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Herbert Jay Perry Sr. (March 28, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. HERBERT JAY PERRY, SR.

March 28, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview with Mr. H. J. Perry, full name is Herbert Jay Perry, Sr. of Whittier, California. Today's date is March 28, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Perry, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

PERRY: I was born in Jackson, Tennessee, October 20, 1890.

ARENA: Would you mind indicating how it is that you now find yourself in Whittier, California?

PERRY: That's a long story.

ARENA: Let's say when was it you first came to Whittier?

PERRY: 1930.

ARENA: Would you explain the direct circumstances of your coming here? Was it a question of health, business?

PERRY: No. I sold out my business in Aberdeen, South Dakota. I put the wife and the kids--three of them at that time--in the car and leisurely drove to California, arriving in San Diego [California] a day before Christmas, 1929. We spent a week in San Diego. I made a survey of San Diego. A friend of mine who was an insurance broker in Aberdeen had moved to San Diego and he got in contact with me and showed me around the town. I came to the conclusion it wasn't the place that I

wanted to settle for two reasons. They had plenty of furniture stores and I was interested in getting back into business. The other reason was it was a waterfront town. We had three youngsters and I didn't think it was the best place to raise them.

Then we left San Diego and drove down here to the beach. It happened that there was a family living here in Whittier-- a mother and three daughters--relatives of people that we knew in Aberdeen. He run a big lumber mill there. One of the girls was with the Bank of America, the other one was with the public library in Los Angeles [California], and the other was a school teacher, and the old lady. We come up to visit them and we kind of liked the looks of the town. This was in 1930, in January or thereabouts. So we looked around and we found an old lady here who had a home and she wanted to rent it for three months so she could go up to Canada and visit her children up there. She was a widow of a minister. So we rented her home.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you were aware when you came here in 1930 that this was a Quaker-found community?

PERRY: Oh, yes.

ARENA: And did that make any difference?

PERRY: Not a bit.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you are a Quaker or were at that time?

PERRY: No, no.

ARENA: Did this lady who rent you the house raise any questions about your religion?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: Whether you were a Quaker?

PERRY: No. She wasn't a Quaker either. I think her husband was an Episcopalian minister. But at any rate we settled down here, and from the time we settled down until we finally decided to stay here, we made a survey of practically everything from Santa Barbara [California] to San Diego. We packed the kids in the car and drove out, and we visited one town after another. And it finally simmered down to Monrovia [California] or Whittier. A chap in Monrovia that wanted to sell his store, and Chalmers Newsom, here, was interested in selling that store.

ARENA: Would you happen to know Vice President Roy Newsom of Whittier College, and could that be a relative, do you think?

PERRY: No, I knew him, but that's not him. Chalmers Newsom was in the manufacturing business up in Washington, I think, before he come down here. And I think that everybody in town had an interest in the business that he was running here. That was during the depression, of course, or just about the beginning of it.

ARENA: During this early period did you meet the Nixons themselves? Let's say, right off the bat in 1930 did you come into contact with his grocery store which had been there since 1922?

PERRY: Well, I never did any business out there, because we never lived even close to it. Our first location living here was down on Pickering [Avenue] near Beverly [Boulevard]. I knew his father and mother. I met them. We weren't intimate.

ARENA: About how far back, Mr. Perry, around what year?

PERRY: I'd say possibly '33 or '34. I knew his brother, too.

ARENA: By the brother, you mean the brother of Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon?

PERRY: No, I knew Dick's brother, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon], the heavysset boy.

ARENA: You didn't happen to know the two who died, by any chance?

PERRY: No, I knew Don.

ARENA: While we are on this question of your first meeting members of the family, how about the Milhouses themselves, who did live in East Whittier, but as you know it was at the end of Painter Avenue and Whittier Boulevard?

PERRY: I knew of them, but I didn't know them personally.

ARENA: Did they ever deal with your store in any way?

PERRY: I don't think so. See, it was 1930 that I bought out Newsom.

ARENA: The grandmother was still living. The grandmother lived at least long enough--Mrs. Almira Milhous--to see him graduate from Duke Law School in 1937.

PERRY: I knew of her, but I didn't know her personally.

ARENA: In addition to that particular branch of the family, now how about the [Oscar O.] Marshburns, in this case Mrs. Rose Olive Milhous Marshburn, who did live in that house that was located where the Quad is now located, as you know, at the intersection of Painter [Avenue] and Whittier Boulevard? Do you recall meeting that branch of the family, which would be the President's aunt and uncle, at that early period?

PERRY: I don't think so. No. If I did I don't remember it, it wasn't of any impression.

ARENA: During the '30's themselves, do you recall hearing about the young Richard Nixon from the standpoint of being involved in debates in high school and college, from the standpoint of his delivering groceries to some friends of yours?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: In other words, there was no direct contact in the '30's at all.

PERRY: No. The only contact with Dick was when he came to join partnership with [Thomas W.] Bewley up here.

ARENA: In other words, when he began his law career, finishing law school in 1937.

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: Do you recall the very first time you met him during that period, or was it a question of your knowing about him joining the law firm?

PERRY: No, I met Dick.

ARENA: What do you recollect of the young lawyer?

PERRY: I did some business with him. Well, I've always admired him. I've always had confidence in him.

ARENA: Did you have actual legal dealings with him?

PERRY: No, no.

ARENA: But you did run into him as a practicing lawyer?

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: May I ask you why you say that? Why was it that you did have this confidence, especially at that time when he was a young lawyer, just starting out?

PERRY: In talking with him, he had a personality that created that condition, as he has today. Regardless of what they say about him today, I'd vote for him. A few years back I had a whole string of old-timers that would come in here and ask me how I was going to vote, and they'd vote the same way. So I imagine I controlled possibly thirty-five votes for any candidate that I endorsed.

ARENA: When he first entered politics seriously, and as you recall this was 1945, what was it about his personality that you had known firsthand that would inspire this sort of confidence? In other words, it wasn't someone telling you about a stranger, you knew him firsthand.

PERRY: No, it was from actions that I had heard of that I had come in contact with.

ARENA: Other people whom you trusted?

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: Would you mind mentioning some of these names of such persons?

PERRY: That's so long ago that I can't say.

ARENA: For example, as you know one of his main backers was Mr. Herman Perry. Did you know Mr. Herman Perry personally?

PERRY: Herman and I were very good friends.

ARENA: Do you recall about Mr. Perry's comments on young Richard Nixon?

PERRY: I don't really honestly say that I could say anything along those lines that would help at all. We had, I imagine, discussions of Dick, but anything pertinent Herman and I were. . . . I had some dealings with the bank and I knew Herman and his wife, I knew his family. But my impression of Dick is through action, personal opinions of his actions that created that condition of mine in me.

ARENA: In which you had this faith and reliance.

PERRY: Yes.

ARENA: Can you recall ever hearing him speak publicly--again before 1945--at one of the local service clubs, on some occasion where he was a guest speaker and you were present?

PERRY: If it happened I wouldn't remember it. I think it happened at Rotary [Club].

ARENA: How far back did your membership go, Mr. Perry?

PERRY: Ever since I've been in Whittier. I joined Rotary in 1920 in Aberdeen. In 1922 I was offered the presidency of Rotary in Aberdeen. I turned it down because I couldn't conscientiously do justice to the job and run my business.

ARENA: Do you recall that a young student was brought from Whittier College by the name of Richard Nixon who was the guest speaker at Rotary?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: Now, you say you also knew the President's brother, Donald. Did you know him before this 1945 period, before the beginning of the political life of the President?

PERRY: Oh, I think so.

ARENA: How would you describe him and compare him with Richard from the point of personality?

PERRY: No comparisons, none whatever. Don wasn't of the same material. Now, don't misunderstand me, Don was a nice fellow, but he just didn't have the brains, I believe, if I would say it, that Richard had. And his wife [Patricia Ryan Nixon] was a very intelligent person also.

ARENA: The wife of . . .

PERRY: . . . Dick.

ARENA: Of President Nixon. Did you ever meet her, by any chance, before 1945, in connection say with teaching on the high school level?

PERRY: No, my first contact with Dick's wife was when they bought that house out there.

ARENA: Would you describe that, Mr. Perry, that contact you had with her?

PERRY: They come in here and I think I sold them some furniture for the house.

ARENA: Do you recall which house this would have been, the one in the Candlewood Park?

PERRY: That's it.

ARENA: The one that they rented from a Mr. [William T.] Bill Hughes?

PERRY: Was it rented? I don't know whether they rented it or bought it.

ARENA: Rent or bought, but the person who did so was a fellow Rotarian, if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Bill Hughes. Do you recall that they both shopped together for that furniture, or was it Mrs. Pat Nixon coming in alone?

PERRY: Mrs. Nixon did the shopping.

ARENA: Do you recall the price, the type of furniture, to what extent was there bargaining back and forth?

PERRY: There was no bargaining. We don't run a business that's a bargaining deal, and we don't have priced merchandise. In other words, if a person wants anything below the standard of quality that we handle, we'll tell them where to get it. But we won't get it for them and we don't handle it, and we never have handled it. In fact, even before I came out to Whittier I carried the top of the line, and that's really the reason I made a success of the business back in Aberdeen, to the extent that I bought the business from a corporation. I started with nothing.

ARENA: Was that your policy at the time Mrs. Pat Nixon was shopping at your store?

PERRY: Absolutely.

ARENA: In other words, she would know that you wouldn't find, we'll say, bargains here.

PERRY: No. We had a reputation of quality from the time we started in business here.

ARENA: Compared to other stores at that time, were there any other stores that would have a more expensive or more quality type line?

- PERRY: Not in Whittier, no. [George] Lackey was the closest to it, and he wasn't competition to us.
- ARENA: Do you possibly recall the piece of furniture and again, about the year when this took place, Mr. Perry?
- PERRY: No. I possibly could go back through my records and find it someplace. We've got records.
- ARENA: Another way we could check, of course, is when he was living at Candlewood Park.
- PERRY: I think it was very close to the time that he joined Bewley.
- ARENA: Well, let's say this, he was not married until 1940 and came back from military service in 1945, and I believe that was when he was in politics that he lived out there.
- PERRY: When did he join Bewley?
- ARENA: That was 1937, and he wasn't married until 1940, so it couldn't have been between those years.
- PERRY: It was some time, as I say, right after he was married, I think, when I sold them the furniture.
- ARENA: Did you possibly ever enter his home, his and his wife's, Mrs. Pat Nixon?
- PERRY: Well, if we'd sold him some furniture I'd naturally have been in his home. That was usual.
- ARENA: In other words, maybe advised them on it's location and sister pieces of furniture.
- PERRY: That's right. We weren't known as decorators at that time. On the other hand, I had been in the furniture business for a good many years before I come out here. I went into the furniture business when I was eighteen years old. And I come out here in 1930, so I was forty years old then. I've been in the furniture business sixty-four years, that is, I started sixty-four years ago.
- ARENA: Did you ever sell any other furniture to any other members of the Nixon family, including the Milhous side?
- PERRY: The only one that I think I did was his brother Donald.
- ARENA: Did any of your children attend Whittier High School, possibly at the time when Mrs. Pat Nixon was teaching there?

PERRY: When was she teaching there?

ARENA: This would have been 1938 to 1940. She was teaching commercial subjects.

PERRY: I don't remember. Now, let's see, Ed [Edward Perry] would be, I think.

ARENA: But you personally don't recall, we'll say, meeting her at a PTA [Parent Teachers Association] meeting or something like that?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: There is no occasion where you entered the school, any occasion?

PERRY: My wife would be the only one that would attend anything like that because I had a business to run here and it took all of my attention. I haven't made a success of this business by ignoring it, or by sacrificing the business for something else.

ARENA: Would I be correct in assuming, Mr. Perry, that this is your sole business?

PERRY: Absolutely.

ARENA: That this is not part of a chain and does not belong in another chain?

PERRY: No. It isn't my business today. The boys own it today, I've given it to them. Back in Aberdeen I had a partner. When I bought the store from the corporation, which was 1925, I think, I took on a partner who was an assistant cashier in the bank that I was doing business with. He was a young fellow, and my reason for taking on the partner was, in the first place he had some money, and the second place I thought I needed financial advice. I figured he could give it to me as assistant cashier of a bank. The biggest mistake I ever made. He was a nice fellow but he had inherited this money, see, and he was a playboy, a woman chaser, and he had a wife and two kids. But he wasn't worth a damn to me. And I stuck that out for five years and then finally offered to buy him out, and he wanted a premium. I offered to sell to him and he wouldn't buy me. So I went out and got a third party to buy both of us out. And then I come out here. And I bought this store from Newsom and paid him \$25,000 cash for it.

ARENA: About what year was that?

PERRY: 1930.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you--from the standpoint of understanding the community in which the President was living at that time, in this sense the business community of which you were a member--how was doing business in a town that had been founded by Quakers, but was open, of course, to all businessmen; how were conditions?

PERRY: Well, how, let me tell you. When I come to Whittier I'd say that pretty near half the population of Whittier were Quakers. The other half were people connected with the oil fields down here in Santa Fe Springs [California], either interested in, like Wardman investments down there, or working from top level jobs to run-of-the-mill jobs in the oil business. A big percentage of this town was of those two connections.

ARENA: Did you get the impression that the Quakers were more of the agricultural rather than the oil people?

PERRY: I think so.

ARENA: And what gave you hope that an agricultural community which in the 1930's was very hard hit by the depression in the country as a whole? What gave you the hope that that would not be the case in Whittier where the majority of the people were agricultural people, and how could you make out, if it isn't too personal, how did you make out with a high quality furniture store in an agricultural community in the 1930's where the President was attending college? That's the period I'm kind of interested in, right through the '30's.

PERRY: I did a lot of sweating during that time. In fact, at one time Amos Maple owned the building that this store is located in. And Amos Maple was at that time manager of the Bank of America, and a mighty fine gentleman. Amos lived up here just two blocks on Painter [Avenue] and Hadley [Street], and he walked down to the bank every morning and walked right along the other side of the street there. That was before there was any buildings, just a vacant lot over there with a lot of weeds and a couple of trees on it. And one morning--this was, I think, '31--Amos was walking down there and I walked over to talk with him and I said, "A.C., things are kind of tough." I think I was paying him \$275 a month rent.

ARENA: Is the building now substantially the same size? I'm sure it's been redone here and there.

PERRY: Yes. Only there was offices up in front there that a dentist and chiropractor occupied, and this was back here with storage, really. We used the first floor, mostly.

ARENA: May I ask you, also, how old the building is, if you know?

PERRY: Well, I'd say the building is around fifty some years old.

ARENA: Going back to the 1920's.

PERRY: Yes.

ARENA: Some ten years or so before you purchased it.

PERRY: I think so, now I'm not certain of it. I think that old man [Roland] White had something to do with the building. But A. C. Maple owned it and I approached him that morning and told him things were awful tough. He says, "Is that right?" "Well," I says, "Amos, you own this property and you own other property downtown and you're a banker, so you ought to know how tough it is." "Yes," he says, "It's pretty tough." And for, I think, six months or more he agreed that I wasn't to pay any rent, voluntarily.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask if he was a Quaker?

PERRY: He was a Quaker.

ARENA: Did you ever encounter anything like that with other businessmen in your life? And, too, would you say that the Quakers are a particular breed when it comes to handling business, from your personal experience?

PERRY: I'll give you an example. I had two or three old Quakers come in here shortly after I bought the business. I'd got rid of what I had in here and then put in my new stock. And I had two great big grandfather clocks on the floor. These two or three old Quakers would come in, nosey you know, and want to get acquainted and stick their nose into it. And they made a remark, "You'll never sell those hall clocks in Whittier." And I says, "Gentlemen, I've been in this business back East before I come out here, for quite a few years, and I've always had a hall clock or two on the floor and I like them for company. So, if I don't sell those hall clocks it won't make a damned bit of difference to me." And they looked at me as if I was nuts. They stood there with their mouths wide open, couldn't understand how in the hell a man in business would invest that much money in a couple of hall clocks and not give a damn whether he is going to sell them or not. But it did shut them up. The first ten years I was in the business I sold 150 hall clocks, so they were very, very wrong.

ARENA: Were most of your customers Quakers who were well-to-do citrus growers, or were there just a cross section of all religions and so forth?

PERRY: Well, there were quite a few citrus growers and there was quite a few retired people that weren't poor people, by any means. And then I had a lot of business among the other people in town that were connected with the oil fields.

ARENA: Would you say the oil people bought more than their share because they were better off? Would that be a general true statement?

PERRY: No, I wouldn't say that. I think among the Quakers we had a very nice business.

ARENA: Did you belong to any businessmen's association where there were Quaker members, and how did you as a non-Quaker get along with them?

PERRY: Listen, while I was here I hadn't belonged to the credit association. My first experience with them when I decided to join them, within a few months I was completely disillusioned, they had made so damned many mistakes. They gave me a report on a man out here in East Whittier that was a rancher that his credit wasn't any good, and so I sold him a thousand dollars worth of merchandise and he paid for it. And he was good as gold. So I think that my membership in that credit association amounted to about three months. And I quit it, and I never have belonged to a credit association. The result of that is, that all of the years that I have been in business here, my losses from bad debts have been less than one tenth of one percent, based on sound business, on good judgment and on not taking advantage of people, not overdoing a thing.

ARENA: Going back to that gentleman who allowed you to have so many months clear of rent. How long a period did that extend to?

PERRY: I think it was at least three or four months, or more.

ARENA: Did anything like that ever happen again?

PERRY: No, nor did it happen before. Of course, I never run into that circumstances before, either.

ARENA: Were there any other problems like that caused by the depression? And how did you weather the storm, if I may ask?

PERRY: Well, I did business with the bank down there practically ever since I've been in business.

ARENA: This would be the Bank of America.

PERRY: No, the other one, on the other corner.

ARENA: United California [Bank]?

PERRY: Yes, when old man [A. C.] Johnson was head of it.

ARENA: His initials, or first name?

PERRY: I can't remember that now. There were two brothers in there. One was manager of the bank and then his brother was assistant manager, or something like that. But, at any rate I've done business with that bank ever since I've been in business here, and they knew in my safe deposit box that I had certain securities. And when nobody else could borrow a dime, if I needed to borrow, I was told that I could. I didn't take advantage of that. I've only borrowed money twice in my life. The first time was when I borrowed ten thousand dollars back in 1920 to buy stock in the corporation that I was running the store for. I paid that off in nine months at 8 percent. And the second time was when I built the house up on top of the hill. I paid Vic York for the lot, I paid for the landscaping.

ARENA: Just to be sure, this Vic would be Victor York.

PERRY: Victor York.

ARENA: And the house would be your present one on Summit Drive in Whittier, California.

PERRY: That's right. It was thirty-seven years ago.

ARENA: This would be the address, 13977 Summit Drive. How far is that home from the Wardman residence, which is now Whittier College residence?

PERRY: Just a half a block, less than a half a block. In fact, when I built that house [Aubrey] Wardman was just finishing his. He'd come up and tell me certain things that I ought to do. He and his wife [Bonnie Bell Wardman] used to walk the dog up there every day while I was building the house.

ARENA: Do you recall his bringing up Whittier College, of which he has been such an important benefactor, and whom the President wrote a preface in the book A. Wardman by Dr. Charles Cooper? Do you recall that Mr. Wardman ever brought up the subject of Richard Nixon to you?

PERRY: No. I did some furnishings for Mr. Wardman.

ARENA: How can you account for the fact that during the depression years when farmers were in such bad shape all over the country, and Whittier was primarily--correct me if I'm wrong--a farming, citrus growing community, it did not suffer the same fate; and maybe that's the difference, it was a citrus growing community. But, would you comment on that, Mr. Perry?

PERRY: One of the reasons I decided to locate here rather than Monrovia, it was a cleaner town, it was a more solidly founded town, more conservative. At that time there were very few businesses that went out of business, bankrupt or anything of that kind, with all the difficulties. And I think they were more considerate of each other.

ARENA: Have you ever heard the expression that to a Quaker his word is his bond, including the business word?

PERRY: Yes.

ARENA: Would you say that that has been your experience as a non-Quaker?

PERRY: Yes, that's my experience. As a whole they are a very fine bunch of people. They are a little skeptical before they know you, but once they know you. . . . Well, I had that same experience back in Iowa. I had three towns of Hollanders, and I was the youngest man on the floor in the store I was working in.

ARENA: When you say Hollanders, you are referring to Dutch?

PERRY: Dutch.

ARENA: Anything in particular about them besides Dutch?

PERRY: Orange City [Iowa], Alton [Iowa]. There were three towns that were solid Holland Dutch.

ARENA: Were they also Quakers?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: But they had the same characteristics as the Quakers here in Whittier, California.

PERRY: That's right. We had one bad debt in all the time I did business with them, and they wouldn't allow anybody else to wait on them. There were three salesmen on the floor that were old enough to be my father. They couldn't touch me with a ten foot pole. They'd sit and wait for me for two hours to wait on them. Nobody else could do it. And, of course, that was brought about by something that I did for a couple from up there. They were related, the whole three towns.

ARENA: Your being so close to Whittier College so many years, including the period--correct me if I'm wrong--1930 to 1934 when President Nixon was a student. I notice that in your storefront window you have the sign inviting students to come in and browse and sit and chat. Do you mind if I ask you if that invitation goes back to that period, possibly 1930 to '34?

PERRY: I think so, though I don't believe we had a sign on the window.

ARENA: May I ask you what is behind that, Mr. Perry?

PERRY: Well, I've always. . . .

ARENA: When did you form that attitude and that invitation?

PERRY: I've been interested in young people all my life, including my own. There's a great many youngsters from the college that come in just to visit with me today, see. I had a minister from down at Laguna Beach [California] and his wife stop in to meet me, to shake hands with me, and to thank me for what I had done for their son.

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ARENA: You were discussing your policy of inviting students--and you had Whittier College primarily in mind since it was right next door--and this minister thanking you for this courtesy to his own son. Would you continue, Mr. Perry?

PERRY: A young man come in and he had problems and I listened to him. And when he asked for advice I gave him advice. And by the time we spent, oh, at least a half hour talking over his problems, he went out of here entirely different from when he come in.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you what these problems consist of, without giving the student's name, without getting too personal? Would they be academic, would they be financial, would they be love affairs in the sense of running away?

PERRY: No, they were academic and financial.

ARENA: Would some of your solutions and advice be offering the young man a job?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: For example, I notice you have one of my students working in your store. As a matter of fact, this young man is from a foreign country.

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: Correct me if I am wrong, but his name is Adem Mohamid.

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: And, would you state the country? It just slips my mind, I believe it is from one of the African nations.

PERRY: It's from Ethiopia.

ARENA: Does this policy of your offering employment to students of Whittier College go back to President Nixon's day?

PERRY: I've had young people from the college work part-time, but it hasn't been an inducement to bring them in to see me. I've had many young women. I had a young woman in here who was a senior up there that spent at least a half hour with me. She had certain problems on her mind. But, I enjoy that. And some of these longhairs come in, and among those longhairs are some of the finest young people I've had in the store. So you can't take and judge them just on account of the length of their hair. Now, some of them are just the opposite, but then you can't judge a book by its cover.

ARENA: Obviously, as you have said, one of the reasons that you do this, invite students to come in and talk with you, is that you enjoy it. Is there any other reason, going back to your original motives, if you can think as to why and how you got started? A businessman usually doesn't sit around and browse with children. Was this your policy before you were retired?

PERRY: I was raised in the city of New York [New York]. I was an orphan at three years of age. An uncle raised me. His wife died when I was quite young, seven or eight years of age. From that time on we had a housekeeper. And when I was quite young, possibly ten years of age, I spent a lot of time down on the lower East side of New York City, down among the Italian immigrants, the Hebrews, the Chinese, and the bowery questionables. And from those people I learned a lot.

ARENA: Would you mind stating for the standpoint of history about what that period was?

PERRY: 1910 to 1912. I went to work when I was thirteen years old, that was 1903.

ARENA: And of course, there couldn't be two more opposite worlds, that and Whittier.

PERRY: I finished the eighth grade and went to work in the lace business.

ARENA: Was that the last formal schooling you had, Mr. Perry?

PERRY: Absolutely, the eighth grade. But I acquired a liberal education by reading. My uncle was general manager for Funk and Wagnalls, the book publishers in New York. And in our apartment we had one room where there was a library, bookcases to the ceiling. And I had my nose in a book every minute that I wasn't doing something else. In fact, I got more lickings for going to bed with a book under my pillow and being caught with the lights on when lights were supposed to be out, than any other reason.

ARENA: As you say, that would have been a liberal education in itself.

PERRY: Yes.

ARENA: Would you want to comment on the fact that Whittier was so radically different, there was nothing like that variety for a young man growing up, or was there? What would be the advantages and disadvantages in a young man growing up in the community you did and compared to the young man growing up in a community like Whittier, if you can see any?

PERRY: Well, I see this: In New York City you can count your associates on your fingers. In Whittier you couldn't count them on your fingers.

ARENA: By associates, would you say close personal friends?

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: People you could trust not only in business but in your everyday life.

PERRY: That's right.

ARENA: And you could not develop that type of closeness in New York City.

PERRY: Not in New York City, no.

ARENA: And that appealed to you, as far as Whittier was concerned.

PERRY: That's right, absolutely. In fact I did when I left New York and went to Columbus, Ohio. I knew more people in six months in Columbus, Ohio than I knew in New York City all the time I was raised there. In fact, I had lunch with the governor of the state when I was about nineteen, twenty.

ARENA: Getting back to this closeness of your business to Whittier College, and thinking back if you can to that period, just about when you were starting, 1930 to 1934 when the President was a student at Whittier College, how would you describe that school as a neighbor? Were there any problems, students carrying on, any vandalism?

PERRY: No, not a bit. Nothing like that. In fact, they didn't have all those buildings they've got up there. It was very small.

ARENA: Were you asked to contribute at that time to the support of that college, if it isn't too personal?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: Do you think that that may be because only Quakers were asked to support their own Quaker institution?

PERRY: That might be.

ARENA: Do you recall being invited to attend different functions on the campus at that time, such as plays or musical events or debates?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: Let me make that question clear. Were you invited but did not attend? In other words, were they open to the community when they had affairs there?

PERRY: No.

ARENA: Maybe sometimes the affairs were put on in the Roxy Theater or the Whittier Women's Club that the school promoted. I'm thinking of some of their plays.

PERRY: Oh, I might have attended two or three of their affairs up there, I can't remember that, really.

ARENA: But you definitely don't recall any neighborly problems being a neighbor of the school.

PERRY: Oh, no, no. I've been very happily associated with those teachers and those officials of the college for many years.

ARENA: In the sense of their being customers?

PERRY: No, not alone that.

ARENA: Or associates?

PERRY: Yes.

ARENA: I was just wondering, considering the pay of the ordinary teacher, college or high school, would you say that as a group they were not your common customer? It was the successful businessman, possibly, or professional man over the years.

PERRY: A percentage of them always were, those that had brains. In other words, there's a difference between spending money and investing money. You can spend a lot of money, you don't get any place. But, if you invest it you can accumulate and get someplace. And spending money for something cheap is just throwing it away. And I've preached that from the time I started in this business, and you'd be surprised how many people are intelligent enough to appreciate that. Something that's going to give them service over a period of years, they're going to be happy with, that they're going to have no problems with. That goes for anything. That goes for investments and stocks, or in property, or whatever you want to put your money into. Bargains are not bargains unless they're really worth the money.

ARENA: Is it your personal experience that the amount of education a person has, whether it stops with high school or stops with college, or graduate school, that it doesn't always follow that he is that successful in investments and in the business community?

PERRY: That's true in some cases.

ARENA: How would you compare the students of President Nixon's college days with the students of today?

PERRY: Well, I think the students today as a whole--now there are exceptions--are possibly more intelligent than they were at that time. I've got eight grandchildren and I've got three great-grandchildren, but they're still to come, I mean as far as schooling. But the eight grandchildren are good sound individuals, everyone of them. And I'm proud of every one of them. We've never had any trouble with any one of them. I think that is attributed to their background, their parents and to their associations. They've never been domineered. One's going to school in Missouri, one's going to school in Colorado, and two of them are going to school up in Washington. And the grandchildren back East had the same privileges and opportunities to go where they wanted to. And every one of them are capable of earning something themselves. They've been encouraged that in their spare time to earn a little money. Even during their schooling some of them do. It isn't a matter of have to. I could give it to them or their parents could give it to them, but we encourage them to help themselves as much as they're helped.

ARENA: Would it be correct to say that one of the big differences of the times of today, in which we're comparing the students of today and the times of the early 1930's, was the question of the need for students to work, whereas today it's a need to work for luxuries for the needs?

PERRY: That's right. I think that a great many parents are spoiling their children today, and I don't mean babies, but I mean grown-up young men and women. They're not teaching them to be self-reliant. From the time I was six years old I never asked for money, and I could have. My uncle would have given it to me. I got out and made it.

ARENA: You were just talking about the influence of the parents on the character of the children. Do you think that there was more cooperation at that time--when the President was growing up in Whittier, 1922 to World War II--on the part of the community, the parents, we'll say such religious and social institutions and the school and the church? That these worked together much more so than today, and that made a difference, for better or for worse.

PERRY: Absolutely, absolutely.

ARENA: Finally, Mr. Perry, do you recall any special occasions such as the parades that the college would put on before or after homecoming football games? Do you think that there is less Whittier College, Whittier community cooperation and spirit today than there was in your day, that the community was closer than it is today?

PERRY: No, I don't think so. I think there's still a feeling of closeness to Whittier College.

ARENA: As we come to the end of this interview, is there anything that you would like to state or comment on that I have not raised in the way of a question, or in the way of bringing up the subject? Because I do want this to be as complete as possible.

PERRY: Well, I'm not going to criticize Whittier College, but there is one thing that I don't agree with, and that is bringing in Communists to talk before the youngsters in Whittier College. But that's a matter of the faculty up there, not me. They know what they are doing. There may be an object in it. I believe that the young people, especially some of them, can be influenced in the wrong way. I think that if they're good, sound individuals they won't be influenced. That goes back through history, as far as that goes.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, from your recollection going back to the 1930's would you say Whittier ever suffered poverty, the community itself?

PERRY: I don't think so.

ARENA: Granted, individual families.

PERRY: No, I don't think so. If so it wasn't publicized, and I don't believe it was that way. Even your Mexicans over in Jim Town, they weren't unhappy people.

ARENA: Would the largest Mexican community, again around the time of President Nixon, be on the Leffingwell Ranch? Was that the area you were speaking of?

PERRY: No, no. I'm talking about down along the riverbank here. There was quite a Mexican community down there, and you never heard of any troubles down there, or anything. Oh, they'd get high with liquor every once in awhile, but I mean there wasn't any horrible things happen. Nothing, compared to what happens today.

ARENA: Is there anything else you'd like to touch on?

PERRY: No, I'm going to have to go.

ARENA: Mr. Perry, I can't thank you enough for answering all of my questions so frankly and fully, and letting us have the benefit of your recollections for the oral history project of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. Thank you very much.

PERRY: There's no one that I have more respect for, and I mean that very sincerely.