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**Henry M. Ramirez (May 17, 1972)**

C. Richard Arena

Oral History Interview

with

DR. HENRY M. RAMIREZ

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Washington, D. C.

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Dr. Henry M. Ramirez. M, the middle initial, stands for Michael. We are in Bethesda, Maryland, the residence of Dr. Ramirez. The date is May 17, 1972, Arena interviewing. Would you please give the official title of your position, Dr. Ramirez?

RAMIREZ: I am Chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Opportunity for the Spanish Speaking People.

ARENA: Thank you. May I begin, Dr. Ramirez, by asking you where and when you were born and to give a brief biographical resume in which you will give your formal educational background and your career highlights to date.

RAMIREZ: I was born in Walnut, California, which at that time, May 4, 1929, was simply a watering place for the locomotives of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company.

ARENA: Excuse me. Where in California is Walnut?

RAMIREZ: Walnut, California, is located between Whittier and Pomona, but much closer to Pomona. When I was six months old, my parents moved to Pomona, California. After the depression started, they went to work with the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. The company at that time had a few very simple little

houses for their employees, and I was born in one of those houses, in the style of the old days without hospital or doctors. Later we moved into a much larger house provided by the railroad for the foreman. He, in turn, let my father have it because he had his own residence. From there, I began my education at St. Joseph's Catholic Grammar School in the first grade. I spoke Spanish at home and had to learn English from the very first day. But I was fortunate to have a teacher, Sister Maria Luz. She was of Mexican background and took a very deep interest in me. Sister Maria Luz made me feel I was successful in everything I did and I believe that due to her efforts, I began school on the right foot.

ARENA: Am I correct in assuming that she also knew Spanish as well as English?

RAMIREZ: Yes, very definitely. So I must say that I had a bilingual experience to begin with in the first grade and felt very successful throughout my grammar school days. After graduating from St. Joseph's Grammar School in the eighth grade in 1944, I entered the St. John's High School in Los Angeles to study for the priesthood. I continued on through the high school part and went on to the college part, called St. John's College. I was elected president of the student body of what we called the Junior Seminary in 1940. I continued on to the Major Seminary called St. John's Seminary, from where I received my bachelor's degree in arts and continued to study theology. After I left the seminary I entered the military service, and upon termination . . .

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you where you served during the military service period?

RAMIREZ: No, I served in two very exciting places, three really. One was Fort Ord for my basic training. From there the Army sent me to a faraway place called Barstow, California, which is quite close to my home. Consequently, I spent half of my life at home while in the Army, but I was able to finagle a sojourn into San Francisco to study for two months at Army school and had a wonderful time there. I then returned to Barstow, from where I was discharged. That was the extent of my military service.

Barstow was a camp where people trained in mechanized Army, basic to the armored part of the Army--tanks and personnel carriers and things of that kind. But since I worked in the administration office I always saw tanks from a distance of about a mile and rarely got closer than that. After my discharge, I went to Claremont Graduate

College to pursue a course in education, and from there I went to Loyola University to acquire my credential in education and my master's in the same field. At a later time, I received a credential in administration.

In the meantime, I went to Loyola Law School. I was hoping to become a lawyer, but finances and an incipient ulcer got in the way, so I quit that and resumed again my study of education, receiving an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Loyola with full recognition. Contrary to most Honorary Doctorates, this one was unique in that the university with its powers recognized it as a genuine doctorate. The board granted an honest-to-goodness doctorate. As I indicated before, this year I was selected Alumnus of the Year of Loyola University. In brief, this is the formal education I received.

ARENA: Did you know the President grew up in Southern California in a town named after a person of Spanish-speaking origin--Yorba--and in a recent reference, I believe in his speech delivered for Pan American Day at the Organization of American States, he refers to his exposure to the Spanish culture and Mexican culture that is a part of the heritage of Southern California. In view of the fact that you are a live example of such a culture, and in view of the fact that you have grown up in that immediate area, would you mind giving some idea of what life was like around Whittier, around the time in which the President was growing up himself?

He was born, as you recall, in 1913. He graduated from Whittier College, for example, in '34, and this more or less parallels your own career in education. His father, you may recall, as we were discussing off tape and as you have informed me, dealt with those of Mexican background, some of whom are still living in the Whittier area, and you very generously afforded me their names and telephone numbers and you gave an introduction to me to meet them. With this general background, I would like to ask you to reminisce from the standpoint of your own personal experiences about those times, say before World War II, that you and I were discussing--you from personal experience and me as a student in your presence--to discuss those times.

RAMIREZ: Basically the California of 1910, 1920, 1930 was characterized by three distinct populations. One was very small and was comprised of what we call early Californians. These were people who had been there for a century or so and who had participated in government at one time or another, who were or had been landowners, those who had acquired an entree into the society of the incoming Easterners by reason of marriage. Another group was

made up of the Mexicans who had recently arrived from Mexico as a result of the revolutions of 1910 and subsequent periods. They came seeking peace and tranquility and employment in the Whittier area, essentially Yorba Linda, Pomona, Covina, La Puente. In essence they sought work in the citrus groves and other agricultural pursuits and to a very minimal extent in the service-oriented area or in industry. The third group which increased very quickly were the Easterners, whom we called Anglos, who came in and settled these towns and formed new towns in many cases, like Pomona in the 1890's and 1880's, and began to establish institutions that they had known on the Eastern Seaboard.

Consequently, you had one group that was pretty well the Californians assimilating. Then there were the Mexicans, who were distinct by reason of language, religion, culture and color. We're different from the Anglos, whose religion was basically Protestant, whose origins were the Eastern Seaboard and who had very little understanding of the Mexicans or Mexico. And so you had a very deep cleavage--an ethnic cleavage--between both groups, with the lack of mutual understanding and the lack of mutual acceptance which manifested itself in many ways. One was their residential patterns. You had Mexican areas and Anglo areas in every town. You had segregation, in that you had Mexican schools and Anglo schools. You had activities wherein the majority community, the Anglo community, went about its business almost oblivious of the presence of Mexicans about them, except when they needed farm hands. About the only place that you had contact between the Anglos and the Mexicans was in the field of commerce, in the little grocery stores, in the little furniture stores, in banks and on the used car lots.

ARENA:       Excuse me. For the record, an example of one of these little grocery stores would have been the Nixon market of President Nixon's father.

RAMIREZ:     Exactly. His location was such that he would have served the Mexican families working in the citrus groves and/or the farms. And so the Mexican family, more than others, would have had daily contact with Mexicans, and since they were children, they would have had probably even more contact than the adults would have had at this time. Their contacts would have been in grammar school and in high school and, of course, in and around the business.

ARENA:       Even though you did not know President Nixon personally, you did mention off the tape some names of those you do

know who did know the Nixon's. Would you mind for the record repeating some of these names?

RAMIREZ: Certainly, Carlos and Ida Ramirez who still live in Whittier . . .

ARENA: And to make sure there is no confusion, the name Ramirez is spelled the same as yours, but you said there was no relationship.

RAMIREZ: Yes, the name is spelled the same way and there is no relationship. They belong to the early California families and have extensive contacts with the Nixons. Mr. Carlos Ramirez knew the President's father. He also knew [Francis Donald] Don Nixon extremely well and had many contacts with him and is very knowledgeable about the family because there weren't that many people in the Whittier area at that time, and the few people who were there knew each other very well. And so I recommend that you talk with them about that period of time, and from them get further leads about other people, because it is my impression that not only Mexicans living in Leffingwell Ranch but the ones that were living in Murphy Ranch, very close by, had contact with the Nixons. I would also recommend that you contact the Limon family for further information about the Nixons and, of course, the Spencers who now live in Pomona, whose father was the general manager of that ranch. They would probably have additional information about the Nixon family contacts with the Mexican community.

ARENA: Although you did not know the President before 1945, obviously you know him personally now, since your appointment is a personal one. Am I correct in that?

RAMIREZ: Yes.

ARENA: Then would you mind describing, from the standpoint of history, the nature of the New Horizons Program, or as it is now called, Expanded Horizons, which was initiated after 1945, correct me if I'm wrong, which had no counterpart when you were growing up in the Whittier area?

RAMIREZ: The New Horizons Program was inspired by the tremendous contrast that I saw at Whittier High School between the Anglos and the Mexican-Americans. It appears that for years and years and years the Mexicans had always congregated about a half a block away from the school grounds under a fig tree in an alley.

ARENA: Excuse me. When you say years and years, you are also talking about the pre-1945 period, the period in which the President was growing up. That would be true of his time?

RAMIREZ: Yes, it would. They were completely alienated and they excluded themselves and felt excluded from the school life. That is why they gathered under this fig tree. I felt that something had to be done. During my formative period, many individuals had played a role in trying to make a Pygmalion out of me, and so I set out to basically do the same thing with these young Mexican boys and girls. I sought to bring them to the mainstream of Whittier School and to bring the Anglo boys and girls to understand and develop mutual acceptance. I found a receptive climate. Most of the members of the school board, the administrators and the people in town needed no explanation as what the phenomenon was all about, and they were very grateful and thankful that something was finally being done to reverse the situation that they had known and seen as high school students. And so they were very warm and responsive to the efforts that I made in establishing the New Horizons Program, to bring about mutual acceptance in the community and in the high school.

ARENA: Thank you. If it is not privileged or confidential information, in view of the President's public recollections-- I'm thinking of this last Pan American Day speech, and I've read others as a matter of fact--on one occasion he specifically referred to Yorba Linda and its Mexican heritage. If it isn't privileged information, would you discuss any discussions you may have had with the President, in view of your special position and your special knowledge, about his recollections as a youth or young man and its ties with Mexican heritage.

RAMIREZ: I recall two incidents very clearly and vividly in my mind that I imagine I will hold very dear to me the rest of my life. One was on August 5, 1971, at the time when the first meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Opportunity for the Spanish Speaking People was held. The President was present. During the meeting he spoke about the need for developing opportunities for the Mexican-Americans and other Spanish-speaking groups but in particular the Mexican-Americans. He mentioned that fact that he had picked oranges in Yorba Linda and Whittier and said something about how many boxes he picked a day. I responded and indicated that I was known as a one hundred box-a-day man. The President threw his arms up, laughed and said, "You have no business here if you can do that well." This told me that he understood rather well what it



was to pick oranges and to be intimately involved in the life of the citrus community. On another occasion I indicated to him that I had worked in the Jim Town barrios.

ARENA: Would you mind explaining for the laymen what is meant by Jim Town?

RAMIREZ: Jim Town is another name for the Mexican barrios of Whittier. I mentioned to him that I had worked closely with the boys and girls from Jim Town and their parents. Upon hearing the word Jim Town, he threw his arms in the air again and laughed. In fact, he yelled out in the presence of many people who didn't understand what he was saying. He said, "Jim Town, Jim Town. It's been twenty years since I heard that word." He said, "I remember those streets so well that formed the boundary of Jim Town. Oh, I had so many friends, people I went to school with, that are from Jim Town. My, how I would like to see them again." This left me with a feeling that there was very warm feeling towards the people that he remembered and knew from Jim Town. And now as President, I am sure he would very much enjoy seeing them again, difficult though it is. On another occasion at a White House Service as my wife, my children and I approached the President, who was at that time accompanied by Archbishop Madeiros from Boston, who is also bilingual in Spanish . . .

ARENA: Would you mind spelling his name, please?

RAMIREZ: M A D E I R O S, and former President Lyndon Johnson. As I came up the line he spotted me and he said, "Henry, Henry, how is it going with the Cabinet Committee? I'm hearing good things about it." He pursued the subject for a while then took me by the arm and told Archbishop Madeiros, "One of the reasons I like Henry so much is that he and I both started at the bottom. We were both poor and both picked oranges in the same groves, and that's the kind of people I like to have in my administration, people who came from the bottom and know what it is to be poor. We have that understanding." These statements reveal to me the feelings he has for poor people and for the Mexican people that he remembers so well and the life Mexican people endured during those days.

ARENA: Is there any question or topic that I have not raised in this interview which deals with your personal contact with the President and this pre-1945 period? Obviously,



there is a great deal that can be said of recent events. Unfortunately, that belongs to the political historian, but is there anything that I have not covered concerning this pre-1945 period and your recollections of it and the idea of the President's family living in Whittier that you would like to raise at this time yourself?

RAMIREZ: Well, I didn't know him personally. I had heard about him, of course. I didn't know too much about him because he was in Whittier, which was on the other side of the hills from Pomona, but I would imagine that the life that he led was very similar to the life of many other young Anglo men that I knew in Pomona, who had limited contact with Mexican boys and girls. But it strikes me that he remembers that period very well.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you along those lines, did you ever have any contact or did you ever know of any person of Mexican ancestry who graduated from Whittier College, we'll say, before the President's time? His class was 1934. Obviously, it would have been unusual, but do you recall even an unusual case, of some person of Mexican ancestry who did graduate?

RAMIREZ: I don't recall any. There may have been some, but I don't even recall any that finished high school in those days. It was an extremely unusual situation for Mexicans, extremely unusual even to finish high school. But for him to have that memory of people he knew is . . .

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: We were discussing the role of Judge [Edward] Guirado.

RAMIREZ: The President remembers Judge Guirado in a very warm way and he never has forgotten him. This leads me to believe that the President, despite the situation then, when the relations between Mexicans and Anglos were spotty, must have had relations that were above normal and really out of the ordinary. They had to be for him to remember these people and the relationships that he had. I don't want to betray confidences and I know this is going in history, but I do know that a month and a half ago the President asked his number one recruiter at the White House to please take care of Judge Guirado in terms of an important post. For the President to remember that among all of the thousands of things he has to think about is, to me, extremely significant.

ARENA: Would you happen to recall if you met any other members of the President's family, where this question of Mexican-Americans came up? I am thinking of his mother, for example. You may recall in that connection that in the book Six Crises where there is a copy of the President's Acceptance Speech, that the President's mother indicated that she hoped--and the President admitted this in his Acceptance Speech at Miami to be the Republican candidate for the election of 1968--he mentioned that his mother had hopes that he would be a Central American missionary. I am just wondering if that Latin American note ever came up in any discussion with you and the President, if he ever alluded to it?

RAMIREZ: No, he never did, but I talked to Ed [Edward Calvert Nixon], his brother, about that period of time, and throughout our conversation I sensed an affinity, for some reason or other, with Latin America in the Nixon family. Beyond this, it is demonstrated by the fact that he went to Acapulco for his honeymoon. This was something out of the ordinary in those days--Acapulco was hardly known. Demonstrated, too, by his frequent trips back there and by the fact that many members of the Nixon family enjoy going back to Mexico. I just don't know the reason for the affinity but it is there and, as I said before, this is something that wasn't usually found in Anglos in those communities then. Mexico was just a strange place you didn't go to visit. You just read about it or studied about it. We knew many people that just wouldn't go to Mexico. They were deathly afraid to go. For him to have gone is really significant.

ARENA: And he did not go by airplane, as I recollect. He drove. Stereotypes die very hard, but for the record, I recall that when I took my family from Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] to Mexico in a car as recently as 1963, the mere mention of that fact to college students in Philadelphia was greeted with "Aren't you afraid?" That was the first reaction. Stereotypes do die very hard. I want to thank you very much for the hospitality of you and your wife in allowing me to come to your home for the purpose of this interview, and for your answering all of my questions so frankly and fully. And I know that I speak not only for myself but my fellow historians. Thank you very much.

RAMIREZ: Thank you for the privilege.