

PAT NIXON TODAY

Her best friends
talk about her
life behind the
walls at San Clemente.

By Kandy Stroud

Painting by Sherry Wolf



Pat Nixon stood proudly in the Los Angeles sun the morning of November 6, 1968. Her husband, Richard M. Nixon, had finally been elected President of the United States, and Mrs. Nixon was supremely triumphant, yet bitterness tinged her voice as she and I talked before we boarded our plane. "Of course I'm happy," she snapped in response to my question. "We deserved to win. We won in 1960, but the election was stolen from us."

I shall never forget that moment alone with Pat Nixon when a tiny corner of her soul was bared, when she exposed a flash of the resentment she had harbored silently for eight years. In the next seven years that I covered her as a White House correspondent, such feelings almost never surfaced again. Bitterness, anger, sorrow, embarrassment—all were veiled by a merry twinkle and a cheerful laugh. Patricia Ryan Nixon has never allowed herself the luxury of expressing her emotions. Pat Nixon suffers in silence. As her former social secretary, Lucy Winchester, puts it, "She's the proverbial Iron Butterfly."

The agony Pat Nixon endured throughout the long, painful months of the unfolding Watergate disclosures—and the excruciating sense of defeat she must feel today—are known only to a handful of intimates. This is an attempt to piece together how a proud, sensitive, valiant woman has survived one of the most tragic, most hu-

miliating personal and political scandals in American history.

From the very first Washington *Post* reports of the Watergate break-in in June, 1972, Pat Nixon followed the news carefully, calling her press secretary Helen Smith every morning to discuss the latest developments. "She was shocked," Mrs. Smith recalls, "but she always tried to rationalize things. She was saddened by what was happening, but she was always the optimist. She kept thinking it [Watergate] would go away, and wishing it would."

Clement Conger, the White House Curator who was helping Mrs. Nixon refurbish the Mansion and saw her at least twice a week, says she never discussed Watergate. "Sometimes I'd say I was so sorry about all the unpleasant distractions and she'd simply say, 'They're out to get us, Clem. They want us out of here. But it's all politics and it will go away.' She never seemed bitter and she always tried not to let it worry her."

Then came the discovery in July, 1973, that President Nixon had secretly taped all conversations that had taken place in his Oval Office. According to a friend, neither Mrs. Nixon nor her children had suspected until then how deeply Watergate reached into the White House. "She was appalled," says this friend, who asks to remain anonymous. "She couldn't believe the stupidity involved. She said the

tapes should never have been used in the first place—it's something you just don't do. She blamed H. R. Haldeman. They weren't the best of friends; she was convinced that Haldeman did many things without the President's ever knowing—and that this was just another. She never saw Haldeman again after the business of the tapes."

From that moment on, the reality of Watergate haunted her every step. She became a captive of the White House and its scandal—virtually cut off from the outside world. Even her excellent relations with the press deteriorated. "She understood the press and that it was their job to ask questions," says Helen Smith. "But she really didn't want to discuss Watergate with anyone. She said, 'What can I say? I believe in the President. And I can't say any more because I don't know any more.' Her loyalty was fierce."

As the morale of the White House staff plunged, Mrs. Nixon tried to inject some levity. "I'll never forget the Christmas of 1973," says Lucy Winchester. "Helene Drown [Pat Nixon's closest friend] sent the President the most hideous pair of six-inch platform shoes, and Pat got a pair in green. She called me up and said I must come right away and share her wonderful gift. We howled. Then she sent them down for the rest of the staff to see and laugh at."

Mrs. Nixon never moped. Each and every (continued on page 132)

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morning she was up and dressed as if to go out, even if there was no place to go. She did her job until the end. "I could always see the strain on her face," says architect Edward Jones, who was working with her on the White House furniture collection. "Certainly she was upset . . . but she's extremely strong. If her heart were broken you'd never know it. She'd say, 'We all have bad things to put up with in life.' I truly love that woman. Working with her was one of the great experiences of my life."

Adds Curator Clement Conger: "In the last four months, we were redoing the Queen's Bedroom, the East Sitting Hall, installing new draperies in the family dining room on the second floor, upgrading the collection in the Yellow Oval Room and doing a garden room on the ground floor. We were working on a silver flatware service and had revived the subject of the Nixon china. After months of looking, we had finally found a gentleman from a New Jersey oil company who said he could raise \$200,000 for the china (150 pieces of each, cobalt blue and white), and we had gotten a preliminary design. At that point, things were tense; we all knew there was trouble brewing. But Mrs. Nixon was still working as if she were going to stay in the White House.

"Six or seven days before August 9, 1974, she called me and said, 'I won't explain, Clem, but don't go ahead with the porcelain. Call it off.' Her voice was quivering. I knew what she meant. We stopped work on everything. I have worked for six or seven First Ladies, and I admire Mrs. Nixon much more than all the others. She never let the altitude of the job go to her head. She was always just Pat Nixon from Whittier, California. She's so real, so warm, so realistic, so matter-of-fact. She did more for the authentic refurbishing of the White House, and its beautification, than any other Administration in history—and that includes the Kennedys. I only hope that someday she'll be given credit for her accomplishments."

Her final day in the White House must have been the hardest of Pat Nixon's life. She had spent her most productive years helping her husband reach the Presidency, often subordinating her wishes and identity to his. Now she had to watch him leave in disgrace, the first President ever to resign.

"I hope I'll never go through another day like that," says Conger. "There was a terribly emotional farewell with the staff. The President even came out in his pajamas and hugged them all." Many observers wondered why, in his farewell speech, the President mentioned his mother but not his wife. Explains Helen Smith, "If he had said 'My wonderful

Pat,' she would have broken down completely. She had a tremendous rein on herself. I think if any word had been spoken she wouldn't have made it."

As she walked swiftly to the helicopter that was to take them from the White House to Andrews Air Force Base, where they would begin their flight to San Clemente, Calif., Mrs. Nixon's eyes never left the ground. Friends, including Louise and Roger Johnson, were waiting to say good-bye at Andrews. It was again a silent farewell. "We just gave them a big hug," says Louise Johnson. "Pat was drained. But there was no letting down. I don't think any of them would have let go. They're too proud. It was a matter of dignity."

Colonel Ralph Albertazzi, the pilot of Air Force One, recalls flying over Jefferson City, Mo., at the precise moment Gerald Ford took the oath of office. Most of the passengers on the Presidential jet were listening to Ford being sworn in, but neither Pat Nixon nor her husband picked up the earphones attached to their seats.

Into exile

Since August 9, Pat Nixon has disappeared into virtual exile behind the walls of her San Clemente compound. "It's as if she went underground or vanished into the sea," comments a friend. Of the five dozen people contacted for this article, most have written to Mrs. Nixon, but few hear from her. Architect Jones received a reply to his letter. Former staffer Terry Ivy received a photo she had sent out to be autographed. Lucy Winchester, Helen Smith and Louise Johnson talk with Mrs. Nixon occasionally. Many, like Clem Conger, are afraid to contact her. "What would I say?" Others, like Mrs. Thurmond Clark, Mrs. Hugh Scott and Mrs. J. Willard Marriott, have not written because they have heard that the mail just piles up and never reaches her.

All this has provoked considerable speculation that Mrs. Nixon has become a recluse. Her friends deny it, yet it is true that she rarely leaves the San Clemente complex. There are exceptions. Disguised in a dark wig, she made one Christmas shopping trip to Los Angeles with her friend Helene Drown and, at a Christmas party, sipped champagne with local volunteers who help with the mail. (But when one volunteer asked to take her picture, Mrs. Nixon refused.) And when her husband underwent surgery for phlebitis, she visited him every day in Long Beach Memorial Hospital. Other than that, she goes nowhere.

"It's very, very difficult on her," says Helen Smith. "She seems very normal when I talk to her, but it must be terribly depressing. She has no staff except Fina [her maid] and Manolo [Nixon's valet]. She's pushing cartons around by herself, she's swamped with mail that

she hasn't touched. She didn't even send out Christmas cards. She loves privacy, but she misses people very much. The worst part is her husband's illness. She was never sick and he was always touted as the healthiest President in history. To see him incapacitated is hard on her. And he's been very low. She's tried to keep him cheered up, but it's difficult to do. On top of that, any mental strain can bring on another attack of phlebitis, so she has to walk on pincushions to make sure he doesn't get upset."

Friends say Mrs. Nixon keeps up with the news, reading newspapers, magazines and reams of books (which she stopped doing at the height of Watergate). "She knows what's going on," says Helen Smith. She was also touched that she is still considered the most admired woman. When I told her that several people wanted to interview her, she couldn't believe it. She said, 'Oh, Helen, we're out of it now.' She feels the emphasis shouldn't be on her, that there's another First Lady."

TV producer Paul Keyes dined with the Nixons the night before the former President went to the hospital for surgery. Keyes says Pat met him and his wife Miriam at the door. "The President and I went for a swim while Pat and Miriam chatted," Keyes recalls. "Pat was a wonderful, warm hostess. But it only makes sense that they entertain at home rather than going out to dinner. They couldn't go anywhere without creating a fuss. It's much easier for them to see a few friends quietly at home."

But even that can be embarrassing. Recently, Pat Nixon invited several old friends to dinner—but to her dismay the subject of Watergate arose. One man, who had held a high position in the Nixon Administration, began probing, undiplomatically asking the former President what had really happened—who had said what to whom. Mrs. Nixon was furious. "She doesn't feel that the President, in his physical condition, should be exposed to that sort of thing," says a friend. Dinner guests have been carefully screened ever since.

Her best friend, Helene Drown, denies that Mrs. Nixon has been traumatized by what has happened. "She's been at the top of great peaks with her husband, and she's also seen some deep valleys. She's not about to go to pieces now."

Dr. John Lungren, the former President's physician, saw Mrs. Nixon every day while her husband was in the hospital. He was amazed by her composure. "I hate to use the word 'extraordinary,' but I will in her case. She behaved in remarkable fashion throughout the whole ordeal. She realized the President was close to death, but she had an amazing ability to handle the situation. There were tears, of course, but always in private. She was here every day during the critical period. Most of the time she

spent the night at Helene and Jack Drown's. They live nearby. But when the going got rough, she never left the hospital. She ate all her meals here and slept in the suite next to the President's.

"What floored me was that she wanted to reassure me. The press was always insinuating that nothing was the matter with the President. I've been a physician for 26 years, and that was pretty difficult for me to go through. But she would say she wanted me to know that she and the family had complete faith in me. She said it was up to God and our ability to handle the situation."

Says psychiatrist Arnold A. Hutschnecker: "Generally, a woman holds up in relation to her man. It happens when you see a man battling. Some women collapse, but others rise to see their men through difficulties." (Richard Nixon was once Hutschnecker's patient, although this was before the doctor changed his practice from internal medicine to psychiatry—and before Nixon became President.)

Dr. Lungren sees Mrs. Nixon at least once a week when he visits the former President. Lungren says she looks thin but well. Although a Navy Corpsman attends to Nixon's medical needs, administering physical therapy and anti-coagulant drugs, Pat walks two miles a day with her husband, reads to him and covers for the Corpsman at night. She gives her husband his medicine and keeps in touch with Dr. Lungren in case there are any problems. (West Coast TV executive John Grant, a friend of Nixon's, says he spoke to him on the phone New Year's Eve. Nixon said he was working three hours a day on his memoirs. "Things will be a great deal better in 1975 than in 1974," he told Grant. "Lots of things haven't been told.")

A new life

Lucy Winchester, who talks to Mrs. Nixon almost every day on the phone, says she seems to enjoy certain aspects of her new, private life. "She loves feeling at one with nature. She loves to feel the sun and the breeze on her face, and to work with her hands. She's weeding and digging. The last time I called she was in the garden. She said, 'My hands are dirty.' And she talks about all the birds. There are hummingbirds out there, and she found a nest of doves in the courtyard. She tells me she's digging clams, too. She always wants to know what's going on in Washington. She's very concerned about Mrs. Ford. Sure, Pat's sad, but I think she's peaceful. She was such a prisoner at the White House. Now she feels free. The only thing is, she wonders if people will ever recognize the wonderful things her husband has done, and if she'll live to see the day they do. She's afraid people will forget."

End

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