

*By Donnie Radcliffe*

SAN CLEMENTE, Calif.—Gone are the pilgrims who always seemed to be waiting near the gate. A sign—“No sightseers ...”—is, in fact, the only sign left of the curious and clamoring that crowded down the sun-baked street past seacliff villas looking out to sea.

The loyalists are still coming, they who file in thin, quiet parade past the armed guards and electric fence surrounding what the world once knew as the “Western White House.”

And with these loyalists—John Mitchell, Charles Colson, Bebe Rebozo—come rumors of yet another new Richard Nixon ready to emerge into public view again after the presidential election next November.

The street to Nixon's retirement dream house is still called Avenida del Presidente, so named as a tribute to Nixon but equally applicable to Franklin Delano Roosevelt who visited Cotton's Point, now site of the Nixon family's La Casa Pacifica, as guest of wealthy Hamilton Cotton during the 1930s.

Down the road apiece a hostelry made famous by many a Watergate figure has added a new dimension to its commerce of catering to transients. In its way it solves a problem: without a university campus, a special library or an official museum, where to display what souvenirs Richard Nixon still has of his presidency?

The answer: a motel room.

Tourists who look beyond the pricetagged curios of presidential seals reproduced on cuff links and tie



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## Shadows of a Presidency: Mr. Nixon's Neighborhood



clasps, will find memorabilia of the Nixons' second trip to China displayed at the invitation of Pat Nixon to innkeeper Paul Presley, now one of Nixon's inner circle. There are cloisonne vases and pendants, jade trees and grapes, handpainted eggs and delicate tea sets, lengths of silk and poems of Mao Tse-tung. Arranged in glass showcases, they provide accent to color photographs that show a broadly grinning Richard Nixon and his wife, their Secret Service detail and their beaming Chinese hosts.

On a wall nearby is a photograph of sunset over Cotton's Point with the provocative words of Alphonse de Lamartine:

"History teaches everything...even the future."

Presley's "Little Bit of History Museum" is regarded

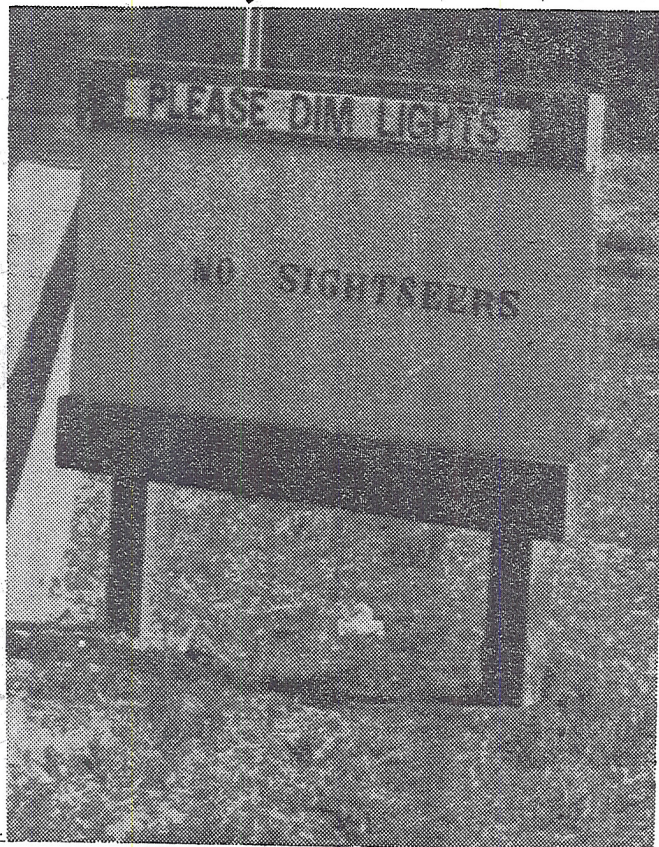
by some here as forerunner to what they hope will be a more permanent historical repository for Richard Nixon's collection of presidential mementoes. It has supplanted what was formerly the coffee shop next to the lobby that used to teem with Nixon entourages, secretive couriers, inquisitive reporters and, later, visiting lawyers.

Thinking back to those days, Fred Divel, a young man who claims to have helped bring Nixon to San Clemente, notes what others in this busy seaside community cannot help but note as well:

"It's really San Clemente's only visual evidence that the President was there."

Four years after Watergate, nearly two years after





Photos by the San Clemente Sun-Post and Rock Kendall

*At San Clemente: The gate (far left) and the sign (above) at the Nixons' California retreat. At left, the former President at the motel museum.*

his resignation, "there" for Richard Milhous Nixon might be anyplace at all if there is anything to the talk of his promised public reemergence.

One-time White House counsel Charles Colson envies no "formal" role for his former boss but more likely something akin to "elder statesman," circumnavigating the globe to "trouble spots where he could be useful."

Colson, who was himself "Born Again" and wrote a book about it after emerging from prison where he served time for interfering with the defense of Daniel Ellsberg in the Pentagon Papers case, says Nixon has world-wide stature. Claiming he knew in advance of Nixon's trip to China last February, he says the former President "is the only man alive (among Americans) who has talked to the (new) Chinese premier."

The idea of Richard Nixon, the diplomat, is an oft-repeated one that has gained momentum in some quarters since Julie Nixon Eisenhower first voiced it shortly after her father resigned. Then, she pictured him in the role of "roving ambassador or top-level adviser" whom history will exonerate because "the net worth of the man is going to far outweigh the mistakes."

See CLEMENTE, H3, Col. 1



CLEMENTE, From H1

Here in San Clemente that kind of talk raises a few eyebrows. Townspeople say from what they have seen of him there has been little sign of Richard Nixon, the involved neighbor, let alone the new Richard Nixon, "roving ambassador."

He has, however, recently made at least some forays outside the confines of his Spanish-colonial style hacienda:

He appeared at Concordia Elementary School to vote in California's recent primary. "Republican or Democrat," asked a flustered precinct worker who quickly recovered and handed him a Republican ballot. "That's the right one," Nixon said with a grin.

A couple of times a week he has come out to play golf, sometimes at Shorcliffs, sometimes at El Toro and usually with aide Jack Brennan. A few days ago, he turned up with old pal and confidante Charles "Bebe" Rebozo.

Says one San Clemente civic leader of Nixon's need for golf partners, "The joke here goes, I'm sorry, Mr. President, we already have our threesome."

He has emerged to drop in at Camp Pendleton Marine Base down the coast just in time to become an impromptu honor guest at a pageant celebrating the Marine Corps' 200th birthday. An eyewitness says the Corps took it in stride despite a flurry of reseating that put the Nixons in front row center and despite enlisted men later breaking ranks to shake hands with their former Commander-in-Chief.

He has dined out occasionally this spring, once with FDR's son James in Newport Beach. "It was a quiet family dinner," said Roosevelt, an acquaintance of Nixon's since 1955 when he was Vice President and Roosevelt a fledgling U.S. congressman from California.

Nixon told his hosts about his post-presidential trip to China but, says Roosevelt, nobody talked politics.

Nixon also broke bread at San Clemente Inn, dining with his wife, Pat, innkeeper Presley and Mrs. Presley and two other couples, Marine Lt. Gen. Leo Dulacki, former commandant at Camp Pendleton, his date, Margie Dooley, and National Football League referee Fred Swearingen and his wife.

Ann Swearingen, a piano teacher, proudly recounted how Nixon promised "You can teach me to play the piano in something other than the key of G" once he finishes his memoirs, due to be published next year.

She said that, not unexpectedly, everybody steered clear of talking politics or about the then just-published Woodward-Bernstein book, "The Final Days," which gives its unvarnished view of the last days of the Nixon White House.

Mrs. Swearingen also made these observations about the table talk:

Mrs. Nixon does most of the gardening herself at Casa Pacifica...Nixon is "terribly wrapped up in his golf and was astounded at his good score" (which he kept to himself)...He is just

as interested in football as he ever was and still keeps in touch with Redskins Coach George Allen...The Nixons are "ready to go out socially, to make the break from seclusion, to make some new associations but I get the impression they don't know where to begin"...They "live in a different social climate—I don't think their friends are close by."

It was at this out-to-dinner excursion that Nixon also inspected the "Little Bit of History Museum" for the first time. He was "absolutely thrilled," said Mrs. Swearingen. He also signed the guest book, leaving blank the "comments" space.

Nixon did have a few comments earlier this spring when two young winners of the San Clemente Exchange Club's talent contest visited him at his office to receive their awards. Also present was someone San Clemente people says is the "joiningest" man in town—Jack Brennan, one of the newer members of the Exchange Club, the Chamber of Commerce and several other local service organizations.

Some see Brennan as Nixon's alter ego, public relations adviser and community relations liaison. One former Nixon associate calls Brennan's decision to remain with Nixon and resign from the Marine Corps after 17 years (three years short of retirement benefits) "the ultimate loyalty."

Martin Robideau, 18, a San Clemente High School senior, recalled that his chat with Nixon was personal rather than political. "He wanted to know what we wanted to do with our talent, and he told us about the time he sang in the choir."

The encounter had the desired effect. Club officers wanted the ceremony "to attract a lot of attention and make headlines and it sure did," said Robideau. What surprised him was that they all stayed so long—25 minutes—in view of all the stories about how secluded Nixon is. Reports that the former President "is getting back" into politics are especially interesting to the youth. "If people could forgive him," he believes, "he'd do a good job for us as ambassador to China."

Richard A. Asper, active in conservative Orange County politics as a Reagan supporter and campaign volunteer, thinks Nixon might well be "drafted" into public service once there is a "proper remonstrance of the public...he would make an idyllic Secretary of State or ambassador to China or Russia."

Asper says he has seen Nixon at close range on several occasions arranged by "historical" supporters with his "best interests at heart" who wanted to draw him out socially. Not everybody was Republican but most represented Orange County conservatism and all were anxious to let the former President know they were still in his corner.

Thomas Evans, a Newport Beach interior designer and member of the ultra-conservative Lincoln Club,\* says that people who turned up at one party last fall were eager to shake Nix-

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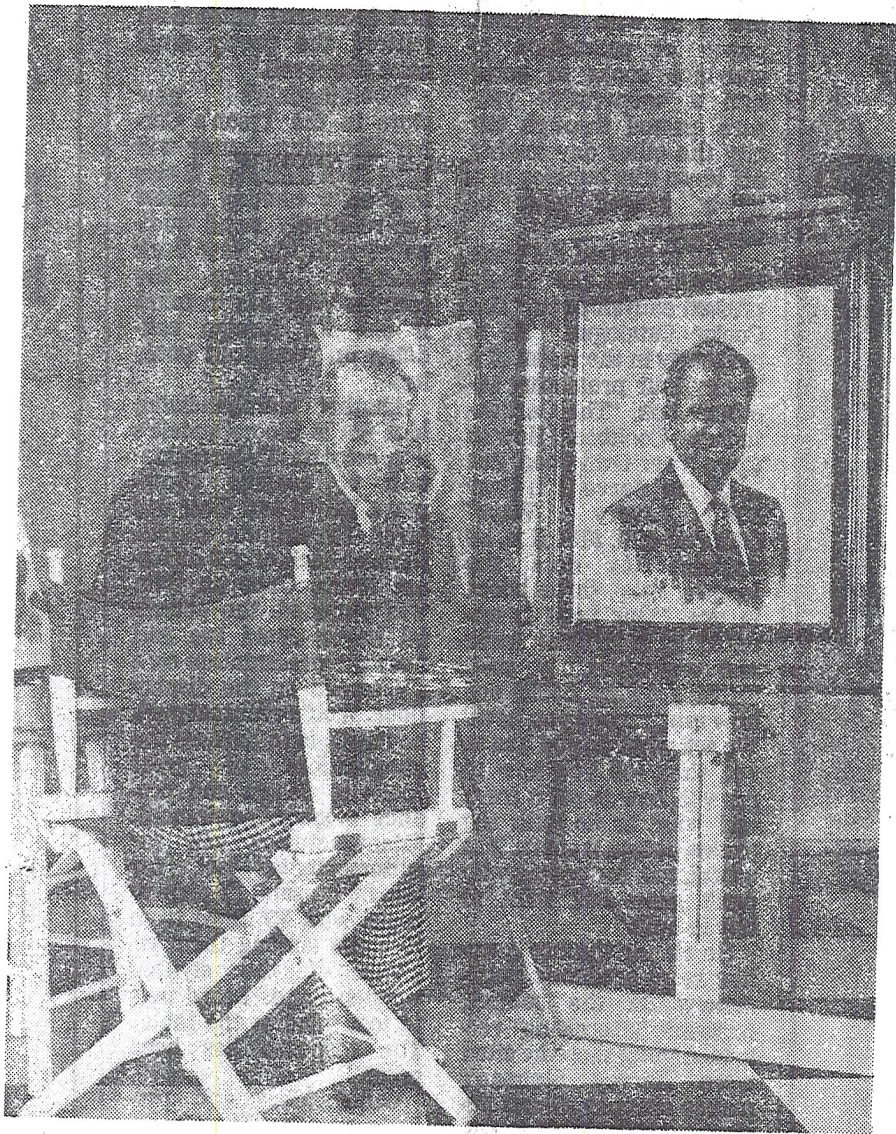


Photo by Tony Sanders

*Diana Neville paints Nixon's portrait from a painting she made in 1974 which she felt would eventually hang in the White House: "My husband always says that of all the Nixon crimes, the worst thing he ever did was step down and delay my career."*

on's hand and let him know they thought "Dickey boy got a raw shake."

"People in California don't want him. He's too vain to stay where he's not wanted," said Farrell Smith, then president of the San Clemente Republican Club when Nixon came home after his White House resignation.

It proved to be an unpopular statement with many in this predominantly Republican Party stronghold. Still, a resolution proposed to the city council that would have officially acknowledged Nixon's return, failed to carry.

"It died a natural death," says Mayor B. Patrick Lane. "I think everyone knew he was here."

City fathers have been neutral toward Nixon. They have never named any municipal landmark after him; even Avenida del Presidente doesn't bear his name.

"Nothing ever came up to name," says Mayor Lane cryptically.

A bronze bust of Nixon commis-

sioned by a citizens group which raised \$8,000 to pay for it, sat in city hall—near the water billing department—for nearly four years awaiting a permanent place in the then-proposed Nixon library. Last winter it was quietly turned over to curator-in-keeper Presley's "Little Bit of History Museum."

Revisionist tactics?

Not according to former City Manager Ken Carr.

"We were only custodians."

San Clemente is a town whose Chamber of Commerce scrubbed "Western White House" off its official letterhead as long ago as 1973, "before any of the problems arose," says Executive Manager Emil Radic.

"You can't ride that kind of moniker indefinitely. When it came time to reorder the stationary, it was determined that the President's term was only for four years more."



San Clemente is a town of 22,000 inhabitants where 27 per cent of those heading households are retired, where manufacturing rubber gaskets, skateboards and surfboards accounts for almost its entire industrial complex, where land developers lock horns with civic preservationists advocating its quaint past, Spanish heritage, architecture and scenic shoreline.

San Clemente is a town that has suffered little from Nixon's fall from power. "All the economic factors that existed seven years ago exist today," says the Chamber's Radic

For awhile the city felt the pinch when a \$229,000 annual federal police fund grant was cut off. For five years it had provided salaries for 10 additional police officers as part of the security protecting a President in residence. Then in August, 1974 the money was withheld.

"There was a feeling of disappointment that we should have had transitional funds," says Carr.

"It was a clear economic disadvantage," concedes Mayor Lane though his position had long been that San Clemente was getting far more than it was putting out in service.

Fred Divel was 19 when he signed on in 1968 as a volunteer in Richard Nixon's presidential campaign. Later, after victory, efforts began to find a retreat to which Nixon could escape from anticipated White House pressures. Dwight Chapin, later to become White House appointments secretary, told Divel that the choice centered on California.

In Divel's opinion, there was no other choice than San Clemente. As grandson of a founder and one of the town's most vocal champions, the young man immediately began a search that eventually led to the old Cotton estate. On his own, he investigated security "aspects," got aerial photographs of the property and subsequently wrote Nixon adviser and later domestic counselor John Ehrlichman of his findings. Only by chance, later, he says, did he learn that Nixon was indeed intrigued enough by the estate to make a trip west that winter of 1968-69 to inspect it.

Divel's efforts won him no recognition, he says—a relative of H.R. "Bob" Haldeman reportedly got a \$3,000 finder's fee—but he never held Nixon to blame.

"He's brought a lot of attention to San Clemente. I'm not sorry that I helped find him the house. I don't think he could have found any place else where, after something like this (the resignation) he could have had this kind of privacy."

Other residents are less impressed by Richard Nixon's impact on their town.

"The fact that he lives here hasn't affected a whole lot of people," say Phyllis Wentz and Jo Olsen who, as co-owners of The Book Site, report brisk (for San Clemente) sales of Woodward and Bernstein's latest book.

"This isn't a hardcover town," they report. Noting a "resurgence" of inter-

est in Woodstein's first effort on Watergate, "All The President's Men," and in Theodore White's "Breach of Faith," now that both are out in paperback, the two women speculate that some customers were ones who "didn't care enough" to read them when they first came out.

A few doors away on busy but unhurried Avenida Del Mar, a clerk in The Town Book Shop sees reading habits here another way: "The average person won't spend the kind of money hardcovers sell for. I can order it for you but if you'll be patient it'll be out in paperback."

A tendency by some townspeople to display little outward interest in the Nixons' comings and goings isn't really indifference, says Greg Joannidi Jr. A registered Democrat like his father who, until recently, was a standout in the town's political life, Joannidi attributes this reserve to the fact that "Southern California is a transient area. People aren't born or raised here; they come and go."

Some still see their star in Richard Nixon's galaxy. Paul Presley commissioned artist Diana Neville in 1974 to do Nixon's portrait—"before he stepped down"—when she was given the impression there was a strong possibility that it would hang in the White House.

"My husband always says that of all the Nixon crimes, the worst thing he ever did was step down and delay my career."

Nixon's activities continue to command attention—"There's an aura about him that's fascinating," says one Nixon watcher. Nixon "sightings" have become a local game, with tips fed eagerly to the Daily Sun-Post. A year ago—on June 21, the Nixons' wedding anniversary—a couple resembling them was seen cruising slowly along nearby Dana Point where, by some accounts, Nixon proposed to the former Patricia Ryan some 35 years earlier.

Occasionally readers have had enough. "There is good reporting on everything except Mr. Nixon. He shamed us and the world. He played sick to plea bargain his way out of trouble," complained one recent letter to the editor. Countered another: "The constant and continual persecution of our former President by the news media is a shame and a real drag."

A few days ago when the Daily Sun-Post carried a wire service story about purported love letters written by Nixon to an unidentified woman, there was "no response at all" either by the former President's critics or supporters, according to editor Warren Esterline.

Mayor Lane suspects that "egocentric" Richard Nixon "craves publicity—but on his terms." And he believes that the reaction of San Clemente citizens to a deposed President in their midst is as varied as that of people anywhere.

"The walkin' around people who liked him before, do now," says Lane.

"And those who didn't, don't now."

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