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The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum

By Alyssa Thurston

In the September/October 2014 issue of the SCALL Newsletter, I wrote about my visit to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley. This visit was prompted by recent media interest in the ongoing selection process for the future Barack Obama Presidential Library. I noted then that two of the thirteen existing U.S. presidential libraries are located in Southern California. In addition to the Reagan Library, we have the Richard Nixon Presidential Library & Museum in Yorba Linda. My recent holiday travels to Orange County presented an ideal opportunity to round out my SoCal presidential library experience with a visit.

The Nixon Library first opened in 1990 as a private institution and transferred to federal management under the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 2007. Because my visit fell during the holidays, I was able to catch a special exhibit on “Nixon Family Holiday Traditions at the White House 1969-1972” in the museum’s lobby. On display were photos of Nixon-era White House parties and copies of press releases detailing the arrangement of nativity scenes and other special events. It was a fascinating and festive glimpse into behind-the-scenes holiday operations in the nation’s capital.

Nixon Library and Museum grounds.

Upon leaving the lobby, visitors enter a large auditorium where a video documentary on Nixon is shown. From there, a series of permanent galleries chronicle the details of Nixon’s lengthy political career, including his service in the U.S. House and Senate, vice presidency, and presidency. The exhibits place strong emphasis on Nixon’s foreign affairs work, especially in rooms such as a “Structure of Peace,” which contains a section of the Berlin Wall and items from his historic visit to China in 1972. In the “World Leaders” room, visitors view gifts given to the Nixons by foreign governments and walk among statues of former world leaders Nixon met while in office.

Galleries with a more domestic focus feature such items as campaign photographs and memorabilia; 60s-era televisions playing back footage of Nixon’s speeches and his 1960 campaign debate with John F. Kennedy, Jr.; and the presidential limousine used by Nixon and several other presidents. A small, inconspicuous room containing gifts sent to the Nixons by private citizens also happens to feature the most requested item in the history of the National Archives: a photograph of Nixon and Elvis Presley together. Remaining rooms include replicas of the Lincoln Sitting Room and the East Room from the Nixon-era White House and a gallery dedicated to former First Lady Pat Nixon.

Because Nixon was born on the property in 1913, the grounds of the Nixon Library have a very personal connection with the former president. In fact, the family home where he was raised still stands and is open for touring with a docent. Stepping inside the home built by his father is truly akin to stepping back in time, as the house contains pieces of furniture and other items originally belonging to the Nixons by private citizens also happens to feature the most requested item in the history of the National Archives: a photograph of Nixon and Elvis Presley together. Remaining rooms include replicas of the Lincoln Sitting Room and the East Room from the Nixon-era White House and a gallery dedicated to former First Lady Pat Nixon.

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Nixon family. Bringing things full circle, the graves of Richard and Pat Nixon are located just steps from the house. Also outside on permanent display and available to tour is Army One, the helicopter Nixon used to leave the White House just after resigning from the presidency on August 9, 1974.

Synonymous with Nixon’s presidency for many people is, of course, the Watergate scandal that resulted in his resignation. To its credit, as much as the Library celebrates Nixon, it does not shy away from critical examination of this pivotal event in American history. Indeed, the Watergate Gallery is possibly the most dynamic and interactive room in the museum, despite also being one of the smallest. Where most of the previous galleries are muted in color and tone, the walls here are splashed with bold colors and lettering, giving an effect that almost recalls the front page of a tabloid newspaper. If the purpose of these visuals is to recapture the visitor’s attention, possibly now ever-so-slightly lagging after an hour or two in the museum, it works. Meticulous timelines and other displays about Watergate events are accompanied by multiple wall-mounted touchscreens letting visitors replay White House tapes of audio conversations between Nixon and other Watergate figures (including the infamous and still-mysterious 18 ½ minute gap in a conversation between Nixon and Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman), as well as touchscreen TV monitors featuring a selection of television footage and interviews from that time.

In contrast to the Reagan Library, which sometimes tended to obscure that president’s less-glorious moments within larger-themed galleries, the Nixon Library’s Watergate Gallery offers a refreshingly detailed focus on the scandal that left a permanent mark on Nixon’s legacy and on American politics. At the same time, the Library’s exhaustive attention to the many other aspects of Nixon’s life and career in the rest of the galleries offer a rounded-out portrait of a man so overshadowed by the events of the early 1970s.

A stop in the museum’s Research Room allows interested visitors to further explore some of the White House Watergate tapes, as well as other audiovisual materials, original documents, and more from Nixon’s entire political career. Unfortunately, the Research Room was closed on the day of my visit due to special holiday hours, but the Nixon Library website contains a thorough Guide to Holdings (detailing what materials are and are not available to the public), finding aids for textual materials, and a limited online library linking to selected materials from the Library’s collection.

More information about the Nixon Presidential Library & Museum and using the Research Room, and about Nixon’s life and presidency is available online at http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/.

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The home where Nixon was born and raised is available to tour.

One of the permanent galleries at the Nixon Library and Museum.