years past when the Nixon's were blessed with a postscript to their family, it was another boy, the fifth son, Edward. This son was the age of my second son Walter and they became playmates whenever Walter was visiting his grandparents, the Woods.

When the East Whittier Friends Church decided to build a new church building my father encouraged Frank Nixon to move the old church building across the street, where they operated a little service station, and turn it around and put a front on it and have a building for a grocery store at very little expense. This was done and a nice little business resulted. The whole family worked. Don took over the meat department and I believe Richard had the vegetable department and even little Eddie replenished the canned goods and other errands. Hannah was cashier and adviser, ran a home for four men, and baked pies to sell in the store. (You cannot buy pies like those anyplace.) At one time Hannah told me that things got pretty

rough and that if it had not been for my father and two or three -14-
other men in the community they would have lost everything.'

One thing is certain, the Milhouse-Nixon families were devoted Christian people.' They loved and served their God, were honest to a fault, sincere and friendly and believed in and served their country, the United States of America.' Sometimes Frank would get a little hot headed and if someone came in the store and complained about taxes or the way the country was run, he would really raise his voice in protest and tell them there were other countries they could live in if they did not like it here.'

Many more truly intimate stories could be told but I have related the beginnings of our friendship. Those were happy years indeed and my heart often longs for my "big sister" Hannah.'