



11-30-1971

E. Clayton Votaw (November 30, 1971)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT
Oral History Interview
with

MR. E. CLAYTON VOTAW

November 30, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

The initial part of the interview deals with Mr. Votaw's ancestral background and his own family and experiences. Then Dr. Arena asks him about his direct connection with the President and the Nixon and Milhous families.

Verbatim dialogue follows:

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ARENA: If you don't mind, I would like to get on with your direct connection with the President, but then go back to this interesting background since, in a way, the President's family was a pioneer family. You might or might not know, for example, that the President is a Nixon but he is also a Milhous.

VOTAW: That's right.

ARENA: And that was a birghright Quaker family and they came in this very early period also in 1897. And I would like to have you continue answering questions about your own personal background, if you don't mind, because it helps to explain the type of community in which the President grew up. I think your father is an example of the type of pioneering people that really made up this community. But I would like to establish at this point your overall connection with the Nixon and Milhous family. Let me ask you that question generally. When did you yourself personally first come into contact with President Nixon, and then give a kind of overall picture of the nature of that contact? For example, even though

it wasn't a direct contact with the President, it was with the Nixon grocery store and later on with the Nixon law partnership of Wingert, Bewley and Nixon, as much as you can recollect, and don't worry about being specific. I would like to get the general picture and then ask specific questions about that relationship, as I did with you and your father and his experiences moving into this area.

VOTAW: I imagine our acquaintance came primarily when we were citrus growers out on Valley Home Avenue, when we traded with the [Francis Anthony] Nixon family.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you about how far from the Nixon grocery store was this Valley Home ranch?

VOTAW: About two miles from where we lived. Maybe a little shorter than that.

ARENA: And the year more or less when your father and family first moved into that ranch?

VOTAW: This was in later years. 1928. I was already married and established then, and we had a citrus grove there.

ARENA: And when you say we, it's you, not your father, now.

VOTAW: No, it's my wife and I; I should have said that. And of course, we raised our family there and traded all the time with the Nixon family in their market.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you how many were in your family?

VOTAW: MY family?

ARENA: Yes.

VOTAW: We had two children, one boy and one girl.

ARENA: And when they were born?

VOTAW: Our son, Don [Donald Votaw], was born in 1929, and our daughter, Arlene [Votaw], was born in 1935.

ARENA: The reason I ask that is to see more or less how they tie in with the Nixon boys. You might be interested in knowing they were born much later. You probably realized that, but they were born close to Edward Nixon's age. Edward, the youngest of Frank and Hannah Nixon's children, of course, still living, and he was born in 1930. And as a matter of fact, did your boy play with Edward, do you happen to know? Did he know him?

VOTAW: Well, I'm sure he was acquainted with him, but I don't know whether they had an opportunity to play together.

I don't know whether Edward went to the Lowell School or not.

ARENA: He did.

VOTAW: Well then, they may have done so, because both of our children were educated in the Lowell School.

ARENA: And while we're on that subject, were you aware that one of the Milhouses, I think it was a gentleman with the initials C. W. [Charles Wright Milhous], was with the Board of Education of the Lowell School District?

VOTAW: That's correct.

ARENA: Did you know him personally?

VOTAW: I knew him personally. As a matter of fact, I succeeded him on the Board of Education for at least twelve years.

ARENA: That's very interesting.

VOTAW: That was a little community school, and we didn't have the growing pains that East Whittier finally got into, which came along at a later time. But our children went through that, and I was on the board during the time they were in school.

ARENA: Fine. I just wanted to see if there are any loose ends about your residency in this area, living on Valley Home [Avenue]. Were the streets paved that went out to these different ranches, including Valley Home?

VOTAW: Yes, it was a narrow paving, graded up, so there were ditches on each side, but it had the macadam paving there.

ARENA: And was mail delivered by rural free delivery, or did you have to go to pick up your mail somewhere?

VOTAW: As a matter of fact, we lived in Orange County because that is the county line. But the mail was delivered by the Whittier Post Office, rural delivery. We had a Los Angeles County address and lived in Orange County.

ARENA: As far as you know, the Nixon store was not a mail depository in any way, certainly not for you.

VOTAW: I don't believe so.

ARENA: You never had mail that was deposited there, like a substation?

VOTAW: No, I don't recall that he did.

ARENA: You spoke of the one son attending Lowell. Was that true of the daughter, as well?

VOTAW: Both of them went through Lowell School.

ARENA: I see. And just to sharpen my memory, if you don't mind, what grades did the Lowell School cover?

VOTAW: One through eight.

ARENA: Was there a kindergarten?

VOTAW: Yes, I believe there was.

ARENA: Do you think that might have been full time--a full day of kindergarten?

VOTAW: I don't believe I recall that.

ARENA: Do you recall if some of the grades were joint--that is, more than one grade in the same room?

VOTAW: I think the first years that Don [Votaw] went there, there were more than one grade in one room.

ARENA: Speaking of Don, of course, you knew all of the children? You knew Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] as well as the President, through your connection with the grocery store?

VOTAW: Oh, yes.

ARENA: And as a matter of fact, that is right; Donald as well as Edward attended that school, whereas the President attended the East Whittier Elementary School.

VOTAW: I see.

ARENA: That would have given you more opportunity to see the other boys rather than the President. I don't know if that was the case or not.

VOTAW: Well, of course, Don Nixon was very active in the market. He was the meat cutter there, and later developed and promoted freeze boxes. That is, he built the entire building for that purpose. That was quite the rage in those days, to buy meat and put it into storage. And he actually financed that building by selling rental boxes in advance.

ARENA: In other words, people could buy and keep meat inside this storage; that was the nature of the business?

VOTAW: Oh, yes. Buy half a beef and then Don would cut it all for us and wrap it and store it.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if any other business in the Whittier area did that--performed that particular meat service?

VOTAW: I don't happen to recall any. I think that was more or less new at that time.

ARENA: Possibly in Los Angeles [California] it might have been.

VOTAW: It could have been. It was pretty much of a promotional game on the part of Don Nixon.

ARENA: And as far as you know, you say that these cold storage lockers were individualized. Each customer had his own?

VOTAW: Oh, yes.

ARENA: It wasn't that it was a large locker with shelves where the individual customer kept his meat.

VOTAW: Well, it was under lock and key. You would keep your own meat in storage there under lock and key.

ARENA: In your own individualized compartment?

VOTAW: Right.

ARENA: That must have been an interesting carpentry feat. Do you suppose he was responsible for designing that, or if that came ready-made, this storage setup where the individual could keep his meat?

VOTAW: I can't say whether he designed it or not, but he did build it.

ARENA: And you saw this was a completely separate building, not in the grocery store itself.

VOTAW: No, it was a new building.

ARENA: And about what year did that go into operation? I was wondering if he was doing this part-time during the high school years or was this after he finished high school?

VOTAW: Well, I can't recall the exact years that that was.

ARENA: Do you recall if Donald Nixon was still in high school or not, while this was going on?

VOTAW: Seemed to me like he was older than high school when he was doing this, but he may have started cutting meat when he was in high school.

ARENA: And your own personal dealings, and maybe you might know about the other customers, but as far as you are concerned, that meat business, especially the cold storage business, was completely handled by Donald Nixon?

VOTAW: Yes, I would say it was. I don't know whether it was joint ownership or not.

ARENA: As far as your personal dealings, getting the meat and so forth?

VOTAW: Yes.

ARENA: How about the paying of the bills? Would that have gone along with your overall grocery bills, or was that even a separate arrangement, do you recall, when you paid for the use of the storage, as well as the meat individually?

VOTAW: No, I can't recall. Of course, we always paid cash every time we traded.

ARENA: Would you say, offhand, that you were the exception regarding that, that most people paid by having their bills carried by the Nixons, or didn't you pay much attention or recollect?

VOTAW: No, I didn't. I know we were always cash customers.

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At this point, Dr. Arena elicits from Mr. Votaw his recollections of his ranching and agricultural experience, his family's interest in horses, life in the community around Lowell School, and the development of the Lowell Joint School District.