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Elva Urich (April 28, 1971)

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Oral History Interview

with

MRS. ELVA URICH

April 28, 1971
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena
Mrs. Evelyn Dorn

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: We are in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Urich, Mrs. Elva Urich. Mrs. Evelyn Dorn and Dr. C. Richard Arena interviewing. This is Wednesday, April 28, 1971. Mrs. Urich, do you remember any experiences with Mrs. Hannah Nixon, the President's mother, that indicates the type of person she was as you recall?

URICH: Well, yes, I think I remember quite a few things about Mrs. Nixon. I think one of the things I remember most is the fact that she never ever criticized anyone regardless what they did to her or said about her or her family, even Richard [Nixon]. She never criticized them for what they said. She wished they wouldn't say these things about him that they did in the papers, but she never said anything to criticize them for it.

ARENA: Did you know Mrs. Nixon when she was working in the store or making and selling pies, by any chance?

URICH: No, I didn't know her then.

ARENA: This was the period after her husband, Mr. [Francis Anthony] Frank Nixon, had retired from business.

URICH: Yes.

ARENA: I see. Do you recall her visiting relatives in the Eastern part of the United States?

URICH: I--we were back on their farm in Pennsylvania one time, and I don't remember what year that was in, then they took us from there to Richard's home.

ARENA: Did Mrs.--I beg your pardon--did Mrs. Nixon seem happy living on the East Coast, or did she miss California, and seemed anxious to return here.

URICH: Well, I think she preferred living in California. Mr. Nixon liked Pennsylvania very much, but I believe Mrs. Nixon preferred living out here closer to her children--the rest of her children. At that time, however, I guess, Eddie [Edward Calvert Nixon] was living in Pennsylvania also. He wasn't even married at this time, he was living with them.

ARENA: Do you recall Mrs. Nixon mentioning any particular financial difficulties in having to live in the East Coast because of any financial problems, or was it mainly to be with her son, Dick?

URICH: I think that was the main reason that she was staying there.

ARENA: At that time was the other son, Donald [Francis Donald Nixon] living in Southern California and running the business?

URICH: Yes, yes, he was.

ARENA: Did Donald come and visit the family any time while you were there by any chance?

URICH: We went with Don. We flew to Detroit [Michigan] and picked up two cars. He picked up a car and we picked up one and we drove on to their home in Pennsylvania at that time.

ARENA: Do you recall if Mrs. Nixon at this age, when you knew her, seemed to be a fussy type of person? Did she seem to be a person who would spend a lot of time, say, with clothing--shopping for clothes, in fixing her hair--or was she a person who just did not spend too much time with these things?

URICH: No, Mrs. Nixon lived for her family, and she thought of herself least of anyone, I believe. It was all for her family that she lived for--taking care of her family and Mr. [Frank] Nixon.

ARENA: Did Mr. Frank Nixon, who now seemed retired, seem to be impatient? Did he seem to lose his temper, maybe in discussing politics, maybe in the early years when the boys were young? Is there any signs that he still had a temper at this period?

URICH: Not when I was there. He--Mr. Nixon--liked me. I would go out, and he always acted like he was just really glad to see me, and I never ever heard him lose his temper.

- ARENA: Do you recall his discussing any of the political events that involved his son, President Nixon, at that time, and at this occasion caused him to lose his temper?
- URICH: Yes.
- ARENA: Do you remember any particular incident, possibly, in which that happened?
- URICH: No, I don't remember anything in particular, but I do know that he would become upset over things that were said about him and printed about him in the paper.
- ARENA: Was it things that were said about President Nixon, or the Nixon family itself?
- URICH: About President Nixon, this was after he was in politics, the articles that were in the paper about he--he was kinda upset about that.
- ARENA: When Mrs. Nixon returned here you would frequently assist her--taking her shopping and things like that. Do you recall that she would discuss that in any way?
- URICH: Well, I would go out--she didn't like to leave Mr. Nixon--so I would go out and set her hair for her. I'm not a beauty operator, but I can do hair almost as good as a beauty operator can. At first she felt like she was imposing on me to ask me to do it. She never asked me, I always volunteered to do it for her, and she liked the way I did it and it always looked nice. And Mr. Nixon liked it, and he'd say how pretty he thought she looked after I'd get through with her. So then it got so where after Richard was, I guess he was running for Vice President at this time, and then she needed to have her hair done because she was invited out to so many places. I would always go out and fix it for her before she would go to any of these luncheons or dinners or anything that she was invited to.
- ARENA: Do you recall that she, in attending some of these affairs, was called upon to make long speeches or even just a few comments at the time?
- URICH: She talked some. I don't know how long a speech she made, but I know that she was called upon to make some speeches.
- ARENA: You might or might not be aware that in the Milhous background there were some lady preachers. Was there any indications to you that Mrs. Hannah Nixon had any leanings or seemed to enjoy public speaking herself, by any chance?
- URICH: I never heard her speak. I know she was a well-educated woman and did express herself very well, but I never heard her speak.

- ARENA: Do you possibly ever recall her attending any of her school reunions? I understand she did go to Whittier College or possibly Whittier Academy before it became a college.
- URICH: No, she never mentioned that to me.
- ARENA: Did you ever happen to be in the presence of Mrs. Hannah Nixon when she and some of her other sisters--relatives--got together, and do you recall the way they acted, in the sense where there were these family reunions? Do you recall any of this ever happening when you were present?
- URICH: I was never at a family reunion, but Olive was out at her house quite often when I was there.
- ARENA: And, of course, Olive is Mrs. [Rose] Olive Marshburn, also of Whittier.
- URICH: Yes.
- ARENA: What type of way would you describe Mrs. Nixon's hair? Was it hard to work on? Would it be the type of hair that would be straight--considered straight hair? Was it difficult to manage?
- URICH: I gave her permanents, so it wasn't straight. It was very lovely hair to work on, easy to handle.
- ARENA: Would it remain fixed for a couple of days, or did it need attention, possibly . . .
- URICH: Yes, I usually did it once a week for her, unless she was going someplace special.
- ARENA: Was there any particular clothing that she preferred, any particular color, do you recall?
- URICH: She depended on Clara Jane [Lemke Nixon] that's Don's wife, for all of this, and she said many, many times that she never had a daughter of her own, but if she had of had one that they could never have been any better to her than what Clara Jane was to her--to help her. Clara Jane had very good taste, and she helped her with all of her clothing and the jewelry and accessories and things that she needed to wear when she'd go to these dinners and luncheons.
- ARENA: Did you get the impression that Mrs. Nixon did not like to shop--she was bothered by that?
- URICH: Well, I don't really know. Clara Jane took her shopping mostly for clothing, or else Clara Jane would bring things to her to see if she liked it.

ARENA: Do you recall Mrs. Nixon liking to drive? Did she drive by the way?

URICH: Yes, she drove.

ARENA: But you would drive her in her older years?

URICH: No, she drove up until she became--I took her places, yes, but . . .

ARENA: But she could have gone herself, but she preferred to go with someone.

URICH: Yes, very active. Oh, yes.

ARENA: I see. Do you recall any of the homes in which she lived that she particularly enjoyed? I believe she lived in several homes in Whittier as well as, of course, Yorba Linda.

URICH: The last home that they lived in when Mr. Nixon died--she loved that place very, very much.

ARENA: What is the address, Mrs. Urich?

URICH: Gee, I can't remember. It was on . . .

ARENA: Beach Boulevard.

URICH: Yes, Beach Boulevard. I don't remember the number.

ARENA: Right here in Whittier. [La Habra, California]

URICH: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall, possibly, Mrs. Nixon--Hannah Nixon--ever receiving or writing to relatives in Indiana?

URICH: No.

ARENA: I believe that's where her father was born and where he left to settle in Whittier--Butlerville [Indiana]--possibly. Do you recall Mrs. Hannah Nixon having anything to do with students? Didn't President Nixon himself have students home from time to time, or he belonged to the Orthogonian Society at Whittier College? Do you recall if there were any get-togethers like that in which Mrs. Nixon acted as hostess, etc.

URICH: No, that was before I knew her well.

ARENA: By that time President Nixon had graduated from college?

URICH: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall if Mrs. Hannah Nixon or Mr. Frank Nixon did any Sunday school teaching?

URICH: No, I don't recall that.

ARENA: I believe he did it as a young man--a young married man. I don't know how long he continued this Sunday school teaching. I don't know if he did any of it in Whittier. Do you recall the particular church they attended in Whittier?

URICH: Yes, they attended one. It was on Whittier Boulevard, the Friends church on Whittier Boulevard.

ARENA: Was this the church called East Whittier Friends Church? Do you recall her minister possibly visiting them, a Mr. [R. Ernest] Lamb, by any chance?

URICH: I was out there when he visited when Mr. Nixon was so ill, but I wasn't in the room at the time. Richard's children were there at this time, and I was helping take care of them until they got back from San Francisco [California]. They were up there, and Mrs. Nixon was taking care of them, and Mr. Nixon came so ill, and the minister was out there.

ARENA: And that minister's name was Mr. Lamb, you believe?

URICH: Yes.

ARENA: How would you describe--if you recall--the way in which Mrs. Nixon held up under the strain of her husband's illness?

URICH: Well, very well. I remember the newspaper men all being there, and they even came in the room and took pictures. I don't believe she liked that too well, and I don't see how she could have let them do it, but there again, she didn't want to do or say anything that would hurt Richard in any way. I believe that was one of the reasons that she went along with them, but they even just came right in the room and took pictures while he was sick in bed there.

ARENA: Do you recall how she was on the day of the passing away of Mr. Frank Nixon, and how she held up the period following? Did she need any special attention herself, say, special medical attention?

URICH: No, I don't believe so. I wasn't there at the time that he passed away, but I was out there afterwards quite a lot, and it was just remarkable the strength that woman had, I

think, because she gave everyone else courage and strength, instead of you giving to her, it seemed to me.

ARENA: Do you recall to what extent she lived with any of the boys and their wives after Mr. Nixon passed away, or did she continue to live alone, do you know?

URICH: She lived alone. She didn't want to live with her children. She preferred staying alone.

ARENA: Was this in the house that she enjoyed also? She remained in that house that she did enjoy.

URICH: Up until the time that she wasn't able, they felt, for her to stay out there alone, because it was a large house and then she moved into a smaller home on Whittier Boulevard.

DORN: At that particular time after Mr. Nixon's death when she stayed there, that was the time that she was nervous at night, and would go over and stay with Hazel Burnett at night . . .

URICH: Yes.

DORN: . . . and then come back in the morning.

URICH: There were prowlers. There were prowlers out there, and they found footprints around the house.

DORN: And they found cigarette butts in her car one morning, so that's why she decided . . .

ARENA: Something must have frightened her. Do you recall the different societies or clubs that Mrs. Hannah Nixon belonged to, such as the Red Cross or her church groups? Do you recall attending any of these affairs with her?

URICH: No, I never.

ARENA: Is that because you think she did not, or you just don't know? She was an active person socially, do you think? Mrs. Dorn, do you have any recollection?

DORN: Well, I took Mrs. Nixon to many of these things a great deal. She belonged to the Blue Star Mothers, and I took her to several of those meetings, and she was an honorary member, I believe, of the Red Cross, and she attended some functions up at Whittier College, and she was invited a great many places. And at that particular time, why, Mr. and Mrs. Simon Fluor had provided a chauffeur-driven car for Mrs. Nixon's use, and when she wanted to

go anywhere we would just call for the car and the chauffeur would come after us. [Chimes in background] I took her to many of these social affairs.

ARENA: Did Mrs. Nixon enjoy TV, the movies, or attending school plays? Either Mrs. Urich or Mrs. Dorn, do you recall what type of entertainment she did prefer?

URICH: She read a lot, I know that.

DORN: She read a lot, and she wrote a lot of letters because her mail was so heavy.

URICH: And she answered all of these letters that people would write up things about Richard Nixon. I think she answered all of those herself, didn't she?

DORN: Well, many of them she did, yes, and then it got so there were too many.

ARENA: Do you recall any particular letter that she mentioned that made an impression--that she talked about with you, Mrs. Urich? Do you recall any particular correspondence that seems to stand out?

URICH: She had a letter from Eddie that I think meant more to her than any letter that she ever had from anyone, and he mentioned something about how much he loved his mother, and how much a generation gap that there was, the difference in their ages, as he was a much younger child than the other, and that letter meant very, very much to her.

ARENA: Do you recall where and how old Ed was at the time? Was he back in Pennsylvania?

URICH: This was just before he was married; I don't know how old he was.

ARENA: Then he had . . .

URICH: (To Mrs. Dorn) Did you ever find that letter?

DORN: Yes, we have that letter in this material. It is a beautiful letter, and he says something in there about the family, the reason that they had been able to reach the heights of some member of the family, meaning, of course, Richard, was the fact that his mother and father had both pulled on the oars.

ARENA: Had Mr. Nixon, Frank Nixon, passed away when that letter was written, do you recall?

URICH: No, he was still alive when it was written.

ARENA: I understand, also, that Mrs. Hannah Nixon liked to write poetry. Do you recall ever reading her poetry or her reading any of her poems to you? I believe that Mrs. Olive Marshburn also wrote some poetry.

DORN: Yes, Olive did. But the grandmother, Almira Milhous wrote a book of verse.

URICH: I don't recall Mrs. Nixon writing poetry, but she certainly wrote lots of prose--beautiful things.

ARENA: Do you recall if there were any special events that took place in Whittier that she particularly enjoyed attending? I'm thinking, for example, something like Founders' Day or any particular event that comes to mind that you recall her enjoying very much.

URICH: No, I don't remember.

ARENA: You don't recall you taking her, for example, to something like the Ramona Pageant or the Festival of Roses in Pasadena [California]? Do you happen to know if she ever attended anything like that possibly?

URICH: No. When Mr. Nixon became ill, Mrs. Nixon went out very little.

DORN: No, she didn't socialize much at all. She took care of Mr. Nixon.

URICH: I recall that she did attend a meeting--of course this was in later years--of Billy Graham's that she enjoyed very much.

ARENA: Did she meet him personally?

URICH: Oh, yes, yes.

DORN: He came to her funeral.

URICH: He spoke at her funeral, but she had met him on several occasions.

ARENA: Do you recall some of the comments that Reverend Billy Graham made at her funeral, if you were there?

URICH: We were in Canada. We were not there. We did not know Mrs. Nixon had died until two days' later.

ARENA: Do you know if those comments were kept, or they were written down and possibly someone might some day acquire them?

I'm sure the newspapers must have repeated something. I am just wondering if there might be a full written text which would be worth looking for.

DORN: No. The morning of her funeral, he telephoned. I think he was in Texas, and he offered to come, or said he wanted to come to the church and, of course, the other minister was there.

ARENA: You wouldn't happen to know the very first occasion when Mrs. Nixon and Billy Graham met, Mrs. Dorn?

DORN: No, I don't know that it was the first, but I do recall that he was speaking in Los Angeles [California] and she was taken over there. I don't know whether the President took her over or who took her over, but I remember her telling me she had met him personally. Clara Jane could tell you that.

ARENA: She was quite impressed by him--you recall that?

DORN: Yes. Oh, yes.

ARENA: Were there any other national leaders or any particular movie actors, as you recall, that she enjoyed, or particular authors that she enjoyed meeting?

DORN: Well, I recall she was very fond of Jeannette MacDonald, who was very kind to Mrs. Nixon. And I think Irene Dunne-- I think she had met her a few times.

ARENA: Actually had them at her home, possibly.

DORN: No, no. I think this was during a rally or that sort of thing. I know she met Jeannette MacDonald several times and she had written Mrs. Nixon a letter that I had answered for her, and then she met Mr. [James P.] Mitchell who represented President [Dwight David] Eisenhower at Mr. Nixon's funeral.

ARENA: Did she seem to enjoy meeting these people too? She didn't consider it an imposition in any way? She enjoyed being with people and attending these different political dinners and political affairs?

DORN: Oh, no, she loved people.

ARENA: How did she seem to handle the impolite reporter or impolite person? Could she lose her temper at times with any of these people?

URICH: No.

DORN: No.

ARENA: In contrast with Mr. Frank Nixon, do you recall, possibly, he might have lost his temper with some impolite reporters?

URICH: I never heard him.

DORN: I recall one time a reporter from Washington arrived, and I went out to the house to be there while Mrs. Nixon had this interview and there were two or three people who arrived, and this one particular woman, I remember, she came into the room and said, "Well, Mrs. Nixon, what makes you think your son will make a better President than John F. Kennedy?" So I said, "Well, let's keep this thing on generalities, and no questions like that," because that's the reason I was there, to help her out a little bit. She was just as sweet as could be, you know.

ARENA: She seemed to be a person who had marvelous control of her emotions. I hear that from everyone.

DORN: Elva, did you ever see her weep, did you ever see Mrs. Nixon cry?

URICH: No, never.

DORN: I haven't either. I've seen people all around crying, but I've never seen Mrs. Nixon cry.

URICH: No, I never did see her weep.

ARENA: Do you recall her mentioning her mother, Almira [Burdg Milhous] in any particular occasion? Now I realize that you did not meet her, but was there something that she liked to recall about her, or some particular incident?

DORN: No, I don't remember. She never talked to me about her mother.

ARENA: Do you recall that business problems or business affairs in any way upset her? Did she seem to be worried--the needs . . .

DORN: If she was, you never knew about it.

ARENA: You wouldn't know it. Of course, she had lived through some very hard times on the farm, and the early years at Whittier, and while she was looking after her two sons who did die. Do you recall her mentioning her two sons, Harold [Samuel Nixon] and Arthur [Burdg Nixon] who had died?

DORN: Oh, yes, she talked about them quite often.

ARENA: In what way, do you recall; how would she bring them up?

URICH: Well, just recalling little things that they did when they were children, and how they played, or little things that they said. I don't remember anything now that she told me that they said, but she had this picture of her four sons--and I think Lawrence [Nixon] Don's daughter, has that now--and she always had that hanging in the hall where you could see it when you went up the steps, and she was very proud of that and she talked about that quite often.

DORN: That was one of those panels, and then Clara Jane took that and had the fifth boy put on it.

URICH: Eddie? I didn't see it after that.

DORN: So that it was done in one panel. That's on file too down there.

ARENA: Did she in any way ever gossip about other people?

URICH: Never--never about anyone.

ARENA: Do you recall in meeting other people--and you don't have to mention any names--but do you recall other people gossiping about her?

URICH: I never heard anyone saying anything bad about Mrs. Nixon, never. Never have. I don't think they would have any call to say anything against her because she was always so sweet and gentle.