

**OSCAR MARSHBURN ADDRESSING WHITTIER ROTARY CLUB
ON
“MY HOME TOWN FOR 70 YEARS”
MARCH 1, 1974**

This is a recording of a talk made before the Rotary Club of Whittier California on Friday, March 1, 1974 by Oscar Marshburn.

Introduction (by Mynatt Smith): Our speaker today, Oscar Marshburn, has a lot of friends in this room, and most of them came up during the lunch to tell him they were glad he was here and that they would have to leave at 1:00 (Laughter), some of whom are now departing. Oscar is an old old timer in Whittier. I doubt if there are very many who can match his record. He came here in the year 1903 as a youngster seven years old. His folks had emigrated out from North Carolina through Texas for a few years, which of course adds something to Oscar's background. He went through school here. His father was a doctor, Dr. William V. Marshburn, who practiced here until his death in 1938. Oscar went through the public schools here and got his degree at Whittier College in 1917 at a time when it was overpopulated with 150 students. He had gone into business with Earl Myer's dad, Earl Myers in a little grocery near the high school in 1916, and they were selling hamburgers for 5 cents apiece, which was a very popular student number. I think that's where the elder Earl and the younger Earl finally made the determination they were going into banking instead of the food business. Oscar went to France in 1918 to serve with the Red Cross during the war years there, and when he came home he bought the Poinsettia Pharmacy and ran it for a year and a half. Then in 1922 he started his insurance business, and he's still in it. On his wall, on his office wall hangs a plaque from the local insurance agent's association honoring him for fifty years in that organization. Oscar is a life-long Quaker, a member of the Friends Church; he's held many positions with the First Friends Church here. He was Clerk of the California Yearly Meeting for ten years. He served one term as Clerk of the Triennial Meeting of the national organization of Friends United in Richmond, Indiana, as recently as 1967-68. He has made three trips for the Friends organization to Africa. In 1961 he did some famine relief there among the Masai tribes, and in 1963 to 1965 he served as Administrator of the Friends Mission Hospital in Kenya. So he's got some background and information on Africa that's very fascinating. Here, he's been a very busy man. He served as a high school trustee for eleven years, 1933 to 1944. He's been president and secretary of his

insurance agent's association; he's served on the YMCA board. He was the Red Cross chairman here during the depression years back in, including 1933, the year of the big earthquake. He was chairman of the Los Angeles County Red Cross Chapter's organization that year. He's still on the Red Cross board today, and he started with the Red Cross in 1918. In 1942, one of his real chores was directing the civilian public service camp for conscientious objectors in the mountains near here. And in 1944-1945 he served in the Middle East, in Egypt, and in France with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. As you can see, he's been a busy man. He is an uncle of our president, and I'm happy to present to you, Oscar Marshburn. (Applause)

Mr. Marshburn:

President George, Chairman Mynatt Smith, my fellow townsmen, I thank you that my speech has a good deal been made when I get that rundown, if I could live up to that. However, I have a few other notes so I wouldn't wander too far from the text; I may read a portion of it. But I'm very happy to be with you gentlemen, many of you whom I've known and some of you may feel you've known me too long.

At any rate, in November, 1903, I left the house in which I'd been born seven years earlier. And with my family and three different conveyances we left for a new home that was new and unknown to me. My father and mother and the youngest child of the family took the fast horse and buggy and drove it in half the time it took us a little later. My two sisters and I followed in a two seated carriage, following a team of horses with a wagon of furniture and our household effects. We drove out through the town of Orange, Anaheim, Fullerton, over the hills to the Bastanchury Ranch this side of Fullerton, and then into the brown barley stubble fields of La Habra Valley. Pretty soon we reached the El Camino Real and went along it by Will Hold's ranch on the north, and pretty soon the new plantings of citrus and walnuts showed up. By then we had arrived where the Leffingwell Ranch was under operation already; it was on our left coming toward Whittier, and the Murphy Ranch was on our right. Coming on toward this town we reached Painter Avenue and turned north up the street, a dirt road, crossing over the wooden bridge that was a little south of Penn Street, right where the City Hall now stands. And to Philadelphia Street, down Philadelphia Street to Bright Avenue. And 150 feet south on Bright Avenue was where my home was to be for the next ten years. But this new place,

unknown to me, Whittier, was to be my hometown for more than seventy years.

This was a new world for me. There were electric lights in the windows of stores downtown, and downtown was only a block away. There were many things that were different. I had never been off of the nearer (?) area where I was born near Orange, and here I was in a new town. In the morning I might hear Mr. St. Johns call, who lived and operated the Whittier Hotel on the corner just north of us, call to Hallie, "Get up and feed your burro before you go to school." And I, too, had to get up and go over to Washington and down a couple of blocks to the Penn Street School, which had been built a year before. I soon made friends with the neighbor family boys, and they would include many that you know of and know about: the families of the Johnsons, the Crooks, the Sharplesses, Truebloods, and the Montgomerys. As the town center was only a block away at Greenleaf and Philadelphia, so the activities, changes, and excitement was virtually outside our door.

Going barefoot, I experienced splinters in my feet from the board walks used in town before being replaced by concrete walks. Within a year the town celebrated the coming of the big red cars, the Pacific Electric Railway and arriving at the station on Philadelphia Street just west of Greenleaf; it's now occupied by Newberry's Store.

Also I have vivid memory of the torchlight parade held in 1904 by the Boosters for the election of Theodore Roosevelt. They were impressive with their torches, red bandanas around their neck, and their big goggle horn-rimmed glasses. But their six-shooters with plenty of blanks was the thing that did impress me. I decided at the age of eight that there was only one party, the GOPs. I was not born a Republican nor a Democrat, as my father always registered as a Prohibitionist. But the only Democrat I knew looked to me like the cartoonist depicted in General Otis's *Los Angeles Times*. The *Times* has changed, like some other things, since then, however. (Laughter). A city lot was not supposed to confine a boy, at least not me. So I sought ways and means of earning some money. Once a week I would go to the office of the *Whittier Register* and fold the papers when they came off the press so that they would be ready to be put in the mail. The *Register* was an important weekly for several years but finally turned their assets to the *Whittier News* that would become a daily. But their editors, Herman Williams and his son, Harry Williams, and B.F. Arnold and his son, Jay Clem Arnold, left their footprints in the sands of journalism in the

southwest. Harry Williams was on the Whittier News staff awhile and then joined the *L.A. Times*; he was a popular sports writer for many years. Jay Clem Arnold went to Oakland and was with the *Oakland Tribune* and later back to Los Angeles with the *Los Angeles Herald*. These men had some impression on me, and I felt that I knew them. They were men who were helping form public opinion.

A neighbor of ours, W.L. Dresser, ran the Golden Rule Store, and once in a while he would have some handbills run off and get me to take them and put them in the front screen door of every house in Whittier. I figure there were nearly a thousand houses at that time, and he would pay me a dollar for doing the job. I don't know where else he could distribute his advertising for 1/10 of one cent per house any better. But neither did I know where I could make a dollar any better. (Laughter) Soon I became an agent for the *Saturday Evening Post*. It sold for 5 cents, and my profit was two cents. Before long I was selling more than fifty copies a week and my story to my prospects was "*Saturday Evening Post*, only a nickel, a half a dime; it keeps you reading all the time." I was not inhibited from entering doctors' and lawyers' offices as well as the bowling alley and Hearst's cigar store to sell magazines. But the back room of the pool hall was off limits to me. This gave me contact with the men about town, and while I had to take a certain amount of kidding, I seemed to thrive in the business. I think I learned much about people of different types, such as Paul Danninger, a young man who came as manager of the Gas and Electric Company. They were combined in one office, just west of Greenleaf on Philadelphia Street. Paul was all business and with a smile, but he'd buy a paper and that would be it. And then to the other side of the extreme, I remember C.W. Harvey. I don't know how many here remember C.W. Harvey; Dee Essley does and some few others. But at any rate, he was quite different from Paul. If he had time, he took lots of my time, but giving me a lot of advice about business and things to go with it. He was giving me practical lessons and probably I profited by them, so I do not want to seem ungrateful to C.W., because in the end he'd always buy the *Post* from me. C.W. was a builder, a promoter, a man with vision. He owned property in the north part of town, tried to center the town at Greenleaf and Hadley Streets by building a brick on each of the four corners. Many stories were told about C.W. and his various activities, including his ability to drive into a town, light up his torches, and start selling patent medicines from his buggy. I never saw him in this role, but I well remember the patent medicine vendors on our streets on a

Saturday night. I believe C.W. Harvey owned the *Whittier News* for a short time also.

Whittier was growing. Improvements were being made, sidewalks installed, and the dirt streets were graded and graveled with gravel and oil put on to control the ruts and the dust. Scott King with his teams and men had a major part in this effort. He operated the gravel pit at the east end of Camilla Street, where his wagons would load with gravel and haul it down to the streets being improved. Just a few days ago I was privileged to listen to a tape by Dr. Leland Hunnicutt living in Pasadena; a little younger than I, but he lived on north Painter Avenue. And in this tape he told about the blasting with dynamite to get the gravel loose up there on east Camilla. Thomas Armstrong and his wife, Sarah, lived in the first house and that house still stands on the corner of Camilla and Alta. And once in a while blasting was a little heavy and would blow a few rocks over onto their house. But Sarah Armstrong, the very lovely sweet old lady that she was, did not go over and threaten suit or anything like that. She mixed up a big pitcher of lemonade and took over to the men and workers that were hot in that gravel pit on that summer afternoon. So that was the type of people that we had.

Walter King was the son of Scott King, and he was well written-up by Erma Frodsham (sp?), a *Daily News* writer, and it appeared in last Saturday's *Daily News*.

The city voted sewer bonds, and sewers were built. Father had a bathroom built in our house with a real bathtub and a flush toilet so that the chick sales (?) we had on the rear of our lot could now be used as a shed for tools. Father, being a doctor, kept a nice driving horse on our lot also, while Dr. Johnson across the street owned the first automobile, a Locomobile. We also had a cow, and it was my job to stake her out on grass in the morning and bring her in in the evening. We had four acres on the corner of Painter Avenue and Ocean View Lane, which is now Mar Vista. And I ordinarily took the cow out there in the morning and bring her back in the evening, but some neighbors liked to have me put her on their vacant lot to help control the weeds. So I well remember staking our cow on the vacant lot where the William Penn Hotel now stands. And being a boy about town gave my father some concerns. I was not always able to walk the straight and narrow, but I managed fairly well to keep in the good graces of my family. I am thankful now for a rather close home life, with certain rules that I knew were to be followed. Our attendance at Sunday school and church was a foregone

conclusion. So that we could better abide by the commandment to “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Father would get up early on Sunday morning and go out and get the morning paper and bring it in and put it away so that we wouldn’t be tempted to read the funny papers on Sunday. (Laughter). The paper was available to us on Monday morning, however. Father was progressive and farsighted in many ways. His practice was heavy, and he joined with twenty-nine other citizens to form the Whittier Hospital Association. They obtained a large residence on the southeast corner of Painter and Broadway, remodeled the house some, and had an operating room built on. But the Association went in the hole and wasn’t able to continue quite a year when it had to close. It stood vacant for nearly another year when father felt the community needed the hospital, and so he leased it and opened it on December 1, 1908. Whittier has not been without a hospital since that time. My job was to mow the lawn and keep the leaves raked up. Father hired Martha Milhous as the head nurse, who later became my sister-in-law. Father’s operation of the hospital was to meet a need he knew so well existed. He ran it as a Christian institution. One time he needed another nurse on short notice, and he called the Nurses’ Exchange in Los Angeles; he asked them to send him a good Christian nurse. The answer from the other end was “their training usually knocks that out of them.” (Laughter).

In each decade I have lived in Whittier there have been persons in the various walks of life who seemed to be outstanding to me. It is dangerous to name names, as maybe some of the most outstanding will be missed. But I want to risk naming a few. Washington Hadley was back of every good movement in our city. I was only a boy, but I have vivid memories of him coming to his bank after he was ninety years old. One of the early benefactors of Whittier College, and I hope we will not sell short the influence of Whittier College on our community over the years. I think it absolutely essential that town and gown sustain each other. Without going into detail about each, I have some special memories of the Landreths, the Greggs, both A.H. and Wallace, the Barrs, O.H. and C.C., Truman Barry, Elsie Montgomery, Aubrey Wardman and Victor York. But lastly I do want to mention Rex B. Kennedy. I knew him as my friend because he was friendly. His column heard in the barber shop, was more widely read in that day in Whittier than Ann Landers is today. (Laughter). Rex Kennedy was always there when the community had a need or an emergency to be met. I was chairman of the Whittier chapter of the Red Cross during the Depression years, and some people never knew and some have forgotten the

real breach the Red Cross stepped into to alleviate suffering right here in Whittier. The door to Rex's office was always open to me within reason. A man who met the business world head on as circumstances warranted, but a man whose softness of spirit and real compassion ran deep within. Yes, I know he was your fellow Rotarian, and while you had many more like him, I did want to pay this tribute to my friend, who was my advisor, R.B. Kennedy. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Jintown Welfare Association, the PTAs and other groups coordinated their efforts. The Red Cross made some cash grants for grocery orders, operated the warehouse on Penn Street, where government flour, yardage, and cotton materials were distributed together with some surplus milk from the local dairies. The Red Cross accomplished this with volunteer help, except for a half time executive secretary and a man and wife team in charge of the warehouse to distribute articles on order. The cooperative gardens of Whittier was a big asset to the Depression years. When I was eleven years old, my brother-in-law, Leslie Siemen, was a conductor for the Pacific Electric. On occasions I would meet his car at the station when it arrived from Los Angeles and ride down Greenleaf to the car barn at Penn Street. This is when I met his motorman, Frank A. Nixon, and with whom I was later to become more involved. It was only a few months later that Frank met Hannah Milhous, and being the fast worker he was, soon claimed her for his bride. This still had little meaning for me, until three years later I met Hannah's youngest sister, Olive. Being younger in years than Frank and more timid, it took me seven years to consummate the marriage, (Laughter), when then I became Frank and Hannah Milhous Nixon's brother-in-law.

Before this happened, my father had moved to Yorba Linda. He became a widower, as mother died, and in a little more than a year he met a widow just arrived from Ohio. And she was Frank Nixon's stepmother. They soon married so that Frank's stepmother became my stepmother. What relationship did that make us? None, I guess. But we did feel our family ties very much when I became the brother-in-law. Olive and I have always said that Frank and Hannah were opposites in so many ways – he very much an activist and she the very quiet and thoughtful, reserved type. We also agree that their son Richard has many attributes from both his father and his mother. My father-in-law and mother-in-law, Frank and Elmira Milhous, were one of the most hospitable couples in Whittier. I suppose that made it easier for me to get into the family. Father Milhous was a successful rancher and nurseryman. They came to Whittier in 1897, and within five or six years he had located his two brothers and two sisters in Whittier on citrus

groves. Whenever he made a trip back to Indiana he invited his friends and relatives to come to California; and when they would come, "Come and stay with us." Many accepted, and some stayed for the winter. Father Milhous was known to be the last one to leave the Meeting House on Sunday to be sure there was no visitor left without a place to have dinner that day. And often there would be one or more guests to put their feet under the table at the family home on the County Road, now Whittier Boulevard.

When I was fifteen years old, I felt the need of earning more money for my education. Some of my older friends were raising citrus nursery stock to help plant the new orchards in north Whittier. But where could I plant a nursery? I went to Will Crook, a real estate man, and he found two lots on Friends Avenue, just a half block north of where the City Hall now stands. I bought those two lots for \$425, \$100 down which I had saved from working in Mills' Grocery the summer before; and \$100 to be paid each year until they were paid for. When the second payment became due, I had only \$25. (Laughter). I took up the matter with my father, and he told me, "The banks are in business to loan money." (Laughter). I went to A.C. Johnson at the Whittier National Bank and he loaned me the \$75 needed. I never knew whether there was collusion on the part of my father or not. I do know he impressed on me that to be prepared to pay interest and principal the day it was due. If I could not, I should go before the due date and see what arrangements I might make. I know that up to the present time, the banks have never had to send me a second notice.

During three years of my college work, I worked out of school in the Poinsettia Sweet Shop. This continued that part of my education to meet and know the men about town. This is when I first knew Aubrey Wardman. I hold and value an unsolicited letter from him, written many years later on my retiring as chairman of the Red Cross.

I have talked much about myself and not enough about you, you my fellow citizens. You have made our town. You have participated and encouraged the betterment of our community. You have also stood up to be counted when the going was rough. The panic of 1907 when scrip was used for money; the freeze of 1913, when many ranchers were hard hit, and this was a rural economy at the time. You have been counted when there has been a national disaster, and we have solicited funds for relief, be it a flood, famine, or earthquake. My heart was heavy as a trustee of the Whittier Union High School District when in the Depression we had to cut salaries so that some

teachers received only \$1,620 for a year's work. There was no strike or threatened strike. We were all in it together. We helped each other. We cared for one another. The war years, both WWI and WWII presented their problems. We had our differences, but we had our common goal. Through our institutions, service clubs and churches, we have acted for the good of all. This is why I am proud of Whittier, my hometown for seventy years. And this is why I predict a great future for the town and citizens of the town – because we do care for our neighbor and we care for each other. God bless you and our hometown. (Applause)

Transcribed: February 14, 2003