

Oral History Interview
Dr. Milton Eisenhower
October 15, 1971

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EISENHOWER: I worked after school and on Saturdays. When I got home, I still had to do my chores. When all six were home—though keep in mind that Arthur was born 14 years before I was, so I don't really have much recollection of six of us being at home—mother was very skillful at getting the work done by the boys; in order to keep them from being bored to death she rotated the chores. We had a large orchard; we had an enormous vegetable garden; we had an extensive alfalfa field, chickens, cow, and horse. And these chores outdoors were assigned to five of the boys, and there were six of us at home then. One had to work in the house, and that [chore] was the one each of us hated.

BURG: The one in the house?

EISENHOWER: Oh, sure. He had to help with the washing and all the rest.

BURG: And as I understand it you drew about a week's duty?

EISENHOWER: That's right, it was one week—

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EISENHOWER: Responsibility to us was as much a part—natural part—of life as eating and sleeping and going to school. I think that this early acceptance, in a perfectly natural way, of responsibility gave us an appropriate attitude toward education, toward our duties as citizens, toward our opportunities, and our obligations in whatever work we undertook. Then may I say that—here I'll have to speak for myself rather than for my brothers—the rule was that two things had to be done before I could play: one, I had to do my chores: second, I had to have every school lesson for the next day letter perfect.

BURG: These were really self-imposed rules, or was only the latter self-imposed. Was it your mother who put the first—

EISENHOWER: Mother was the one who established the rules, but soon the regime of work, study, play was just as natural as anything else. I never went to bed with an unsolved problem for the next day's lessons.

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BURG: Had your scarlet fever bout set you back—

EISENHOWER: I don't have—

BURG: —or anything in that regard?

EISENHOWER: —any doubt that it did. You know I was unconscious for two weeks.

BURG: It sounded like a dreadful siege you had.

EISENHOWER: I remember that the doors to the two living rooms were sealed off. Earl and mother were in there. Earl had been exposed, and of course mother served as full-time nurse. The rest of the family lived in the other part of the house. The food would be handed quickly through the door.

BURG: In this, in these two rooms?

EISENHOWER: In those two rooms in there—that's where three of us lived for—I think it was six weeks.

BURG: Six weeks?

EISENHOWER: Yes. For two weeks as I remember—I think my mother told me—I was unconscious. I have no doubt that the scarlet fever left a weakness. To this day my throat where those great swellings came—I guess they eventually burst—is tender.

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EISENHOWER: Certainly we had to work, but you know I'm absolutely certain that we didn't feel that we were being imposed upon. I mean life was the way it was; it was natural. Of course most of the rest of Abilene people had to work too. Edgar is the only one who ever sensed the difference between the north and south sections of Abilene. You know this is supposed to be the wrong side of the tracks: Edgar was conscious of that. In a book he wrote he made a point of this.

BURG: Yes.

EISENHOWER: I want to say that Earl and I were utterly unconscious of any such thing. And I often talked to Ike about it; and he said, "It's just, I think, a figment of Ed's imagination." But you know we grew so many vegetables and originally fruit that—the fruit orchard was eventually destroyed by a storm—we had things to sell—more than we could consume

BURG: Right.

EISENHOWER: And Ed used to say, "When I took vegetables up north of the tracks and up on Buckeye, the people would sniff at them as if they wondered where they came from." I never experienced any such thing.

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EISENHOWER: Dad made us read the Bible from the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelations. We read it together and—

BURG: Out loud, sir?

EISENHOWER: Yes. I'm not sure that it was a good educational exercise. But the trick was this: he would start reading; any time that he made a mistake and we caught him, that gave me the privilege of reading. And then if Earl or dad caught me in an error, that gave them the chance to read—and this is the way we went through the whole Bible. Well, I'm sure that that was very good in teaching how to read accurately, but I'm not sure it was—

BURG: Theologically, whether it did much.

EISENHOWER: Theologically, I don't think it amounted to much.

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EISENHOWER: These rooms were very busy places. In addition to religious and social meetings and Bible-reading lessons, other things went on in here. Let me mention one. This is not due to my memory: this is what Ike told me: When I was a baby, Ike would have to take his turn taking care of me usually in this room. And mother—

BURG: I hadn't known that.

EISENHOWER: Oh, yes.

BURG: That's part of the household duty then—

EISENHOWER: Yes, as far—

BURG: —you or whoever is young.

EISENHOWER: If the baby—and I was the youngest—were in a baby carriage—you know, the wheels are about so far apart—Ike would lay on his back reading a book—probably history because he was an avid history reader: and he would kick the one axle—and then when it hit the front of his foot he would putt it toward him and keep it going back and forth until the baby was asleep. Then he'd just lay there and read. And pretty soon if the baby started to cry, he'd do the—

BURG: He'd get her again. I would—

EISENHOWER: Oh, no—

BURG:—imagine that was pretty popular duty with him.

EISENHOWER: —Another thing: Mother used to play the piano and sing; she had a beautiful voice, you know. She liked to sing mostly religious songs.

BURG: In a pre-radio era, reading would probably be one of the things—the leisure things—although I'm not sure how—just how much leisure would be left to you once chores and the school work had been done. Did your mother and father put you in bed pretty early or—

EISENHOWER: I guess so. Yes, I think so.

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EISENHOWER: Now, by the way, going back to the beginning of our discussion about how six sons did fairly well in life, I wouldn't for the world think of detracting from the positive influences of mother and father. They were good people. They were not only intelligent and compassionate—with big hearts—but they were good in the best sense of that term. I never heard a cross word spoken between my parents, and I was home longer than anybody else. I was home till I was eighteen. And then even when I went to college, I came home quite often. As a matter of fact, I stayed out of school twice. It took me six years to get a bachelor's degree because of those two different years.

BURG: I see.

EISENHOWER: So—

BURG: It occurs to me to say something. Forgive me for saying it, but in a rather long, full lifetime you've observed many men and women. And your mother and father still stand high, do they not—

EISENHOWER: Yes, oh, indeed, indeed.

BURG: —even by comparison with the many that you have worked with?

EISENHOWER: In character, in philosophy, in intelligence, and in their personal relationships. You know, the children to look out for are the children who are being raised in homes where the atmosphere is not that way—where there is quarreling, too much drinking and, in drunkenness, doing ridiculous things which affect the children. No, if you look at your whole life from the time you are a youngster until the time you pass on, I suppose the first twelve years of your life are the most important. I think by then—and I say this now as an educator and having worked with many thousands of young people—

BURG: Yes.

EISENHOWER: —I think your attitude toward life, your attitude toward yourself, your attitude toward your responsibility: what you deem to be right, what you deem to be wrong—I think these things are pretty well set. Now that doesn't mean that by hard study of many things, such as philosophy, that you can't refine or that you can't even change. I certainly wouldn't say that.

BURG: Yes.

EISENHOWER: In fact I've been supporting for years a school out in California that has a marvelous record of rehabilitating boys; they are boys who at about the age of 12 have been in trouble with the law. The record since 1902 up to now is that eighty percent never again have had trouble. But I still say that deep-seated aspects of your whole makeup—your character, your attitude toward others, your attitude toward yourself and your responsibilities—are pretty much fixed in childhood, up to twelve or fourteen years of age.

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BURG: When you came back to this house, Dr. Eisenhower, did you find that these two people [his parents, David and Ida] were still two people that you enjoyed knowing and being with as adults?

EISENHOWER: I think I enjoyed mother and father more as human beings when I was older than when I was young. I've often thought about this. I think that I—and I suspect my brothers too—rather took them for granted when we were young. The relationship was a close one; there were never any quarrels. We got punished if we did things wrong, and the worst punishment we'd get [was that] mother would say, "I'll tell your father about this when he gets home." Because now you had two punishments. Now you had to worry from the time she said this to you—

BURG: Right.

EISENHOWER: —and you knew the punishment was going to be more difficult when—

BURG: And she carried through when she told you that?

EISENHOWER: Always. We knew we were going to catch it. No. As I got older and came home—I was home a good deal when I was president of Kansas State University—it was easy to drive up here.

BURG: Right.

EISENHOWER: Of course, by that time, dad had passed on in forty-two, and I came to Kansas State in forty-three. I enjoyed mother then intellectually and as a person. She was no longer a mother, you know. We were—

BURG: Yes.

EISENHOWER: —we were on the same plane then, and she was lots of fun—oh, she was fun.