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Lewis C. Pollard (April 4, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

MR. LEWIS C. POLLARD

April 4, 1972
Santa Fe Springs, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Mr. Lewis C. Pollard. (C stands for Childs), in Santa Fe Springs, California, where we now are holding this interview, on April 4, 1972, Arena interviewing. Mr. Pollard, may we begin by my asking you where and when you were born?

POLLARD: I was born in Los Angeles [California] in 1910, August 23.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how far your family roots in California go? Were your parents born here too?

POLLARD: No. My father was born in Downey.

ARENA: But in California.

POLLARD: In California. My mother was born in Illinois. My grandparents came out from--well, we've kind of lost track--my grandmother from Texas. She was half Mexican, and her sister was married to Don Antonio Cornell, last Mexican mayor of Los Angeles. Their rancho was at Seventh and Alameda Streets in Los Angeles, which is industrial area next to the river now. My grandfather came out from the south after the Civil War, as a lot of the southern boys did. And, of course, Downey was more or less a southern community started by southern people. They were over there where my father was born.

ARENA: How is it that you find yourself here in Santa Fe Springs, next to the President's home town of Whittier?

POLLARD: In 1930 when I was twenty and the depression was starting good, I started an ice route out through this general area, Santa Fe Springs, Los Nietos and what is

called Pico Rivera--it was not called that then. Pico was up north by Whittier Boulevard, and Rivera was down along the Santa Fe Railroad track. I ran an ice route in that general . . .

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you used horsepower at that point?

POLLARD: No, no. We had trucks. And, of course, refrigerators were coming in, but the Santa Fe Springs and the oil fields, they had a lot of it in industrial use which made it. . . . I had a very fine route. That was when I was on the ice route, the first time that I had ever bumped into Richard [Milhous] Nixon. There was a customer of mine who had a service station on the southeast corner of Telegraph Road and Carmenita [Street]. Carmenita did not extend north past Telegraph Road. Mr. [Walter] Dietrick, the service station operator, owned some property directly across the street. His oldest boy was a classmate of Richard Nixon in college and was a football player at Whittier College, and I can't recall his name either--his first name. In fact, I can remember this older Dietrick boy, the first professional football team they had in Los Angeles [California], I think they played out at Gilmore Stadium, or something, and I went out there to watch the game. I can't even remember what they called the team. But he was on there. But anyway, Dietrick allowed a group of gypsies, a gypsy family, clan, or whatever they called them, to camp across the street from him. And it was a very isolated area at that particular time, and these gypsies made patio furniture out of bamboo. They used two types, the type that would bend around, and then the stouter type for the legs and supports. One type they got along the Colorado River [California], and the other type they got up around Bakersfield [California], out of some river up there. And then they would make this furniture, and the men and women would load it on their pick-up trucks and take it around and sell it, or trade for anything they figured they could turn into cash.

ARENA: Do you recall, just offhand, if they were fairly successful in that?

POLLARD: They made a living at it. That seemed to be their main source of income during the period. Now they generally would go north to Salinas [California] for the lettuce crops. They followed some truck gardening, seasonal work. Anyway, some complaints came in because of the camp of gypsies down there. When anything was missing in the neighborhood, the first thing they figured was that the gypsies got it. The people apparently were complaining, and the Los Angeles Health Department started rousting them, you know, to come up to health standards. They had no sanitation, no running water, and they finally issued an injunction for

them to vacate the premises. And Dietrick took their side as to the fact that they were being roused and bulldozed, and he hired Richard Nixon as his defense lawyer, the defense lawyer for the gypsies. And I was a witness for the defense there.

ARENA: And I believe you said off the tape that this was around the time that he had just started to practice law.

POLLARD: Now, I don't recall the exact time, but it would probably be in the late thirties or early forties, somewhere.

ARENA: Well, one thing, it was before the war.

POLLARD: It was before the war because I was drafted off the ice route to go into the service, so it was prior to that time.

ARENA: And when was that if I may ask? When were you drafted?

POLLARD: Let's see--around '43. Yes, in that vicinity. Somewhere along in there. And it came up with a hung jury, and they reset the case, as all those things take time. And before the second trial came up the gypsies disappeared. One night they moved between suns, and either went up to Salinas [California] to pick lettuce, or down to Imperial Valley [California] to the tomatoes. They just disappeared. So that was my first contact with him, and I remember that, because he was a cub lawyer just out of school and was a classmate of Dietrick's son, was the reason that Dietrick had hired him over anyone else.

ARENA: What do you recall of him in the courtroom, his style, his delivery? Were you impressed? Did you have any feeling that he might be an outstanding lawyer, or just another lawyer, thinking not now that he's President, but if you can, what your recollections were of him at that time?

POLLARD: Well, of course, not having been in any courtroom before, I never knew the difference between a good lawyer and a bad lawyer. He seemed to give an adequate defense. He had a losing case [Laughter] so to speak. As you know, with no running water, no sanitation, they probably WERE a health hazard. He did the best he could with the subject he had to work with.

ARENA: Any idea as to why he might take a case like that?

POLLARD: Well, I would say that here Dietrick was determined that here was people being oppressed. They were only their own worst enemies, and why should the county pick on them personally, just to run them someplace else. And that's all they were going to do was run them someplace else to pitch their camp. And as long as he was willing to let them set there, and he

was the closest neighbor, you might say that it could have been an early civil rights case, I don't know. It was definitely people who couldn't afford to defend themselves and Dietrick was actually the one who was paying the cost of defense.

ARENA: Any idea as to his own reaction after the case? Did you happen to have a talk with . . .

POLLARD: No, as a matter of fact, I never stayed around to the conclusion of the trial, because I had to leave work.

ARENA: And you heard that the jury was a hung jury then?

POLLARD: Yes. Dietrick was the one that told me that it was a hung jury and that the case would be rescheduled for trial at some later date, which was put off for a few weeks, and between the time of that, the gypsies, as I said before, found greener pastures somewhere else and just disappeared and the case solved itself.

ARENA: Do you recall that anyone spoke ill of either you or President Nixon because of your defense, in a way, of those gypsies?

POLLARD: Oh, no, no.

ARENA: Was there that much animosity involved?

POLLARD: There were no neighborhood problems or anything else. It was probably an overexuberant county worker, you know, seeing something and taking action, unilateral action. He might just as well have turned his head and drove on by.

ARENA: Mr. Pollard, have you ever met President Nixon since that occasion?

POLLARD: Well, after I got out of the service, I went to work for one of the major bread companies in Los Angeles, and had the Whittier route, and delivered bread to the family store on the corner of Whittier [Boulevard] and Santa Gertrudes [Avenue]. Then, once again, was the only other time that I ever ran into the President, and it was during the time that he was campaigning against Jerry Voorhis. And he would, naturally, show up at his parents' store there, and he happened to come in, and his mother introduced me. And, of course, the rest is history from then on, what happened to him from that time, but it was just a passing meeting there. But, of course, his mother was a very beloved woman. Everyone loved Mrs. [Hannah] Nixon.

ARENA: I would appreciate whatever you recollect about your own direct contact with Mrs. Hannah Milhous Nixon.

POLLARD: Well, that's what I say. She was a wonderful person to do business with, and . . .

ARENA: And did you actually do business with her, rather than Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon?

POLLARD: Well, he was around the store. There was one thing about Frank Nixon. You never had to worry about where he stood. He always told you. [Laughter] And he loved an argument better than eating dinner probably. I don't think that he liked to have anybody agree with him. He did love to argue. I don't mean that he was. . . . I think he really got a joy out of that.

And Don [Francis Donald Nixon] was the butcher and had his frozen food lockers, which was very popular right after the war. And then his cousin [William Alan] Bill Milhous and [Thomas T.] Tom Seulke worked at the store. I think they had the vegetable room and, of course, the store. And it was about that time that most of the tradesmen would meet out there and have lunch. The breadman would furnish the bread, the milkman would furnish the cottage cheese and half and half. And then, from that point, Don started the little lunch counter, simply, I guess, because he couldn't buy a decent hamburger, and he loved good food. And he ground his own meat and knew what was going into it. It was a success. There was standing room only during the lunch hour.

ARENA: Where did the customers come from, if I may ask? This was still out on Santa Gertrudes [Avenue] which is not as busy as it is now, of course.

POLLARD: No. They came from all directions. I mean, when you build a better mousetrap, they seem to get there. Word of mouth, just went around. You know, most people don't want to eat a big lunch, just a sandwich. From there I can't recall which he built first, whether it was the [Nixon] Family Restaurant or the Nixon Drive-In. Both were successes. My wife and I used to eat our Sunday dinner, most of the time, at the Nixon Family Restaurant. We enjoyed it terrifically. And our boy was in high school about that time, and our oldest boy and most of the high school students loved to go to the Nixon Drive-In, just like now this Bob's [Big Boy Restaurant] or something they meet at, and it was quite the thing to do in those days.

ARENA: You have known Donald then all along? You knew him from that period.

POLLARD: No, I knew him after the war.

ARENA: But since that time you have known him and come into contact with him on and off?

POLLARD: Right. Well then, after I left the bread business and went into this business that I'm presently in, this mass marketing of motor oil with these discount houses and that type of trade, which I'm located in Orange County, well, then was when I ran into Don again, which started, probably, all this bad publicity that he got. He took over a restaurant in Fullerton [California]--I think it was on Commonwealth [Avenue]--and then when Disneyland was getting started they built this Nixon's Drive-In south of Disneyland on Harbor [Boulevard]. Well, it was a little premature, probably, as much as anything else.

ARENA: What I was getting at, in a way too, and this idea of your having contact with the President's brother, as the President's star rose, so to speak, in the political heavens, did this change him so far as his attitude toward you?

POLLARD: Oh, no. I think the world of that man. He's one of the most honest men I ever met. You know, if you make a mistake, an honest mistake, some people condemn you for it. His business ventures, the two in Orange County, I would say, were business mistakes. Had they been successes, he'd have been the smartest guy in the world if he'd made money on 'em. You're more or less judged by the dollars you have rather than what kind of a person you are. Don is a terrific man.

ARENA: For the record, we talked about your knowing different members of the family, did you ever know Edward [Calvert Nixon], the youngest brother of the President?

POLLARD: I recognized him when he was a young man, when he was around his parents' store. I can't recall whether he was going to school there or not.

ARENA: He was born in 1930, so in 1935, around that time he started at the Lowell School.

POLLARD: So you see, when I was in the bread business, it would be somewhere, probably from '46, oh, '45, maybe . . .

ARENA: Around high school age?

POLLARD: So he was probably a school boy at that time. He wasn't around the store a great deal. I knew him when he came in. Whether I would recognize him now or not, I don't know as an adult.

ARENA: Just to be sure, you did make it clear about when you went into the bread business and were meeting with the Nixons in their store. But when you started about the ice business, you did say something about going up and down Whittier Boulevard. Did you actually deliver ice as far as the grocery store?

POLLARD: No.

ARENA: Because the grocery store was there since 1922.

POLLARD: No, I did not. My ice business was in the Santa Fe Springs, Los Nietos, Rivera section, and I did not go north, up that way. I didn't get to the family store until after World War II when I went into the bread business.

ARENA: I see.

POLLARD: And I met Don and his mother and father after World War II and this incident with the gypsies took place prior to World War II, I would imagine shortly after Nixon got out of law school and got his degree. He was single. That's what I remember about him there. But, of course, Donald is the one that I knew best of the family, because I dealt with him for five years in business, and always found him to be very straightforward, honest, and a real fine character. And what bad publicity he got, as I said previously, was probably a result of that expansion, what you might call ill-timed expansion. Whether it was premature for his time, or what, I do not know. So then, when he got into financial difficulty, everybody. . . . It's always easy to kick a guy when he's down. But I always thought he was a perfect man.

ARENA: Did you, by any chance, ever have any contact with the President from the standpoint of reading about him in the newspapers before the political period? I'm thinking that his name might have appeared, say, in connection with debates and that sort of thing.

POLLARD: Well, of course, we've always taken the Whittier Daily News. Of course, you would read articles which meant nothing, you know. There's maybe a hundred people mentioned in the paper today and maybe one of them will be president some day, but today they're not probably any more outstanding than anyone else. Like I say, the only reason I happened to remember him in that gypsy thing was because I was a witness and my friend and customer, Mr. [Walter] Dietrick, hired him because his boy went to college with him, and I more or less knew him from that.

ARENA: I wonder if you had any contact with any of the President's other close relatives that you've mentioned. You

did mention Tom Seulke, of course, and Bill Milhous, but I'm thinking of the [Oscar O.] Marshburn side, which is through marriage--the President's aunt, Rose Olive Milhous [Marshburn].

POLLARD: You know, if I recall correctly, and I'm not certain about that whether they were relatives or not, they did have some women seemed to me a sister or two worked in the store. Now what their names were has evaded me, but I cannot recall whether they were relatives or not, but if they weren't they were old acquaintances.

ARENA: They did have some neighbors and as you say they were church members. The name I'm thinking of particularly, and you may have had contact with them through your bread route, was Mrs. [Gladys] Starbuck and a Mrs. [Mabel] Schuyler, who was a sister-in-law of Mr. Harry Schuyler. Everyone knows Harry Schuyler.

POLLARD: I remember him around Nixon's store, and he was pointed out to me as Harry Schuyler. I don't know why. He seemed to be a distinguished sort of individual. And as far as the other names, I had no occasion to have business with them, because with a wholesale bread route, you deal with either restaurants or grocery people and unless they were in the grocery or restaurant business, you just did not know them, businesswise.

ARENA: Now this question might sound a little personal, and don't answer it if you don't want to. As you know, Whittier was a kind of special town in that it was founded by the members of the Friends, members of a religious group. And would you mind if I ask you if you happen to be a Friend yourself?

POLLARD: No, I don't.

ARENA: Well, that's good, in this sense, because I was going to ask you what you recall about dealing, in a business way, with members of the Friends church. Was there anything special from the standpoint of dealing with other people? I'm trying to get the setting of, you know, the President's own family and his own life and his own immediate background.

POLLARD: Well, I don't know just exactly . . .

ARENA: Was it any different? The question really boils down to: Was it any different dealing with Quakers than any other religious group in the community, whether they were Methodists or Presbyterians?

POLLARD: Well, I don't know. Of course, I never did check the man's ring to see what he was supposed to be. The ones

that I knew that were of the Quaker religion were always very fine people.

ARENA: As a matter of fact, did you know that the President was a Quaker, say, back in the 1930's when he was a lawyer.

POLLARD: No, I had no idea.

ARENA: Now, later, when you dealt with them on that business of the bread, did that come up, I wonder?

POLLARD: Well, of course, dealing with the people out there, and you know you tried to know your customers, and that was one thing--you knew the Nixons were Friends. And whether they were or were not, the money was the same, you know.

ARENA: Let me ask you this question, to show how it could be a practical business matter: The Friends had, let's say, certain views about not smoking, not drinking, not dancing, and did you ever find yourself personally inconvenienced? I'm thinking, for example, if you did smoke and you wanted a cigar and you asked Frank Nixon for one [Laughter], as you know, that could have been a problem. Along those lines, was there any disadvantage in that way?

POLLARD: Here's the situation: It so happens that I was never silly enough to get started in smoking, so I would never have occasion to be offended or offend somebody by smoking or not smoking. You never offend them by not smoking. So it just happened that I never smoked and I haven't the physique to stand the drinking. You just naturally knew from word of mouth that the Quaker people were just opposed to those things, and in my day you didn't purposely go out to try to set new records and offend people. I mean, you just lived and let live.

ARENA: As you were going from community to community, as you mentioned, Pico, Rivera, Santa Fe Springs, do you recall, again, that communities seemed to differ a great deal because of the different make-up?

POLLARD: Well, of course, when I started dealing in the ice business in Santa Fe Springs, it was right at the tail end of the boom, the oil field boom here. In fact, Norwalk Boulevard, across from the mental hospital, there was a eucalyptus grove over there. They had kind of an itinerant camp in there with a restaurant and a pool hall, and there was little--they used to call 'em honky-tonks--restaurants all along Norwalk Boulevard, and most of them, they had a bootlegger hanging around, you know these oil workers. There was a vast difference between Santa Fe Springs and Whittier,

Now most of the oil field executives lived in Whittier. Now the fellows, the roustabouts, the roughnecks, they called them, they may have lived in some of those old camps or around Norwalk over in Downey, and it was a great difference. Now I went into Los Nietos and, of course, Los Nietos was a heavily Mexican-populated town, and there were very few families in there. I think around that time the Guirado family lost their place to the Porrs up there, you know, on Los Nietos Road, the old Guirado ranch. I know when I went in the service they were still living there. It seemed to me it was the old man and his wife and the daughter. I don't know whether it's still in that family or not.

ARENA: Let me also explain the line of these particular questions which I can only ask a person like you, in this sense. You, of course, like anyone else, can see the President on television and can read about him, but you can also recollect the town in which he grew up, you can also recollect that one incident in which you saw him in person. What I'd like to have you consider is this: What of Whittier is in President Nixon today, as far as you can see? He was obviously influenced, as all of us are, by our communities. He did grow up in Yorba Linda for the first nine years of his life, a very small, rural community then, as you would know. Then Whittier from about 1922 through Whittier College days, 1934, going back to North Carolina for law school for three years. Knowing Whittier as you do, living in this area for so many years, I would just like for you to comment and give your estimate of that connection. How does the community still live on in the President, which he does refer to as his home town, as you know?

POLLARD: That's very true, yes. Well, I think that Whittier was a unique community in those days. You must remember that those were the days of prohibition, and probably of all the cities of Southern California, probably Whittier had less alcohol problems of any other community around. I mean, in any town. The town I was raised in over here at Downey, everybody knew who the bootlegger was, and I suppose he knew all his prospective customers just as well [Laughter], and in Whittier the corrupt element wasn't at the surface, let's put it that way. It wasn't as obvious, if they had them. I don't know that they had them. It was probably a town where a little more was expected of everybody, and everybody seemed to rise to the challenge, and it seemed to be a better town than most of them. I would say that was probably it.

ARENA: Mr. Pollard, as this interview is coming to a close, is there anything that I have not raised, any question that I have not asked that you would like to comment on yourself?

POLLARD: Well, actually, as I say, my meeting with the President was under unusual circumstances, and casual, as far as he was concerned. I mean, he couldn't even, possibly even remember it. But he may have remembered [laughter] defending that group of gypsies. But that was the first time. And then, of course, it was his family that I dealt with most of the time, and saw him casually around the store, would be it. Outside of that, that would be about it.

ARENA: I really thank you for your hospitality in allowing me to come to your home and in answering all of my questions so frankly and fully. Thank you very much.

POLLARD: Well, I appreciate the opportunity.