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Ralph E. Palmer (December 16, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

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Oral History Interview

with

MR. RALPH E. PALMER

December 16, 1972
Bakersfield, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Ralph E. Palmer. (E, middle initial, is just that, a middle initial, no name.) We are in his residence in Bakersfield, California.

Today's date is December 16, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Palmer, may I begin by way of getting some background information on yourself, by asking you where and when you were born?

PALMER: I was born near Newcastle, Indiana, in 1909.

ARENA: And how is it you came to California?

PALMER: My family came in 1916. My Grandfather Palmer preceded us, probably in 1912 or before.

ARENA: When you say your grandfather, was he the first and only relative that preceded you? Had anyone preceded him, do you know?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: And where did he arrive and settle in California?

PALMER: In Whittier.

ARENA: Would this be the section now known as East Whittier, as well?

PALMER: No. Actually, he lived in Whittier. He built a home at the corner of Painter [Avenue] and Via del Palma [Street] which still stands.

ARENA: Are those streets still called that, by the way?

PALMER: Right.

ARENA: Would you give an idea of your education, including these early years?

PALMER: Well, I attended East Whittier Grammar School. Of course, I started in Indiana at the age of five and a half in a little country school. We came to California just after I turned seven, and I entered the second grade at East Whittier Grammar School.

ARENA: Do you recall or do you know, by any chance, if your area in Indiana was near the Milhous area where the President's grandparents lived?

PALMER: No, I don't. I don't believe we were near there.

ARENA: I believe it was Vernon, not too far from Butlerville, Indiana.

PALMER: No, that doesn't ring a bell.

ARENA: And just for the record, had you known the [Franklin] Milhouses or [Francis Anthony] Nixons at any time, or was there any connection before coming to California?

PALMER: None at all, no.

ARENA: And Mr. Palmer, had you gone on beyond high school, say, either formally or informally, with any special training, any special courses of any kind?

PALMER: I was a music major. I attended College of the Pacific one semester. This was in 1929 during the depression. [Interruption]

ARENA: After that slight interruption, Mr. Palmer, let me ask you again to go over what you were saying about the College of the Pacific.

PALMER: Yes. My major interest was music, and so I enrolled in the Conservatory of Music at the College of the Pacific in 1929, and there I remained for one semester, but it was depression times and money was very, very scarce. Furthermore, I was in love, and so I thought it best that I discontinue my education at that time.

ARENA: I believe you mentioned off the tape a while back, but just to be sure. As you know, there are members of the President's family who are in music. One is his aunt, Mrs. Jane [Milhous] Beeson. Another is his deceased uncle, Griffith [William] Milhous. I just wondered if you had any contact with these relatives.

PALMER: Yes, it was Griffith Milhous who started me on the cornet. He was my first instructor.

ARENA: Just to be sure, that was the cornet.

PALMER: Yes. Later I got the trumpet. And now that I recall, that was in the [John C.] Mitchell home. And let's see, Mrs. [Elsie Ware] Mitchell was a relation too. I don't know just what the relationship was, but there was a close relationship there.

ARENA: When you say that it was in the Mitchell home, does that mean that your lessons were there?

PALMER: Yes.

ARENA: Were these private lessons?

PALMER: Yes. I walked oh, probably two miles, and Griffith met me there in their home, and that's where I took my first lessons.

ARENA: What are your recollections of Mr. Griffith Milhous, who was the halfbrother of the President's mother, Mrs. Hannah Milhous Nixon?

PALMER: Well, he was a very wonderful individual. However, he wasn't very dynamic. It was not uncommon for him to take a little doze during my lesson, [Laughter] not that it was that comforting, but he was a good musician.

ARENA: Do you recall what his occupation was other than giving music lessons, or was that his full time and interest?

PALMER: No, I think that was full time.

ARENA: Did you have any contact with him in any way through his teaching at the John Muir Junior High School? Maybe you knew others who knew him in that capacity?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: While we're on this question of the relatives of the President, and before we get to the subject of your direct contact with the President, were there any other relatives that you had contact with, in Whittier or anywhere else? I might mention some of the names, such as the President's brothers including those who are deceased.

PALMER: Well, first, Harold [Samuel Nixon] was a very close friend of mine.

ARENA: And, as you know, Harold was the first-born, the oldest brother of the President.

PALMER: Right. And he and I were approximately the same age, and so we were very close. We chummed together quite a bit. During his illness and his stay in Prescott, Arizona, I visited him.

ARENA: Do you remember about when that was? Was it on one occasion that you visited him there?

PALMER: Yes, it was over a Fourth of July weekend, and it must have been in 1930.

ARENA: Do you recall that the President himself was there at the time?

PALMER: No. Harold was living with a family, I believe, at that time. Of course, our stay was very brief.

ARENA: May I ask who the we was? Was it you and . . .

PALMER: A fellow with whom I worked there at the Leffingwell walnut orchard, [Arthur] Art Vincent.

ARENA: Would he be any relation to a Camilla Vincent, now Mrs. Simmons, by the way?

PALMER: No. The Vincents lived there on Russell Street, just a few hundred yards from the store.

ARENA: Did you have any contact with Harold while he was working for a gentleman by the name of Cecil Sperring by any chance, or know about that?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: Did you know Harold when he did this job, which was fumigating groves in that area for Mr. Sperring? Did you know him while he was doing that kind of work?

PALMER: I must have. I worked for the Leffingwell walnut orchard, which was just below the Leffingwell Rancho, so it was during that period, I'm sure. I wasn't aware that he did any of that fumigating, however.

ARENA: I don't know how long and how extensive, but he did do it for a while, and I had the pleasure of interviewing this gentleman, who lives in Whittier and is with the Montebello Ford Agency now. People called him Cece, nickname for Cecil. Why, may I ask you what your job with the Leffingwell Ranch, which bordered the Nixon grocery store, as you know--the Nixon grocery store was a small part of it--may I ask you what you did with the Leffingwell Ranch?

PALMER: Well, now, when you speak of the Leffingwell Ranch, keep in mind that there was the Leffingwell Rancho and also the Leffingwell walnut orchard which was owned by Ernest de Koven Leffingwell. He seemed to have been the favorite son. His parents gave him over a hundred acres of land which bordered on Leffingwell Road.

ARENA: Does that mean that the Leffingwell Ranch was owned by the de Kovens?

PALMER: No. No, it was the Leffingwell Rancho. They were the Leffingwell brothers. I don't know just who all was involved. I believe Dr. [Ira George] McBeth was a part owner, had his own holdings.

ARENA: And this Mr. Ernest de Koven Leffingwell was involved in what way?

PALMER: He went to the North Pole with [Roald] Amundsen and wrote a book which can be found, I would imagine, in some of the libraries. We lived there on the ranch.

ARENA: Any idea, by the way, if this Mr. Ernest de Koven Leffingwell is still living, or relatives of his in that area? Did you come into contact with him in recent years?

PALMER: No. No, I believe he's gone.

ARENA: Any idea if he may have known the Nixons or may have had direct contact, we'll say, with the grocery store?

PALMER: It's possible. They lived down there for a while. They had one daughter and two adopted children.

ARENA: Do you recall Mr. Leffingwell talking about that possibly?

PALMER: Yes, he was a guest in our home, although he didn't talk too much. He was a kind of a loner and a hobbyist.

ARENA: Going back to Harold Nixon, correct me if I'm wrong, but one of his hobbies dealt with flying, including building models. I wonder if you recall that connection?

PALMER: I think probably most of this was done while he was in Arizona. I remember that my wife used to write to him, and he sent pictures, and the one picture that we have shows him on top of the house with one of his model airplanes. It must have been a favorite hobby.

ARENA: Was this correspondence between your wife and Harold before you and your wife were married, by the way?

PALMER: Yes.

ARENA: Would you give your wife's full maiden name?

PALMER: Elizabeth Ella Boynton.

ARENA: And speaking of this social contact with Harold, did you ever go on any double dates or group dates with him? Would your contact include that?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: Knowing the President as you do, and we haven't gotten into that yet, but since Harold is a close member of the family and this project is mainly concerned with the President's life before the political years, this is very significant. Knowing the President as you do and knowing Harold as you did, would you compare the two, say from the standpoint of appearance, mannerisms, interests and as many ways as you can. Was Harold, for example, a bookworm? Was Harold very talkative? Did he speak in public? Whatever comes to mind in the way of comparison.

PALMER: Well, I don't know that Harold was much of a student. He was quite gay, very cheerful, even to the end. I recall a faux pas that I made one time when I visited him after he had come back from Arizona. Apparently the tuberculosis was in its last stages, and I visited him and his cheeks were rosy, which is an indication of the last phase of the tuberculosis, but I was completely ignorant of that, I said, "Harold, you look better, you've got some color to your face." He informed me that that was part of the last stage of tuberculosis, but even at that point he was not depressed. In comparison, then, Dick was strictly business all the way. Nothing frivolous about him, unless it was talking about girls and, of course, he put on quite a campaign against girls at that age. He was strictly a bachelor for a time. But that picture changed in due time.

ARENA: You do say 'that age'; what years?

PALMER: That would be fifteen or sixteen probably.

ARENA: In other words the high school years.

PALMER: Right. I recall coming home from my dates, possibly 1:30 sometimes 2 o'clock in the morning, and I'd come by their home and look in and see Dick sitting at the dining room table, poring over his books. And, of course, I was aware that he got up early in the morning and went to Los Angeles [California] to get the produce for the market.

ARENA: Just to be sure, when you say you're aware of that, is that through reading about it now, or you have firsthand knowledge of seeing that?

PALMER: Oh, yes. And knowing that Harold had tuberculosis and Dick had been exposed to it, I was really concerned that he might get down with TB [tuberculosis].

ARENA: Could I ask you about a gentleman called Ralph Howe who was also one of the pallbearers at Harold's funeral. I'm just wondering, by the way, if you were at his funeral.

PALMER: I was a pallbearer.

ARENA: You were a pallbearer as well.

PALMER: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall receiving a note of appreciation? I'm wondering if you might still have it, as a matter of fact. Do you recall receiving a note of appreciation from Mrs. Hannah Nixon?

PALMER: No, I really don't.

ARENA: Is it that you don't remember receiving it, or you know you did not?

PALMER: I don't remember receiving it. I might say at this point that Mrs. Nixon gave me a shower before I was married, which was rather unique. I appreciated it, particularly since I knew she worked so hard.

ARENA: May I ask what year that was?

PALMER: 1931, January.

ARENA: This would have been about the time the President was entering college. Of course, it was still the depression years.

PALMER: That's right.

ARENA: May I ask you where you lived in relationship to the store itself? That home you described earlier that your grandfather built?

PALMER: We lived on Leffingwell Road near the end of Stamy [Road], which would be about, oh, let's see, two miles from the store.

ARENA: Was the store your family's main source of supplies?

PALMER: Yes, that's true. As a matter of fact, it was the only store that I can recall between La Habra and Whittier. Farther back, there was the old Orcutt's store in Whittier and they had delivery, and Nixon had delivery for a while.

ARENA: In this case you mean Richard Nixon.

PALMER: His parents, yes.

ARENA: Oh, I see. Did he ever deliver himself, to your recollection?

PALMER: I don't recall.

ARENA: In addition to getting up for the groceries, would you go into that a little more if you can? For example, how did he go? Did he go with someone, for example, Harold? And by what time was he back, and so forth? Whatever details you remember about that part of his . . .

PALMER: Well, I really don't know the details, but he must have gone in at 4:30 or 5 o'clock, because he had to get back . . .

ARENA: Was this to Los Angeles, by the way?

PALMER: Yes. And we must keep in mind that those were the Model T days, you know, well, the Model A. But in order to get back and put these things on the shelves. . . . I'm not sure whether he stacked the shelves or not with the produce. He had to get to school, so he had to be up very, very early; and till today, I can't understand when he got his rest.

ARENA: Did Harold's illness excuse him from all chores like that, do you remember, or did he do anything around the store or around the house?

PALMER: Well, that part I don't remember. I know that he worked before. He tended the service station and helped in the store. I don't think there were any lazy members of the family.

ARENA: Was he mechanically inclined? In other words, did the interest in models carry over?

PALMER: Yes, well, I remember that he built . . .

ARENA: Excuse me. By "he", for the record, we're talking about Harold.

PALMER: Yes. He took a Model T Ford and cut it down until it was about the size of a little Volkswagon. Of course it was just a chassis and just a stripped-down model, but he took auto mechanics in high school and apparently that is where he did the work. It functioned very well. We took out across the hills with it, between Whittier and Buena Park.

ARENA: Do you recall President Nixon's proficiency in that area? How was he . . .

PALMER: In mechanics?

ARENA: Yes.

PALMER: I know of no activity there at all. I think he was more interested in book learning.

ARENA: Did he ever tend the filling station, or did you ever see him, say, change a tire, actually?

PALMER: No, I don't recall that I did, but they all worked so he probably did.

ARENA: Mr. Palmer, what do you remember in the way of the relationship: one, between Harold and the President himself-- Harold was the older brother; and secondly, the relationship of the members of the family among themselves? Father to son, the matter of discipline, whatever comes to mind about that family situation from your recollection of being with Harold, stopping at the store when you were shopping and any occasion that you had to recall about the family relationship.

PALMER: Certainly, there wasn't anything outstanding. By that I mean there were no abuses. They all worked. They all seemed to be cheerful. I never sensed any friction in the family.

ARENA: Did you ever witness a fight between the brothers, for example?

PALMER: No. I would imagine they did, like all boys. If they didn't, they wouldn't be boys.

ARENA: How about the exercise of discipline on the part of the parents toward the boys? Were you ever present when something like that was done?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: How about the exercise of discipline by the oldest brother, in this case Harold, on the younger brothers, the President, younger brother Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] and the youngest, Edward [Calvert Nixon].

PALMER: I wasn't in the home really that much. Most of my relationship was with Harold and, of course, it wasn't like living next door. It was an occasion such as Sunday school activities or Christian Endeavor activities, things of that nature or possibly a get-together on Sunday afternoon occasionally. You know, we had a boys' club, and maybe there'd be a cook-out or something of that nature. But it wasn't like the relationship in a real close community. We didn't always have transportation, and it was a rural community.

ARENA: Going into that area next, the question of religion, unless this is too personal, I would like to explore what you do recall about the question of religion and the Nixons. Did you have any Sunday school classes, for example, with any members of the family in any capacity where the Nixons may have been either teachers--maybe the parents may have been your Sunday school teachers--or you may have been in the same Sunday school class with any members of the family?

PALMER: Yes, I was in class with Harold and Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon was my wife's Sunday school teacher. I understand that Mr. [Francis Anthony] Nixon did teach a class at one time, but I don't believe at East Whittier. They were terribly busy there in the store.

ARENA: Do you recall who your Sunday school teacher was when you and Harold were in the same class?

PALMER: I believe it was Robert Brokaw.

ARENA: Would you have any idea if he may still be living?

PALMER: Yes, as far as I know, he lives near the corner of Telegraph Road and the Valley View Avenue, near the old McNalley olive orchard in La Mirada [California].

ARENA: Thank you. In a previous interview concerning Sunday school and related activities, one gentleman recalls that--it may have been Mr. Brokaw--but boxing lessons were a part of the overall activity, in someone's farm or ranch shed. Do you recall anything like that yourself?

PALMER: Not particularly boxing. I do remember that for a short time we had the use of the Macy Smith barn.

ARENA: Do you recall the activity, if not the boxing, what activity?

PALMER: I think we had a basketball hoop there. That didn't last too long.

ARENA: Was this just a personal thing, or a part of a regular activity out of the church?

PALMER: I don't recall, really, whether it was a social group, the Sunday school class, or who all was involved there.

ARENA: Do you recall from time to time, if ever, President Nixon tagged along with you older boys for some of these things, and how he was treated; if not this Macy Smith barn incident, any experience where he might have . . .

PALMER: No, none at all.

ARENA: In other words, you don't recall, or you don't recall that he did tag along?

PALMER: No. Of course, at that age we were very conscious of the age bracket, you know, and . . .

ARENA: You were born in 1909 and he was born in 1913.

PALMER: We were a little more conscious of those older than we, so he may have tagged along, but there was never any problem.

ARENA: What do you recall--again in this instance where you and Harold were in the Sunday school class--what do you recall about the class itself, from the standpoint of the teaching of it? Was the Bible itself emphasized? Were the students given a chance to talk up, so to speak, or was it kind of a straight lecture? Whatever you recall about that.

PALMER: No, it was discussion. Of course, we had a regular study course, Sunday school lessons, Bible lessons. Oh, yes, there was plenty of freedom of discussion.

ARENA: These special books, they were prepared just for Sunday school teaching?

PALMER: Yes, they would take stories from the Bible and then try to pick up a moral out of it.

ARENA: Do you recall Harold's reaction to attending the class? In other words . . .

PALMER: No, none at all. Once in a while, oh, there was one member who was a problem. I suppose today we would call him a hyperactive child.

ARENA: You're not talking about Harold at this point.

PALMER: No, but as far as Harold, there was nothing troublesome about him at all.

ARENA: How about the question of absenteeism, do you recall, aside from his illness?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: Do you recall the anecdote which has been described in print already in which Harold, shortly before his death, bought a special present for his mother? It may have been a mixing machine, or some special appliance?

PALMER: No, I don't.

ARENA: Is there anything else about Harold Nixon that you recall that I haven't asked by the way that you would like to say about him?

PALMER: Not particularly. As I say, it wasn't like boys who are together every day. It was, maybe, once or twice a week. It was a group generally. You can't compare it to children living next door to one another or in the same block today, where they're with one another every day. And, of course, their time was very limited. They had to keep shop. They didn't have too much free time.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Mr. Palmer, given your firsthand knowledge of the mortuary profession, how would you describe the arrangements, the funeral for Harold, reactions of the family, other people present, anything that comes to mind regarding how it was taken by the individual members, if you had any contact with them after, and so forth?

PALMER: I really don't remember a thing about it. I suppose I was stunned, but I was young, of course. And that's been many years ago, but I really don't remember any reactions. I think that at a time like that you respect everybody and you don't. . . . That was something we had anticipated, of course.

ARENA: This might be a little difficult and complicated, but bearing in mind some of the general notions about the so-called Irish funeral, so-called typical funeral of a group, was that a typical Quaker funeral . . .

PALMER: I don't remember.

ARENA: . . . if there is such a thing, for example? Were the services held at the church and how was the casket brought and where was Harold laid to rest? If you recall any of that?

PALMER: I know where he's laid to rest. He's at Rose Hills [Memorial Park] in the Milhous family memorial plot. He's alongside his brother, Arthur [Burdg Nixon] and his mother [Hannah Nixon] and father [Frank Nixon]. I have visited the grave many times.

ARENA: Had you met the youngest (at that time) brother, Arthur, who died?

PALMER: I knew him, just as a youngster, yes.

ARENA: How would you describe him?

PALMER: I have no recollection.

ARENA: No clear recollection.

PALMER: No.

ARENA: What WOULD you say about the burial arrangements for the Milhouses, from your experience and knowledge, that would not be breaking a confidence to say? For example, do you recall if it was the grandfather who made the original arrangements, and that the Milhous burial arrangements are a result of his work and so forth? Would Mr. [Franklin] and Mrs. [Almira Burdg] Milhous both be buried near the grandfathers, grandparents, and so forth?

PALMER: Yes. I can only say that as a grandparent he had great foresight in setting up a family memorial. Of course, I'm in this work and I'm very conscious of it.

ARENA: You were with Rose Hills Memorial Park?

- PALMER: Yes, and it's a tribute to him that he thought that much of his family to set aside a family plot, and I'm sure that the Nixons appreciated it greatly that there was a place for all of them.
- ARENA: I would imagine that he was the first of the Milhouses to pass away, the grandfather, Franklin Milhous.
- PALMER: That I really don't know.
- ARENA: But certainly he was one of the earliest, and this did take place around World War I, maybe 1917, '18 or '19, but it does go back that far. What was Rose Hills in those days, around that time, by the way?
- PALMER: Well, Rose Hills was established in 1914, I believe it was.
- ARENA: I see. So it was a new cemetery at the time the first Milhous passed away.
- PALMER: That's right.
- ARENA: As you know, there is another cemetery in the heart of the city, which was later converted into a park, I believe, Founders Park.
- PALMER: Yes.
- ARENA: Was there sort of competition in any way? Was there any reason why he had not chosen that one, which YOU might know, may have been older than Rose Hills?
- PALMER: I have no knowledge there at all. I would imagine that the Well, first of all, there was no endowment care there at the old cemetery, so it did get to looking dilapidated. For many, many years it was a disgrace to the city. Tombstones were knocked over, graves were broken into, and so it was a disgrace. I would imagine--and by the way, it was known as the Whittier Heights Cemetery originally, and later was changed to Rose Hills Memorial Park as they began to expand. But it's in a beautiful location, near the little mausoleum, the original mausoleum--the Milhous memorial, that is.
- ARENA: Is it non-denominational?
- PALMER: Oh, yes.
- ARENA: Not only Quakers are there but people of any denomination.

PALMER: True. However, the Catholics do have cemeteries of their own in that area, and so they try very diligently to get their people to use the Catholic cemeteries, but . . .

ARENA: As far as Rose Hills, they have no restrictions.

PALMER: None.

ARENA: From the standpoint of firsthand recollections of President Nixon, since you knew the family from the very beginning, is there such a thing as a first recollection of the first time you met him? Does that stand out in any way?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: It was just that he was kind of always there, as you were growing up.

PALMER: Well, they moved in and started their little business there, and I have no first recollection, no.

ARENA: Do you recall his attending, not the same class necessarily, you were older, of course, but the same school? Do you recall his attendance at East Whittier Elementary School?

PALMER: No. I remember when we went to Fullerton High School together.

ARENA: What do you recall about that, Mr. Palmer?

PALMER: Only that we rode the bus together, and that he made quite an issue of girls, that he was a woman-hater.
[Laughter]

ARENA: How did he do this?

PALMER: He was just opposed to women at that time. He was going to be a bachelor all his life, and he made quite a deal out of it.

ARENA: Was this physical in any way, in the sense that he teased the girls?

PALMER: No, I don't believe so.

ARENA: Some boys put girls' pigtails in ink.

PALMER: No.

ARENA: It was not he.

PALMER: No.

ARENA: He didn't act THAT way toward them.

PALMER: No. Of course, this was very common with adolescence. It seems to be a defense mechanism, I suppose. He was probably beginning to realize that there was an attraction there and this was his self-defense.

ARENA: Do you recall that he had a particular positive interest? We'll say that the girls were a negative, maybe, at this time. Did he have a positive one in the way of, say, sports, which on the college level seemed to attract him? As you know, he tried to make the varsity all the time he was in college. Was there any sign of that during this early period?

PALMER: I think that was probably an effort to display his manhood. He wasn't a well-coordinated boy, as you know. He went out for football. He had a bulldog tenacity. He wouldn't give up. Coach [Wallace J.] Newman told me that he never saw ANYONE take as much punishment as Dick Nixon did. They used him for tackle practice and he never made a letter. "Frankly," he said, "I don't know how he came through it without just being broken up." But so often we think of intellectuals as being prissy, but Dick was tough. Effeminate, bookworms--very often they're not interested in athletics at all. Now whether this was just a way of proving that he was manly, I don't know. Certainly he's a man in every respect, as far as I'm concerned. But he certainly had the stick-to-itiveness.

ARENA: Do you recall that he turned out for football at Fullerton High School, by the way?

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

ARENA: I think you are aware, he did transfer out of Fullerton High over to Whittier High School for his last two years, and graduated in 1930.

PALMER: I'd forgotten that.

ARENA: Is there anything else, any incident at all that comes to mind concerning your contact with him in the Fullerton High School days, by the way? Any unusual auditorium meetings or anything unusual that happened at Fullerton High when you knew him in those days?

PALMER: No. I should say that he played the piano for the Sunday school opening exercises, and I played the cornet or the trumpet.

ARENA: Would this be at the same time . . .

PALMER: Yes.

ARENA: . . . or would you take turns?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: You played a duet.

PALMER: Well, it was to accompany the singing for the opening exercises. My father was superintendent, and so I had little choice. Dick volunteered.

ARENA: What was your father's full name, Mr. Palmer?

PALMER: Ernest Orville Palmer. He was superintendent for several years.

ARENA: About how many were in the Sunday school? First of all, would all of the Sunday school children be together for that, and then break up into classes?

PALMER: For the opening exercises, that is correct. I would have to guess. I would guess in the neighborhood of 125.

ARENA: I happen to know that you have been a member of service organizations, Kiwanis [Club] for one, and others that you would know about, of course. But thinking back, would you say that your interest, and therefore possibly the President's, that your interest in service comes from these Sunday school experiences? In other words, would that be very clear in your mind through what you got from your Sunday school classes? Would this idea of service come from your own parents or from a combination of things and you just couldn't pinpoint it?

PALMER: I don't know that one can pinpoint a thing like that. I think we all HOPE to contribute something to justify the oxygen that we consume. But I did find it gratifying to serve in some capacity, and I felt that our Kiwanis Club had many worthy causes. I think a great deal depends on the individual. I do feel that my Sunday school background contributed. Of course, we had somewhat of an organization. We used Roberts Rules of Order and so forth, which later became very helpful to me. But to break it down and analyze it, I don't know that I could.

ARENA: I wonder if I could ask you, from the standpoint of, you might say, historical philosophy. Historians are interested in the ideas of the past as well as the actual events and action, and the ideas may be even more important, who knows? But, from the standpoint of looking at some of the ideas

of the past, would you want to speculate on the attraction to politics by President Nixon, the attraction to politics because of his desire to serve, which was evident, and I would ask you if it were evident or not from your firsthand contact with him, in belonging to your Sunday school class? He belonged to Christian Endeavor. He was a member of the Kiwanis [Club] in La Habra [California] before he went into politics. Is that worth pursuing from your own speculation, knowing the president as you do, and did at that time, and knowing, of course, that he did go on into politics?

PALMER: Are you asking what would motivate an individual?

ARENA: Well, I would say, could that have been one of the motives?

PALMER: Did he aspire to become a politician . . .

ARENA: . . . to serve others? And that this idea of service came from that.

PALMER: I really can't answer that. I've often wondered what motivates a politician. Frankly, I wouldn't aspire it for any of my children, for all the abuses they have to take, I'm afraid they're too much like me to take it; they'd break up. And so I do admire anyone who will go into politics and take all of that abuse, but there must be a tremendous desire to serve for them to pursue it. And certainly Dick has stayed with it through thick and thin.

ARENA: And just to be sure, did you ever have any opportunity to see the President on the college level, even though you did not attend college there. Did you see him from the standpoint of, maybe, appearing on the football bench, if not in the game? Did you run into him from time to time during his college years, which would have been between 1930 and 1934?

PALMER: Not that I recall. We moved to the San Gabriel [California] area at that time, so that there was very little occasion for us to . . .

ARENA: And how about even after, from the standpoint of his going away to law school and then coming back and starting to practice in 1937, until he left for Washington in 1943? Was there any contact at all in any way between you and the President between 1937, when he came back to practice law, and 1943 when he went away?

PALMER: No.

ARENA: Just to be sure, had you been in contact with anyone? For example, were you aware that he had become a lawyer?

PALMER: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, he had his office, when he was in partnership with [Thomas W.] Bewley, his office was just a stone's throw from our place of business.

ARENA: The very first office would have been Bank of America Building.

PALMER: Right.

ARENA: You say, our place of business.

PALMER: The Whittier Pet Store, right there within a half block of the Bank of America.

ARENA: On Greenleaf Avenue where it still is located.

PALMER: Correct.

ARENA: When was that established?

PALMER: When was the pet shop established?

ARENA: Yes, and would you give the full legal name, by the way?

PALMER: Well, my mother and father started it at 170 South Greenleaf, and I'd have to guess at that, but I would say about, oh, 1936, and then they expanded, moved up to larger quarters. My brother and his wife came in as partners and then I was invited to come in. Eventually, after the folks were gone, we bought the business from my brother.

ARENA: Speaking of pets, do you recall any of the Nixon pets, Nixon household pets including just any dogs?

PALMER: No. I recall that the girls were in our store on one or two occasions.

ARENA: By the girls, you mean President Nixon's children?

PALMER: Right.

ARENA: About when was this and what was the occasion?

PALMER: What was his secretary's name?

ARENA: The President? His first one, Mrs. Evelyn Dorn. And another, his present private secretary, if there was a connection at that time, was Miss Rose Mary Woods.

PALMER: I believe she's the one who came in on one or two occasions.

ARENA: Do you recall what was involved? Did they actually purchase some pets?

PALMER: I can't remember whether they came in to enjoy the puppies or just what it was, but we had a lot of animals there. Quite an attraction; a small zoo, you might say.

ARENA: Do you recall the President's own attitude regarding animals?

PALMER: No, I really didn't know.

ARENA: I believe you were saying, though, that you may have come into contact with him there because of the proximity of your business and his law office. Do you recall that you did run into him, or that he or the Bewley-Wingert-Nixon firm--that was the full law . . .

PALMER: No. When I came back to Whittier, I believe he was, what, a congressman--was running for Congress.

ARENA: He ran in '46 and took office in '47 as a congressman.

PALMER: Yes, and I do recall that at one of the meetings there at the women's clubhouse I had a short chat with him, and I told him at that time that in six years I predicted he'd be President.

ARENA: Just to be sure, by the women's clubhouse, you're talking about the Whittier Women's Club?

PALMER: Yes.

ARENA: There's also an East Whittier . . .

PALMER: This was on North Friends [Avenue].

ARENA: Do you recall what his reaction was to your prediction?

PALMER: No. Of course, it was just a side remark, you know. A very quick remark, because there were hundreds of people who wanted to speak to him.

ARENA: Could I ask you now, from the standpoint of speculation, and actual memory, to what extent had the young, serious scholar that you recall--of course, we all change--what was still evident in the young congressman, not going into politics per se, but the personality of the man? What was new, what was still similar about the boy, Richard Nixon, you had known?

PALMER: I think he was always a campaigner, whether it would be girls or a political issue. I recall that we were at Pomona [California] at his kick-off, and . . .

ARENA: This was for his running for Congress.

PALMER: Right. And he used as the main plank in his platform the Korean War, which he termed "Harry's War." Later I understand, at one of our Kiwanis conventions, I believe in Reno [Nevada], he did admit that he was wrong, that it was a necessary police action and he accepted it as such. But he did have a platform and a main plank and he stood on it and he. . . . But, I don't know what can be said. He's a real campaigner.

ARENA: Could I ask you this, from the standpoint of one who knew him personally, knew the family personally, and one, like all of us, who has read about him in the press, and read about the young Richard Nixon. Without mentioning names, the press or the columnists, necessarily, to what extent would you say that you feel that the printed image of the President is accurate or inaccurate, according to your firsthand recollection of him?

PALMER: Let me quote an individual here in Bakersfield, and I don't know her name, but it was during the Presidential election campaign, and I made a remark that I was a friend of the President, knew him personally, and this woman said, "Well, you know, I just can't believe that ANYONE can be as good as they say he is." And my remark was, "Well, every bit of it is true." Now, of course, there are those who would like to put him down, but I think that I could best describe it this way: I don't think that you could talk with anyone who knew him as a young man who was surprised that he became President. He was that quality.

ARENA: Is there anything else that I have not brought up in the way of a question or subject that you would like to mention as this interview comes to a close? Any topic at all that you feel should be on the record, any incident or anecdote?

PALMER: Well, I might conclude by saying that I haven't always agreed with him, but I think he's been man enough to admit when he was wrong. I think he's made some big mistakes, and I'm sure that we all do, and we continue to make big mistakes. But I've been very, very thrilled with his progress. I think he's doing an outstanding job, and I'm back of him 100 percent.

ARENA: Mr. Palmer, I thank you very much for your hospitality in allowing me to come here and ask you all of these questions and for answering them so fully and frankly. I know my fellow historians join me in expressing this appreciation. Thank you very much.

PALMER: Thank you. It's been a real pleasure.