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Sigrid H. Pedersen (May 31, 1972)

C. Richard Arena
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Oral History Interview

with

MISS SIGRID H. PEDERSEN

May 31, 1972
New York City, New York

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Miss Sigrid H. Pedersen. Miss Pedersen's married name is Mrs. Howard S. Foley. And the "S" stands for?

PEDERSEN: Scott, his mother's name.

ARENA: We are in New York, New York, today's date is May 31, 1972, Arena interviewing. Miss Pedersen, may I begin by asking you where and when you were born, so that the researcher has an idea from you directly about your own background in connection with the biography of the President?

PEDERSEN: I was born in New York City [New York], October 6, 1914.

ARENA: And would you give a general resume of your education and your career to date?

PEDERSEN: I attended grammar school and so-called secondary school in New York City. After high school I went to Duke University, that is, Woman's College of Duke University, for my undergraduate work, and in my senior year I took advantage of a special program whereby one might take the senior year in law school and potentially do seven years in six. That is how I became a member of the class of 1937 at Duke Law School, although I did not graduate from Duke Law School with my class.

ARENA: May I ask you from what school you did graduate?

PEDERSEN: I obtained my LL.B. degree, which is now elevated to a J.D., Doctor of Jurisprudence--I believe that's the proper term for the degree now given--at Fordham [University]

in 1938, where incidentally I was a member of the class of John Mitchell.

ARENA: Would you mind if I asked you what your major was at Duke woman's school? Was it a specifically designed pre-law major?

PEDERSEN: It was. It was what was known as pre-law or some such nomenclature, designed in a loose fashion to prepare you for law school. It was heavy on English, public speaking, history, with particular reference to government, and British parliamentary history. I would say essentially that the emphasis was on those subjects.

ARENA: What years were you in attendance during your law period at Duke?

PEDERSEN: 1935 and 1936.

ARENA: In other words, those two academic years beginning 1935.

PEDERSON: But I must correct that record, although it may not make much difference for your purposes. I was taken ill in the first year of law school and was unable to complete the year, so I returned the next year and completed all of my undergraduate credits and more, plus finishing up my first year of law school. That is why, when I transferred I became a member of the class of 1938 at Fordham. Are those years correct, Dr. Arena? Did I say 1935 through 1936?

ARENA: I'm thinking of the so-called academic year. His freshman year was '34-35.

PEDERSEN: Well, that is the first one. That's correct.

ARENA: And that is the only year, as far as your stay at Duke Law School.

PEDERSEN: Right. No, it's not the only year.

ARENA: I mean at the law school.

PEDERSEN: No, because I returned to the law school in '35-'36 for the second semester of the freshman year.

ARENA: I see. Do you recall the name of Mr. [Charles S.] Rhyne? Did his years parallel yours? Because as you know, he also started there but went on to finish elsewhere.

PEDERSON: Yes, he was in our class the first year. I am quite certain of that.

ARENA: Would you mind going into why you did transfer from Duke to Fordham? Was it the question of illness?

PEDERSEN: Oh, no, it was the common ailment of the times--depression--and my hometown was New York City and I could live at home and go to law school. I hated to leave Duke but it became quite a financial burden because I had already had a fairly extravagant social time as an undergraduate that my father had provided, so I returned to New York.

ARENA: Was your father a victim of the financial times and therefore you were a victim of that situation?

PEDERSEN: Definitely. My father was a very hard-working man and he worked diligently and saved diligently to afford me an education.

ARENA: May I ask what his line of work was?

PEDERSEN: Yes, he was a physiotherapist. Both my parents were Norwegians and my father, as I say, was a physiotherapist. He worked with his hands.

ARENA: May I ask where your interest in law originated?

PEDERSEN: I often wish I knew, but my earliest recollection of being adamant on having law as a career was age eleven. I wanted to be a lawyer and this was my dream and I finally made it.

ARENA: Can you trace it to a particular incident or particular person who inspired you?

PEDERSEN: I am unable to do so, because while I had some relatives through marriage who were in the legal profession, I recall no particular hero or heroine. I think probably it is because I was a frustrated actress. I always was interested in dramatics.

ARENA: Had you appeared in plays through the school years?

PEDERSEN: Yes, in school. I was a member of Duke Players as an undergraduate at Duke University and I was the first woman on the Entertainment Committee of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York. I played in all their shows beginning with the first one they had at the association. They say we lawyers are all hams and I probably am.

ARENA: As you know, the President enjoyed that as an extra-curricular activity. Was there any opportunity during the Duke Law School years, by any chance, for acting? Any volunteer projects?

PEDERSEN: No. Are you referring to me?

ARENA: Both of you. I am wondering if you and he got together in any plays.

PEDERSEN: No, we didn't. As a matter of fact, I am certain my recollection is correct on this point. There was nothing HARDLY but work. The law school at Duke was a very awesome undertaking. We were a very small class. Something like 90 percent I believe were scholarships. It was a whole new academic world, and as the President remarked at the dinner party for our class at The White House a few weeks ago, I believe he said that there were twenty-six Phi Beta Kappa keys evident the first day in our freshman year at law school. After Professor [Douglas B.] Maggs, who was our torts professor, was finished with us that day, the President noticed the second day of law school not one Phi Beta key was evidenced. Professor Maggs really took you down and we were all told--the class--the old saw that is supposed to have originated at Harvard Law School, I believe, the welcoming gesture to the freshman law class, the professor says--and this literally happened to us--"Ladies and gentlemen, look to the left of you, look to the right of you. One of you three will be here next year." Does that answer your question?

ARENA: Very much so.

PEDERSEN: I don't know if I strayed on that question.

ARENA: The question was, was there time for extracurricular activity, such as acting, and also keep your studies up?

PEDERSEN: No, there certainly wasn't. As a matter of fact, I was very conscious of the social pull and strain, because I had been an undergraduate and literally still was an undergraduate, so I had a marvelous built-in social life that was already going and didn't just belong to this small professional school group. I managed to keep going to plenty of dances but I didn't have as much social life as I had had the preceding three years, believe me. [Laughter]

ARENA: It might be easier to divide this search into your direct relations and contacts with the President during the Duke law years into three categories. And this will give you an idea of which direction I am going and which direction the questions are going. One, we'll say, the purely student and academic side. Two, the extracurricular, such as writing for the Law Review, maybe attending some of the moot trials, the extracurricular student side. Three, the completely extra side, what social life and outside life there was.

Beginning with the purely student side, what do you personally recall about the President and his student life and his role as a pure student? For example, in some of the classes when you were together, how would you say he performed, maybe in answering

questions on the floor? I don't know if you studied together with him, but from whatever angle it comes to you, your recollections of him as a student.

PEDERSEN: My recollection of him as a student is that of a very able student, a devoted student. He was diligent, the most diligent person in the class I would say, unless one were also to consider Mr. [William R.] Perdue, whom I think you have met. He was from Georgia. Bill Perdue and he were roommates at one time, too, during their law school days. I think they were the two top men in the class and the record can be checked, but my recollection is that they were within a fraction of a point of each other in the rating system, being number one and number two. They were just neck and neck. Dick Nixon was always very pleasant, a conservative chap. He performed well in class in a very specific manner, without any dramatics. He had done his lesson well and he answered well.

ARENA: I believe it has come out through some of the interviews that the method of teaching or the method of approaching the study of law was that of the case method.

PEDERSEN: That's right.

ARENA: And the person would have to present the issues and so forth. Did this reveal any side of him, this approach indicate anything about the individual? I'm thinking, for example, about the fact--now correct me if I'm wrong--law is one of those disciplines where hard work alone doesn't always guarantee results. In other words, some students can work quite hard, as well as others, and yet do not succeed, for whatever the reason is. But it isn't a question of hard work alone.

PEDERSEN: Well, no, I agree with that statement. One has to have the mental prowess to add to the hard work.

ARENA: I wonder if this showed up, in addition to the fact that he did work very hard.

PEDERSEN: I may not be answering your question directly, but the case book method presumably is superior because it presents the student with certain fact situations, and the holding of law (the decision) as a result of those facts in a particular case. The sum total of a study of many cases in a particular field of law gives the thinking lawyer a history of the law as applied to certain fact situations which he, in turn, will apply to new fact situations, because there are never any cases which are on all fours with something that happened before. That is, not in important cases.

ARENA: Would that situation still apply today regarding our law?

PEDERSEN: I understand it does, and obviously in the case book method, when you are called upon either in class or in answering an examination, a new set of facts will be given to you and you will reason your answer based on your knowledge of the other cases that you have studied.

ARENA: Would this be a pertinent observation from a layman, that as a general statement, the student who is good at memorizing and repeating facts does not necessarily have the study of law in the bag because of that ability?

PEDERSEN: Absolutely. It is the ability to comprehend the reasoning in the decision which, I believe, gives the good lawyer the ability to apply to his practice and/or his cases.

ARENA: As a tie-in possibly with the subsequent career of the President, namely politics, is there anything that indicated that his manner in the classroom, the academic side of the man as you knew him, indicated that he would some day be in politics?

PEDERSEN: Absolutely nothing. As a matter of fact we--meaning a number of my classmates with whom I have kept in close touch over the years--were so surprised. Most of us thought of him, at least I thought of him, as a brilliant law student who would become a lawyer's lawyer. I had no doubt that he would be famous, at least in legal circles, but there was nothing at all to indicate the signs of gregariousness or political prowess that I associated with someone who wanted a political career, at least at that point in my life.

ARENA: Is there anything else regarding the academic side of the President as you knew it, that you would like to raise before we move out of that area into the extra-curricular side of your contacts with him?

PEDERSEN: Well, this point might be of interest. You may be aware that the pride of most graduating law students was to be invited to one of the famous law firms. I am more familiar with the well-known, old (formerly known as Wall Street) law firms in New York City although there are, of course, comparable firms in Boston [Massachusetts] and Chicago [Illinois] and other places. It was customary for these large firms to take one or two or three, according to the size of the firm, gentlemen--and I say this advisedly because they weren't taking girls--who stood at the head of their class. They would come down--I say come down because most of the candidates came down from Harvard [Law School]--the week before Christmas, the school holiday season, and they would be interviewed by the various members or managing partners and handed around in the law firms as candidates.

My recollection is that Richard Nixon had no aspirations that way. He had planned from the beginning to return to California

and practice law in California, although there is no doubt that he would have been invited to be an associate at one of the prominent law firms, had he wanted to. Bill Perdue went to the old Cotton, Gordon & Franklin firm, I believe.

ARENA: Mr. Harland F. Leathers may have been one, I believe, who did make a visit with the President and Mr. Perdue to New York City, with both of these gentlemen landing positions, but again not the President.

PEDERSEN: Well, now I am giving you my recollections.

ARENA: That was their recollection also, that he did not . . .

PEDERSEN: He did not want to be a candidate. He may have come up to look over the lay of the land, but I think he was very determined that he was going to practice law in California.

ARENA: To move into the next area of extracurricular activity, I am wondering, did you see him in the library, up to his neck in work?

PEDERSEN: I saw him often in the library. I was doing the same thing--up to my neck--although we had a curfew hour for the girls in the dormitory on the [Duke University] Woman's College campus. Caroline Phillips, Mrs. Stoel now, and I were in the same dormitory. There is her picture in the class picture at the reunion. She married our classmate, [Thomas B.] Tom Stoel. Caroline and I had to return to the dormitory by, I think, 10:30 weekday nights, so we weren't always in the library as late as the boys were; but we were there many, many nights.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: We were on the general subject of your recollection of the extracurricular activities and ideas and thoughts. Moving from the library to possibly the religious side of the man, which may or may not be a part of the academic side. I'm thinking, for example, here is a young Quaker gentleman all the way from the West Coast, his religion to begin with was an overwhelming minority sect. Was there any indication as to the fact that he was a Quaker, in his speech, in his manner to you, born and raised a New Yorker, Miss Pedersen, where Quakers I am sure are in the minority there, as well as other places? But I am wondering what, if anything, of that side of him caught your attention?

PEDERSEN: The fact that he was a Quaker was not a big impression point with me. Even though I come from New York City where I was a WASP [White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant], which word I didn't know at the time I was a classmate of the

President, puts me in a minority to begin with. The whole atmosphere at Duke University, which originated as Trinity College, lends itself to students of various Protestant faiths. In the undergraduate school we had many, many ministers', particularly missionaries', children. It's my understanding that ministers' children had some kind of a break on tuition. My godmother was a Quaker, and I almost went to school at Swarthmore College. My parents, as I told you before, were born in Norway and brought up in the Lutheran ethic and to me it seemed very similar to the Quaker ethic.

ARENA: In the case of the President, the fact that he came from that stem of the Quakers that believed in preaching ministries, whereas you know some are the silent type, may have made a difference. Well, the fundamental question, I guess is, as far as you are concerned, there were no special problems for him because he was, one, a Quaker; two, as way far west as California; and vice versa, there weren't problems for you in your, we'll say, social contact with him or communication because of that.

PEDERSEN: None whatsoever.

ARENA: As far as you're concerned; with other students or faculty as well?

PEDERSEN: Not at all. Duke University, about the time when we were in school, was opening up to establish itself as a first-class university. You can tell by the faculty. It was so-called imported, so that they would have a very fine faculty. The students were from all over. I believe every one of the states was represented. I can't say they were all represented in our class--we didn't have that many in our class--but at the university; we were quite an all USA student body. At first, of course, there was a preponderance of Southerners, but more and more students came from different parts of the country and also from abroad. Therefore, the climate was such that someone coming from as far west as California wasn't an oddity. You probably know that Dean [Justin] Miller had come from California.

ARENA: And he is still living but is not well at all. This would be Justin Miller.

PEDERSEN: A very fine man, and I think he had a great deal to do with Dick Nixon's choosing Duke, in addition to the fact that he obtained a scholarship. When he was paying tribute to our professors and former deans [Justin] Miller and [Benjamin S.] Horack at the dinner a few weeks ago, he said, "Of course I was lucky, we all were very lucky, but the basic reason I went to Duke was I got a scholarship," or words to that effect.

ARENA: We can move on into this third area, as this interview is coming to a close, unless you have a point you would like to make concerning this extracurricular academic side; say, possibly eating.

PEDERSEN: Oh, we had very good times together. There was a group of us--well, leaving the library, going to the nickel hamburger place down in town, occasionally going out to Whippoorwill Manor. Have you been told about The Manor?

ARENA: I would like to hear your recollections of it. I have heard that mentioned. People react differently to it.

PEDERSEN: It's a very high-sounding name. But there was a, I guess you'd call it a rooming house, an old farmhouse on the edge of town and Dick Nixon and two other fellows had lodging there. I can't remember whether he told me it was five dollars a week or a month, and as for hot and cold running water, they had neither at The Manor.

ARENA: Did you possibly ever have the opportunity to see what The Manor looks like?

PEDERSEN: Oh, certainly.

ARENA: How would you describe it?

PEDERSEN: Oh, a very shabby, first-floor large room that was a combined sitting room-bedroom in the sense that I believe studio couches served as beds for the fellows.

ARENA: How far from the classes was the main part of the school? Was it within walking distance?

PEDERSEN: No, they usually went by car.

ARENA: Do you recall that the President had a car, or one of his classmates?

PEDERSEN: Yes. I think it was his car. Now, the President corrected me at dinner. When I mentioned to him about the Ford that he and [Edward] Eddie Rubin and one other chap--whose name I don't remember--used to drive to Durham from California, he corrected me and said, "No, it was a Chevy." Now I don't know whether it was a '32 Chevy or a '34 Chevy. Anyway, it was a pretty early vintage Chevy, but it wasn't a Model T Ford I had him coming across the country in. And the boys had used this car because it was cheaper transportation even than the very low bus fares at that time. Somehow or another, I don't recall whose car was what, but there was always a car behind the law school building in the parking lot and it seemed to be community property.

And in one of several jalopies we would take off to go [Laughter] downtown or have some hamburgers downtown or take a ride, and when the boys were really flush or they saved up for some Carolina moonshine after exams, one of these old cars--they seem like very old vintage cars now in my recollection--would be available and we would pile in. Often someone would say, "Can we take the keys to

your car," because one of the students would be staying on at the library or hadn't finished up or whatever. But it wasn't within walking distance to The Manor.

ARENA: Moving on to this third side of contact with the President, the social side, whether on campus or off campus, what incidents or recollections come to mind in this regard?

PEDERSEN: Well, he was always affable and a very nice-looking young man. He was not a good dancer, and I asked him recently if he was still a poor dancer, and he said, "I sure am."

ARENA: May I ask you, if it is not too personal, are you speaking from personal experience when it comes to his dancing?

PEDERSEN: Yes, that is what I was speaking about when I asked him at The White House and he said, "Yes, Sigrid, I'm still a lousy dancer." And he attributes this, and I think correctly so, to the fact that he didn't learn it when he was young. And he does a presentable piece of getting around the floor, but not very skillful. In his home dancing wasn't permitted. I believe this is part of the Quaker training as was liquor and tobacco banned.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, had you been on any dates with him where the main event, so to speak, or the purpose of the date was to go out dancing, or was that part of a dinner engagement where dancing . . .

PEDERSEN: No, as contrasted to the undergraduate school, where coeds were always dating and there were many dances on the campus by reason of different fraternities and sororities, in the law school there was just the law school dance.

ARENA: Every year.

PEDERSEN: Every year, and I am fairly certain that I attended the freshman law school dance with the President.

ARENA: Was it a question, from the standpoint of formalities, his coming to your dormitory in a car? Was it a formal affair do you recall?

PEDERSEN: Oh, it was formal. We did things up very proud that way. A coed who was popular really had to have a pretty good formal wardrobe. I recall that I had eighteen evening dresses at one time, although I didn't have the occasion to use them much that first year of law school, because our study load was too much.

ARENA: Do you recall if the President rented a tuxedo or did he have one, or did he just use a dark suit?

PEDERSEN: I just don't remember.

ARENA: Did he bring you a corsage?

PEDERSEN: I think he did, but I am very weak on this.

ARENA: Do you recall once at the affair his volunteering some entertainment? I'm thinking, for example, if there were a piano, or any occasion for your date to sit down and play the piano?

PEDERSEN: Yes, he would. I don't recall it at the formal dance, but I recall several instances where he did sit down and play the piano, as did others.

ARENA: Do you recall that he did that at the recent reunion? Was there a piano nearby at The White House?

PEDERSEN: No, he didn't do that. Actually the stage wasn't for it. This was put on as a state function, with all the pomp and circumstance. The President's Marine Band was playing in what I would call the Rotunda there, where they dance, at the foot of the staircase up to the Lincoln Room. The Army Strings, I believe it was, played during dinner as strolling troubadours and the Air Force Choral Group sang. There wasn't a piano in the State Dining Room that I noticed, but the physical situation wasn't such that the President could just ease over into a piano where everyone would gather around.

ARENA: On the question of your social contact with the President and, say, with the Duke lawyers in general, law students, what were the relations of town and gown? Was this strictly a world unto itself or were there social affairs, Southern belles, so to speak, and young Southern gentlemen who were available for socializing?

PEDERSEN: Do you mean within the law school group?

ARENA: Within the law school group--that's right. You were in two worlds, because of your previous experience. I am thinking of your recollection of how this would apply to the President in particular. Did you notice that he was able to mingle with the local society or just local Durham [North Caroline] inhabitants and the ordinary out-of-towner from New York, we'll say?

PEDERSEN: I probably wasn't in a position to observe this closely. However, my judgment would be that he mixed primarily with his classmates, and then he had a good social contact with a number of the professors and their wives. Now, for instance, one Christmas he and two other fellows couldn't go back home for the holidays. It was a matter of finances, and they went

to Professor [David F.] Caver's house. They were invited for turkey dinner and all the trimmings. I remember he said he had never had creamed onions before. That was a new one on him.

We had two other girls in the class, Caroline Phillips who I mentioned before and Helen Lanier from Walla Walla, Washington, and often we three girls would be in the company of a number of the fellows in the law school including Dick Nixon, Bill Perdue, Hale McCown from Nebraska, who is now a judge and married Helen Lanier. Hale was and still is a very gregarious, exhuberant person with a wonderful light touch. Incidentally, he had a strict family and religious background. He is a minister's son. As compared to Dick Nixon, who was a very close friend of his, I believe, Hale was much more carefree, much more apparently fun-loving. What I am trying to get over to you is that Dick Nixon was a very pleasant, nice person socially but a much more serious chap than, say, someone like Hale McCown. He wasn't a recluse. He just wasn't quite as outgoing. Do I give you the picture?

ARENA: Oh, yes. Is there any recollection on your part, as we bring this interview to a close, regarding the overall personality of the man at that time, of his carrying the torch for the girl back home, one; and two, any attempt to impress his classmates about the wonders of California, so to speak? Did that theme recur?

PEDERSEN: I'll take the second part of your question first. He was always very much a Californian and did quietly cant the glories of his home state. Now, I wasn't in a position to hear about his carrying the torch for the girl back home, but I'm certain that his classmates and particularly roommates would know about that. He was too much of a gentleman certainly to tell me about that, and I have absolutely no firsthand knowledge or recollection of his having a girl back home, or saying that he had a girl back home.

ARENA: Finally, is there any point or question, any subject that I have not brought up that you would like to touch upon as we bring this interview to a close?

PEDERSEN: You mean as a recollection of those days?

ARENA: Yes, or even maybe some comparison of the President then as he is now.

PEDERSEN: Well, I felt after this unusual opportunity to spend so much time with him a few weeks ago as his dinner partner at this party, that he was very much the same person in principles, character and diligence as he was in law school. I found him very easy to talk to and I find that he is still the man who goes after the facts, thinks the matter out and comes to the only conclusion. Over the years, whenever I have defended the President in ordinary conversation with one's co-workers or friends

here in New York, where you find the political climate is certainly not Republican, I have come back to the way I knew him in school. I was so sure that he was going or had gone after his decision in a diligent way and that he was convinced this was the proper decision to make. And I found out at that dinner party, in response to my questions and our conversation in general, that he is the same. He was very easy to talk to, he was a genial, but whether in jest when talking to the group as a whole, or in conversation with me at the table, it came back to work, work, discipline, discipline. Now, I don't mean to give the impression that he is just a drudge, because I think he isn't just a drudge.

ARENA: Thank you very much for this interview. .