

Oral History Interview
with
C. THOMAS BENDORF

City Manager, City of Santa Maria, California, 1958; Aide to Senator Clair Engle, 1959-61; Assistant to Governor Pat Brown, 1961-63; Director of Government Relations for Lockheed, 1963-?.

Independence, Missouri
May 29, 1992
by Niel M. Johnson, Harry S. Truman Library

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C. THOMAS BENDORF

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Summary Description:

Topics discussed by Mr. Bendorf include his work as an advance man for the Democratic Party in California for the 1960 campaign; his experiences while escorting President Truman during events in Oakland, California and Reno, Nevada; Truman's fall at the Claremont Hotel; Truman's fund-raising for his Presidential Library; political dirty tricks; Truman's Reno, Nevada talk; and Presidential profanity.

Individuals mentioned by Bendorf include Harry S. Truman, Lyndon Johnson, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Adlai Stevenson, Bill Bray, David Stowe, Pat Dirksen and Ed Pauley.

Donor:

C. Thomas Bendorf

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JOHNSON: I will start by asking when and where you were born and what your parents' names were.

BENDORF: I was born on the 4th of June in 1924. My father's name was Cyril and my mother's name is Madeline. She's still alive in Oakland, California.

JOHNSON: You were born where?

BENDORF: In Flagstaff, Arizona. But we lived in California until 1958, except for a couple of wars.

JOHNSON: You moved to California when you were how old?

BENDORF: An infant.

JOHNSON: You lived there, except for the time out during World War II, when you were in England with the Air

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Force.

BENDORF: And the Korean war as well.

JOHNSON: When did you get into politics, so to speak?

BENDORF: Well, I went through a program in San Francisco called the Coro Foundation. This is kind of a unique organization. But I had graduated from law school. While in the Coro Foundation I met Elizabeth Smith and Roger Kent and Don Bradley and all of the people that ran the Democrat Party.

JOHNSON: In California.

BENDORF: In California. I helped out with all the dinners, and all the security at the California Democratic Council conventions and whatnot. That was where I first met Harry Truman.

JOHNSON: What year would that have been?

BENDORF: I can't remember, but it would have been when he spoke in San Francisco on behalf of the Library.

JOHNSON: Oh, the Truman Library.

BENDORF: The Truman Library. And my guess is...

JOHNSON: In [November] 1955.

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BENDORF: I can recall that a young black fellow by the name of Sammy Davis, Jr. performed. And I had never heard of him before. That was the first time. He performed very well and Harry Truman made a truly great talk. What a speech! He talked about the Presidency and what the Presidency meant, and what it meant to him. And that was the first time I met him.

JOHNSON: And why was it you were there?

BENDORF: I was helping with the dinner, and I ran an errand of some kind or other, to his room. I don't remember why. That's the first time I met him. He invited me in, as he would always do.

The reason I was allowed to run the errand was because I would say "no," as I always did. Therefore, I would be back down for other work. I usually worked the doors at those dinners and trouble-shot.

JOHNSON: For the Democratic...

BENDORF: For the Democratic Party.

JOHNSON: How did you become connected with the party?

BENDORF: Well, in 1958 I had been on the floor at the California Democratic Council on behalf of Clair Engle.

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He was a Congressman who decided it was time to run for the Senate or get out. I was City Manager of the City of Santa Maria at that time, and after Clair was elected he asked me to go to Washington as his aide. So, I packed up my seven kids and went to Washington in 1958.

Then I met Harry Truman again at Clair's swearing-in party in January of 1959. Mr. Truman came to that party.

JOHNSON: Oh, in Washington, D.C.

BENDORF: In Washington, D.C. They were good friends. So I got to talk to him there. In 1960 Clair had a Piper Apache [airplane]; I flew him to Idaho, dropped him off there, and I went

on to California. He went on to elk hunt, and I went out and started work on the campaign. I advanced the "whistlestop," the Kennedy whistlestop campaign. The next thing I knew, Harry Truman was coming to town. So I guess Don Bradley, who was running the Democratic Party in California in those days -- and I guess he was in charge of the Kennedy campaign in California -- asked me to go to Oakland and stay with Harry during the Oakland events, and then take him to Reno.

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JOHNSON: Where did you meet Truman in Oakland?

BENDORF: In Oakland at the Claremont Hotel.

JOHNSON: At the Claremont. Is that where he fell?

BENDORF: Well, yes. The morning that I picked him up to take him to Reno, he fell down the stairs. He was apparently on what would have been the next floor above the lobby and he walked down the stairs, as I guess he was wont to do. My recollection is that he walked a lot. I was waiting in the lobby and he fell on the stair, causing brief panic throughout. But he was uninjured and joked about it.

We then went to the airport. There are too many of these flights for me to single out, but I think we flew out of Concord, which is east of Oakland. We might have gone out of the Oakland airport. But when we arrived at the airplane, he probably asked me whose airplane it was. It was a Lockheed 18, twin engine, reciprocating-engine, executive aircraft. I told him it was Ed Pauley's. Then he proceeded to spend some time with me, telling me what a wonderful man Ed Pauley was, how much he loved him, and that if there was one man on earth he owed more to than Ed Pauley, he didn't know who it was. He, Ed, could ask him for anything,

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anywhere, anytime, and it would be his. Then he related how, during the whistlestop in '48, they'd run out of money. The railroad refused to allow the train to go forward, and Ed had sent the money that got the train started again. So, right then and there he attributed his election to Ed Pauley, in his 1948 election, and told me how much he, Ed Pauley, meant to him.

In those days Ed Pauley was one of the better Democratic contributors. And in those days nobody cared about whose airplane one used. So we used corporate airplanes at will for those kinds of purposes.

We got to Reno. I can recall being met at the airport by Roger Foley, who was the Nevada Attorney General, and by others. Roger Foley, among others, met us. I have the impression that Harry Truman probably appointed Roger Foley, Sr. to the Federal bench in Nevada. In those days there was only one Federal district court. So, they exchanged some pleasantries. We did a motorcade through town, that I recall. We went to the stadium at the University of Nevada. I recall four or 5,000 people probably, in a stadium that might have held 40 or 50 thousand, but they were well grouped at one end. Then the sound system went out

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just as Harry began his speech. It was virtually unheard. I don't think there could have been more than a few hundred people that could hear him speak. There was a lot of confusion while attempts were made to restore the system, but it was not restored and it was not restorable.

I do recall that we thought that it was sabotage and we frankly thought that it was Republican sabotage.

In the old days, we all had dirty tricks, and that was a dirty trick. It was the responsibility of somebody to have insured that that could not have happened, but Reno was not a hotbed of professional politicians who would know to have a sound system in reserve.

JOHNSON: Do you remember Bill Bray and David Stowe?

BENDORF: I remember two guys that were with him, and one of them I saw later. Frankly, I don't remember the names. I remember that one of them was tall and dark haired and wore glasses. For some reason or other I think one was less tall and slight. One of them appeared to me to have a very close relationship with Truman.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think David Stowe was very close to Truman.

BENDORF: And I believe that I saw him in Washington. I

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believe I saw him subsequent to that trip on some occasion.

JOHNSON: But you were doing advance work for the Truman part of the Kennedy campaign.

BENDORF: Well, I didn't advance it, but I was simply escorting him. I was simply what you would call an escort officer. I had the airplane and the....

JOHNSON: You didn't fly?

BENDORF: No, I wasn't the pilot. I had an airplane out there at that time, but it was a smaller airplane. It was a twin engine Piper Apache.

JOHNSON: You said that Truman had talked to you about his father and grandfather going to California.

BENDORF: Yes.

JOHNSON: When was that that he told you that story?

BENDORF: Well, a Lockheed-18 is not pressurized, and so the flight to Reno would have been gradual, the climb would have been gradual. That's why I think we went out of Concord,

because we were still only maybe 3,000 feet high as we went over Sacramento, just south of the Capitol complex. As you fly over Sacramento you'll see

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that that area is kind of in the confluence of two rivers. Harry Truman then talked to me at great length about how he could have been born in California. He could have been a native Californian. He told me how his grandfather had taken his father, and I'm going to say at the age of eight. My recollection is that it was at the age of eight.

JOHNSON: Well, his father's father would have been Anderson Shippe Truman. His father was John Anderson Truman, and he did not go out on the trails. Wasn't he talking about Solomon Young who had freighted to California? Did he use a name?

BENDORF: He didn't use a name. He talked about his grandfather, and he talked about his father.

JOHNSON: We've never heard that Anderson Shippe Truman ever went to California, or went out on the trails.

BENDORF: Well, he told me that his father had been in Sacramento, and that his grandfather had acquired this vast amount of land...

JOHNSON: That would have been Solomon Young.

BENDORF: And that he could just as well have been born in California, except that the family moved back to

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Missouri.

JOHNSON: Yes. But you see, his father was a Truman. The grandfather that had the land in Sacramento was a Young. That's why it's a little confusing.

BENDORF: It's confusing. As you tell me, it confuses me too, because I have a clear recollection of his talking about his father having been out there, because that's what led into the discussion of Jamie McPheeters.

JOHNSON: He said his grandfather had been there in Sacramento for how long?

BENDORF: Well, just a short time. I'd say a couple of years, a short time. He had not stayed there; he had changed his mind, or something had caused him to return to Missouri. The reason that I identify it as his father was because we had long conversations about the fact that that was, I think, in 1851 or '52 -- or else it was in 1849 -- and Jamie McPheeters, the object of the book that I was discussing with him, was probably eleven years of age, and probably was on his way out there in 1849. So confusion exists in my mind.

JOHNSON: Well, his mother Martha Ellen was born in 1851.

BENDORF: It could not have been his mother that he was

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talking about.

JOHNSON: He didn't refer to his mother having gone with her father?

BENDORF: It could not have been his mother because we were talking about the boys. We were talking about the adventures; we were talking about what kind of a life that would have been and...

JOHNSON: And he was acquainted with the Jamie McPheeters story.

BENDORF: I had recently read a Pulitzer Prize winning book called *The Travels of Jamie McPheeters* and it's the story of a boy, who is either orphaned or lost, who travels the trail to California by himself at that age. It was a good book, a fun book. A movie was made out of it, and apparently it was a bomb. But I then sent Harry Truman the book. I sent him a copy of *Jamie McPheeters*, and he wrote me and thanked me and said he had enjoyed it and chuckled.

Then, I guess subsequently I sent him a book called *Gumbo*, which was the story of a little boy growing up in the Depression in Texas. It is a little, tiny book, but a great book. He acknowledged that one as well, and expressed his pleasure with it. So, there

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would have been no connection with Jamie McPheeters and his grandmother.

JOHNSON: Well, I'm interested in Truman and the trails. I did an article on "Truman and the Trails" for the *Overland Journal* [Volume VI, No. 2, 1988].

BENDORF: I must say in all candor I've been around enough politicians to know that all of these stories don't have to be the same every time that they are repeated. But because we were flying over that land, he pointed it out to me as land that his grandfather had possessed.

JOHNSON: Did he say anything about how his grandfather had lost it?

BENDORF: I don't recall him saying how he had lost it. You mentioned a bad partner. I just remember that he mentioned that but for the fact that his grandfather pulled up stakes and went back to Missouri, he, Harry, would have been a Californian. And that's why I have to think that he was talking about his grandfather.

JOHNSON: What happened after the Reno speech?

BENDORF: Well, we went to Oakland. We went back to Oakland and back to Claremont. I do recall another event, the

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big event, but I did so many of them in Oakland that I can't remember all of them. I think we went to the auditorium, Municipal Auditorium in Oakland and had a big political rally. That would have either been the night before Reno, or possibly the night of Reno. I can't remember which. I don't remember that we stayed over in Reno. I think we went up and came back the same day and I that's why we had the Pauley airplane.

I can remember I met Kennedy in Oakland in '60 just before the election, the last weekend of the election. And I can remember that he had another major political event there. Oh, I can remember Adlai Stevenson in Oakland, probably in '60, almost certainly in '60, again at the Oakland auditorium. There we had Nat King Cole and Bob Newhart, and I had never heard of Bob Newhart.

JOHNSON: You mean for Stevenson's speech?

BENDORF: This was with Adlai Stevenson. They may have been there with John Kennedy, because the last weekend of the campaign we had Kennedy in California again, and we did an event at the Oakland Auditorium with Kennedy. I know that we had one there with Stevenson, because Stevenson's sister and several others stayed again at the Claremont Hotel. I had to do a motorcade to get

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them to the auditorium. I recall that.

JOHNSON: Did Truman give a talk in Oakland after he came back from Reno, or had he done that before he went to Reno?

BENDORF: Well, I just read this account that reflects on a labor meeting at a hotel in Oakland, the Stowe and Bray account [oral history interview]. I don't recall a labor meeting in Oakland. But they say we flew back to a big labor meeting in Oakland, California that night.

If I had to recollect, I would say we did something in Oakland the night before, but I'm not certain.

JOHNSON: When did you leave Truman then?

BENDORF: That would have been probably when he left. Whenever he left Oakland, my responsibility would have ended.

JOHNSON: You were with him in Oakland and Reno, just those two.

BENDORF: Yes, just those two cities.

JOHNSON: Did you ever see him in Washington?

BENDORF: I saw him in Washington but I can't remember all

[15]

of the occasions.

JOHNSON: Were you with the Democrat National Committee at

BENDORF: No, I was with Clair Engle until March of '61, and then I opened an office for Pat Brown in Washington. I was there until April of '63, and all of this time I was deeply involved in Democratic activities and politics. I had worked for Pat Brown in '62. In '60 I went through Johnson's advance school. I don't know whether you ever heard of his advance school, but Lyndon Johnson had an advance school. I didn't thereafter do that much advancing, but I did have Lyndon Johnson in California for two and a half days in '60, and we did an event in Sacramento, and we did one in..

JOHNSON: Did you meet Truman in '62 when he was campaigning for Pat Brown?

BENDORF: I don't think I did, although I spent most of '62 here in California. I don't recall.

JOHNSON: So, the last time that you can recall really speaking with Truman was...

BENDORF: Speaking with him was '60.

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JOHNSON: In '60 in Oakland.

BENDORF: Yes.

JOHNSON: So you were an aid to Clair Engel, Senator Clair Engel. When did that end?

BENDORF: That ended in '61, when I opened an office for Pat Brown in Washington. Pat was Governor of the State of California. He was elected Governor in '58, along with everybody. The Democrats won in '58 in California.

JOHNSON: How long were you with Governor Brown?

BENDORF: Until '63, through that election, the '62 election. Then in '63 I went to work for Lockheed and I was Lockheed's director of Government relations, director of government public affairs, that sort of thing. I spent a lot of time with the Johnsons, Humphreys and even with Nixon. Believe it or not, I spent a week with Nixon one time.

JOHNSON: But not with Truman, again.

BENDORF: Not with Truman again.

JOHNSON: Well, I suppose our part of it can end at this point unless you have any other anecdotes about Harry

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Truman.

BENDORF: I always think of Johnson when I think of Truman because I brought Johnson out in '62 in behalf of Pat Brown.

JOHNSON: Brought him out where?

BENDORF: To California. Johnson said to me, "There are two guys I will never lift a finger against; one of them is Tommy Kuchel and the other is Pat Dirksen. And then he gave me some reasons for his loyalty. The old days of politics, you just glowed when you heard real loyalty expressed.

JOHNSON: Who was Kuchel?

BENDORF: Tommy Kuchel was a Republican Senator from California. Then when Lyndon was coming to California to speak in behalf of Brown, he made it clear to me that he would not say a negative word about Tommy Kuchel, nor would he support Tommy's opponent who was running also in '52. That's the kind of resolute, absolute, loyalty that I heard from Harry Truman on the subject of Ed Pauley. And I always think of those two.

One other thing I recall a la Truman. Truman had used some colorful language. I have always suggested

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that there are honest hypocrites and dishonest hypocrites. In politics there are honest men, and there are honest hypocrites and dishonest hypocrites, and I always considered Harry Truman an honest man. If he used fragrant language, he used it and didn't kid about it. John Kennedy had a wicked mouth, and Richard Nixon had a wicked mouth. In private they were guilty of some pretty severe profanities.

So, Harry Truman had said something, and somebody had said, "Isn't it terrible that a President speaks like that?" So they asked John Kennedy, and John Kennedy, he of the foul mouth, responded, "That's Mrs. Truman's problem; that's not my problem." So that's the honest hypocrite, and Truman's the honest man. Then they asked Nixon about it and Nixon said, "It's absolutely awful that any man that is President of the United States would ever use that kind of language," and so that was the dishonest hypocrite.

JOHNSON: There are three categories there.

BENDORF: They always had three categories, and Truman was always my example of the honest man -- no hypocrite.

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