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Grant Garman (October 15, 1971, second interview)

C. Richard Arena

Second Oral History Interview

with

GRANT M. GARMAN

October 15, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #2 with Grant M. Garman. Today's date is October 15, 1971. The place is Whittier, California, Arena interviewing. The first interview with Mr. Garman was September 16, 1971, and is on the other side of this tape. Grant, can I begin by asking you to recall the very first occasion when you met the President--about when and maybe the circumstances also?

GARMAN: I'm rather indefinite about that, the first time. I'm sure it was during the years when they might have had the market out there and the time doesn't seem to come to me particularly, because it was sort of casual, as it would be in meeting someone in the store. Then, later on when Dick Nixon was in the law practice.

ARENA: I see. Then actually it was before the interest in the theater you had met him. It was before the theater days?

GARMAN: Before the theater days.

ARENA: It does go back to the period when his parents lived in the market store in East Whittier [California]?

GARMAN: Right. I was on the newspaper. I was working at the Whittier News for many years and was in the advertising department which meant that I was on the streets of

Whittier daily. Oh, this goes back as far as 1925, I guess, or something like that. I can't recall.

ARENA: Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, the President's father, moved into the area in 1922. So it was definite that somewhere along that line, you possibly ran ads and met him personally in that connection, with his store?

GARMAN: I don't recall that they used the Whittier News for their ads at that time. But in shopping, in and out of the store, I'm sure that I met him sometime during those years.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if there was at that time an East Whittier newspaper, such as East Whittier Review?

GARMAN: No. There was a newspaper in the early '30's. Santa Fe Springs [California], you know, was discovered about 19. . . . Oh, my, the date gets away from me now. Well it was discovered down there, you probably have the record of it, and then there was a paper. The Whittier News was the only paper in Whittier. It was called the Whittier News at that time and it was, as you know, owned by Rex Kennedy and Harry Holdsworth, who is my uncle--Harry was. I worked on the newspaper from about 1920 to 1930. There was one other newspaper that established after Santa Fe Springs was discovered and we had an influx of oil people in town. It was called, I think, the Santa Fe Springs Review.

ARENA: As far as you know is that still in existence?

GARMAN: No. But there was an interesting thing about that, and it shows you how an alert management--if you want to go back into the Whittier News thing, I don't know if you want it or not--handles a situation like that. This ties up with what you said, is there another newspaper. This other newspaper came to town and was getting some business and Holdsworth conceived the idea of running what he called a shopper and this was a shopper--there's a lot of them at the present day you know, newspapers that are throw away--but they offered the merchants a combination rate. They used the Whittier News for an ad, then they could pick up that ad at a very low rate and run it in the shopper which was sent out once a week. This, I guess, made it rather difficult for the Santa Fe Springs paper to catch on, so it wasn't around too awfully long. This is a digression that. . . .

ARENA: Well, it helps to throw light on the background of the world and the community in which the Nixons lived, and I think that's important. When was the first occasion that you recall, say, more clearly having a dialogue or having discussions with President Nixon?

GARMAN: Except for these casual acquaintances, when he was established, I ran the Poinsettia Restaurant right across the street which is now this paint store right on the alley.

ARENA: What would the intersection be, or the precise number, so there's no confusion for the person who's not from this area?

GARMAN: The number now, I don't know what it would be, it would be changed. It's right on the alley between. . . . It's on the north side of Philadelphia [Street] on the west side of the alley between Greenleaf [Avenue] and Bright [Avenue]. The building is still there, of course. But I had that restaurant and Mr. Nixon's office was right across the street from there. He was a customer and I'd see him occasionally from that point of view.

ARENA: Do you recall his coming personally to get food and would he eat it there or bring it up to the office, or did the secretary, or both?

GARMAN: I don't know. I don't think the secretary did. He would come in, I think, for occasional meals and maybe a coke or something. It used to be quite a habit--I don't think he was involved in this particularly--but like in most towns there's a gathering place of business people and professional people for a coffee in the morning, you know around 10:00, and this was one of the things that he might have joined, I can't pin it really.

ARENA: Since he was just starting out in law at that time the date would be about 1937, 1938, of course. He was just beginning his law practice then.

GARMAN: This was before that. I had that from 1930 to 1933, and it's very possible that maybe he wasn't in the law practice at that time.

ARENA: Well, I know that he graduated from [Duke University] Law School in 1937. He was in Whittier College between 1930 and 1934. He might have been in there during those college years.

GARMAN: He could have.

ARENA: The other time he would be mostly out of the city as he was at Duke University on the East Coast. That would be the second occasion--again as you say casual--but you recall his coming into the store for that purpose.

GARMAN: The recollection is not what I could say vital, I don't recall, like we had so many kids come down, or students come in and out of the place that I don't know. This is hazy, that particular part. Particularly of his being a regular customer; I don't think this is so.

ARENA: Until what time did you have the store, Grant?

GARMAN: Between 1930 and 1933.

ARENA: That would definitely leave the law business out, right. That would not be while he was a lawyer.

GARMAN: No.

ARENA: When is the next time after that?

GARMAN: I think the time that is most prominent in my memory is when he came in to read for that play.

ARENA: The name of that play?

GARMAN: "The Dark Tower."

ARENA: What do you recall about all of that? Just let yourself go, so to speak, in the sense of anything you want to bring up in that connection.

GARMAN: Like most amateur theatricals we had some difficulty in casting the parts. There were perhaps twenty-five or more people who used to like to come up for the readings all the time. Mrs. Louise Baldwin was director of the show. This was a play by Moss Hart and George Kauffman. There was the night of the reading for the parts and this--we met at various places for the reading--was a building on Washington Street right near the Saint Matthias [Episcopal] Church, where the Saint Matthias Church is now. But that was also the site of the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] and I believe this building was one that had been used for the Y, but I think the Saint Matthias Church used it sort of as a Sunday School annex or something. They kindly donated it to the Whittier Community Theater for rehearsals. This night we were in there and Patricia Ryan had come for a reading of the ingenue in the play. She was a teacher at that time at Whittier High School.

ARENA: I believe you mentioned that you had met her possibly before then in connection with chaperoning of dances.

GARMAN: Yes.

ARENA: That was before this time, the dancing business.

GARMAN: Yes. And we were, I think, good friends, good acquaintances because my wife worked so closely with her. Mrs. Baldwin, I guess had called [Richard] Nixon to ask him to come up and read for the part of this young juvenile lead, a juvenile part in the play. He was a playwright supposedly. As I recall it, we were standing around reading, and Mr. Nixon came in. Of course I knew him, and Pat Ryan was standing there and I think--but I can't swear to this and I wouldn't--that just in the ordinary sense of things being near the door I introduced them, Mr. Nixon and Patricia Ryan. Then you get rather closely acquainted during rehearsals. We used to rehearse four nights a week for about five weeks and then you'd have the show for two nights after that. So there was an association of rehearsing and so forth during all that time. I believe this was the time--in fact I'm sure of it--the first time that he had met Pat and I guess he was impressed. I think it was about two years before they were married, or something like that.

ARENA: At the time he was a lawyer.

GARMAN: At the time he was a lawyer, yes. This was 1938.

ARENA: How would you describe them each, physically, in your recollection? Even though we do have pictures of them of that period, but how about a picture from your mind as to their appearances, personality?

GARMAN: I was always impressed with Pat. Of course, she was thin. It doesn't look like she's changed any at the present time from what she was then. I thought her combination of her red hair and all was very impressive. She was a very beautiful, very pleasant person. A little shy it seemed to me at the time. Nixon was. . . . I always remember him as quite thin, very thin and quite intense really. Pleasant, however, and affable. He seemed to have a quick grasp of his lines and I guess you'd call him a quick study, I guess is the theatrical expression.

So the part went off good and there was one interesting thing. Pat had a place in the show where she was supposed to sing a little verse of a song called "Stormy Weather" and we'd go along in the rehearsal and everything would be going fine and everybody would have their lines after we got into the swing of the thing. The show would be rolling along fine and we'd come to this time where Pat was supposed to sing "Stormy Weather." She never could sing it, never could sing that line. The rehearsal would be hung up right there. So finally Mrs. Baldwin said "Now, just say it." I don't know whether she's ever sung anything else or not, I don't know. But she couldn't sing "Stormy Weather."

ARENA: How was the play received by the audience and who comprised the audience at that time?

GARMAN: We had as we do now, they have patrons and season ticket holders. As it still is, it's a struggle for a community group to get the season to hang together so you don't lose money at the end. We had perhaps fifty people who were patrons or season ticket holders and the cast would have to hustle out and sell tickets. It was the local business and professional people who supported it mainly. If we get a real good play, we'd get some outside audiences.

ARENA: Do you think there might have been any disadvantage in the fact that this was a Quaker community and the Quakers were not especially strong along the idea of supporting the theater, the movies, entertainment, your problems with dancing? Do you think that carried over into the theater end of things and was a disadvantage from the standpoint of selling tickets and having community support?

GARMAN: I think it could have a bearing on it, yes. But the difficulty still carries on. Of course, we didn't have the competition from the entertainment field that they have now. Now they have to overcome all of the television and so forth. Any local theatrical group does. It was a problem. We made some money on the program. This was always a good thing; I sold ads in the program for many years which helped support our theatre. Even in those days the royalties on the shows were quite big. It wasn't very big on "The Dark Tower" because this wasn't one of the most famous shows that Hart and Kauffman had ever written. But we had our regular patrons and they seemed to enjoy the shows.

ARENA: And when you say that Nixon had a juvenile part, was that the lead part as well?

GARMAN: No, it wasn't the lead. I would call it the juvenile lead. That's what you can call it, it was a juvenile lead in the show.

ARENA: Was he in any way temperamental, not on time for rehearsals, uncooperative in his part of coming out for rehearsals and working with the cast or the director?

GARMAN: No, never. I wasn't aware of anything like that.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask again what your particular function was, Grant, with the theater?

GARMAN: I was in many shows as an actor.

ARENA: Were you in this particular one, by any chance?

GARMAN: Oh yes. I was. . . . And then I was president of the Community Theater for a couple of years.

ARENA: Were you possibly one of the charter founders, or had that been in existence before you came?

GARMAN: No, it had been in existence before. I became, I guess, interested in the Community Theater in the '30's, middle '30's perhaps. But it had been going on for, I can't recall offhand just exactly when.

ARENA: Was the presence of Hollywood [California] any special significance, the nearby presence of Hollywood?

GARMAN: I think in a way. We had scouts come to our shows once in a while. Nothing to my knowledge ever happened about it, but there was an awareness, I believe, of the possibility that somebody would come out and be impressed. It was being done you know in Pasadena [California] and I guess the other community groups, amateur groups. There was a possibility that somebody would be seen.

ARENA: I believe one of the famous picture magazines showed pictures of Pat Nixon appearing in some bit parts in the movies. Was this during the period she was out here in Whittier and would you know anything about that?

GARMAN: No, I don't know. It might have been before she came to teach at the high school. I don't know.

ARENA: Was there anything like a continuing social interaction between the actors as well as people like you who were a part of the administration of the theater? Were there ongoing get-togethers that had nothing to do with acting, but say possibly trips to attend plays in Los Angeles [California] and so forth?

GARMAN: Not to my knowledge, no. There was generally a little party after the shows--not all of them but most of them. There would be a small party after the last performance where you would have light refreshments. But as a rule this did not bring on much further personal activity. I think it did in the President's and Pat's case because it ended up in marriage.

ARENA: Do you happen to know if he played in any other plays after that?

GARMAN: I recall that he played the "Night of January 16th," I believe it was. That was a mystery and he had the part of an attorney, I can recall and I'm still impressed by the way he plead his case in that show. I think he was in one other, but I don't recall what it was.

ARENA: I don't suppose any movies or any other thing like that was taken of the plays. There was no attempt to put them on film, other than maybe just stills, snapshots.

GARMAN: That's all. Most of the shows we had a photographer and he took some pictures for publicity and things like that.

ARENA: To what extent was Nixon typical or not typical of the amateur player of your group? For example, were there other lawyers, were there other professional people who would come out?

GARMAN: Oh, yes. We had Wallace Black, for instance, who was an attorney. He had a lot of activity in the theater. The director had this problem of getting people that wanted to and could give the time for the play. And you had to become a ham to even want to go out for it. So she had a list of a cross section of people, I think, of all professions and all activities that she could call on.

ARENA: By she, that would be Mrs. Baldwin?

GARMAN: Mrs. Baldwin, yes, that she could call on, and this is how she got Mr. Nixon involved.

ARENA: Then she's the one that got him involved.

GARMAN: Oh, yes.

ARENA: In other words, it was on her part, her taking the time to inform him rather than his calling in or trying to find the group?

GARMAN: I'm sure she must have called him, because this is what generally happened. Whether he had told her call me if there's a part of something like that, I don't know.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if Mrs. Baldwin is still living?

GARMAN: No, she isn't.

ARENA: Would you happen to know if Nixon appeared in any other plays with other groups, other communities?

GARMAN: I don't know.

ARENA: Following this close contact with the Nixons, did you have any others, after this period?

GARMAN: Personal contacts. . . . I have several letters which Pat wrote to my wife in a response, and I have a few letters from Mr. Nixon when he was Vice President and so on. I think I told you before of the contact I had with him in Chicago [Illinois] at the Rotary Convention.

ARENA: Would you review that just to make sure.

GARMAN: This is one of the experiences that proved to me his recall, his ability to recall incidents. I was President of Whittier Rotary [Club] at that time and this was in 1955 and the International Rotary Convention was in Chicago and he was Vice President, Mr. Nixon was Vice President of the United States at the time. He was the main speaker at the closing day of the convention. This is always the top feature of the Rotary Convention.

I thought that it would be nice as a speaker if we could meet him before he spoke and say hello and exchange greetings. I had taken--I noticed that he'd carried most of his speeches in a manila folder--and I had occasion to get a nice little leather briefcase and I took that along with me, thinking maybe this would be of some help to him.

Well, anyway, we had to get cleared--the secretary of the club and I--by the secret service and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] before the appointment was set up and it was set up then, some hour or something like that before he was to speak. It was at the Chicago auditorium; we were there at the time and cleared our people with those people at least. At the appointed time Mr. Nixon came down in one of the underground passages of the auditorium and came up to us very animated and, of course, very cordial and shook my and and said, "Have you been in any plays lately?"

Now this was 1955 and, of course, I'd seldom seen him since our play in 1938. This is an example to me of his ability to recall incidences that impress people. So, I gave him this little briefcase and we had a nice visit and so forth. As I recall he made a magnificent speech at the convention. And that is the last personal contact that I have had.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you recall when you did have the most contact, which was during this play, this rehearsal, its production in 1938, what you did talk about? Was it strictly always the theater or were there discussions about other things, his personal life, his family, his interests, his background, his past?

GARMAN: No, I think it was mainly about the theater. I was aware, of course, at that time of his law practice and knew [Thomas W.] Tom Bewley and I did some business with them, but I did this with Tom.

ARENA: Did you, by any chance, hear him in court? Did you ever attend any trials where possibly he was speaking?

GARMAN: No.

ARENA: Did you, in discussing the question of your business, ever recall buying pies for your store from the Nixons?

GARMAN: No. We made our own pies.

ARENA: His mother continued to make them and continued to sell them up to the first year he was in law practice. Do you recall ever eating in the Nixon market at the luncheon counter, too?

GARMAN: You mean the later one?

ARENA: I understand they had first a little counter in the original one there in East Whittier. It was a very minor one.

GARMAN: Yes, they did. They had a little counter there.

ARENA: Do you recall the parents and meeting with them personally or at any time--not only then. I was just wondering what your recollections of Frank, the father, and Hannah, Mrs. Nixon, were?

GARMAN: No. Again, as I recall it would be just sort of a casual acquaintance. I think an awareness that they were around more than anything else. I had no real personal contact with them.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you, of all the things you do remember about your personal contact with the President during the theater period and afterwards, what things stand out from the standpoint of recalling events? What particular events stand out or personality traits?

GARMAN: I think the thing that I was always aware of it seemed to me he always impressed me as serious and quite intense. These are the two qualities that I recall mainly.

ARENA: Were these the qualities that were needed in the play and in the roles in which he took part?

GARMAN: Not particularly in the one "The Dark Tower." He was supposed to be a rather sophisticated playwright who was hoping for success of his play. But the one, "Night of January 16th," I could see him in a courtroom in that. It was done that way. It seemed to be a perfectly natural sort of a thing.

ARENA: This is a question that only a person like you could answer--and I wonder if you will--recalling his public appearances, public speaking ability at that time and the speaker that he is today. I'm sure you've seen him on TV [television] as we all have. What is the change, if any, what similarities, if any, do you find in the Nixon of your theatrical period days, say 1938, and the Nixon of 1971? Do you find some things are very strongly reminiscent of that period? Do you find things that are fairly new?

GARMAN: This is a rather difficult thing for me to recall. My impression to tell you is that he seemed to me at the time to be more natural than he is now. I think he--and probably rightly so--has improved or polished his appearances as he does it now. The one particular part that he played that I was impressed with was of this attorney, and to me it was very convincing. So, he is more polished and learned a tremendous amount of ways to appear before the millions that he has to. And particularly recently he seems to me in appearances, he's adopted a policy of great reserve and quiet strength. At least this is the way he comes over to me.

ARENA: Again, only a person like you could answer this question. I'd like to have your opinion on it. How has acting affected, helped his overall personality, anyone for that matter, in your opinion?

GARMAN: How has acting, training you mean?

ARENA: By acting I mean the training, the rehearsal, the plays. How has that overall activity been of value to him in particular, but to anyone?

GARMAN: In my opinion, the greatest thing that makes an actor, separates an actor from a reader or a real ham, is a sense of timing. In acting, timing is everything. Great actors and great actresses have a innate, sometimes natural but sometimes cultivated sense of timing. It seems to me that Mr. Nixon has developed that well--timing in the way he speaks. He doesn't necessarily have to go to great emphasis or raise his voice and shake his head and pound his fist to get over the points he wants to make. He's doing it by timing.

ARENA: From your having heard the President speaking from a prepared text and seeing him again in TV or in person, and having seen and heard him without a text--and I guess that would be really what acting is all about, you have memorized your text so to speak--then there would be the third category of spontaneity. How would you assess him in those three different categories?

GARMAN: I think spontaneity is his greatest strength to me. He has a great grasp and a great feeling for spontaneous conversation. How deeply he's planned these things I don't know, but he comes up with tremendous impact because of his recall, if it's somebody he's met before or has studied or been briefed or whatever it happens to be.

I would prefer, and I think his great strength is extemporaneous speaking. His speech the other night on Phase Two was in my opinion quite staged and maybe purposely so, I don't know. He's had a lot of coaching, I'm sure, for his TV appearances. But to me his greatest charm is his ability to speak extemporaneously, and his warmth comes through then and all that. So of the three, that to me would be the strong point of Mr. Nixon. This is why, I guess, he's such a tremendous campaigner in the open.

ARENA: A moment ago you mentioned the difference between a reader and a ham. Just to make sure that the non-actor layman such as myself is aware of this, what is a reader?

GARMAN: When I was talking about a reader, one that has a part and just reads the lines with either no expression or overexpression, overemphasis, no timing. In that context of a reader, I don't mean someone who really reads well. I've seen Charles Laughton read from the Bible--perhaps you have too--and I've never heard anything like it in my life. Now there is a reader, but he's an actor. By a reader, I mean one who is not particularly skilled in the art of language. And a ham is one who overdoes most everything, overdoes his gestures, expression and so forth. Now to me, I don't say readers don't understand the art of timing, but my point is made simply to emphasize what is the greatest asset of anyone before the public. To me they would want to develop either the art or the knack of timing. And he's doing it pretty well in the reading of his speeches.

ARENA: Is there anything I haven't brought up that you would like to mention or cite as this interview comes to a close, Grant?

GARMAN: No, I don't believe so. I think we've covered it. You wanted--and I forgot to get it for you--the names of those people in that dance class. Do you still think you have an interest in that?

ARENA: More for the local history end of things. It would be interesting to pass on to the local Historical Society.

GARMAN: I see.

ARENA: Thank you very much for this second interview.

GARMAN: Thank you.