

Interview with

Abram Forney

on

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by

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Oral Historian

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER LIBRARY

Abilene, Kansas

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, would you please identify yourself and tell us your relationship to Dwight Eisenhower?

MR. FORNEY: My relationship with Dwight Eisenhower dates back many years. We were both near the same age, as I am two years and two days older than Dwight and my early remembrance of him was being in the same Sunday school class. During my school vacation at the age of twelve, I worked at the Creamery in the east section of Abilene. It was Dwight's job to come to the Creamery each day, either on foot or horseback, bringing a gallon can in which he took home a gallon of buttermilk. Dwight's father was the engineer and, also, in charge of the milk receiving department, and on occasions substituted as butter-maker.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, could you, please, give us the background on the founding and establishment of the Belle Springs Creamery in Abilene, and, also, how Dwight Eisenhower's father came to be associated with the creamery?

MR. FORNEY: The Belle Springs Creamery Company's first meeting was organized in a grove at the crossroads, nine miles south and three miles east of Abilene. The men who gathered at this meeting were H.G. Hershey, C.S. Hoffman, Eli S. Hoffman, J.E. Nissley, and

my father, J.K. Forney. In naming the organization, we used nature itself. In the grove there was a small creek fed by springs, and as the question of name was being discussed, a milk cow came to the spring with a bell around her neck. The name Belle Springs Creamery Company thus came to be. J.K. Forney was selected to make a trip back east to investigate small creameries, equipment, etc., for the operation of a creamery. Upon his return, construction of the creamery was started in 1885, nine miles south and three miles east of Abilene. A general mercantile store was also built across the road. This store contained the Post Office named Donegal, Kansas. The production of this creamery soon expanded to where they had large surpluses of butter, for which they had no sale. So it was then decided to build a larger plant in Abilene where rail transportation was available for shipments of butter. A plot of real estate was purchased east of the city limits, at the east end of Cottage Avenue. A large building was built and was equipped to produce a large quantity of butter. This building was built and in operation by 1890. The butter maker, Mr. C.O. Musser,

who was in charge of the butter production, was a brother-in-law of Dwight's father. Mr. Musser requested that an offer be made to Mr. Eisenhower, now living in Danison, Texas, that he be offered a position in the creamery. In 1892 the Eisenhower's returned to Abilene, Dwight being two years of age. An office was opened on the second floor of Hodge Brothers Hardware building which was located just south of the present location of the Post Office. The first property purchased a few years later was the property of the old Drivers Hotel, the famous hostelry of the cattle drivers from Texas. The Creamery office was located in this building. The Bar room and Dining Room were used as storage for car lots of tubs, salt, and box shacks. This property purchased with additional property, is now the present location of the creamery. A bronze placque on the front of this building, donated by the D.A.R., contains the Historical status of this location. Then, in later years, about 1900, came another increase, much larger business, so they branched into the manufacture of ice and ice cream and cold storage. This company turned out to be one of the largest independent creameries in the Middle West. Mr. Eisenhower was engineer in the first creamery built in Abilene and knowing what the new construction and the new business meant and having no qualifications as a refrigeration

engineer made application and took a course with the International Correspondence Schools, Scranton, Pennsylvania. By the time the new plant was ready to open, Mr. Eisenhower had a full fledged certificate as a refrigeration engineer. Nearly all the Creamery employees, having sons able to do the work, hired them during school vacations to work in the creamery. I remember one such school vacation in 1906 where Dwight and I were employees on the same job. He had the night shift, which didn't require quite as much as work on the day shift. Dwight was receiving 32.50 a month and the company paid me 35.00 a month because the day shift had considerably more work to do serving the delivery--ice delivery wagons and the neighboring towns who purchased ice there, transferring it to their own locations.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, could you, please, go back to a little bit to the Eisenhower business in Hope, Kansas, and tell us about the establishment of it and why it failed, and so on.

MR. FORNEY: This venture was probably in the early '80's. D.J. Eisenhower, Dwight's father, and a fellow member of this group by the name of Milton Good, opened a mercantile business in Hope, Kansas, which was an inland town. Of course, in those days a mercantile store handled practically everything from a needle to a threshing machine. This business thrived very well at the start because the

farmers had good crops, but then they had a depression with poor crops for a period of three or four years. The creditors had to take over and close up the business, so Mr. Eisenhower with his family moved to Dennison, Texas. Of course, Dwight was not born until two years later in 1890 in Dennison, Texas. Now the story of the mercantile business, which I believe to be authentic: Mr. Eisenhower's brother-in-law's father, also from Pennsylvania, who in those days was considered a wealthy man, paid off all the creditors, took notes from the farmers, and within a few years everything was paid off and the business completely in the clear.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, would you, please, tell us about the Belle Springs Creamery and how they made arrangements to bring David Eisenhower back to Abilene from Dennison, Texas?

MR. FORNEY: The Creamery which was built in the east of Abilene, was large enough to necessitate a full time engineer. Mr. Eisenhower's brother-in-law, Mr. C.O. Musser, was the butter maker and Mrs. Musser was very anxious to get the Eisenhower family back in Abilene. Mr. Eisenhower was contacted and accepted the job and the records are that he was paid 35.00 a month as an engineer and there was a

deduction from that salary of 5.00 a month, which I sincerely believe, was a deduction to be repaid for an advance of money to bring the family back to Abilene.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, when you were growing up in Abilene, did you have very much contact with Dwight Eisenhower?

MR. FORNEY: There was a situation in Abilene which divided the town very much socially. The people who lived on the south side of the tracks were a group that stayed pretty close together and the same thing applied to the people that lived on the north side of the track. To finish the grade school Dwight went to the Garfield School--7th and 8th grades--and finished his grade school on the north side of the track and, of course, the social gatherings were mainly classroom-wise. Each class had its own activities and, having been two years older, I happened to be two classes ahead of Dwight in the school, so I can't say very much as to further association with Dwight.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, could you, please, tell us under what circumstances you became--you went to work at the Belle Springs Creamery?

MR. FORNEY: This dates back to about 1904 where I was in High School at the time. I chose to leave High School in my Sophomore year

and took a position with the creamery with about a year's work in the different capacities in the Butter room, the engine room, and the ice room, when I was given a job in the office as shipping clerk. Of course, in today's category that job would have been called sort of a traffic manager. I had charge of all the shipments of butter both local, express and carload. In 1910, the company purchased the Herington Creamery Company at Herington, and I was sent down to manage that business. We closed the creamery there and had a buyer of cream in practically every community southwest as far as Liberal and south as far as the Oklahoma State line. The cream was shipped into Herington under the name of the Herington Creamery Company and then reshipped to Abilene. The butter production in Kansas offered an interesting contrast with the crop production. In practically all the southern and western part of Kansas the poor crop years always proved to give us a larger production of butter. This was due to the fact that if the farmers had a good year, wheat crops, and the business of milking cows didn't work out satisfactorily, they still had enough money from the wheat crop to carry them through. Where there was a year or two of drought and no wheat crops, we always found that the butter production at the plants was very much greater. This was

because the milk production, along with the eggs, was considered the real ticket to them.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, could you, please, tell us when you worked at the creamery with Dwight Eisenhower and could you tell us any interesting incidents that took place while you worked there with him?

MR. FORNEY: I remember an incident during school vacation when I was employed on the second floor of the building and nailing together butter boxes. I happened to come down through the engine room to the wash room which was on the ground floor. On returning to the second floor I had stopped on the first floor to talk to D.J. Eisenhower-- a little conversation--and as we parted he went through the door into the boiler room and I started to return to the second floor. As I stood at the landing going up to the second floor there was a terrific noise. The governor belt on an engine which operated all of the churns and the power elevators in the building broke and, of course, there was the engine just "running away" with such velocity that the fly wheel which was about 6 feet in diameter exploded. Portions of that fly wheel had broken a steam line, and also, hit one of the ammonia pipes which turned the ammonia pipes loose. I remember very well, standing on that landing, that the first thing

I saw was Mr. Eisenhower coming back in and cutting off the steam. This engine was still running, although all it was, was the shaft. He cut off the steam from that, ran over and cut off the ammonia from the ammonia tank. Fortunately, if this had happened approximately 10 seconds sooner and where I was standing right in front of this engine talking to Mr. Eisenhower I don't think I would be here today to tell this story.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, do you remember what kind of work Dwight did at the Creamery and did you ever have an opportunity to work with him?

MR. FORNEY: Well, there was one summer during our school vacation that both operated what they called the "ice tank", by taking out 300 pound blocks of ice and dumping and setting them through a chute into the ice room and Dwight had the night shift at that time. I had the day shift. His salary was 32.50 and I was given 35.00 a month on the day shift. I had considerable more work to do serving the delivery trucks and the people from outer communities who came in here to purchase ice.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, what background information or what do you know about Dwight when he was preparing to go to West Point and was writing to various people in order to get an appointment to West Point?

MR. FORNEY: Dwight graduated from Abilene High School in 1909 and, of course, his father immediately put him on a job in the Creamery. Dwight had a young, very good friend, by the name of Everett Haslett, who already had an assignment at Annapolis in the Navy and on one of Haslett's returns to Abilene. I believe was the influence, that gave Dwight the idea of trying to get an assignment to Annapolis. However, he made the inquiries, obtained the assignment, and when it came to the studies, which were in the examination, he was short of two subjects, that was in this examination that he did not get in High School. His father put him to work firing the boilers at night, which probably took only about 10 minutes out of the hour. He boned up on these subjects while he was working but by the time he was ready to take the examination, he then was over the age limit for Annapolis. Through the effort s of Senator Joseph L. Bristow, the United States Senator whose residence was at Salina, Kansas, his appointment was transferred to West Point.

MR. BARRASH: How much help was Charley Harger in getting Dwight Eisenhower his appointment?

MR. FORNEY: Well, Mr. Harger was always ready and willing to give any young Abilene boy a chance to achieve almost anything that he

wanted to get. Dwight received every consideration and help as Mr. Harger was one of the leading Republicans, and, of course, was very close to Senator Bristow.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, you stated that you attended Sunday School with Dwight Eisenhower. I wonder if you could tell us if there was anything interesting that happened during those years and if you could give us a brief rundown on the various religious beliefs of the Eisenhower family.

MR. FORNEY: Practically all of the Eisenhower boys that were old enough to go to Sunday School at that time, attended the River Brethren Church. The Sunday School class, which Dwight and the other Eisenhower boys and I attended was the class was sponsored and our teacher happened to be Dwight's aunt, Mrs. Musser. In the later years I don't believe that Mrs. Eisenhower, Dwight's mother, or his father, was ever a member of this religious sect that came from Pennsylvania.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, did you work at great length with Mr. Eisenhower, that is, David Eisenhower, and could you give us some background information on him--what sort of a man was he and how was he to work with and so on?

MR. FORNEY: In the early days of the first creamery built in Abilene, I was employed as the printing butter and, also, the washing of milk cans. Mr. D.J. Eisenhower was one of the most wonderful men that I ever was in contact with. He was a friend of every employee of the creamery. In other words, if you were given a man's job to do as a boy he didn't let you do it alone but would help you. There were other members who had charge of other departments that-- I might say--didn't give you that cooperation. Mr. Eisenhower was very methodical in all of his work and I consider him one of the finest men that I ever knew. Of course, when the new building--the new creamery--was built I had worked under his supervision in the manufacture of ice.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, could you tell us why David Eisenhower left the creamery and went to work for the United Utilities?

MR. FORNEY: When I came back from France in 1919, having served in the World War I, it was pretty hard to settle down in the old grind in the creamery. I had been given an opportunity to take a position in California and left in 1920. It was after I had left the creamery that Mr. Eisenhower left the employment as engineer and in a short time he was given a position with the United Power Company--Riverside

Light and Power Company--and, also, the Independent Telephone company as in charge of their pension program. As far as his employment at the creamery, and that termination, I have no information as to the change of the employment.

MR. BAREASH: Then, Mr. Forney, did you ever see Dwight Eisenhower after he left Abilene, that is, between the time he left to go to West Point and when he became prominent in World War II?

MR. FORNEY: Ah, my contact with Dwight--both in correspondence started on his return from the Philippines which I believe was in 1942. My contact with Dwight dates back to the time when he returned from the Philippines. We had started a sort of correspondence and being, at that time, in Southern California, I was a member of an organization known as the Abilene Dickinson County Association Society of Southern California. In later years I served as its president. We had a registration, at one time, of approximately 500 former residents of Dickinson County and my real correspondence with Dwight was of anything regarding news of any of his old friends out there in that community, which was always transmitted to him. He was very appreciative and I always received an acknowledgment of any information which I had sent on to him.

MR. BARRASH: Mr. Forney, after World War II began when did you first meet Dwight Eisenhower again?

MR. FORNEY: My first visit with Dwight was in 1945 and on his initial visit back to the home town. I have had the pleasure of returning to Abilene on many occasions, most of which were when he visited officially in Abilene. I believe that there were only two trips that he made to Abilene that I missed. It was always a pleasure to come back and visit with him and it was a good thing to return to the old home town when he was here because it brought many of the old friends back to the town here for the various and many occasions and celebrations which were done in his honor.

MR. BARRASH: Mr. Forney, I saw a photograph of you with a uniform-- army uniform on--of the World War II era--era--I wonder if you could tell us what your job was in the army in "orld War I" and whether or not you ever met Dwight at that time?

MR. FORNEY: During that period, I, of course, had some correspondence from Dwight. One of the first things greatly appreciated was that he had sent me from England while he was the Supreme Allied Commander,

an autographed photograph. I still treasure that picture. After the Pearl Harbor incident of 1941 and being of the age that I was, I would not be accepted into the regular army. I assisted in Southern California in the organization of the California State Guard which was an auxiliary to the National Guard. We could not be accepted into the regular army at that time because it was made up of the older men. Due to the fact that there were so many Japanese in Southern California, we went on active duty as of December 7, 1941. I served the State of California for approximately two years and came out with the rank of Major.

MR. BAREASH: Mr. Forney, did you ever get involved in politics in the early 1950's when Dwight Eisenhower ran for president or even before then when he was--when the build up was beginning as far back as 1947--did you get involved in any political doings regarding General Eisenhower?

MR. FORNEY: During the early days in the campaign--of course, before the convention--the organization known as the Citizens for Eisenhower Committee in Southern California was formed. I was a member of that organization and was manager of the campaign which

we put on in the City of Glendale. The City of Glendale, approximately had a big majority belonging to the Republican Party and it was a pretty trying job to promote Dwight in that area due to the fact that all--at that time, practically all of the Republicans of Glendale were for Governor Warren first and Taft next. Of course, after the nomination, when Dwight had received the nomination, then he had the entire support of all of the Republicans of the City of Glendale.

MR. BARRASH: Mr. Forney, did you have an opportunity to talk to Dwight when he visited Abilene in 1952 when he began his campaign for the presidency--if you did is there anything of significance that he said to you that you think worthy of mentioning here?

MR. FORNEY: During his first visit to Abilene when he made his first appearance here after the convention, though he was a very busy man, I had several short visits with him. However, it was not in a private place and any time that we visited it was by meeting him in the lobby of the Sunflower Hotel. There was always somebody running up to shake hands with him but I did have contact with him at that time and had a little visit with him at the home of Charley A. Case, who was one of the prominent Republicans of the State--of Abilene.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, several people in Abilene have said that when they saw Dwight in 1952 they asked him why he decided to run and he gave them various answers. Did Dwight Eisenhower ever give you any reason why he decided to run for the Presidency in 1952?

MR. FORNEY: No, I don't believe that ever came up. He was influenced, of course, while he was still over in Paris, being contacted by a lot of prominent Republicans and Democrats. Before he came back I had a letter--I can't give the date of it now--but it was a letter confirming what he had done that week, of the decision he had made. The letter didn't contain the decision but the decision that he did make in that letter was whether he was a Republican or a Democrat. The world knows that his statement was to declare himself a Republican.

MR. BARBASH: Mr. Forney, after Eisenhower was elected did you have an opportunity to attend the inauguration or any of the stag dinners at the White House--as several other prominent Abilene people did?

MR. FORNEY: Well, living in California, I am sorry that I didn't have the opportunity of ever getting to Washington while he was President. However, I did have a special invitation at any time to come back and pay him a visit at the dairy farm--the farm at Gettysburg.

On numerous occasions some of his old friends, and later the members of the Eisenhower Foundation were entertained at the White House.

MR. BARRASH: Mr. Forney, have you seen General Eisenhower since he left the Presidency?

MR. FORNEY: No, the only time that I've seen him is when he--that I've had a chance to visit with him--was two years ago at approximately about this time of the first of May at the dedication of the Library. There I had a very nice visit with the entire family--he and Mamie and Earl, Edgar and Milton.

MR. BARRASH: Mr. Forney, on behalf of the Eisenhower--the staff of the Eisenhower Library I would thank you very much for allowing us to interview you this afternoon and unless you have anything to add I think we will close this interview.

MR. FORNEY: No, I think we have covered practically everything and I want the staff here to know that I appreciate very much having this opportunity to tell the story--a lot of which has been told-- but we may have added some new items to it that might be interesting.

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