

Timothy Naftali

Hi, my name is Timothy Naftali. I'm Director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. I'm here to welcome Mr. Art Linkletter, who is going to participate in our Oral History Program. The date is January 23, 2007, and I am joined by my special assistant, Paul Musgrave. Gentlemen, thank you for coming today. Let me kick off this interview, Mr. Linkletter, by asking you, when did you meet Richard Nixon?

Art Linkletter

I met him many years ago when I was a young master of ceremonies in Hollywood, doing "People Are Funny" and "Kids Say the Darndest Things" in the early '40s. And he was a man about town who was being honored by the Rotary clubs, and I met him on the stage. I was emcee of all kinds of civic events. I was mayor of Hollywood at one time. And so, whenever there was something happening, he'd show up, and I'd show up, and we'd be sitting there talking about various things. And I had no idea that he would ever be President, of course, he didn't either, and we were just good friends. We had the same kind of background, religious, and we were both interested in children, and the care of youngsters growing up, and education, and good friends.

Timothy Naftali

But you also -- you've mentioned that you also felt a certain commonality with Pat Nixon.

Art Linkletter

Pat Nixon had been a schoolteacher, of course, and I studied to be a schoolteacher, and we talked a lot about education problems. And she was a very sweet lady. And I would best describe her, really, as very unsophisticated.

Timothy Naftali

Really, oh.

Art Linkletter

Very unsophisticated, she had a happy outlook on life. And later on, after I was in the drug abuse field, and I would talk to her about what I was doing in a way of helping to educate and prevent drug epidemic from spreading, and she made several suggestions, which were very unsophisticated and not very smart. In other words, just, she said, "Why don't you just tell them it's bad for them?" That kind of thing. She meant well, but she just had a kind of a nice outlook on life.

Timothy Naftali

So you met the Nixons when President -- when Richard Nixon was a Congressman?

Art Linkletter

Yes, he was a congressman.

Timothy Naftali

At that point. Tell us a little bit about how you got President Nixon's mother, Hannah, to come on your television program.

Art Linkletter

Well --

Timothy Naftali

He was Vice President, I guess, at the time.

Art Linkletter

Yes, he was. I was talking to old people. My two best interviews on the "House Party," as a regular thing, were either children under 10 or people over 65. And he used to brag about her. And I said, "Well, I ought to have her on, because she represents a large section of people, and they're going to get a lot larger." I still say the two best interviews are the old people and the young people, on a basis that the young people don't really know what they're saying, and the old people don't care. They've lived like I have now, long enough so that they can say almost anything, and they're either forgiven or they're applauded.

Timothy Naftali

And that's how Hannah Nixon got on your show.

Art Linkletter

Yes, yes.

Timothy Naftali

And I think it's the only time that we've found a record of that she appeared in.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, and nothing particularly startling happened that I can recall, except she was very pleasant, and very agreeable, and very perky.

Timothy Naftali

Before we move on to when President Nixon was in office, I'd like to ask you a little bit about your public career as a public servant. Could you tell us a little bit about your World War II career and the role you played in American propaganda?

Art Linkletter

In San Francisco, I had accepted an offer from the Rockefeller Committee on Inter-American Affairs to do a program on shortwave for our overseas troops that I was already doing on NBC, locally, in San Francisco. It was called "Date at Eight." And it was, actually, a compilation of the interesting and important things happening, as reported by magazines. I was doing a "Reader's Digest" of the air and taking it from everything that I was reading about. And I wrote it, as well as did it. And the Committee thought it was interesting cross-section of the world, and would I be available to run it on a Washington shortwave hookup around the world? So I volunteered to do that. Now what was funny about this was that after I had been doing it for a while, my draft board called me up. And here I was, a new father with a new child, my career was just starting. I really didn't want to go to war. I'm more of a lover than I am a warrior. So I went to my draft board and I said, "Well, I'm working for the government." And they said, "Well, that's good. And what does your contract call for?" I said, "I'm volunteering." "Oh, you're volunteering," said the draft board. "A great many people volunteer to do things, but that has nothing to do with the draft." "You are 1A, and we'll be calling you." Well, I went home -- lived in Saint Francis Wood, up in the hills above San Francisco -- and told my wife that I'd rapidly be leaving her to go over and be killed on one of these strange islands in the South Pacific by the Japanese. And she said, "Gee, my gosh, what are we going to do? We just got started with our new house and everything." The next morning -- not a week, not a month, but the next morning -- I went out to the mailbox to pick up the mail, about noon, and there was a big fat letter from Washington, D.C. And they said, "We are reorganizing our broadcast, and we are going to ask you -- we hope that you'll agree to be sure to -- we have you for the next couple of years, would you sign this contract for X number of hundred dollars a week?" I signed it right on the spot. I didn't read anything else. Next thing I did, I got in my car and went down to the draft board, and showed them the contract, and they said, "You're X'd." And so I stayed in the Bay Area. And I had been so startled by this near death experience, that about a month later, a friend of mine from the University of California, who was working with a man named Henry Kaiser, who was building cargo ships and Liberty ships at Richmond. He had four shipyards, and they wanted to have somebody go on the air and get women to come down and learn how to be welders, because the draft and other things had taken away the people they needed. And for the kind of drafting, they did a pre-examination, just flat welding, none of the tricky up-in-the-corner stuff. They needed more welders. And they were willing to pay me well. And then I thought, "Well, what the Lord hath given, the Lord may take away, so there may be an envelope from Washington next week that I don't know about." So I said, "I'll be working for you, for the government, for the armament, and for the building of the ships." They say, "Yes, you'll emcee the launching of the ships, as well as the cheering, leading, and the emceeing of the noontime luncheons, where Mr. Kaiser talks to the 4,000 workers we have."

Timothy Naftali

And that's how you met Eleanor Roosevelt.

Art Linkletter

And that's how I met Eleanor Roosevelt and a good many other people, and how I got a great respect for Henry Kaiser and his huge enthusiasm for life, and his love of people, and it -- he was one of my mentors. He was the kind of guy, they'd said about him when he went back to Washington, and he met the top people of the Pentagon, and he said, "I have an idea I want to suggest for the War Department for our war." He says, "Instead of just building Liberty ships, I want to build a small, lean, quick ship, and we launch, from that ship, helicopters." "And we can run the ship in close to the coastline of the enemy, and the helicopters can take off and pinpoint their bombing and come back and we're gone." And the Pentagon is supposed to have said to him, "That's a cute idea Mr. Kaiser, but Leonardo da Vinci thought about the idea for helicopters already." And Henry Kaiser said, "Well, we don't care who gets the credit. We'll hire him, we'll put him on our staff, and let him develop it." In other words, he was a salesman. He didn't know who Leonardo da Vinci was, but he accepted him right away and said, "He'll be on our staff."

Timothy Naftali

Did you interact at all with Nelson Rockefeller [unintelligible]?

Art Linkletter

Not at that time. I met Nelson Rockefeller, on occasion, when I went to Washington or when he came out to the coast, but it wasn't because I worked on his group, it was just that I knew a lot of the important people. I was always a friend to the Republican Californians, whoever was Supreme Court justice or governor, whoever it was, and so I met him through him. And then we became good friends. And he invited me to stay with him when I went back to New York, and so I stayed in the Rockefeller home, up in the place where all five or six of the Rockefeller families were located around a whole group of lakes.

Timothy Naftali

In the Adirondacks.

Art Linkletter

In the Adirondacks. And I stayed with him and was present with him in his office, and I admired him very much.

Timothy Naftali

You talked to us about how you got to know Harry Truman, and I'd like to just ask you a couple questions about that. Was Truman working on his memoirs when --

Art Linkletter

When I was approached as the owner, one of the owners of a book publishing company, and we had agents looking for people who were looking for books to be printed, we got him to have a series of memoirs about his life. And as the president of the company, I met him and liked him immediately. I

had met him out here when he was out here with Ed Polly [phonetic sp], who was the national chairman of the Democratic Party. And Ed Polly was a big builder, and banker, and everything else. He was one of the top Democrats in the West. And I met him at his home, because I was a good friend of the Pollys. And we liked each other, and so he invited me to come up and spend weekends with him. And I also met him at his office, and we talked about various things and problems. And it just took, just a friend. I wasn't trying to be anything or do anything, except I had great respect for a man who had been, as a child, diminished in his future because, you know, he was a victim of -- what's the disease where you can't remember numbers or names?

Timothy Naftali

Oh, you mean he was dyslexic?

Art Linkletter

Dyslexic, a lot of people didn't know that, as a child, he was dyslexic. He couldn't read, and the Rockefeller family was a little concerned, because they didn't know what dyslexia was. And they had thought he was maybe an idiot. Everybody else could learn to read, why couldn't he learn to read?

Timothy Naftali

Oh, you mean Nelson, Nelson Rockefeller.

Art Linkletter

Nelson Rockefeller.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah, that's -- and then he rose, yeah.

Art Linkletter

And then he got treated finally with doctors and he overcame it, but he always had a little lingering problem with it, as so often stutterers do, who don't stutter except when they're very excited or --

Timothy Naftali

Or they're stressed.

Art Linkletter

-- stressed. And so he was an interesting person to overcome that.

Timothy Naftali

Well, I'd also like to ask you, just to ask you a bit about, more about Truman, because you were there as he was working through his memoirs, I assume.

Art Linkletter

Yes, yes.

Timothy Naftali

And you asked him about, you know --

Art Linkletter

We were up at the Carlisle Hotel, where he had a suite. And then we'd go out and walk around on the -- and just walk around the neighborhood. And he'd talk to everybody, wedding [phonetic sp] people coming down out of the brownstone fronts, he'd stop and shake hands with them.

Timothy Naftali

How did they do his memoirs? Had he dictated his memoirs? Do you remember? Is that how he did it?

Art Linkletter

He was dictating them, and I was suggesting ways to go, only I had an overall look at what we wanted as compared to what he might want. But he was a strong willed man, and he had his own ideas about it, and so it was a good experience for me to be deferential but still persuasive, that he'd leave things out that we didn't want in.

Timothy Naftali

Could you, do you remember anything that you wanted to leave out?

Art Linkletter

Only -- we were worried about -- he wanted to include the letters he wrote to editorial people who criticized him.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

And, you know, he wrote real tough letters. And when his wife -- when his daughter --

Timothy Naftali

Margaret.

Art Linkletter

-- Margaret performed, she was really criticized, and he was very stormy. He was profane in his language. He loved to play poker, high stakes poker, not with me but with some of his friends. I was on a boat once with him, and Ed Polly, and a group, and he invited me to sit in. And I said, "Well, what does \$100 buy?" And they said, "One chip." And I said, "No thanks." But he made no bones about the fact he was a guy who liked a little brand water and bourbon, and he wasn't vulgar in his language, but he used cuss words. And he was a very confident guy but very, very average from his language.

Timothy Naftali

Did you get to know General Eisenhower at all?

Art Linkletter

Only briefly, I was in Paris once with Andy, of "Amos and Andy," and he was a great fan of theirs. And so we were having dinner at a famous French restaurant, and Charlie said, "Look, there's General Eisenhower over there." Sure enough, a waiter came over and they asked us to come over and join them because he wanted to talk to Charlie Correll. But Mamie, his wife, was my fan.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

And so she wanted to talk to me, and he wanted to talk to "Amos and Andy." And she was the one who got me acquainted with him later, and they invited me to come and speak at the White House at one of his big soirees.

Timothy Naftali

You've noted that First Ladies were often your entree to [unintelligible]

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Art Linkletter

Oh, yes; oh, yes. Eleanor Roosevelt, and her, and --

Timothy Naftali

Well, did you get to meet Franklin Roosevelt in the White House?

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, please tell us about that.

Art Linkletter

Well, I just met him briefly, and it was in the office, and I was with Eleanor, so it was not a long conversation. But I was very much impressed by the similarity of the handshake he gave me and the look he gave me that I got years later, in the same place, from Lyndon Johnson.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, boy, Lyndon Johnson would've loved to hear that. Did you tell Lyndon Johnson?

Art Linkletter

No, I never told him that, but --

Timothy Naftali

He's a great fan of Roosevelt's.

Art Linkletter

I know he was right on, boom, and the first thing I remember Lyndon Johnson telling me -- there was a line of people being introduced to him, and I was introduced to him before my wife was introduced to him. She was in back of him. And Lyndon Johnson said to me, "I want to apologize for the fact that we're not speaking to the lady, your lady first, but it's historic precedence that the man meet the President before the wife." I said, "Well, that's all right with me." And later on, I talked to Lois about it, because she met him after I did, and I said, "What was your impression?" She said, "If I've ever had a grip and a look of a guy who was coming on to me, that was it." The old rascal. She's a very pretty girl, my wife.

Timothy Naftali

I -- no doubt, but he's noted for that.

Art Linkletter

And he gave her that kind of a grip.

Timothy Naftali

Let's talk a bit about, a little bit more about Richard Nixon.

Art Linkletter

Yes, I also became a very close friend of Richard Nixon's, because we were both members of a very exclusive and very famous Western club called the Bohemian Club.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

The Bohemian Club is the kind of club that the members, if they want their sons to get in, register him as an applicant when he's born. I, one time, was standing by a redwood tree in the forest, and young David Rockefeller was standing beside me, and I will not tell you what we were doing on the trunk of the tree.

Timothy Naftali

It's famous for that.

Art Linkletter

But it's famous for that. And so, I had known David Rockefeller casually, been through and to Nelson, and I said, "How long have you been a member of the club?" "Oh," he said, "just this last year." I said, "Well, I've seen you up here before at a distance." "Well," he says, "I've been a member, I've been a guest of the board of governors," but, he said, "I've had my membership in for 14 years." I said, "It took you 14 years to get into the Bohemian Club?" I said, "You must not have any talent, because they're always looking for people who can write musicals, who can sing, who can perform, who can talk, as the other part of the Grove." Because the Bohemian Club was begun by a group -- 115 years ago, by a group of very rich pioneers who were building railroads, and mines, and the gold diggers of that era. And they found out that a bunch of actors had a barn, that they were putting on shows, and these guys were all anxious to be people who were in, you know, they called them prop men or something. So they said to their, to the actors and performers, "If we can be members of the club and be in your shows just standing around, we'll take care of the commercial part of it." "You guys don't know how to run a business, you don't know how to pay your bills. We'll pay dues." And that's how the club was started.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, so --

Art Linkletter

So the club today is made up, primarily, of famous performers, and actors, and singers, and authors, and famous businessmen, and famous politicians who are successful in their fields and like to be with the people who perform in their singing groups, in their orchestra groups, and there's a whole symphony of 112 people, and choral --

Timothy Naftali

So there's a variety show when you're there?

Art Linkletter

And they put on shows for two weeks and three weekends, every weekend, and --

Timothy Naftali

So you've emceed shows?

Art Linkletter

I've emceed them, and I went up there once as a guest, and I was a member the next month.

Timothy Naftali

Well, you did a good job.

Art Linkletter

Because they could see I not only did the big shows, but I was the guy who liked to wander around, they have 115 different camps. And these camps are like fraternities in college. You don't have to be a member if you want to stay just a Bohemian member and stay with a bunch of guys who don't want to go in any one camp. Camps are more expensive, they're more exclusive, they're like fraternities, but you're still all Bohemians. And I used to wander around at the invitation of them and tell stories, and that's what they loved. And then this year was the first year I haven't gone up -- will be the first year I haven't gone up to emcee the annual big show that we put on for the community and raise money for the education and the physical education of people up in Northern California.

Timothy Naftali

And that big show is when, in the summer?

Art Linkletter

It's done in the last weekend of the three -- of the two weeks. And I've been up there, and I haven't emceed it, but I've been the star of it.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, my goodness.

Art Linkletter

So that's how we met.

Timothy Naftali

Who were some of the -- can I ask you, who were some of the performers when you were emceeding?

Art Linkletter

Oh, some of the performers would be people like opera stars, famous opera stars, I can't even remember their names at the moment, and we --

Timothy Naftali

[Unintelligible]

Art Linkletter

-- have Bing Crosby and Perry Como.

Timothy Naftali

What was Bing Crosby like?

Art Linkletter

Bing Crosby was a very interesting guy. He was a good friend of mine. He had the two faces. He had the performer's face, and he had the private face. And the private face was one of suspicion that anybody who meets him that he doesn't know is going to try to take advantage of him.

Timothy Naftali

Why do you think he was like that?

Art Linkletter

Because so many people have taken advantage of him, and me, and every other star, real-estate operators and guys who wanted to get plugs for their businesses or use them for something, charities, or something, and he was very strict with his sons, very, very strict.

Timothy Naftali

I mean, I was a kid, but I saw some of his latter shows, later shows in the '70s and, I mean, he seemed a little sad.

Art Linkletter

Well, he did a lot of drinking, and he married a girl who tried to cure him from drinking in the early days. And finally, she was a drinker herself and got burned to death in a fire of a Christmas tree. They lived a block away from me.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, my goodness.

Art Linkletter

And his brother, Bob Crosby, told me one time that he had wired Bing from a place in New York, where he was starting a band -- and in that time those all night clubs were run by the Mafia -- and the guy who ran the Mafia didn't like him and said, "Get out of here, I don't like you." He says, "But I've got two more weeks to go before I have a date in Miami." He says, "I don't care what you do." Get out of here. We're not going to use you." So he wired Bing, "I need money to get the band to the beach, Miami Beach." And Bing wired him back, "I didn't get your wire."

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

So he was a funny guy that way. I would walk by him on a street and one time he'd stop me and say, "Hey Art, what's doing?" Or one time I was backstage during the war, and we were going up to the Brown Derby to have something to eat between shows, because in those days radio -- it was all radio -- you had to do two shows; it was no tapes. You had to do a show a 5:00 for 8:00 for New York and a show at 8:00 for the West Coast.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, my goodness.

Art Linkletter

And between 5:00 and 8:00, many of the people who came back to do the 8:00 show don't remember doing it after leaving the Brown Derby Bar. And so we were on our way out, and we looked down this long hall, and there were a whole bunch of servicemen at this artist entrance, and Bing says, "Oh, God, they'll all want to grab me and everything. Let's go out the side here." And we go out through the studio, and we walked through the parking lot of the cars and then the -- adjacent for the performers, and then we got back out on Vine Street, and we had a block to walk. And there was a sailor walking

ahead of us, a lone sailor. And Bing had just gone to all the trouble to avoid saying, "Hello," to the servicemen, so he walked up to the sailor, he said, "Hi sailor, where are you from? What's going on?" This is how quickly the Jekyll and Hyde in Bing Crosby operated. And the guy, and he says, "Come on up to the Derby and have a drink with us."

Timothy Naftali

He was such a talented man, Bing Crosby.

Art Linkletter

He was --

Timothy Naftali

His -- I mean, he's being rediscovered, actually, because he was such an innovator in jazz.

Art Linkletter

He was, and when they asked him to be the star of the show on radio, they said, "You know, you have to do two shows and every show is live." And Bing says, "Well, why don't you tape them? Why don't you film them?" And they said, "Oh, people wouldn't watch." And Bing Crosby said, "If you don't tape it or film it, I won't do it. But if I do it, and there's no drop in the rating, I will go on not doing it live." And he was the first one to break the barrier that made absolutely no difference to the audience. And from then on, the gate was open for us to take holidays and tape two or three shows a week and be gone. What do you think of that?

Timothy Naftali

So, Bing --

Art Linkletter

Most people don't even know that.

Timothy Naftali

I'm sure you knew Bob Hope well.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, I knew Bob Hope very well. He was a guy who was working all the time, but he was working on his act. He was working on going places to appear. And so every time I was in a business deal with him, he would be a stockholder, or he'd be a board of directors of the real estate thing. He wouldn't show up. His lawyer would show up. He was known to be a businessman, and he did make the decisions, but he wouldn't go to the meetings. I went to meetings. I wanted to know what was going on. Very interesting.

Timothy Naftali

Was he just over committed, too busy?

Art Linkletter

He didn't like to be bothered by business. He liked it, but he didn't want to go through the deal. You've been in business. You know what I mean. A lot of board meetings are very dull. And he also had another queer thing in business and real estate, and that is, whenever we had a piece of property ready to sell, and we had a buyer, he'd say, "Now wait a minute, Art. He may know something we don't know. We don't want to let him have it at a bargain." I said, "Bob, we got our money in it, and we got a price on it, and that's what I want." He says, "Yeah, but this was too fast. Take it off the market till we can get more."

Timothy Naftali

You --

Art Linkletter

Isn't that funny?

Timothy Naftali

It is funny.

Art Linkletter

They all have queer things. Red Skelton, for instance, wouldn't go anywhere that he doesn't have at least \$40,000 or \$50,000 in cash, either in a suitcase, or in a money belt around his belt.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, my goodness. That's eccentric.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, Red Skelton wouldn't telephone anybody. If Louie B. Mayer of MGM, under whom he was under contract at MGM, called him, he wouldn't accept a phone call.

Timothy Naftali

You were friends with Lucille Ball weren't you?

Art Linkletter

Yes, Lucille Ball was a sweet lady who was also two different people. In her family and among her friends, she was almost shy. The minute she got into the production and rehearsal, she was an iron lady

with her own ideas and a lot of good ideas, took charge of everything. I've been on her show where she, in rehearsal, she redid the whole end of the show because she's, "The curtain's down here, what are we doing going on?"

Timothy Naftali

Well, she had a good sense of timing.

Art Linkletter

Great sense of timing.

Timothy Naftali

But she wasn't a talker, though.

Art Linkletter

No, and she didn't really like business. When Desi and she split up and she took over the studio, she didn't like that, and she wasn't good at it, and she was unhappy with it. The latter part of her life was very unhappy. She married another fellow who was in show business, but she was still in love with Desi, who, unfortunately, never saw a skirt he couldn't take a fling at.

Timothy Naftali

Is that what happened?

Art Linkletter

Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. Everybody in Hollywood knew it, and she was so embarrassed by it, and Desi was just really a big chaser. And so she finally just couldn't stand it anymore.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

On the other hand, as everybody knew and all, even Bob Hope was quite careless, but Deloris was a nice Catholic girl and she says, "He'll be home."

Timothy Naftali

Desi must've been a character, though.

Art Linkletter

Desi was a very good businessman, as well as a wild Cuban drummer.

Timothy Naftali

He was very talented, I mean --

Art Linkletter

Very talented in a lot of ways.

Timothy Naftali

It was amazing, well,

I'm thinking about television then, that they would put him on TV. That was a fight. It was Lucille had

--

Art Linkletter

Oh, Lucille got him on or he never would've made it, and he proved to be an iron center of that whole show.

Timothy Naftali

But it was, in a sense, it was, she was -- they were breaking a color barrier there.

Art Linkletter

Yes, everything, and when they had the children on the air, it became a big thing, and it was accepted by the public.

Timothy Naftali

But was that Lucy's, I guess that was Lucy's idea.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, Lucille Ball and I used to sit at the head table of several big benefits, when there were charities going on and we were both going to perform. And we'd be in the early part of the evening, and she'd be talking to me, and afterwards some people would say to me, "What in the devil were you and Lucille talking about while the whole dinner was going on?" And I would say, "If I told you, I'd offer you \$10,000 if you could guess, I'd be safekeeping it, because you'd never guess what we were talking about." They said, "Well, what was it?" I said, "Lucille Ball had a guilt complex." She had a family and she wasn't spending any time with them because she had rehearsals, she had rewrites, and redoes, and movies, and everything. And when she was with them, she didn't know how to handle them. And she thought I knew everything about children because I had a big family of five, and I did interviews with children, and I wrote books about children. So the whole meeting I had with the head table of this big sophisticated thing with, all the stars sitting on each side of us, and very sophisticated -- we were talking about spanking, and allowances, and all the things that come up with a parent. Isn't that interesting?

Timothy Naftali

[Unintelligible] were you friendly with Jackie Gleason?

Art Linkletter

Only casually. I appeared on his show several times, and he appeared on my show several times, but he was not in my aura. He was a guy that came up drinking, and with girls, and with all kinds of wild stuff, and I just watched him with some awe.

Timothy Naftali

Now, George Burns was in your group, right?

Art Linkletter

George Burns, of course, was happily married, and he and --

Timothy Naftali

Gracie.

Art Linkletter

And what?

Timothy Naftali

Gracie, I guess, right?

Art Linkletter

Gracie.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

Art Linkletter

And they were very good friends with Jack Benny.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, right, yes.

Art Linkletter

George Burns and Jack Benny were inseparable because George Burns could make Jack Benny fall right down on the ground laughing. Jack was his sucker audience, and they were great good friends. And they were both married to two women who became close friends, who were so different as women, that you could possibly imagine. Almost nobody liked Mary Livingston.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

And almost everybody loved Gracie. Gracie was sweet and kind and thoughtful, and Mary was the opposite of all those.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, well that's -- what was Jack Benny like?

Art Linkletter

Jack Benny was a goodhearted guy. He was a, not a creative person. He was a comedy actor. He could play lines, and read lines, and play the part of a miser, and the skinny guy, and, I mean, all kind of funny guy. But Fred Allen, who -- they had a fake feud between them that ran for a long time -- but Fred Allen told me one time that he meant it when he said, "Jack Benny couldn't ad lib a belch after a Hungarian dinner." But he could take a line that you gave him and go miles with it. And the most famous line he ever had that was a minute and a half of solid laughter was when the holdup man said, "Your money or your life." Jack looked at him, and looked at him, and looked around, and finally the holdup man says, "Didn't you hear me?"

I said 'your money or your life.'" And Jack says, "I'm thinking about it." And the way he said it made all the difference.

Timothy Naftali

You spent your life, your career ad libbing. You had to because of reality television and reality radio.

Art Linkletter

Yes, yes, I was an ad libber.

Timothy Naftali

Who were your favorite ad libbers, among your contemporaries, among the performers you saw, who were the best at that?

Art Linkletter

Well, I liked Steve Allen, who was great. I liked, among my ad libbers, I liked, you know, you can't tell about some of them. I liked Groucho Marx, who did nothing but say funny things all the time. You couldn't say a straight line to him that he didn't twist around. If I'd say, "Could you join me for dinner, for lunch tomorrow at the Derby, Groucho?" He says, "What's the matter? Am I coming apart?" Or, "Are you coming apart?" or whatever -- join me.

Timothy Naftali

I know.

Art Linkletter

And, so you -- Jerry Lewis was a funny guy, but he was funny, he couldn't ever stop being funny. I could sit with Jerry Lewis in the Brown Derby, just the two of us, alone, and have a sensible conversation about anything in the world. Now, as people went by, going to their various booths, they'd stop and say, "Hello," and maybe stop and talk to us for a while. The first guy that sat down, we both know, somebody in the business, and Jerry would be just a little bit on the funny edge. By the time two more people were there at the table, there was no more common sense to be -- Jerry Lewis was an absolute babbling idiot, spilling water down his front, and tripping the waiter, and --

Timothy Naftali

He liked attention.

Art Linkletter

And he'd do anything for attention. But here was a guy who was easy to talk to and nice with -- but Groucho never was that, he was always on.

Timothy Naftali

Groucho was always on?

Art Linkletter

Always on, and to show you the difference from Jackie Gleason, Jackie Gleason was a great comic actor, but he was not a good standup. He never -- he was a second-rate standup telling jokes. But when you give him a situation where he is the bartender or whatever, or the husband being beaten to death, he was just great. And when I did his show, I was horrified at what he did at the start, before we went on the air. He'd get all the performers and guest artists together in his dressing room an hour before we went on, or a half hour, we'd done the rehearsal. He'd say, "Now, for my monologue, who's got some ideas for jokes?" And he went out with a bad collection, badly told, and his monologue was one of the worst in the business, but the rest of his show was the best. Fred Allen was a guy who could do both. Fred Allen could be a funny comic, but he was an original writer, an original idea man, and everything. He was one of the best comedy writers in the whole business.

Timothy Naftali

A lot of people in the comedy business talk about Eddie Kovac [phonetic sp] as a very talented man.

Art Linkletter

I didn't know --

Timothy Naftali

Ernie Kovacs.

Art Linkletter

Ernie Kovacs, yes Ernie Kovac was a crazy guy. And I never knew him well, but he was married to Edie. And she told me that he would never come home at night until two or three in the morning. And she never knew whether they owned the house, whether she owned her fur coat, whether they'd have food for breakfast in the morning, because he loved to play no limit poker with very high rollers, and he just lost money all the time. What do you think of that?

Timothy Naftali

That's a bit sad.

Art Linkletter

But he was a crazy, wild talent.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah, apparently, I mean, he inspired --

Art Linkletter

Yeah, he, wild, wild, stuff.

Timothy Naftali

-- well, I mean, inspired a whole group of comedy writers.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, and Ernie Kovac finally died running into an iron telephone pole with his car.

Timothy Naftali

Oh.

Art Linkletter

He drank a lot, too.

Timothy Naftali

I think that sounds like a theme among some of the performers in Hollywood.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, a lot of them. You see, I was well known in Hollywood, and I knew all these people, but I was never a show business accepted star, because I didn't have writers, and rehearsals, and music, particularly. I wasn't playing sketches. I was doing things that they didn't understand. I was looking in ladies' purses.

Timothy Naftali

But they invited you to emcee, though.

Art Linkletter

But they invited me to emcee because I could think of funny things to say in introductions, but I didn't have a routine.

Timothy Naftali

Are there some younger performers that you'd, sort of, give the same high marks to? Have you seen Steve Martin perform?

Art Linkletter

Yeah, Steve Martin is a funny guy. And he's a funny ad libber, too, very good, both. And, but in real life he's very quiet, and very private, and very non-talkative, and very hard to talk to.

Timothy Naftali

But you talk about many performers have these two --

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

Would you -- is it something about the demands of the stage that --

Art Linkletter

I don't know what it is, but they're like clowns. You take Red Skelton, he wasn't a great talker, but he was a clown. The minute he got a costume on, the minute he had a character on he'd do anything, anything, jump off a building or hit himself in the face with a pie or anything like that. There's, like, some actors who are wonderful characters, but the one time the head of J. Walter Thompson came over to meet me and he wanted to have Mason, the English actor, on as a master --

Timothy Naftali

James Mason.

Art Linkletter

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

James Mason.

Art Linkletter

James Mason, terrific actor.

Timothy Naftali

Fantastic.

Art Linkletter

And they wanted him as being the host of a show called "Hollywood on Parade" or something where's he's just the famous host. And he said they came into our office to ask what kind of a thing he would be getting paid for and they said, "Well, this one is where you're just yourself." "You just come out, and you're the host, and you present them." And Mason said to them, "Yeah, I know that, but what is my motivation?" They said, "Well, your motivation is just to be a gracious host." He said, "Who is that? I don't know who it is." And they said, "Who do you like who is a host?" And he said, "Art Linkletter." So I got a call from the guy, and he said, "Could I bring Mason over and sit in your audience during your warm-up?" because I always did my own warm-ups, which most people had announcers for, but I'm warming myself up, as well as the audience. So he came over, and he watched me do the warm-up, and he watched me do the show. He says, "Okay, I'm Art Linkletter." So naturally, I looked at it, it was on television, when it was on and, of course, he had no funny things, but he's thinking me. Now, isn't that something?

Timothy Naftali

Well, but you knew a lot of performers, true performers, like Mason. You were friendly with Cary Grant.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

How's that possible here? Sorry, that's supposed to be impossible here. Sorry about that. We don't usually get cell phone reception. Tell us about Cary Grant. I mean, was he a talker?

Art Linkletter

You on yet? All right.

Timothy Naftali

So you, that was a wonderful story about James Mason.

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

And you have known a number of great actors.

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

Tell us a bit about Cary Grant, please.

Art Linkletter

I knew Cary Grant because we were both members of the board of directors of the MGM movies. When Kerkorian took charge of MGM, I had been a board of directors with him for Western Airlines. And he liked my business of being a director, and he asked me one time at a board meeting, he said, "You know, I'm buying MGM." And he said, "And there's no reason why you should want to be on the board of directors of MGM, but I'd like to have you on the board." And, "Would you think about it?" And I said, "I've thought about it, I'd like to be on it," just like that. He said, "You can make up your mind so fast?" I said, "Oh, yeah." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because 10 years ago, when I came to this town from San Francisco, I couldn't get through the main gates at MGM. I want to drive through. And if anybody tries to stop me, I say, 'Drive over that man.'" He said, "I can understand that." "I've been down, too, to a level where I couldn't get in places." And that's how I accepted. So now I find out that on the board, also, he wanted a couple of performers. The rest are all producers, or businessmen, and no stars until finally, Dinah Shore joined us, and she was on the board for a while. But Cary Grant and I were the only performers, so we sat together, and we talked together, and he was just a very

charming, gracious, delightful guy to be with. And so I told the story about how we were used by Kerkorian for the opening of the MGM Grand Hotel.

Timothy Naftali

Yes.

Art Linkletter

Want me to retell that?

Timothy Naftali

Yeah, I think it's a great story for the camera.

Art Linkletter

Because whenever there was a premier of a picture, Cary Grant and I were there as part of the opening hoopla, so when he opened a hotel in Las Vegas, he wanted us to be there. And we were on the board of directors and of the MGM Grand Hotel in Vegas, because it was two different companies, but he owned both of them. So while I'm on that story, Cary Grant and I were waiting to go on, and photographers were assembling, and things were starting, and a group of showgirls came out wearing their show costumes, which are mostly band aids here and there. And they said, "We'd like to get some autographs, but we'd like to have you autograph our breasts, our chests, breasts, really." And I looked at Cary and I said, "Are you game?" He says, "Yeah, sure. You take a group and I'll take a group." So two or three went with him, a couple with me, and we're autographing, and I said, "Oh, Cary." He said, "Yes, Art?" I said, "Don't you wish you had a long name like mine?" By the time I crossed the T's, I'm down to the belly button. Anyway, Cary Grant and I would talk about things. He would never make a movie. He had become of an age where he is not a leading man with a girl, and he does not want to be a character actor. And we would try to talk him into it, because we needed a picture with his strength, but he wouldn't do it, which was kind of interesting, because, he said, "I've been a leading man, and I know what I am, but that's it." And one day he came up to me before a meeting started, he said, "Art, you give these talks around town, all around the country." He said, "There's a group called, the Town Hall, up in San Jose, had been trying to get me to go up and make a lecture." He says, "They offer good money, but what do I say? I'm not a lecturer. I don't know how to talk." I said, "Cary, I can tell you what you can do." "We have, in the lecture businesses, something called Q and A. That's question and answer. And at the end, or middle, somewhere in our talk, we open the audience to asking us questions. Why don't you go up there, just for the heck of it, and say, 'We'll do a whole Q and A.' As you come into the audience, you're given a card, and a pencil, and if you think of anything you'd like to ask me about my career, you just write it down, and you pick it up, and they bring it backstage, and he picks out the ones he wants." And then he does, "Oh, there's a Mrs. Smith." "Where are you Mrs. Smith?" She says, "I'm over here." And he answers the question. Well, he came back from that meeting like a schoolboy had just discovered there was recess. They had a full house, they all had their hair done, and they all had new clothes on. Cary Grant was a hell of a romantic guy. And he had a good time, and it changed his life. From then on, he accepted dates speaking, and doing Q and A's, and he did trips on ships, tourist ships, which I do, he did -- he died in a dressing room of a theater in Omaha, Nebraska, I think it was, where he had a stroke and died, but he was ready to go out and perform.

Timothy Naftali

But he --

Art Linkletter

So I felt very good about giving his career and his happiness of performing as an ending curtain call for the great Cary Grant. So we were very good friends.

Timothy Naftali

Well, that was a very wonderful thing for you to do. It's funny that he didn't do what Burt Lancaster did. Burt Lancaster took those character roles --

Art Linkletter

Took --

Timothy Naftali

-- wonderful character roles.

Art Linkletter

He took them pictures.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

Art Linkletter

And played them.

Timothy Naftali

And played them beautifully in the latter years of his career.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, in his latter years, Cary did some of that picture stuff, but not much. And one morning, we got there early, as we both did before a board meeting, and he was looking grouchy. I said, "What's the matter Cary?" He said, "Well, Sophia Loren has just written, with her ghost writers, an autobiography. And she tells a story of our affair that we had when we were both single and making a movie in England," or someplace. And you know, "In real life," he said, "we were in love. And she wanted to get married, but I said to her, 'We wouldn't work out as a married couple, because we're doing pictures in different continents, we wouldn't see each other, and it just doesn't work.'

But I really feel very fond of you." "In the book," he said, "she said that she was the one who said

that, that I wanted to get married and she said no." And so he said, "And she never asked me about other things she said in the book, and I thought she should've." So I said to him, "Cary, I would never tell you this before, because we're friends, and you're a sensitive, personal kind of a guy, but Sophia Loren has always been my dream girl. If I would ever dream of anybody that I'd like to be with, it would be her. And I just want to ask you, have I been wasting my time?" And he just looked at me and he said, "No, no, you have not been wasting your time." That was enough for me. I said, "Okay, I'll go on having those dreams," because I knew I had the right answer from a guy who knew and had been around. I've never told that story in public before.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you, that is amazing. Well, I wanted to ask you about Cary Grant, because he personified a certain era of Hollywood residents.

Art Linkletter

Oh, yes, and, you know, he came to this country with a group of acrobats. He was not an actor or performer. He was nothing but a young acrobat who had played in all over England. And they brought him here to play in some of the plays, and they played around, and now he had nothing to do. He told me this himself, and he said -- but a woman named Babe -- no, what was her name? Let me think about it here. I've got a senior moment here. Belle, Baby -- an actor, an actress who was very busty.

Timothy Naftali

Mae West?

Art Linkletter

Mae West. Mae West came and saw him, and she says, "I'd like to have good looking men around me dressed to the top and bottom." And he said, "I needed the money and I needed the performance. She was doing a show. So I went over there, and they dressed me up, and I went out, and I had a couple of lines with her." And he said, "She kept me for a while, but then somebody saw me and they said, 'You ought to be an actor.' And I said, 'How do you be an actor?' They said, 'Oh, you just do easy lines and you rehearse.'" And he says, "And that's how I became an actor. Mae West took me as one of the musclemen."

Timothy Naftali

That's not a bad beginning.

Art Linkletter

That's not bad.

Timothy Naftali

When -- did you meet Ronald Reagan when he was an actor?

Art Linkletter

Yes, I met Ronald Reagan when he was a young actor around town, and he was married to Jane at the time, and he lived in our neighborhood. I was in Holmby Hills then, and he had a house just nearby. And we were, both had been lifeguards, and we both were about the same age, and so forth. We got to be friends, and then he, we used to take our kids and go down and have ice cream together, down at various places in Hollywood, have dinner together. And then she divorced him and he met this girl, Nancy --

Timothy Naftali

She divorced him, because --

Art Linkletter

Well, they divorced. Who knows what happened. But he began lecturing and politicking, and the Republican Party grabbed him, and she didn't like that at all. And he'd lived another life that -- Jane was altogether show business, and he wasn't. He liked business. He liked lecturing. He liked -- like me. And so we were friends, and I never was a particular friend of hers because she was a showgirl's showgirl, actress. So then he met Nancy, I already made a movie with Nancy, sometimes in my lectures I say to the audience, "Nancy Reagan, do I know her? She was my wife at one time." And the audience waits and I say, "It was for a half an hour show on TV, for General Electric, because we were in a movie together." But he married her, and then, so we continued to be friends, and...

Timothy Naftali

Did you overlap? You said you were a spokesman for GE at some point.

Art Linkletter

Yes, I was a spokesman for GE with my own show, "House Party," for five years.

Timothy Naftali

Okay.

Art Linkletter

He came along to be the host of "GE Theater," which had nothing to do with anything I did. And that's how he met people and did the things with them. And he was such a good guy and such a non-actor actor.

Timothy Naftali

You mean not pretentious? Is that what you mean by non-actor actor?

Art Linkletter

That's right, that's right. He wasn't like my other good friend, Bob Cummings, whose favorite topic was his movies. And he would occasionally say at a party, "Look, I'm talking about my movies, my movies, my movies. Let's change the subject. Let's talk about my flying," or something else. He always had the center stage. He talked about -- Bob Cummings talked about his flying, he was one of the original pilots who got a early license. And he lived back -- and his middle name was the name of the first flyer out on the pasture, with the beginning airplane, and so on. But he -- and he also had a predilection for fortune telling for the stars, and he got a thing that he should do every day from his favorite star guy, like, "This is the day to start a bank account." And he'd go start a bank account. I used to steal them before he got up in the morning when we were traveling. And I'd fake out, so at breakfast, I got your stuff, it says here, "Today, don't cross Wilshire Boulevard until you look both ways. Isn't that wonderful that you should get this advice?" He laughed at it.

Timothy Naftali

So Reagan was not as self-centered then?

Art Linkletter

He -- no, he was just a regular guy. And he had been a sports announcer, so had I. He had been a lifeguard; so had I. He'd been the chairman of several things like the Screen Actors Guild, and I'd been active in the TV Guild, and so forth, so we had a lot of common things.

Timothy Naftali

As a professional, tell us a little -- give Ronald Reagan notes. Why was he as effective a spokesman as he was? He was a tremendous spokesman. What did he know about it? I mean, you're a pro in this. What did he know how to do?

Art Linkletter

Reagan was believable, and he had a smile, and he had an openness that made you just absolutely believe in him. The only guy I can think of who had more believability was Walter Cronkite, who gave you all the news of the world, and you believed that he knew everything about everything.

Timothy Naftali

Was it just positive energy from Reagan? I mean --

Art Linkletter

Yeah, it was just energy. He just was a great guy, and it showed.

Timothy Naftali

And you --

Art Linkletter

Not faking, not faking.

Timothy Naftali

You knew him for years, so --

Art Linkletter

Yeah, and furthermore, he had principles; he had character. He thought family was important. He thought that ethics were important. He was not a drinker. He was not a woman chaser. He was all the things that I am in my private life.

Timothy Naftali

Though, with Reagan --

Art Linkletter

So we just liked each other.

Timothy Naftali

With Reagan, though, there was a little bit of tension with his first family wasn't there?

Art Linkletter

With his what?

Timothy Naftali

With his first family, with the kids, the first, you know, his --

Art Linkletter

With Jane?

Timothy Naftali

No, not with Jane, but I meant the older children.

Paul Musgrave

Maureen.

Timothy Naftali

Maureen.

Art Linkletter

Oh, yes, but -- well, yes, but that was mostly Nancy. Nancy didn't get along with everybody equally, but Ronny did. But -- take their adopted son.

Timothy Naftali

Michael.

Art Linkletter

Michael, he's on my board of directors of my Alzheimer's Research Foundation, and he told me that in order to see his father when he was ill, he had to phone Nancy and make a date.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, that's too bad.

Art Linkletter

I mean, that's just family stuff. And she probably was trying to shield Ronny from anything that she didn't want him to see, but, you know, Nancy is -- don't get really close to her.

Timothy Naftali

So we're talking about a leader whom you were friends with who had a great talent for getting his message across.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

You served as an unofficial advisor to Richard Nixon on these issues.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Tried to help him.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Tell us a little bit about the challenges he faced as he worked [unintelligible]

Art Linkletter

Richard Nixon?

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

Art Linkletter

He faced a basic challenge from the very beginning of being born an introvert. He was not an extrovert, a hale fellow well met. During college years, they called him "Silent Gus" as a nickname. And among close and intimate friends and people he trusted, he was just the greatest guy in the world. But when he got out in the business and the world of politics and got higher and higher, he began to be suspicious because he had been double-crossed, and he had been -- the world of politics is a tough, miserable, mean business in many ways. And the Richard Nixon who resigned as President, and who left after that business, was no more the Richard Nixon that I knew than the man in the moon. When I hear on the records some of the things he was saying and the words he was using, I have never heard him use -- around campfires, with other guys -- the kind of rough talk -- he became a man who felt he was surrounded by enemies, and he was suspicious of everything, and ready to fight, and ready to connive, probably. I don't know what went on there, because that whole thing turned into such a terrible mess. I felt so badly for him, and I couldn't help him. The only thing I suggested to him one time was that he burn all the records that had been made, and he said he couldn't because they were history. But if he'd have done it, none of the rest would've happened. But on the record, it was not the Dick Nixon I knew.

Timothy Naftali

You were there a very difficult night for Richard Nixon. You were there the night that he lost the gubernatorial election in California.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Can you tell us -- you were the emcee that night -- can you tell us what you remember of that night?

Art Linkletter

Well, of course, he famously said, "Well, they won't have me to kick around anymore." And I, of course, talked to him and said, "Well, look, it's impossible to please everybody, and you didn't please everybody, and so you made enemies." And when you're in politics, and you begin to get up high, whether it's Governor, whether it's President, not -- and even Mayor, you are opening the doors to every kind of criticism by mean people who are trying to tear you down. And you can't do it because you have dear friends. And that's when I told him, "When you make a talk, you're at your best just talking like you talk to me," and to several other people I mentioned who were in his kitchen cabinet. I said then, "You're so relaxed, and you know so much." I said, "You are the most knowledgeable, high-ranking official that I've ever met in my life who has depth of intellect and knowledge." It's true.

Timothy Naftali

And you're talking to him after the Gubernatorial election?

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

But you were there that night. Where was the event that night?

Art Linkletter

I can't even remember now. It was just -- I think it was in Palladium, or wherever it was. You know, you live, as I have, such a long life, and having been through so many exciting things --

Timothy Naftali

[Unintelligible]

Art Linkletter

-- my memory, you know, when I don't have a book in front of me, I forget.

Timothy Naftali

That's fine. Did you serve as an advisor at all in the 1960 campaign?

Art Linkletter

Yes, but privately. I would call him and say what I thought. And I did a lot of emceeing in Washington among a lot of Presidents and the balls after they had --

Timothy Naftali

The inaugural.

Art Linkletter

The inaugural balls. I emceed, oh, a half a dozen of them for a half a dozen Presidents, and so I got to know them there and be a part of the hoopla.

Timothy Naftali

What was the first one? Do you remember the first one you emceed?

Art Linkletter

I think the first one was the Richard Nixon, but I do know that the most unusual one, it was for Nixon. Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra were going to emcee the big party at the Kennedy Center, two-hour show with an intermission. Frank Sinatra was going to emcee and perform in the first hour, and Hope was going to do the second hour. I was going to do one of the balls afterwards. I was putting on my tuxedo at the Hilton Hotel to get ready to go down and see the show, and the phone rang, and it was the committee from the Kennedy Center. And they say, "Art, could you do the first hour tonight?" I said, "Well, what's happened to Frank Sinatra?" And they said, "He got in a fight with the local director, and he walked off the show. He's gone." I said, "You mean Sinatra is stiffing the President of the United States in this big party because he got in an argument with the local" -- because I know Frank, tremendous temper, he can be your buddy one second and run over you with his car in the driveway five minutes later if you've done something to upset him. So I should've known that, but I said, "Yeah, I can do it. I've been practicing to do this for 40 years." I didn't know it, but I've done a lot of things. "So just get me the names of what the acts are, and then a little introduction, and I'll do it." I went over, and I did it. And I'm in my dressing room after the first hour of the show, there's a knock on the door, and it's Bob Hope. He says, "Art, I just heard you emceed the first hour." I said, "Yeah." He said, "My God, Frank walked out, huh?" "Yeah, I guess so." He said, "Would you do me a favor of coming down to my dressing room and going over all my cards with me so that I don't do anything that you did." Because this is the great fear of comics, that you appear on a program not knowing what's gone before you, and some actor, or some performer, or some comic has taken something that you're going to do, and when you do it, you die, because the audience has heard it. You don't think of that, but it's true. It's true of all these show where you have stars come on, and it goes on for hour after hour after hour after hour. You don't know what's happened before. So I said, "Bob," kiddingly, because I knew him well, I said, "I don't use any of your material." I said, "I'm used to appearing before God-fearing audiences of decent, nice American people." He says, "Cut it out." I said, "You do X before the troops." But I said, "I'm kidding," and he knew it. So I went down there, and I had to go over every one of his jokes, and every one of his cards to be sure that I didn't even use the same kind of material with different jokes.

Timothy Naftali

Now, he didn't write his own material [unintelligible]?

Art Linkletter

No, no, he didn't write his jokes, ever. He had eight or 10 writers, but he was very good at editing. He could say, "I can do this one. I don't like that one." The guys say, "It's a good joke." He says, "I don't like it." And, "Why don't you turn this one around and put it over here on this one." He was an editor. He was a great editor. He knew what he could do, and he could pick it out.

Timothy Naftali

Let me ask you --

Art Linkletter

And a lot of people don't know what they can do.

Timothy Naftali

No.

Art Linkletter

They're comics who don't know what's really funny, but it's funny when they get out there.

Timothy Naftali

Let me ask you another question about Sinatra. Did you, I mean, this wasn't your only interaction with him, I'm sure.

Art Linkletter

With Frank?

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

Art Linkletter

Oh, no, I knew Frank. But I didn't know him really well, because I wasn't in that group. He was a drinking, chasing, wild group, so I never knew him, except when I met him at a benefit, and we had a few words to talk, because he and I didn't talk the same language.

Timothy Naftali

You weren't a rat packer?

Art Linkletter

Oh, not at all, not at all.

Timothy Naftali

Was Dean Martin as much of a drinker as he pretended to be?

Art Linkletter

Dean Martin drank some, but when he was compared with Phil Harris, he said one time, Dean Martin, he says, "I spill more than he drinks." In other words, it's just on his way up to his lips. But Dean was a in-and-out drinker, who, in his last years, I sat with him in a little booth in a little restaurant -- I happened to be going in for, I don't know, something late at night -- and the owner said, "Would you go talk to Dean? He's in the booth over there." And I went over, and Dean was drunk. He was a wreck. He says, "Hi Art, come on it and sit down. What's doing? What's new?" And what'd killed him was the death of his son.

Timothy Naftali

Dino, yeah, the son of -- the son, yeah.

Art Linkletter

He walked out on a contract at Las Vegas because he just didn't want to be on the stage. And he just really started drinking.

Timothy Naftali

Were you friends with Sammy Davis, Jr.?

Art Linkletter

With Sammy Davis, Jr., I was only a casual friend. You know, I knew him and I liked him, I admired him. He was one of the best all-around talents I ever saw. He could sing, dance, act, perform, do everything. He was great. And he -- well, I knew things that've happened up at Vegas that I don't want to talk about.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, with him?

Art Linkletter

Yeah, I don't like to say anything that's derogatory or scandalous.

Timothy Naftali

Fine.

Art Linkletter

It's not my --

Timothy Naftali

Well, that's not the --

Art Linkletter

Not my business. I saw a lot of it. I've walked away from parties that are going on because I discovered that they'd been set up, and there were girls available. I've said to the star who set up the party, I said, "I can't be here. I don't know who these people are. I don't want to have anything to do with them. They're girls available, but what are they going to say afterwards, and to whom, and why? And I'm not interested."

Timothy Naftali

Pardon the segue, but did you ever meet John F. Kennedy?

Art Linkletter

Who? John Kennedy?

Timothy Naftali

Yes.

Art Linkletter

Only once. I met Jack Kennedy when he was President in the Oval Room when I was the man, the star that appeared with the girl of the Seals, Christmas Seals.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, I see.

Art Linkletter

And I brought her over. And because I knew Bobby Kennedy, he heard I was going to be there as the star meeting the President and the girl, little girl, he came over from the West Wing to be sure that I got a great introduction from his brother, and he told his brother how to -- what a friend I was of his.

Timothy Naftali

How did you know Bobby Kennedy?

Art Linkletter

Bobby Kennedy was honeymooning with Ethel in the Hana Ranch at Maui in Honolulu, and I was there in the same place with four of my children and my wife. And the two of them were sitting over there and they were kind of looking glumly, and there was not talking or anything, and my family and I were having a lot of fun. I didn't know who they was. So I walked over and I said, "I'm Art Linkletter." He said, "I'm Robert Kennedy." It meant nothing to me. This was before the brother had become President or anything. He was a senator, and not a very well-known senator. In fact, I -- and later along when he said, "My brother is Jack Kennedy, the senator," I said, "I don't know who he is." Anyway, he came over and sat down at the table and joined my family, and we had a lot of fun. So we met at the beach the next day, and then we took a trip up the coast to a place which was supposed to be a possible good surfing place. And we got up there, and I looked out, and I saw the rip was running, the riptides. And being an older surfer and having been a lifeguard up and down the coast of California for years, I knew dangerous looking water. I said, "Well, we won't go swimming today. That looks too rough." He said, "Oh, it can't be that bad, I want to go in." I said, "No, I don't think you ought to," and he went in. He got out there, and he got caught in the rip, and I went out and got him, and brought him in. I didn't save his life, he wasn't drowning or anything like that, but I got him in out of the rip. So he had a strong feeling. We didn't say anything about it, I didn't say, "You're a damned fool," or anything like that. But he knew that I knew more about swimming than he did. The Kennedy family has always been risk takers, and they've been jumping over side and rivers and all kinds of stuff, and he was part of them. And so whenever I came to Washington I'd see Bobby and say hello to him. And so when I came as the guy for Kennedy, I was given the royal treatment. They were quite a family, tremendous family.

Timothy Naftali

No, well, I'm sure they -- well, you've met some very charismatic Presidents.

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

Would you put Kennedy in the same category as --

Art Linkletter

I would say Kennedy was in the category of Clinton. Clinton was one of his fans. They were both -- entering a room, they'd have the attention of everybody.

Timothy Naftali

That was the same for Johnson, wasn't it?

Art Linkletter

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

You said that Johnson also --

Art Linkletter

Johnson was another one, but not in that same way. He had the power and the kind of the gravitas, to use a strange word, but these other two were lights. They were lit up. They were always, you know, everything was bright and cheerful and funny, and a lot of it wasn't true with Jack Kennedy because he was sick, and he had real problems.

Timothy Naftali

Real pain, yeah.

Art Linkletter

And -- but Bill Clinton, who represented all the things that I don't believe in, and said some terribly strange things and finally wound up his Presidency pardoning a runaway criminal at the state department was advertising to bring back and gave him a pardon with no excuse. That was a crowning blow for me with Mr. Clinton, but I've met him. He's a charming guy, but he was brought up in a atmosphere where it was a lot of fooling around.

Timothy Naftali

In the late '60s, I guess it was at Bohemian Grove, Richard Nixon told you that he was going to run again.

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

And you tell this wonderful story of the speech he gave at Bohemian Grove. I think it was at the lake, '67.

Art Linkletter

Yes, Richard Nixon, at the Bohemian Grove, we always have, every day, a lecture, a talk around the lake. And everybody in the whole place, 2,500 people from all over the world -- the little airport is filled with jets and big planes from everywhere in the world -- and they come, and they hear somebody give a talk. I gave one at one time, and he gave a talk from that place. And he stood up there and he just charmed them. And all of a sudden the buzz was all over the Grove, "He is something. He ought to be a President." This, you know, "He should be running for that job." He was so good. He did an around-the-world trip with no notes, going from country to country to country giving the political background, the economics, the religious, the geographical history, and all the rest of the stuff. I never saw a performance like it.

Timothy Naftali

I know it's a long time ago, but you don't happen to remember whether he mentioned China in that --

Art Linkletter

Whether he mentioned what?

Timothy Naftali

China.

Art Linkletter

I don't remember what he mentioned now, but I'm sure he did because he, you know, thought China was going to be --

Timothy Naftali

Well, sure.

Art Linkletter

-- a tremendous country.

Timothy Naftali

Do you remember anything from the '68 campaign of, again, where you served as an unofficial advisor? Do you remember anything?

Art Linkletter

No, not especially. I think -- you see, I had an advantage visiting the White House, whoever was President. I was not an active radical politician, even though I was a Republican. I had never said anything bad about anybody, I had never campaigned to tear anybody down, and I didn't want anything. If I came to the White House, it was because I was in town, and it was an opportunity to have lunch or breakfast or dinner or something there. I looked at that because I like to be near the powerful people and interesting things, but I didn't. I wasn't fishing. I wasn't undercutting anybody to get something that they might want, and so I was always welcome. I was not a Democrat, and I was not an Independent, but I was a middle-of-the-road Republican. And I wasn't vindictive about it and had no -- at one time, I won't go into this in detail, but at one time, long before Reagan, the top Republicans wanted me to go for governor. And I remember these, were there three or four of them, big wheels, we had lunch and they said, "Why don't you run for governor? Everybody loves you." And I said, "Everybody loves me, I hope, because they don't know what I think about immigration, about abortion, about taxation. And at the end of the first week of campaigning, they would all know what I thought, and half of them would hate me. And besides, I don't want to be a politician. I don't like it. I don't like the -- I don't like the constant accommodations you have to make in order to get what you want, the tradeoffs and, "I'll do this for you if you do this for me," stuff. I just, I don't like -- and some of my best friends have had their throats cut from ear to ear when their usefulness was up, and I saw it at first hand, both Republican and Democrat. I don't like the whole field.

Timothy Naftali

Now, after your daughter's death, you decided that you needed to be more active.

Art Linkletter

Norman Vincent Peale called me the day after my daughter died to comfort me and tell me, as a dear friend, that maybe the Lord was sending me a message, as tragic as it was, that I should be spending more time, at this moment, helping save American families from the epidemic of drug abuse that was just starting, and there was a lot more. And so I stopped doing television and I started doing the learning curve, which meant six months of being with the top people in the drug field and finding out what was going on, because I didn't know what was going on. I was just a guy who knew that some people on the other side of the railroad track were doing the wrong things with drugs. And here it was now, infecting the entire community, and then I spent 15 years speaking in churches and schools -- I did other things, of course, but I had a main thing of being a drug abuse crusader. And Norman Vincent Peale was the man who sold me on that.

Timothy Naftali

What brought you to the White House in 1971? That's when you went to talk to President Nixon about this issue.

Art Linkletter

He did. He invited me. He knew that I was on the -- he had heard about, from Bush, about my talk at the United Nations, when I spoke on drug abuse at the United Nations, and he wanted to come and tell me that he was in back of me, and anything the White House could do, and any kind of thing.

Timothy Naftali

You told him about some minor official who had said that marijuana smoking was not that bad.

Art Linkletter

I came down to breakfast one day at the White House -- I was in the Lincoln Room, and Billy Graham was upstairs in a smaller room. I kidded him, I said, "You're in one of the little bedrooms. I'm in the Lincoln Room." He says, "Yeah, but I'm two stories closer to Heaven than you are." I came down to have breakfast with him, and I picked up the paper before I came down. And I said, "I read in the paper an interview with an official, a high-ranking official in the administration -- not an elected official but its chosen one." "And he said, 'Oh, let's talk about marijuana. It's a lot of nonsense. It's not really a heavy drug at all. It's no worse than a cocktail,'" and one thing and another like that, and when I had breakfast with President Nixon, he said, "How are things?" I said, "Well, I'm not very happy about what I read in the paper today." He said, "What happened?" And I commented on who it was and what he'd said. I said, "We don't need that kind of comments coming, because marijuana is a gate opener for bigger drugs." Boy did he get mad. He picked up the phone, and he got his secretary on the phone. He says, "I want so-and-so out of the building, and his desk cleaned out, and gone before dusk tonight." Wow, I had just cut the head off of a guy that I didn't even know. And I didn't know how true the story was in the paper or how what they'd handled it, but it made me mad. But this flash of fury on the part of Nixon and the elimination of a whole guy's career, I said, "Good night, you shouldn't do that." He said, "If I have a man in my Cabinet," or group rather, "that thinks that way, I don't want him in there." I said, "Well, he might be a family man that thinks" -- And he said, "Nope, he's out." And I saw a quick side of Nixon I never saw before. I never saw him mad. And the power, the power of the Presidency was never so dramatically shown to me. And so I called his two chief guys, you know who they were.

Timothy Naftali

Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

Art Linkletter

Haldeman, and I said, "I think I've just done something bad." They said, "Yeah, that happens sometimes." He said, "We'll get a hold of the guy and hide him for a while somewhere, hide him somewhere in the administration. If he's a good guy, we'll talk to him about it." But even they had ways of getting around the President.

Timothy Naftali

Yes.

Paul Musgrave

And you turned down Richard Nixon's offer to make you Ambassador to Australia.

Art Linkletter

Yes, he knew that I had a big sheep station in Australia and that I had been very active in Australia. He said, "Art, how would you like to be ambassador to Australia?" And I said, "Oh, no, no." I said, "I couldn't do that." I said, "I'm too busy in the drug abuse field." "I would rather be here, helping save our people, rather than ambassador in a country where there is not problems or real serious problems." So I turned it down. And then when Reagan asked me to be ambassador later, it was a different time. And that was the time when I called the secretary of state and said, "I don't like this work because I can't say anything that I think, and I have to say everything that the State Department thinks." And so the secretary of state said to me, "Art, well," he said, "you're an ambassador. You're a messenger boy, and you're at the end of a long line, and we can reach you at any second of the day or night and tell you what's happened and what's -- how you should react to it." I said, "That's what I don't like. I'm an entrepreneur, I'm running my own businesses and I'm saying my own things." He says, "Well, you just can't do it as ambassador." And he said to me, "The last real ambassador we had was Benjamin Franklin, who was ambassador to France, and he was in Paris, and it took three weeks to a month for his ship to get to Washington." So he had to act as an ambassador and make statements for us about war and peace.

Timothy Naftali

You were also, was it commissioner general?

Art Linkletter

I was commissioner general to the World's Fair, and ambassador.

Timothy Naftali

At Brisbane. How was the World's -- how was that?

Art Linkletter

It was a great World's Fair, and I knew a lot about World's Fairs because I had been radio director of the San Diego, Texas Centennial, and the San Francisco World Fairs. So I had been through the World Fair business, so I was a good ambassador.

Timothy Naftali

I have to ask, for personal reasons, did you go to Expo '67? Did you go to the World's Fair in Montreal?

Art Linkletter

No I didn't. I just was busy doing something else.

Paul Musgrave

Can we talk about one of your other business partners?

Art Linkletter

Who's that?

Paul Musgrave

Walt Disney.

Art Linkletter

Walt Disney was a mentor of mine, as well as a partner. I had great respect for him, and he taught me a lot of things, and he opened a lot of doors, and I was a very good comrade for him because I supported him. I agreed with him. I praised his family approach to show business, and all the cartoons, and all the other things. He was a family man.

Timothy Naftali

He told --

Art Linkletter

His wife called my wife up one time and said, you know, "We'd love it when you invite us over to dinner at your house, Walt does, because you don't have photographers, and you don't have press agents, and you only had four or five people, six or eight people, and they're all people who like to talk." And she said, "We just loved coming over to your house for dinner." Because, you see, Hollywood is full of dinners that are just all for the magazines and for the press, and mine were never, because I never played it that way. Only time I went to his party, when there was a lot of people, was at his birthday, and he did have a number of well-known people. And that was where he asked me, in private, what I thought of him building another Disneyland in Fort -- in Florida. I told him I didn't think he should, because it was only one, and it's unique, and Disneyland is the thing in the world, the minute you have two -- he says, "That's true, but I already said there I'm going to have 10,000 acres. Here I had 167. I can have an Epcot." And he told me about his dream for Epcot, which was finally built, but not the way he wanted it. He wanted them living there doing what they did, and they're now exhibits like any World's Fair has. But he was a, he was a good guy, and --

Timothy Naftali

He died relatively young.

Art Linkletter

He died. I tried and tried and tried to get him to stop smoking, wouldn't stop.

Timothy Naftali

What'd he want to do -- he sounds like a man with enormous creativity and imagination.

Art Linkletter

He was.

Timothy Naftali

What'd he want to do next? I mean, what was he planning to do?

Art Linkletter

Well, a world's expansion, and I don't know what else [unintelligible]. He was doing, of course, more big movies than just cartoons. He had some big successes, and he loved those fairs. He loved to walk around, ask people what they thought.

Timothy Naftali

So he wasn't shy?

Art Linkletter

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

He wasn't shy?

Art Linkletter

No, not at all. One time, he and I were walking around the Disneyland in Hollywood, in L.A., and our wives were with us, and so many people had come up to us and ask for autographs that Walt said, "I've got an idea. Before we go out tonight from dinner in a private place," where maybe Nixon would be with us in the apartment, he said, "We'll have a bunch of papers here, and we'll just autograph a whole bunch of them, and as they come up we'll just rip them off and hand them." And my wife said, "Well, why don't you take a disguise? Then they won't come up." He says, "Well, we'll do both." So we did some autographs, then we went over to the Fun Shop at the Castle, and we got beards and mustaches. And we put the beards on, and a mustache, and a funny hat on, and we went out. And people would walk right up to us and say, "Mr. Disney, can we have your autograph?" Or, "Art?" It was the damndest thing I ever saw, so we just tore the mustaches off and gave away the autographs. People know how you walk, how you look from the front, and back, and side if you're well known.

Timothy Naftali

And a question about Mr. Nixon, again, President Nixon, did you see him after Watergate?

Art Linkletter

After Watergate, yes, I saw him several times when he was down the coast and, but it was a different time. He was writing, and I was encouraging him to write, too. The only thing I did then, I said, "You

have a lot yet to say. "Say it." And he did. And he was also very appreciative of the way he was included in some of the things by the Presidents that followed him. They had him there at the big parties.

Timothy Naftali

I also wanted to ask you about, again, your friendship with George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush, and I was wondering if one of the reasons why, if there was such understanding between you and them was that they had lost a child.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Did they talk to you about that?

Art Linkletter

Yes, partly, partly. I think our families were alike in some ways that way. But of course, Barbara Bush was a wonderful first lady, and Laura is a wonderful first lady. Some of the others didn't care for it that much. Mamie didn't particularly like it, and --

Timothy Naftali

Bess didn't like it.

Art Linkletter

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

Bess Truman didn't like it.

Art Linkletter

No.

Paul Musgrave

Mrs. Nixon.

Art Linkletter

Not at all, Bess didn't like it all. I think Mrs. Carter was all right, but I never knew much about her, I didn't see her operate. But it means that your husband is taken away from you constantly, and he's, and if you tag along, you're just in the crowd. It's a great sacrifice.

Timothy Naftali

Did you meet Lady Bird Johnson? You must've met Lady Bird.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, yeah, several times, but never close.

Timothy Naftali

So you were saying about Barbara that, the fact that she loved the job. She loved being first lady.

Art Linkletter

She really did. She took advantage of it. And Laura's taking advantage of it for her own charities and for her own education. Both of them are big for education.

Timothy Naftali

And you've watched --

Art Linkletter

And I am very big for education. See, I've been chairman of the board of directors of trustees of a lot of big colleges and universities and boards of trustees, and I raised money for education, for starting Christian schools all over the country. I do at least 10 performances to raise money for startups of kindergarten to high school by religious organizations, because I think that kids should be taught some kind of faith in school.

Timothy Naftali

Well, faith was very important to you as, I mean, your --

Art Linkletter

Well, it was my life.

Timothy Naftali

-- your adopted family.

Art Linkletter

It was my life. My father was a minister. And my whole early life was with Aimee Semple McPherson, and holy rollers, and faith healing, and [unintelligible] songs, and speaking in tongues, and healings, and faith healings, and all kinds of things.

Timothy Naftali

Would you describe yourself as an evangelical?

Art Linkletter

I was probably partly evangelical, but like many preacher's kids, I got such a heavy dose of it that, until my daughter died, I had drifted away pretty much from anything. But after my daughter's death and Norman Vincent Peale, I came back to my earlier beliefs. It was odd, very odd. It takes a tragedy, sometimes, to wake you up, make you have a decision that you didn't make.

Timothy Naftali

Paul, do you have any other questions?

Paul Musgrave

Just one, I'm very curious, when Richard Nixon ran for Senate in 1950 --

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Paul Musgrave

He ran against Congresswoman Helen Douglas.

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Paul Musgrave

And you would've been at the, you would've been near both candidates.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, I was never near her.

Paul Musgrave

But her supporters.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, but not her. I didn't approve of her, but I didn't get into that on the public's view. I just -- I wouldn't have voted for her.

Paul Musgrave

You mean, just for political reasons?

Art Linkletter

Yeah, I had nothing against her personally.

Timothy Naftali

Did you know Melvyn Douglas?

Art Linkletter

No, no.

Timothy Naftali

Did President Nixon ever talk to you about the Alger Hiss Case?

Art Linkletter

Never, he never talked to me about the campaign or about any of that stuff. The only time we ever got into the hot stuff was after he was -- so-called Watergate thing, and he felt very badly about it, very, very sad about it.

Timothy Naftali

And so he talked to you about this?

Art Linkletter

Oh, he just -- we mentioned it, he says, "That's a bad chapter, bad chapter in my life." And I didn't press him. I didn't want to.

Timothy Naftali

This was at San Clemente, was it?

Art Linkletter

Yeah, yeah, I don't like misery, and I don't like sad things, and I don't like catastrophes, and I don't like gossip, and I don't like things that are hurtful. I'm not good at that. I'm the guy looking at the bright side of things, and I know there are bad things.

Timothy Naftali

But -- well, that's why people who have had a bad turn would come to you --

Art Linkletter

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

You cheer them up.

Art Linkletter

I do, I do, I always look for the other side of it. That's why I'm here today, because I can do something without attacking anybody.

Timothy Naftali

And that's why we hope to be at your 100th party performance.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, I wouldn't mind living to be 100, as long as I don't have a stroke, or have any physical or, more importantly, any mental brain impairment. But you know, when you get this age, I just learned yesterday that one of my best friends has Lou Gehrig's disease.

Timothy Naftali

Oh, no, I'm sorry.

Art Linkletter

In the early stages, very early stages, but it's incurable. Alzheimer's is incurable. Parkinson's is incurable. And so, I'd just as soon be dead. And if I can't work, you know, I'm not retired from anything, except skiing this year.

Timothy Naftali

Well, the concept of retirement has changed anyway. A lot of --

Art Linkletter

Yeah, absolutely.

Timothy Naftali

-- people aren't retiring, thank goodness.

Art Linkletter

That's right, they're living longer, and they're living better, and they're living new dreams and trying things they wouldn't have tried. And what people don't realize is that there was no retirement until about 1980 or 90, in the history of the world. It started in Germany. Did you know that?

Timothy Naftali

No.

Art Linkletter

Bismarck. A young -- in the '80s, a young comer in the German politics was being baffled by old men who were in charge, so he got a law passed, said you had to retire at 65. That eliminated a lot of his competitors. And all of a sudden 65, for some reason, became the time when, you know, they thought when they made Social Security in 1935 that 65 would be, at the most, that anybody would live. Now all of a sudden, people are getting Social Security at 70 and 80, and me, I get Social Security. That screwed the whole business up. And then, of course, they raided the Social Security money and spent it on everything else and even called it revenue. And now they're trillions of dollars in debt. And how they're ever going to pay it -- and Medicare is in even worse shape. In the next 50 years, Medicare and social security have got to undergo such drastic changes that I have no answers to how they're going to do it.

Timothy Naftali

I know. It is distressing.

Art Linkletter

Yeah.

Timothy Naftali

Mr. Linkletter, you have been wonderful.

Art Linkletter

Thank you.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you for your time today.

Art Linkletter

I enjoyed it.

Paul Musgrave

Thank you.

Timothy Naftali

Thank you.

Art Linkletter

Sometimes my memory fails me a little, but it's pretty good for a guy my age.

Timothy Naftali

More than pretty good. We both hope that we can do the same in 50, 60 years.

Art Linkletter

Yeah, thank you.

Paul Musgrave

Thank you.

Art Linkletter

All right.

[low audio]

Timothy Naftali

Oh, wide shots, sure, thank you. [low audio]

Paul Musgrave

Just say this'll be --

Timothy Naftali

Okay, this is -- welcome to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. This is the Oral History Interview with Art Linkletter. It's January 23rd, 2007. I'm Timothy Naftali, Director of the library, with my special assistant, Paul Musgrave. Thank you, Mr. Linkletter.

Art Linkletter

Thank you for a nice session.