

FAWN M. BRODIE

Richard  
Nixon

The Shaping of  
His Character

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EDITOR

*The City of the Saints and Across the Rocky Mountains to California* by Richard F. Burton

in Whittier, not Yorba Linda. If the mother's memory was fragile, the story was sturdy, and found its way into all the Nixon biographies.

In grammar school, Nixon, like many shy boys, relied on memorizing in order to shine. He learned the whole of the episode in *Tom Sawyer* where Tom slyly beguiles Ben Rogers into painting his fence, and never forgot it. When Cyril Clemens, a Mark Twain kin, visited him as president, Nixon took pleasure in reciting it all, without error. Afterward, he said to Clemens, "Any boy who has read *Tom Sawyer* with enjoyment and appreciation . . . will not ever become a juvenile delinquent."<sup>14</sup>

He graduated as valedictorian from the East Whittier grammar school, another important "first" in his life. He had picked up a taste for debating—"Cows are better than horses"; "Insects are more beneficial than harmful"—and when he went on to high school he continued to debate, as well as entering speech contests that won him prize money. As a senior he took a part in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which won him his first girlfriend. As Ola Florence Welch, a pretty and popular senior, described it later,

Aeneas is a wanderer who comes to Carthage and falls in love with Queen Dido. At the end she throws herself on a bier. It was very romantic. We all wore white gowns. After that we started going together.

But it was an uneasy courtship. "He'd be harsh and I'd cry and then we'd make up," she said. Another classmate remembered, "He did not know how to be personable or sexy with girls. He didn't seem to have a sense of fun." "He was smart and set apart," Ola Welch, later Mrs. Gail Jobe, told a *Life* reporter. "I think he felt unsure of himself deep down."<sup>15</sup>

The failure to be "sexy" may well have been the most anguishing in his adolescence. But the only high school failure that he mentioned publicly as rankling him was his losing the election for student-body president.<sup>16</sup> All his school triumphs up to that point had come when he spoke from memory, or argued from a carefully prepared text, or acted in a play—when he was, in effect, someone other than himself. When it came to the test of group affection he failed.

Some former students remember him as prickly and aloof, others as aggressive and argumentative. Mildred Jackson Johns

remembers that some of the high school students "hated him." "He didn't care whose feet he trampled on," she said, and "to get his point across he wouldn't hesitate to twist the truth. Kids in school would tell me how he would elbow his way right through to anything he wanted."<sup>17</sup> His debate coach, Mrs. Clifford Vincent, was disturbed by his ability "to slide round an argument, instead of meeting it head-on."<sup>18</sup> Nixon noted with chagrin that the winning student-body president had been "an athlete and personality boy."<sup>19</sup> This may have been one more reason why, despite his small size, he took up football.

Every aspect of Nixon's adolescence and youth was complicated by the Nixon Market. The gas station built in 1922 had flourished, and Frank Nixon had expanded it by buying an abandoned Quaker church across the street and transforming it into a large country grocery store. Richard, in charge of the fruit and vegetable counter, drove twelve miles every morning at 4 A.M. into the big Los Angeles market. He learned to be a sharp trader, but hated the washing and sorting. "I never drive by a vegetable stand," he said later, "without feeling sorry for the guy who picks out the rotten apples."<sup>20</sup>

Had it not been for the presence of oil derricks in the area, stimulating fantasies of riches, the Nixon family might have found more contentment on the corner of Whittier Boulevard and Leffingwell Road. But profits in the Nixon Market were all measured in pennies. Compared with the sometimes-barren cupboard of the Yorba Linda house, the store was a treasure house of canned food, candy, meat, fruit, clothes, and toys. But every item was marked to be sold for profit. The unsold and overripe fruit was carried to the kitchen where the thrifty Hannah, and later Frank, rose at dawn to bake it into pies.

To give out food no longer represented an act of affection or charity; food was something to be exchanged for cash or credit. It became difficult for Richard to think of food except in these terms. His mother remembered that at church picnics, to which the Nixon family contributed generously, "he used to say people took home, from left overs, more food than they had brought with them in the first place."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, since one or two in the family had to serve in the store at all times, the Nixons almost never sat down together to eat except on Sunday. The family din-