

Oral History Interview

with

CHARLES F. CURRY

Kansas City, Missouri businessman and longtime friend of Harry S. Truman.

Kansas City, Missouri
September 30, 1965

by J. R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
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NOTICE

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MR. FUCHS: Would you give a little background about yourself? Were you born here?

MR. CURRY: Well, I'm a native son. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri. My family moved here from Jefferson City, Missouri, about two years before my birth.

FUCHS: What year were you born?

CURRY: 1889.

FUCHS: Are you a member of The Native Sons?

CURRY: Yes.

FUCHS: Then you've been in the real estate business

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most of your life?

CURRY: Yes, for the greater part of my life. My father was in the real estate business here. He was Charles Smith Curry. I am Charles Forrest Curry.

FUCHS: I see. Did you ever, by any chance, come into contact with any of the Truman family in the early days? His father and mother?

CURRY: I had little or no contact with the Truman family until immediately after World War I. I was in the 110th Engineer's Regiment of the 35th Division, and Harry Truman was in the artillery. After demobilization, we were both active in the American Legion and I had occasion to see him more or less frequently. I was the first commander of the first American Legion Post here, the William T. Fitzsimmons Post Number 8.

FUCHS: You didn't rub shoulders with Mr. Truman during the war, though? You don't recall anything of his experiences in the war?

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CURRY: No.

FUCHS: Were you an officer?

CURRY: Yes, I was a first lieutenant of Engineers.

FUCHS: Well, now, was Mr. Truman a member of that post before he became associated with the post in Independence?

CURRY: No, I think not. Fitzsimmons Post happened to be the first post organized, and there was a very large membership in it for a short time, then there were a number of new posts organized until there were about 10 or 12 different posts for the area. Different groups formed their own posts. Mr. Truman was part owner of a haberdashery store on 12th Street across from the Muehlebach Hotel, and a number of the Legionnaires would drop in there to visit and to talk politics with him.

FUCHS: Did you used to do that?

CURRY: Yes, infrequently, as I was busy trying to

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get started in business. However, the first knowledge that I had that Mr. Truman planned on getting into local politics came in a meeting of a committee of Legionnaires from various posts, called to make recommendations for nomination of a Chairman for the following year. There was a group of a half a dozen of us, including Mr. Truman, meeting in an office in the Railway Exchange Building. I do not recall whose office it was now, but we told Mr. Truman that we'd all decided we'd like to have him to be the Chairman. He thanked us for the thoughtfulness of the suggestion, but said, "Fellows, I can't do it; I've decided that I'm going to run for Eastern Judge of Jackson County. Mr. Pendergast has offered to support me." Young Jim Pendergast was in Mr. Truman's outfit during the war, and was trying to interest Harry into getting into politics, knowing his aptitude for meeting and remembering people and working with them. That was the first intimation that I had that Harry was going to get into politics. That fall, he ran for Eastern

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Judge of the County Court and was elected. From then on, he followed a political career.

FUCHS: Was Mr. Truman quite a leader in the American Legion? Why had they picked him out from Independence?

CURRY: He was very popular. Everybody that knew him liked him. He was very well read and had a large acquaintance and people looked at him as a natural leader. After his election as a County Judge, he was less active in Legion politics because he held a political office.

FUCHS: Is there anything you recall specifically about the haberdashery?

CURRY: Well, the main thing I recall about the haberdashery is buying these Van Heusen collars that just came out about that time that were supposed to remain in shape and not wilt in the summertime, and that's where I bought my Van Heusen collars.

FUCHS: Did you attend summer camps when you were in

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reserves?

CURRY: I did not remain in the reserves after the war. I came home to a son that was eight months old before I ever saw him, and I was trying to make a living for the family.

FUCHS: How many children do you have?

CURRY: I just have two, a son and a daughter.

FUCHS: How did the Legion participate in the election?

CURRY: They were not, at that time, participating in politics, as an organization, but as individuals, and would get out and support their friends. There seemed to be more Democrats active in it. Maybe it was because I knew more Democrats and worked more with them. The next time that I remember being involved in politics with Harry Truman was during his second term

as Presiding Judge of the County Court. He had put over a bond program and had built the County road system into one of the most up-to-date systems in the country and had

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made an outstanding record as a presiding judge. Alex Sachs, who was the County Highway Engineer during this period, was an old personal friend of high school and college days with whom I frequently visited. On one of these visits, I commented on what a fine job Harry had done as Presiding Judge, and told Alex that we ought to get together and form a Truman for Governor Committee because he would make a strong candidate and a wonderful governor. Alex said he would talk with Harry and let me know if this was agreeable to him.

FUCHS: What year would this have been?

CURRY: Well, it was the year he ran for senator.

FUCHS: It was '34? It was at the end of the second term as Presiding Judge?

CURRY: Yes, it was the end of the second term as Presiding Judge. This was, I think, in the fall of the year before. Alex later advised me that he had talked with Harry and the suggestion was

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appreciated, but not to do anything about it right then, that he might have some other plans.

FUCHS: He didn't mention any specific plans?

CURRY: No. But later on, he came out for the Senate. We all got back of him and he went in with a very substantial majority. That was the start of his career in national politics. I was never very close to him; I would see him at meetings and in groups here when he'd be back in the City, and we'd visit together. It was just an acquaintanceship that I guess a great many people had with him.

Later on, I became fairly well acquainted with Harry's brother, Vivian, through the Federal Housing Administration here. Of course, all real estate people active in building operations and mortgaging operations had close contact with the local FHA office of which Vivian Truman was Assistant Director. I think that our office made one of the first FHA insured loans in the City.

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Later, I came to know Vivian very well. I could see him in real estate circles. There had been an upheaval in the political situation with Pendergast back in 1938 which turned the County Court - long-time Democratic -- into the hands of the Republicans under a clean-up movement. They were out to embarrass the Democratic organizations and the people who had been supported by Pendergast. This County Court took up the matter of a mortgage loan on Truman's farm that had been made from the County School Fund and endeavored to make political capital out of it. Harry was never a man of very much means. He did not have any appreciable amount of money saved up at the time he entered politics and the only remuneration he ever received out of the office was the salary attached to it, so Harry was always pretty well strapped for funds, and when

they found the condition of this loan with all the delinquent interest on it, they decided to embarrass Truman by ordering a foreclosure.

FUCHS: They foreclosed on that in 1940, is that right?

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CURRY: Yes.

FUCHS: Were you aware of that at the time?

CURRY: No, but I became aware of it later when the Court decided to publicize the situation that Harry Truman had borrowed money from the County School Fund on his farm, and had not paid the interest thereon, and had allowed it to go into default so that it had to be foreclosed upon, and that the farm had not been worth the money which was borrowed upon it. In order to establish this situation, they conceived the idea of offering the farm at public sale in anticipation that it would not bring the amount at which the farm stood on the books of the School Fund. Such a sale would tend to establish the market value of the farm and the amount of money which the School Fund had lost and from which Truman had benefited by reason of the loan. By this time, Mr. Truman had become Vice President of the United States and his opponents were trying in every way possible to embarrass him. Shortly before the

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date for which the sale was set, I was with a group of the members of the Military Order of the World War discussing the situation. One of the group, Chester Stark, commented that the County Court was trying to embarrass Truman by disclosing that he had borrowed money from the County School Fund in excess of the value of the property, that interest on the loan had not been paid, and that the loan, upon foreclosure, did not bring the amount of the loan plus the interest thereon, and that they had decided to further publicize the situation by ordering a sale of the farm, given as security for the loan, at a public sale. They were not advertising the sale very widely and that it would probably not bring the amount of the indebtedness thereon unless a group could be gotten together to bid it in at the cost price to the County. This, we all agreed, would be a fine thing for friends of Mr. Truman to undertake. The total amount due on the note together with accumulated interest amounted to about \$43,000. I

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became interested in the situation and decided to endeavor to undertake the underwriting of the purchase at the sale.

FUCHS: What year was the sale?

CURRY: The public sale was early in 1945.

FUCHS: The County owned it at this time?

CURRY: Yes.

FUCHS: Yes, the County had previously foreclosed it in '40, is that right, and the County owned it then?

CURRY: Yes, and was advertising it for public sale. Sealed bids were to be received and opened at a specified time by the Court in Special Session.

FUCHS: It wouldn't be what you would call a sheriff's sale?

CURRY: No, it wasn't a sheriff's sale; it was a public sale by the County Court of the entire farm consisting of a 200-acre tract east of Missouri

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Highway 71, and an 87-acre tract west of Highway 71. The Truman home place was located on the 87-acre tract, and Mr. Truman's mother was then living in it. Both tracts were to be sold by the Court to the highest bidder.

I talked with Vivian about this sale and told him I thought it was a shame for the County Court to do this just to embarrass Harry, who was then Vice President of the United States; that they were just trying to make political capital out of it; that the property had a good potential for increased value in the future, and that we ought to get a group together and buy it for the full cost to the County with interest paid to date. Vivian explained that his mother wanted to live in the home place with the 87 acres, and that they were very anxious to keep it for her and could raise \$20,000 to pay for it, but the Court would not sell it separately. He said they would pay \$20,000 for the home place if they could get somebody to buy the entire property and sell the home place back to them. They were very

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anxious to not have their mother dispossessed. I agreed to undertake to get a small group together to underwrite the purchase. The time was short, and I did not want to publicize the plan, so I was limited in the number with whom I could discuss it. I decided that I could get five other persons to join me in each taking one-sixth interest in the purchase. Most of those with whom I discussed this thought it was a good plan and something that should be done, but did not have the cash. By the time of the sale, I had only two others committed -- E. Kemper Carter and Tom Evans, and I decided to go ahead and bid it in and take a four-sixths interest for myself.

I advised Vivian that I would go ahead with the plan to purchase the farm at the sale, and that if I were successful, I would sell to him the 87 acres for \$20,000 if that was what he wanted. Vivian felt that it was not necessary to have a written instrument setting forth our agreement, but his attorney insisted on it so

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they would have it for the record, and a contract to that effect was drawn up and executed by me just before the sale. I remember when we were drawing up the papers, this lawyer, whom I knew pretty well, said something about the farm, and I remarked that I'd never seen the place. He was astounded that I had not inspected the property before bidding on it, but I told him that I wasn't buying real estate for an investment; I was buying it to prevent misleading charges against the

Vice President of the United States. However, knowing the general location, I knew it would increase in value and that it was worth pretty close to the amount of the proposed bid.

I attended the sale and bid \$43,000, which covered the full amount of the accumulated obligations on the original loan, including costs and interest. There were several other bids considerably lower in amount. The terms of my bid were a \$10,000 deposit made with the bid; \$20,000 in cash on delivery of deed, and a note for \$13,000, secured by first Deed of Trust on the 200-acre

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tract. The 87 acres were to be deeded free and clear to allow for transfer of it free of any indebtedness upon the payment of the \$20,000 cash by the Trumans. The Court accepted the bid and the purchase was consummated under its terms. Title was taken in the name of my bookkeeper, E. G. Huston, and she gave a memorandum which stated she held title for E. Kemper Carter for one-sixth interest and for Tom Evans for one-sixth, and myself for four-sixths interest respectively.

FUCHS: And there was a \$13,000 mortgage remaining on it?

CURRY: There was a new \$13,000 mortgage placed on the 200 acres only.

FUCHS: How did you arrive at the figure of \$43,000?

CURRY: It was the amount the Court computed as the amount required to pay the balance due on the note including cost and interest to date.

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FUCHS: There were several other bidders, but they wanted to underbid the Court appraisal?

CURRY: They bid considerably less than the accumulated obligation on the note. There was an article appearing in the Kansas City *Star* giving details of the sale. I understood at the time that Mr. Truman was not interested particularly in this 200-acre tract, primarily because of the money involved. He wasn't in a position to pay for it, and he would not ask his friends to finance it for him. After we bought it, I went out and looked it over and made an appraisal of it. I thought that we had a reasonable buy and would probably make a little profit on it. Several people contacted me about buying it, but I thought that it wasn't a particularly good time to sell the property and we decided to hold it off the market for the time being. It was not very long after the sale before Truman became President of the United States and the Truman farm took on added historical value. It was something that Mr. Truman might

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want to re-acquire later, so we decided to hold it until such a time as Mr. Truman might be able to work out a way to re-acquire it.

It was not very long before it was generally recognized that the Truman Administration would probably go down in history as one of the great administrations of all time. As time went on, the

more we became convinced that the farm was something Mr. Truman should have. I told Vivian to tell Harry that he could have the farm for our cost at any time that he wanted it. The word came back that he didn't want to ask us to hold it -- that he wasn't in a position to purchase it at that time, but we continued to hold it off the market, believing that Mr. Truman would eventually want it.

I never mentioned the matter of the sale of the farm to Mr. Truman personally. I was in Washington occasionally and I'd drop in to see him, but nothing was ever said about the farm.

FUCHS: You never talked to him about it personally?

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CURRY: I never talked with him about apt any time, and he sent word back, through Vivian, that he would be interested in buying it and asked as to the price. I told him the price would be \$10,000 subject to the lien of the \$13,000 mortgage.

FUCHS: Those documents you have there should provide us with some exact dates which are always hard to remember, of course.

CURRY: Yes, March 9, 1945, was when we purchased it, and we sold it May 4, 1946, according to the sale statement.

FUCHS: You sold it to him then?

CURRY: Yes. We sold it to Mr. Truman about a year and a half after we purchased it.

FUCHS: Even at that time you didn't talk to him personally about it?

CURRY: No. At the time of the sale, we dealt through an attorney representing him. He required a Quit Claim Deed from myself and Mrs. Curry along.

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FUCHS: What was your impression of Vivian as FHA -- was he manager here?

CURRY: He was director here.

FUCHS: Director.

CURRY: Afterwards. He was the assistant director under David Powell and then, later, became director.

FUCHS: He did a good job?

CURRY: Yes, indeed, he did a very good job. He was an entirely different type person than Harry, but was very conscientious and was positive in his decision. He made an excellent director.

FUCHS: Did Mr. Truman ever speak to you about this transaction?

CURRY: We've never talked about it, but he's gone out of his way to express to me his appreciation in different ways.

FUCHS: But you know he appreciated it?

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CURRY: Oh, yes. He has gone out of his way to show his appreciation, both while he was President and since. He has invited me to small informal breakfasts and luncheons which he would have on occasions of his visits here.

FUCHS: Do you recall any incidents. Any particular conversations or anything?

CURRY: No particular conversations. The incident I recall mostly about the breakfasts was one scheduled for 7:30 in the morning. Something happened that morning that delayed me, and I was a little late getting down and they had started breakfast and when I came in I felt rather embarrassed, but he soon put me at ease with a little kidding. I thought afterward how very careless of me to be late to a Presidential Breakfast.

FUCHS: Where was this held?

CURRY: In the Muehlebach -- up in the Presidential Suite.

FUCHS: In the Presidential Suite?

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CURRY: Yes, the Presidential Suite. He almost always stayed there on his visits here. Once when he was having a few to an informal luncheon, he had his assistant call me and ask me up to lunch. I was out of my office at the time and he left word with my secretary to have me call him at the Muehlebach Presidential Suite. My secretary located me at the *Kansas City Star* office in the business department about a quarter till twelve. By the time I made contact with the President's assistant, it was past 12 and the luncheon was scheduled for 12:15. So I thought it best to decline on the basis of a prior appointment. I thought afterwards how foolish it was for me to do that. I should have thanked him and rushed on up to the luncheon. An invitation to a President's luncheon should have had precedent over all other engagements.

FUCHS: Were there any other occasions you recall being with Mr. Truman that might be of interest?

CURRY: Yes. There are numerous occasions. I have

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had lots of pictures which were taken with him. There's a picture there when we were giving him a degree at William Jewell College with Dr. Walter Binns, who was President at the College, and myself. And that lower picture -- the Home Savings Association was having an opening of their new building at Tenth and Grand -- their new quarters there. We asked Harry to come in and say a few words by way of dedication of the new building. His picture was published in the Association's house organ. He is really a most remarkable person -- very thoughtful of others.

FUCHS: Do you recall anything of his activities in the Community Savings and Loan Association that he went into with Spencer Salisbury and some others around 1926?

CURRY: That was an Independence association? The Community Savings and Loan Association was in Independence. Spencer Salisbury was a not too scrupulous promoter. His sense of what belonged to him or somebody else wasn't very distinctive.

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If he was running it, he thought he had a right to borrow the money, and he later got into difficulties and they closed it up. Rufus Burrus was in there, but I did not know Mr. Truman's connection with it.

FUCHS: Well, he was one of the officers of it.

CURRY: I thought he was with the Farm and Home Savings and Loan Agency here as one of their salesmen for a brief time.

FUCHS: Mr. Truman? I never heard that. I heard that he sold memberships for the Kansas City Auto Club. After he was defeated for County Eastern Judge in 1924 for a while, he sold Kansas City Auto Club memberships.

CURRY: I thought he had sold some accounts in the Farm and Home Savings and Loan Association through the Kansas City Agency. The Farm and Home was a Nevada, Missouri, company that sold an installment savings plan where you would subscribe to a \$1,000 policy and pay \$5.70 a month for ten years

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and then receive \$1,000.

FUCHS: Was it good for \$1,000 at the end of ten years?

CURRY: Yes. At the end of ten years.

FUCHS: And you put in about \$60 a year?

CURRY: You put in \$68.40 a year. The accumulated interest compounded at 7.8% semi-annually would bring the total amount up to \$1,000.

FUCHS: I hadn't heard of this Farm and Home policy. We did know that he had an insurance company set up known as Truman and Barr, and they had an office on Liberty Street out there in Independence; but all we know is that he had this Truman and Barr Insurance Company at the same time that he had the Community Savings and Loan, and we thought maybe that was just a sideline. Would he have been selling this at the Truman and Barr Insurance Agency -- this Farm and Home policy?

CURRY: Farm and Home sold this from their own agency.

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FUCHS: He would have been working for Farm and Home then?

CURRY: Out of their agency office here, but not necessarily as a full-time salesman.

FUCHS: And you remember Mr. Truman doing this?

CURRY: No, I don't remember his doing it, but I afterwards was active in savings and loan myself, and I understood that he had been connected, for a short time, with the savings and loan business as a salesman for Farm and Home Agency, but I may have been misinformed.

FUCHS: Is there anything else you can think of?

CURRY: Not now.

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