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How Richard Nixon Became an Accidental Archivist

When the son of David Frost went looking for missing tapes of his father's interview show, he found many of them in an unlikely place.



David Frost and former President Nixon in San Clemente, Calif., in March 1977, discussing arrangements for taping the television interviews. Credit...via WNEW

By [Sarah Bahr](#)

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After his famous father died in 2013, Wilfred Frost set out to track down old tapes of “The David Frost Show,” which had aired between 1969 and 1972. But CBS, which owned the rights to the show, told him it had only preserved about half the 750 master tapes.

Recordings of Frost’s remarkably tense, probing interviews with Richard Nixon, which were broadcast in 1977, and which elicited the disgraced president’s first apology for the chaos of Watergate, were safely preserved.

But 370 CBS tapes — tapes that captured Frost’s interviews with all sorts of celebrities and newsmakers — were missing.

So the younger Frost, a financial news anchor on CNBC, turned to David Peck, the founder and president of a footage licensing company, to help him find copies of the lost shows.

Mr. Peck’s search led him to a most unlikely place: The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, Calif.

Nixon White House staff members, it turned out, had recorded 62 episodes of the show, using a video system installed during the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson. The interviews included those with civil rights activists like Jesse Jackson, a session with Nixon’s 1972 Democratic opponent George McGovern and Frost’s conversation with Huey P. Newton, who co-founded the Black Panther Party, all people that the Nixon administration had been keeping a wary eye on.



Vice President Mike Pence, left, being interviewed at the White House by Wilfred Frost in February. Credit...Donna Burton

Some 50 of the recordings made by the Nixon White House are the only copies of those Frost interviews that are known to have survived.

“I was like, “Oh my God, that’s crazy,”” said Wilfred Frost, 35, who is using some resurfaced material from his father’s interviews for a twice-weekly podcast, [“The Frost Tapes,”](#) that debuts on iHeartRadio on Oct. 6.

Some portion of the podcast will, of course, deal with the Frost-Nixon encounters. David Frost recorded nearly 29 hours of interviews with Nixon, which were broadcast in 90-minute segments on four successive nights. Nixon accepted responsibility for the Watergate scandal, acknowledging that he had “let the American people down.” (The [first episode](#), which attracted 45 million viewers, still holds the record for the largest television audience for a political interview.)

Nixon earned \$600,000 for the interviews — equivalent to about \$2.5 million in 2020 — plus a share of the profits from the broadcasts. Frost got the exclusive in part because he made Nixon the highest offer, an exchange that was denigrated as “checkbook journalism” — though at least one network had offered Nixon money too.

The interviews were chronicled in the play “Frost/Nixon” by Peter Morgan. Michael Sheen starred as Frost and Frank Langella as Nixon in the theatrical version, which opened in London in 2006 and on Broadway in 2007. It was adapted for a 2008 Ron Howard film by the same name, in which both actors reprised their roles.

In 2014, Wilfred Frost began working on a deal for the rights to the 380 master recordings that CBS did have of “The David Frost Show,” which had presented its final program five years before the famous Nixon sit-down.

The recordings had been gathering dust for decades in a storage unit in Pennsylvania.

When Mr. Peck began his search for the Frost tapes, he remembered that he had previously recovered a few White House recordings of the “The Merv Griffin Show,” another program whose rights he handled, from the Nixon library.

He called Ryan Pettigrew, an archivist there, who told Mr. Peck his hunch was correct — and then some. “I was blown away by how many we found,” Mr. Peck said. Mr. Pettigrew said he hadn’t realized the library’s off-air recordings were the only remaining copies. “We were overjoyed to learn that the White House Communications Agency had inadvertently preserved these episodes for posterity,” he said.

Most of the Frost recordings taped by the White House [feature appearances by political guests, activists and journalists](#), except for one oddity: A September 1971 episode that featured current and former Miss America titleholders, from Marilyn Buford (1946) to Laurie Lea Schaefer (1972). “You can draw your own conclusions for why he might have wanted to record that,” Wilfred Frost said.

The podcast beginning next month will include episodes about Senator Robert F. Kennedy's last long-form interview, previously unaired selections from a three-hour conversation between David Frost and Joseph R. Biden Jr. in 1987 and unused material from the famous interviews with Nixon.

"I think the listener will toy between thinking 'Gosh, this is depressing that 50 years later we're still stuck on the same questions and issues,' and 'We have made progress, but not enough,'" Wilfred Frost said.

After the Nixon interviews, David Frost said he had almost no contact with the former president beyond perhaps passing each other in a restaurant. Their parting when the shooting wrapped up had been cordial. Nixon even took Frost's girlfriend at the time on a tour of his home. But the two men did not become friends, making it somewhat ironic now that Nixon is Frost's archivist, in a way.

"It's so strange that, given the fact that Dad coaxed the apology out of Nixon," Wilfred Frost said, "we have a quite good relationship with the Nixon library all these years later."