

## Rolling Hills: A memorable presidential getaway

By Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto | Posted: Wednesday, September 28, 2016 5:30 pm

On May 12, 1962, in the midst of a tough primary campaign for governor of California, Richard Nixon was the Grand Marshal in the Fiesta de los Serranos Parade in Palos Verdes Estates.

Nixon's wife, Pat, smartly attired in a gold wool suit and flowered hat, sat next to him as their convertible rumbled down Palos Verdes Drive on its way to the Malaga Cove School. The Nixon's daughter Tricia followed behind in an antique car down a parade route lined with over 10,000 onlookers.

This article, however, is more than a story about an early appearance of a future President and his brief but memorable visit to Palos Verdes Estates.

Rather, this is a story of two families — the Drowns, formerly of Rolling Hills, and the Nixons — that began twenty years before the parade and one that gives us a private view of an otherwise very public life.

Helene Drown and Pat Nixon (then Pat Ryan) met by chance in 1939 when, as newly minted teachers, they both worked at Whittier High School. They soon became the best of friends — almost as close as sisters. When Pat and Richard Nixon married the following year, Helene's husband Jack and Richard also became fast friends.

From Nixon's run for the U.S. House of Representatives, Senate, Vice President, Governor and for President, the Drowns and Nixons were always very close.

Jack Drown was the advance man for Nixon's political events and in fact served on all of his campaigns. The Drowns' living room saw more than one meeting attended by Nixon and aides Bebe Rebozo and H.R. Haldeman, jotting down their strategies and plans on yellow legal pads.

The families even vacationed together. In 1962, after Nixon lost the gubernatorial race, the two families toured Europe for three months.

When Nixon became Vice President and subsequently President in 1968, the Nixons regularly visited the Drowns where they could escape the grind of Washington D.C. and completely relax.

Maureen Drown Nunn, one of Jack and Helene's children, recalls the fun-loving First Lady ditching the Secret Service parked in front of their Rolling Hills home to go shopping at Buffums, the first major department store on the Peninsula. Disguised in a wig and bandana, Nunn recalls people asking, "Are you Pat Nixon?" And the First Lady replying coyly, "What a lovely compliment."



### Nixons and Drowns

Richard Nixon, Pat Nixon, Julie Nixon, Helene Drown and Jack Drown.

Having been raised on a farm, Pat loved to garden. She maintained a garden in the Drowns' backyard similar to the one she had growing up and used a little desk in the guestroom to respond personally to the 300 or so letters she received each week, answering questions of all sorts about her life.

While many recall Richard Nixon's famous "kitchen debate" with Nikita Khrushchev, the opening up of China and of course Watergate, Nunn recalls President Nixon on a personal level: a man with a love for the theater, a relaxed, down-to-earth father who played the family piano from memory and regaled guests in their living room — and as the "uncle" who played with her, saying: "Maureen, go get your (toy) bunny, it looks tired and it's time to put the bunny down to bed."

Most memorable for Nunn, however, were the Nixons' warmth and kindness. "They were a great team... and they never forgot where they came from." Nunn recalls. "They would personally thank chefs at the restaurants where they dined."

Nunn remains close friends with the Nixon family and serves on the board for the Richard Nixon Foundation.

*Dennis Piotrowski and Monique Sugimoto are adult services librarians at the Palos Verdes Library District. They would like to acknowledge and thank Maureen Drown Nunn for her recollections and the photographs that accompany this story.*