

Oral History Interview
with
EUGENE DONNELLY AND EDWARD MEISBURGER

Mr. Donnelly served as a corporal and Mr. Meisburger as a sergeant under Captain Harry S. Truman in Battery D during World War I. Both men remained close personal friends with Harry Truman through his early business years and political career. Mr. Donnelly has practiced law in the Kansas City area since his return to civilian life. Mr. Meisburger was the City Editor for the former Kansas City Journal-Post and a reporter for a Minneapolis, Minnesota newspaper, and the public relations director for the U.S. Corps of Army Engineers in Kansas City before his retirement.

President Truman is the lifetime president of the Battery D Association. Mr. Donnelly is the permanent chairman, and Mr. Meisburger is the permanent secretary-treasurer.

Kansas City, Missouri

December 27, 1975

by William D. Stilley and Jerald L. Hill, William Jewell College

Harry S. Truman Library

Independence, Missouri
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NOTICE

This interview was conducted by William D. Stilley and Jerald L. Hill as part of a intern and independent study project at William Jewell College in March 1976, under the direction of the Political Science Department of William Jewell College.

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by William D. Stilley and Jerald L. Hill.
William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri

STILLEY: Mr. Meisburger, when did you first meet Captain Truman? Was it at Camp Doniphan, or did you meet him earlier than that?

MEISBURGER: I met him first--I believe it was July 11, 1918, at what we called Camp Coetquidan--I believe it's listed in that background there. Coetquidan, near Angers, France.

STILLEY: What was your rank at that time when you first met him?

MEISBURGER: I was sergeant of the first gun section. Sergeant of the first gun section.

[2]

STILLEY: What was your first impression of him? Were you awed? Did you think of his military character, or did you come into much contact when you first met him?

MEISBURGER: Well, my impression was he wasn't a military character, especially. He was just sort of like a man getting his family around a table and telling them what the score was and what he could expect of everybody. They realized, I think, at that time our Battery D was, I would say, a little bit exceptional because they were mostly men that had been through high school, a few in college, and they were--of course it was a volunteer outfit wholly at the time. He was dealing with people that he felt understood what he said about things. I think Mr. Donnelly will affirm that he said that he had a lot of responsibility commanding the outfit, and figuring out movements and firing data and things on the overall level, and the conduct of the outfit would depend on the sergeants and corporals down the line, and he was

[3]

relying on them to take care of it.

STILLEY: Mr. Donnelly, was this when you first met Captain Truman, at the same time?

DONNELLY: Well, in a general way, we had met him, as a man, because he was in charge of the canteen at Camp Doniphan, which served, of course, the whole regiment. In that way we were familiar with Lieutenant Truman because he was in charge of the thing. He operated the barber shop and the canteen, and had to account for the money, of course; and the profits were divided among the various batteries for their mess fund, wouldn't you say?

MEISBURGER: Yes.

DONNELLY: So, that's the only way that I would enlarge a little bit on when we all first met the man, not in a personal manner, or as a superior officer, but just because he was operating the canteen. Of course, he himself wouldn't be on duty there, but Eddie Jacobson, who later was his partner in

[4]

business here in Kansas City, was actively in charge of handing out the merchandise, you know, taking the money.

STILLEY: What was your first impression? Even though you really didn't meet him that well, what was your first impression?

DONNELLY: Well, my first impression of him was a whole lot like Eddies. He succeeded a man by the name of Captain John Thacher, and Captain John Thacher was an elderly man, compared with Truman. I think Truman was about perhaps 32 years of age when he took command of Battery D. John Thacher was several years older than that, and John Thacher was promoted to a major of the Second Battalion, wasn't he Eddie?

MEISBURGER: Yes.

DONNELLY: [William] Yeates was in charge of our battalion.

MEISBURGER: There were contrasts there, if you remember, Gene, even at that time. Captain Thacher, you know, was an honor graduate of Princeton University. He

[5]

Wrote articles for the Atlantic Monthly and things like that; in other words, he was a very scholarly man and Truman was a right down.-to-earth. He had historical knowledge in which other people say he knew more history about the world and the United States than a lot of the people know, but he dealt from man to man, that's what he did.

STILLEY: Sir, the references say that you went through, was it, four captains before Captain Truman took over the battery?

DONNELLY: Yes, when the regiment was first organized Battery D was made up of Kansas City men and some from down in the surrounding counties. And I think that we were still in the National Guard, and the officers went through a process of being elected, didn't they Eddie?

MEISBURGER: Yes, that's right.

DONNELLY, So when we left Kansas City a man by the name of Charles Allen---his name is in the roster there--he was in charge of Battery D, the captain

[6]

of Battery D. And then later on he left the regiment and a man by the name of [Rollin] Ritter became the captain of Battery D. Then Ritter, Captain Ritter, was succeeded by John Thacher, and John Thacher was in command at the time we left Camp Doniphan and remained in charge of Battery D until he was succeeded by Harry Truman.

STILLEY: These men, were they unable to control or to order the battery? I think some references say that Battery D was kind of rambunctious or rough and they weren't able to command the battery, is this true?

DONNELLY: I think that Battery D was unique in a lot of different ways. For instance, Sergeant Meisburger, and Tommy [Thomas E.] Murphy at that time was the amateur lightweight champion in boxing in the United States.

MEISBURGER: Murphy was at that time.

DONNELLY: Yes. Eddie was a boxer too, for that matter, and we could pick a baseball team out of Battery

[7]

D, and play regimental teams, or a football team that would play regimental teams, don't you see? When you think that you had to pick your teams out of 220 to 240 men, to play teams that were the pick of an infantry regiment or an artillery regiment, why it kind of shows you the makeup of the rank and file of Battery D. As you see, there were some awful good men in the battery, big men, good football players.

MEISBURGER: In addition to that, Gene, we won't go into detail name for name, but I believe, of course, we are very proud in the fact that our captain became President of the United States, but you can go down the Battery D roster and you'll find men like Mr. Donnelly. He was chairman of the Democratic County Committee of this county here, Jackson County; he was a public administrator for several years. Then we had another man who became a Federal Judge. That was Judge Albert Ridge. We had another man who was a second--whatever the lowest is--a second grade

[8]

buck private, who rose to become a lieutenant general in War II in Europe, John Uncles. And then they both succeeded in business and other enterprises and I think Captain Truman always had it under his mind that he was dealing with people who could add two and two anyway.

STILLEY: When he took over as your captain, what kind of a speech did he give you? Did he say, "This is the way it's going to be done," or how did he give the orders when he first took over?

DONNELLY: Well, he was ever a gentleman, but he was very firm in telling you just what he wanted you to do. Just like Eddie said, he depended on the sergeants and the corporals to more or less convey to the men under them just what the score was all the time. And of course in a training outfit like that it's a matter of welding them into a team so that every man knew just what his function was and how to perform it. See, a battery consisted of four guns. It was a horse-drawn outfit; we depended on horses both in the United States and when we

[9]

got to France. A sergeant was in charge of each section, and then under him was a gun corporal and a driver corporal, horse corporal, so that that was the way a battery was organized. Then of course, you got down the line and you had men that had to do with ammunition and stable people and horseshoers and all that sort of thing that made you a mobile outfit and so that you could always keep your equipment up, a master mechanic, and the like of that. It required some ability to organize and weld them into a unit that could carry out everything a battery is supposed to do, firing problems, and care of horses, what have you.

HILL: Did Captain Truman operate the battery any differently than the previous captains had done?

DONNELLY: Well, of course, when he took charge of us, this Camp Coetquidan was your last stop before you went to the front, so that your course of training there was very intensive. I don't suppose in the United States that we fired more than ten rounds

[10]

of ammunition to a gun, but at Coetquidan where we got into these firing problems, like the creeping barrage, and firing, just laying your gun on the target that you could see, when they bring the ammunition up there in boxes, and just fire and fire and fire, the barrage program, so it was much more intensive,

MEISBURGGER: That night Mr. Donnelly mentioned at Coetquidan, that's included in our little background on the outfit on their 50th anniversary, so you can refer to that order for specifics, spelling of names and things like that.

I think that a captain of an artillery outfit, and not too far off from going in action was responsible for men's lives and equipment, and he had to deal on the top level about where you're going to be and when are you going to fire and how many rounds to fire and this and that, and that's like Mr. Donnelly said a while ago. He said, "I can't be monkeying with these people down the line that want to cut up some. That's

[11]

up to the sergeants and corporals to take care of that." They did a pretty good job.

DONNELLY: It might be mentioned that along about the first of March in 1918 when we were still at Doniphan, that they picked a contingent of officers from the regiment and about seventeen men from each unit; and Truman was one of the men that was picked, as an officer, and I happened to be one of the men that was picked out of Battery D. We all left Doniphan ahead of the 35th Division and we were sent to France to be schooled in the use of the French 75. And the officers were sent to a specialists camp where they got the more comprehensive knowledge of what was expected of an artillery unit. Truman had that much special training by the time that he took charge of Battery D, I forget where the officers training school was, but we wound up in Camp Valdahon up near, not very far from the Swiss border, where we received our training, the Battery D contingent along with the other units of the regiment. We

[12]

had a West Point man that was in charge of us just to teach us the use of the French 75. And then Truman went to an officers' training school that made him more familiar with what was expected of you in France under actual battle conditions. And it wasn't long before he took charge of Battery D that we were on our way to the front, don't you see. From then on we got into the campaign as far as Battery D was concerned.

We got into five different engagements up in the Vosges Mountains, in Alsace, and then we marched overland to St. Mihiel, and from there to the Argonne. When we came out of the Argonne we had a week's rest or something like that and moved into a sector up near Verdun, and then changed to another sector at Verdun where we were at the time the Armistice was declared, November 11. By that time every man in the battery knew just exactly what his duties were and how to perform them.

STILLEY: Mr. Meisburger, when Captain Truman took over the battery, I have read somewhere, the

[13]

battery tried to initiate him into the battery. What was the initiation like?

MEISBURGER: Is this recorder on here?

STILLEY: Yes. Don't you want to talk about it on the recorder?

MEISBURGER: I have some memories of it; Mr. Donnelly may have others. I remember when they tried to initiate it was just a normal nightly activity at Camp Coetquidan where he took us over (which by the way was Napoleons old training camp). Some of the boys went down on what we called a pike, that was down a highway where they had wine shops and other things like that, and they got fixed up for the evening; and when they got back to the barracks where people slept pretty close together in a kind of a barn more than a barracks, I guess. Anyway someone stepped on somebody's foot or hand; or something, and the commotion arose, and I think they called out the officer of the day; and the captain finally got on the job

[14]

and read the riot act, that's all I remember. He said, "We're not over here for monkey business. There are certain rules and regulations, we've got to quiet this down." So they did. But I must say they had a little respect for him, I'll tell you that. Later on during various engagements they found that. He was a commander, I'll tell you that. Not like General Patton would be; I would say he was the extreme opposite of General Patton, but he still got things done.

STILLEY: Would you like to add something on that, Mr. Donnelly?

DONNELLY: I think that pretty well covers the episode you're speaking of. I was one of those that was down on the pike, I can tell you that.

METSBURGER: Well this is off-the-record. He had a hell of a time. I can remember that night when the chief mechanic, Quinn, came in that night late from down on the pike and the officer--I don't know whether he was a corporal or a sergeant, but

[15]

the guard at the gate questioned him. Quinn had a big heavy wine bottle you know, and had his finger stuck down in the neck of it, and one fellow asked him a question, so Quinn Just swung around to him and hit him on top of the head. I know Captain Truman wouldn't agree to that, because he believed in law and order, that's all.

STILLEY: I presume that both of you have seen the movie or the play "Give 'Em Hell Harry." Did they portray too much? Did he really cuss that much when he gave out orders, or especially the part where.

[16]

MEISBURGER: Go ahead Gene and then I want to say something about that.

DONNELLY: As far as his functioning as a captain, I would say no; he wasn't given to a lot of swearing or cursing.

STILLEY: Do you think that was a normal portrayal of him, or an unfair portrayal? I think it was a specific scene, they were going into a battle or something had happened, a mortar shell had dropped, and he starts in this barrage of telling everybody to pick up their equipment and leave, and the person who portrays him, James Whitmore, is using profanity profusely!

DONNELLY: I think his profanity, the way the author of that book gave it, was expressed to him when he was interviewing Truman to compile this book. He might have cussed a little bit the first time we were under fire, but I don't remember anything about it. I don't remember a bit about him cursing or swearing, or calling anybody a dirty name.

[17]

METSBURGER: Well, as I remember the battle of what the people of the stage and screen play called the "Battle of Who Run," that was named by the people of the battery itself, the Battle of Who Run. That was our first engagement under fire, down in the Vosges Mountains of Southern France; and we went in there the day or two before to set the guns, and to fire a barrage on the enemy, which had been a very quiet sector for months and months. We fired a thirty minute barrage; and our horses to pull out the guns were secreted in the woods back of there. They were in charge of the first sergeant, and when the barrage was finished he was supposed to come and pick us up and pull us out of there. He came all right with all the horses and the drivers and he couldn't find his way, and he yelled something like, "I can't see you, where are you?" I was the first gun section, and I started up the road to show him where to come in. Then he pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and waved it around his head and said, "I can't find you, where are you?" Of

[18]

course, when the enemy saw that flashlight they knew where the target was. I admit a few men may have scattered here and there and certainly a few horses, but, anyway, they all got together and the captain led us out of there, back on the road, back to our original takeoff position some kilometers back of that. I don't recall any excessive commands, or swearing like shown in the play. He may have said it under his breath, but I didn't hear it, I'll tell you the truth.

I read an account not long ago where the Catholic chaplain of the outfit, Monsignor [L. Curtis] Tiernan was quoted by somebody as saying he heard him; now Monsignor Tiernan wasn't within ten miles of there. Anyway, maybe he did get a little bit rough, but anyway it was after that that he took care of us all the way through everything else.

Then another thing--some-people have versions about this--in the play I witnessed here at Kansas City when, what was his name Whitmore --fortunately a friend of mine in the battery had more money than

[19]

I had, and I didn't have it; he bought me two seats in the third row. I went with my wife; she wasn't feeling very good. But the last part of the first half of the show was about the Battle of Who Run, and Truman was saying all kinds of cuss words and he was saying, "Get back there you mackerel-snappers." Now, quite a bit of the battery was made up of men like Mr. Donnelly. Some came from Rockhurst College, which was a Catholic institution; some came from other parts of the thing; but I just can't conceive of Captain Truman at that immediate point--he might have said "s.o.b.'s" or something else--but to call his men a bunch of mackerel-snappers is just, I think, in the scriptwriter's imagination, I don't know.

Anyway, it all ended by him getting the outfit out of there and going on the road and taking them all through four or five more engagements and all right, but they made a lot of capital out of the Battery in the stage and screen play. I don't have any doubt but what Eugene agrees, he's more

[20]

of a politician than I am, and I think maybe if they were sitting around in a conference with a bunch of Senators or Congressmen, or people, that he would undoubtedly use some words that weren't in the dictionary.

I must say again for Truman, he had respect for his men, and his men had a lot of respect for him, that's the way it goes.

STILLEY: Would either one like to discuss just kind of briefly some of the other battles? You mentioned going to St. Mihiel sector, and the Battle of Verdun. Was there any noteworthy events that took place, other than just the battles themselves?

DONNELLY: It was found that moving from place to place in France was a matter of traveling by foot. We were induced to join the field artillery with the understanding that you don't have to walk. But when they picked up all these horses in France, which included farm horses and stallions, by that time the horses were pretty well picked over I

[21]

imagine in France, don't you know; the war had been going on from 1914 on, and we were there in 1918. Consequently, traveling night after night, all the troop movements were at night. There was enough airplanes in the German Army to pinpoint us if we were traveling by day. They could observe the movement of troops you know. So all of our movements were by night and it was the order that varied maybe from 15 kilometers to as high as 30 to 35 kilometers. A kilometer is about as I remember it, about 4/5 of a mile, isn't it?

MEISBURGER: That's about right.

DONNELLY: That's about the terms in our measurement. So that, we would be pretty well worn out after one of those night things and then try to sleep during the day; and if it was raining or something like that, why, we had to watch our bedding and like of that and see that the old horses had their mess along with us. We went into the

[22]

reserves at St. Mihiel. That was a sector that you might term as the shape of a horseshoe, and the American Army strategy was to close the pincers on the Germans, which they succeeded in doing. Battery D wasn't called into action in St. Mihiel, but no sooner was that engagement completed than the masterminds of the American Army decided to drive in the Argonne. The idea was to split the German Army, cut off everything to the east of the Argonne from those that were in the west of the Argonne down towards Belgium, the country that they had occupied there at the start of the war. There of course, the battery got into the thing right at the start of the Argonne drive. There were four divisions of the American Army in line there to start the drive. To our left was the 27th Division, then the 35th Division, and to our right was the 91st Division,

wasn't it, and there was still one other division that would be--you'll find it in the maps in Jay Lee's book, The night the drive started we fired a

[23]

barrage that must have lasted for I don't know how long, Eddie. We probably fired about 1,500 rounds of ammunition, like a creeping barrage; and then when we finished our barrage, the infantry left the trenches and started forward. When morning came, we started to follow the infantry. When we wound up the Germans had been driven back I don't know how many kilometers, but they were still a fighting force of men. We were in the Argonne from September 26 until about October the third or fourth when we were relieved by the First Division. Of course, eventually they kept pounding at the German line in the Argonne, and the whole width of the front until they finally achieved what they started out to do. They brought about the surrender of the German Army. But when we were taken out of the Argonne, we were sent to the Verdun front, up around Verdun where they had that terrible battle for some sixteen months when the French were defending Verdun. Verdun was surrounded by these French forts, and we fired barrages up

[24]

there. We were moved to another sector just before the Armistice. We were firing the morning of November 11 and then the 35th Division mission was to proceed to take Metz, the German city of Metz, when the war ended; that's where we finally wound up. We spent the winter right close to where the war ended, near one of the French forts there at, they call it La Beholle; and later along after the first of the year we moved down to a little village called Rosieres, which was close to Bar-le-duc. Finally we got the news that we were destined to go home, and we moved back towards the coast, then to a little village outside of LeMans; and then, eventually, got orders to move into Brest where we went aboard ship to come home. So that was where our five engagements came in.

We were very fortunate. We had a few men die in France prior to going into any fighting. We had only one man killed in action, and it was a man by the name of [Adolf F.] Anderson, as I

[25]

remember it. But we were constantly exposed to all the rigors of a battle, and I guess God just was kind of looking after Battery D.

Now all during that time, of course, Truman ordinarily would, the minute we took up a position, go to the front, and he would direct the battery fire from the front line position. That's what occurred especially in the Argonne. The Germans had cut our communications every once in a while but in the main we moved into two positions in the Argonne, and that was really our biggest engagement, the Argonne.

STILLER: When the orders came through, or the information, news, of the Armistice was being signed, did you know about it the day before the Armistice was signed, or just right after it was signed?

MEISBURGER: Now in connection with what Mr. Donnelly is talking about, after this publicized Battle of Who Run, we'd been talking about, Gene, Mr. Donnelly, said we moved on a highway with the horses

[26]

following the guns and the men walking and some of the infantrymen would go by us and riding in their big trucks and leaned out of the back and hollered, "Join the artillery and ride." And they were all riding, and we were walking.

Later on, it got a little draggy, and the colonel of the regiment--Gene referred to him as a little former West pointer--he came fluttering down the highway and complained about Battery D sort of straggling, and talked to Captain Truman. I don't know what the words were between them, but anyway, the colonel gave the order, "Call these men in and double time them up this hill." We were pretty tired by then walking, let alone double timing, and the captain said, "Yes, sir." But instead of following the colonel's orders, he ordered a column right and he took us off the highway into an inviting woods and the orders were to feed the horses and tie them up for the evening and to bed the men down and to get a night's rest. Of course, that was contradictory

[27]

to the colonel's regimental orders and the whole outfit, the whole regiment of what is it, six batteries, A, D, C, D, E, F, yes, came to a halt. The colonel sent for Captain Truman to come up at once and everybody figured the captain was going to get court-martialed; but he came back grinning, and apparently won his battle. The result was the colonel called the whole outfit off the highway and rested them overnight and we took off the next morning. But it was movements all along the line. That was the place where--I wasn't an eye-witness to it--but the captain was entitled to aide mounted on his horse at the head of the battery, and he got off and walked. We had some horses that were picked up from the French Army, and Gene said a while ago, some had already been subjected to gas and were kind of weak and the horses are failing out in the harness pulling the gun; and they took the captain's private mount and put it in harness to help pull the gun and the captain walked along with the rest of his men in the outfit.

[28]

Then we got into position near Verdun, which was approaching the end of the war, which we didn't know then. We was in our dugout or billet a few hundred feet from the battery position near Verdun. I don't know what time it was, it must have been 7 o'clock or something, a runner came and said, "The captain wants you to come and report to his headquarters at once;" and I went down there, and he was sitting at a table, and there was another.--Gene, I'm trying to think, it doesn't make a difference here, one of the lieutenants. I don't know whether it's [Victor H.] Householder or (Gordon B.) Jordan.

DONNELLY: It could have been [Lawrence J.] Baldwin couldn't it?

MEISBURGER: Well, they were sitting there eating breakfast and the captain was grinning, and the lieutenant of course was grinning. It was about 8 o'clock then, and I went in and the captain had a sheaf of papers, one was a copy of a thing that he had, and he said, "Sergeant," he said,

[29]

"why don't you take this, go back and read it to the battery?" And I said, "Yes, sir." I looked at it and all those words there, kind of made them out. It said, "Effective November 11, 1918 firing will cease on all fronts at 11 a.m. November 1918," signed by--it wasn't signed by General. Foche, it wasn't signed by [John J.] Pershing, it was signed by I don't remember his name, the chief executive officer of the division. I don't remember his name. But anyway, that was the message and I went back up to the battery positions and finally got them quieted down and read it and it didn't create a whole lot of excitement. It created some Bronx cheers and I think a few shoes were thrown at me if I remember right.

DONNELLY: There had been a false report out a day or two before I think. There was a false report that an armistice had been granted. And that turned out to be a fake, and I guess that's why the rank and file just thought it was a bunch of bullshit.

[30]

MEISBURGER: I think the United Press put out a story, came to the United States at that time, a few days before, that an armistice had been signed and that was the week before, those few days, or whatever it was, It was a night, about midnight or 1 o'clock in the morning we were aroused by a lot of uproar and noise, and we found some French troops in position over the roadway down the gully beyond us had got that message from Paris or something; and they got the wine bottles out and they stuck candles in the neck of them and lighted them and put their hands on each other's shoulders and came marching into where we were bedded down and woke us up and were all singing, "Fini Le Guerre, the war is over," and they carried on for an hour or two; and then this next day they found out it was a false alarm. Then when we got the real one, it was kind of hard to make them believe,

STILLEY: When you finally broke up and came back to the United States, did you think that you would

[31]

stay in close contact with Captain Truman, or did you think that even though you might have your reunions that you'd all go your separate ways?

DONNELLY: Well, Truman and Eddie Jacobson embarked in that haberdashery business soon after they were discharged, and of course, that was over here on West 12th Street, right across the street from the Muehlebach Hotel. That got to be kind of a meeting place for the Battery men

that lived in Kansas City, especially, and beginning in 1921 was the big Legion convention, wasn't it?

MEISBURGER: Yes, that was the American Legion Convention, yes.

DONNELLY: Truman had an active part in the arrangements for the big convention and as a result of that Battery D men were selected to be the color guards for the five notables that were here to celebrate the convention, that was Pershing; and Beatty from Great Britain; [Marshal. Ferdinand]

[32]

Foch from France; and the other one I can't think of his name.

MEISBURGER: [Armando] Diaz.

DONNELLY: Yes, Diaz. One Belgian [General Baron Jacques].

MEISBURGER: Yes, and one or two more, I can't remember.

DONNELLY: He was always looking out for the men of the Battery, and he was instrumental in all of these reunions from that time on. Even when he was President he would come out here to a Battery D reunion. When he was a Senator, the head of the Presidency, when he was a County Judge he would attend those reunions, and had a great deal to do with organizing each one, preparing the programs, and getting the mailing out to the---at that time, of course, they were well-attended.

MEISBURGER: Yes, he was quite a drawing card, of course.

DONNELLY: Eventually the battery got scattered all

[33]

over the United States, and then of course we couldn't muster the number of men at the reunion that we could when practically all of them were living in this vicinity.

MEISBURGER: I seem to remember one reunion, Gene, was in the Trianon Room there at the Muehlebach when he was President. That's the night we put on our kind of a--I don't know what you call it-tongue-in-cheek show for him or something, and people walked around and down to the head table, but anyway they've got some walnut paneled sidewalls there. I kind of remember some of the things sliding back and three or four Secret Service men came stepping out of them or something,

DONNELLY: We had several reunions there at the President Hotel, too, when he was the President.

MEISBURGER: Then after he had retired from the Presidency, let's see, we're at 12th and Grand, just

[34]

two blocks north of here is the Federal Reserve Bank Building where he had offices, and I had been up there.--you have, too, I know--talking to him when I was over at the Corps of Engineers with visiting people from Vietnam, Korea and various places. When we had a reunion or something he'd insist on walking from there over to the Muehlebach where we had a reunion. But you remember the one at the Pickwick Hotel (I think you were there Gene), right over here a couple of blocks, and he got a kind of a catch of some kind in his knee. I don't know what it was. When he got up from the table to leave he was limping and either you or I, and someone else, got on each side and he had his car parked down here on 10th Street. He was going back to Independence; and we supported him on each side, took him down there and the attendant got his car out and we said, "Now Captain, you're in no shape to drive this car." He said, "No," and he told the attendant, "Set it out there and point it towards Independence, and I'll take the damn

[35]

thing and get it home," and that was the way he operated.---he got his mind set now and off he went.

Well, we had, I would say, around 280 in the original battery, and we've always maintained what we call the Battery D Association since the end of the war. They've had charge of all the reunions. Mr. Donnelly is the permanent chairman. What did we call the President, the Permanent President, didn't we?

DONNELLY: Yes.

MEISBURGER: We have dropped that now, Permanent President. I handle some of the paper work, as secretary, and all of that; but our count right now from our latest count across the country is approximately 45. It was always a practice of the President and the Captain, all the time he was with us, if anybody deceased in the outfit, that he would write a personal letter of condolence to the next of kin; some came from the White House, some came when he was back in Kansas City. Now that he's departed

[36]

that activity is devolved upon Mrs. Bess Truman, who has her name on the envelope with a postal privilege the same as the President had; and of course, Gene and I keep her furnished with a little background, but they keep that up.

But anytime he was in this area he was always involved in our reunions and had no strings pulled. I think the time the Secret Service man I was talking about at the Muehlebach a while ago, got a little shocked, that we called him "Captain" instead of "Mr. President," but that's the way he wanted it, I know that; he appreciated that.

Then I remember one time over here at the U.S. Courthouse building--I was on the newspaper at the time-he was here and had all of his staff with him from Washington. Then there were people here from Life magazine and the news services and all of the others in there, and I was milling around with them and somebody came to the door and said, "There's a man up the hall, wants to see you." I think he was a Secret Service man.

[37]

He said, "Follow me." I went up and I went in the door of the office. There was President Truman and Judge Albert Ridge and Captain Ted Marks, who was a captain of Battery C, wasn't it?

DONNELLY: Yes.

MEISBURGER: Anyway, they shut the door and Captain Truman reached in a desk drawer and pulled out a little package and took a little bottle of Four Star Hennessey or something out of it, and he said, "Wait a minute, and we'll all have a drink." He went over to a cupboard and reached up there and got some glasses and I said, "Mr. President, I'm on a Government payroll and I can't take a drink while I'm on duty," and he said, "All right, I'll give you a leave of absence for ten minutes." So we filled them up and had a drink and he said, "I'm sorry, but," he said, "I've got to put this all away now." He said, "I've got a bunch of Presbyterians in the next room waiting to meet me and I can't take another drink with you.

[38]

But," he said, "I would like to go down to the men's room, but, every time I go down there about seven Secret Service men follow me and march along with me and so," he said, "I think I'll leave that go for a while." So we left him then; but you know, he was just a down to earth guy.

I think what Merle Miller says in his book Plain Speaking, was a direct quote from the President. Of course, Miller was quite impressed with his honesty and his down to earthness and kind of asked him where he accumulated all of that; and I think the President said he got that at his mother's knee. I think that's where it all came from.

DONNELLY: I think that it might be interesting to tell you what little Battery D had to do with his political life. When he first ran for Judge of the Eastern District of the County Court, there was, oh, twelve or fifteen of us that went out there to Independence, took our cars and we were sent to the various places to bring in voters, don't you know. And through two of his campaigns for

[39]

the County Court we were active in doing what we could to help him.

In one of those elections, the opposition to him made some statement about him being a member of the Ku Klux Klan and I know at that time that there were some twenty or twenty-five of the

Catholic members of Battery D that signed a pamphlet saying that that was nothing but a libel on the man; but we knew he wouldn't join an outfit like the Ku Klux Klan. And of course, our names all appeared on the dodger that they put out. Strange to say, when he was elected Vice President in 1944, he was in Independence on election night, and some woman came up and handed me one of those placards that we had put out at the time of this particular election where he was accused of being in the Ku Klux Klan and wanted to know if I would hand that to President Truman. He was sure surprised to have that many years intervene and somebody come up with one of those things.

He had deep affection for Battery D, I can tell you that. The way we were treated in Wash-

[40]

ington when he was inaugurated; the way that he treated us when we were in the Army. For instance, by reason of being in that detail that was sent to France, we more or less forfeited our right to a furlough at home, Everybody was granted one furlough before leaving the States, but those on that overseas detail, their furloughs were either cut short or they just didn't get one. So we were the ones that were first getting a furlough in France, and we were sent down to Southern France. Well, he had everyone of us report down to his headquarters to see if we had enough money, and peeled off the francs to see that we were well financed for a little vacation. We left along about, oh, October 25th or thereabouts, and we didn't get back to the front then until November 8th; but he was the one that provided the money, because we didn't have a dime, to see that we had money to spend on food and what have you. And the same way at the inauguration when he was elected President. I don't know of any unit in the American Army that got the treat-

[41]

ment that we did back in Washington.

And take when he passed away. When he passed away every man in Battery D, whether they were living in Kansas City or California, Florida or anyplace else, immediately got a wire from the commanding general down here in Texas, General Cassidy, that we were to attend the President's funeral and that transportation would be furnished if they lived out of town; and there would be an Army officer detailed for each member of the battery, with an automobile and a chauffeur to pick us up at our home, with our wives for those that were married, and deliver us out to the Library the day of the funeral. Quite an impressive thing for us you know to have that opportunity to attend the man's burial, but that all just emphasizes the regard he had for the men who served under him. And of course, to a certain extent the men in Battery F loved him too. That's where he had served as a lieutenant prior to coming over to Battery D. To know the man was to like him, that's a cinch. There isn't any doubt about it,

[42]

he had a personality that he could make friends.

Of course, he went step by step to the Presidency. During the outbreak of World War II he wound up as being chairman of a committee that was appointed by the Senate to go around the country investigating all these war contracts, and building, and all of that where there was billions of dollars being spent, don't you know. And he handled that job so well, that's what attracted, I think, the attention of President Roosevelt, so that at the Democratic Convention in 1944 is when President Roosevelt chose him to be the Vice President. And of course that's when he was inaugurated along with President Roosevelt at that time. Roosevelt died in April and that's when Truman stepped into the Presidency.

Now his standing with the American people has increased ever since he passed away for that matter, but it was significant that at the time they dedicated the Library out there, ex-President Hoover and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court,

[43]

and Mrs. Roosevelt attended that, and they were speakers. Mrs. Roosevelt at that time predicted that he would go down in history as being one of the great Presidents. And then she enumerated the reasons why; that he stepped in at a time when there was momentous decisions that had to be made and he made them and that was it, and then he supported the Marshall plan, where they doled out the money to practically rebuild all the war damage in France and Germany, Italy, the havoc that had been created by that war. That war was, of course, probably more devastating than World War I, and that was bad enough. No, I think he deserved to be portrayed as a great President, there's no doubt about it, all the time retaining the simplicity of a boy that was raised on a Missouri farm.

Now if you can think of any more questions.

STILLEY: Would you like to add something, Mr. Meisburger?

MEISBURGER: Well, I just recall reading, and this

[44]

reminds me of it, I know that somebody's book that I read not long ago, stated that they wished that every grade school child, or every high school student could have had the advantage of listening to Harry Truman as a professor of history. I think he started reading history as soon as he could read, not only reading history of the United States but the history of the world. He was a great authority on that.

DONNELLY: He was instrumental in getting Al Ridge--I don't think Al Ridge had more than a grade school education, and I think Truman prompted him to study law and advised him what to read, and Al Ridge took advantage of that. Of course, he's the one that wound up on the United States Court of Appeals; died while he was still a comparatively young man.

MEISBURGER: Well, without mentioning too many names or anything, somebody else that interviewed us one time said they had an idea they might go off on another tangent something separate. About

[45]

Battery D itself, of course we had the captain who became the 33rd President of the United States. We had Mr. Donnelly here, who was chairman of the Democratic County Committee of Missouri and served several terms as public administrator and is a highly successful lawyer as you can see now by all these furnishings.

Then they mentioned Judge Ridge, who I guess, Al, as I remember I don't know whether he was a first class private or second class private, but he rose to be a judge of the Circuit Court of Appeals. We had another man who was a second class private, John Uncles, who in Second World War was a lieutenant general in command of the Seventh Army in World War II. We had a man who was an orderly--that's as low as you can get, an orderly--to Captain Truman, name of Milton Evans, who rose to be--in Louisville, Kentucky he was a banker and belonged to all kinds of organizations. He's now the commanding general of the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels. And we go down the list, we can name other successful people that

[46]

came out of our outfit. Now I don't know . . .

DONNELLY: Evans took an active interest in the Democrats and all the elections that had a bearing on Truman's political career, and he was a great money raiser down in Kentucky, political money raiser. We had a man by the name of Fred Bowman, Frederick J. Bowman, who was president of the old Lowe Campbell Sporting Goods Company, and then--what was the name of the company that took them over up in Chicago?

MEISBURGER: I don't remember. I remember Lowe and Campbell and he became Chairman of the Board.

DONNELLY: Chairman of the Board until he retired. There were others, too, that turned out to be very successful men. I think Captain [Verne E.] Chaney was quite a success in the telephone business; Erie Company.

MEISBURGER: I think the President was perfectly honest. One time, I remember--I don't know whether it was my wife Margarite or somebody in the family--some—

[47]

body said, "Well, we're going to have a little birthday party over here today, and some ice cream out in the backyard." I don't know why she was so forward or brash in asking him if he would come over. That was after he came back from Washington, but, oh, he jumped at the gun, "What's the address? Sure I'll come over." And then I told Irene Haggard making a monkey out

of herself asking the man to come over here, so I got around it some way or other, but if I had pressed him, he would've. He would have gone to Gene's place, too.

DONNELLY: During the Depression we had a couple of reunions at my house, had the basement fitted out, you know, with the barrel of spiked beer, and a little cheer; and I know he played the piano at our house then, for the benefit of the women folks that were there. At that time he was in the United States Senate.

MEISBURGER: Yes, I remember he played the piano one time over at the Muehlebach for Roy Roberts, who

[48]

was editor of the Kansas City Star, who had a little party over there; and they had a piano there and he sat down and played. Then I remember one thing about him, though, Gene, and you may remember this, I remember him sitting over in the corner talking to somebody and he had that little glass, you know, it was empty at the time. They had a little bar set up in the other corner, and I said, "Captain, would you like for me to go over and put something in that for you?" He said, "No, don't worry," he said, "I'll do it myself." So he gets up and goes over there. I know, I kind of figured that if I had filled it up it would have been about half full, but he went over, gave it a full charge you know.

DONNELLY: "Bourbon and branchwater" he used to say.

STILLEY: How did you help in his campaign? Did you take very active parts other than just being precinct workers for him in, say, his Senatorial campaign?

[49]

MEISBURGER: Now, Gene--I remember making one little talk or another at a carpenter's union or something--but Gene was much more involved in his campaign at that time.

DONNELLY: When I was the county chairman, Truman was running for reelection, It's in the year of 1940, and his first term of the Senate expired on about that time, and so he was running for reelection. Of course, I just had a lot to do with county politics at the time, attending meetings and making what brief speeches I could, not try to talk too much. Truman in that primary campaign was running against Governor Stark and one of the Milligans,

MEISBURGER: Maurice Milligan.

DONNELLY: For a three-way race, And it looked like he might be defeated, you know, for the primary, I wound up on election day--I was adjusting insurance claims at the time, and after my wife and I voted out in our home precinct we headed

[50]

for eastern Missouri down to Bowling Green. We registered into a motel there and then drove into Bowling Green to get the early returns, and when we went to bed that night we thought Stark had won; but when the morning papers came out, Truman was ahead of him by 8,000 votes. So that was probably his toughest political campaign.

And then, of course, at that time, you know, Tom Pendergast had fallen from grace up here and been sentenced to the United States penitentiary for income tax evasion. Truman had been a staunch Pendergast man without ever acquiring any of the stigma that might be attached to anything that was going on that hurt Pendergast, don't you know, vote frauds and like that; he never got into that kind of thing. And he made his great record here in the county where even the Star patted him on the back for the way he handled the bond money that constructed all of our county road system. At that time, it was a great undertaking for the county to get us out of the mud, and he supervised

[51]

all of that, and the building of the courthouse over here, and the home for the aged out in Eastern Jackson County. He was a good executive whether it was a county judge or in the United States Senate

MEISBURGER: Another little side story, but I don't think it ought to go in the record.

STILLEY: Well, I'll tell you what, it's about time to turn the tape, do you want to just tell it while I'm turning the tape?

MEISBURGER: Well, I'll put it on there and you can censor it afterwards,

Now this occasion happened when he was back to his home surroundings after retiring from the Presidency. I was with the Corps of Engineers then as a--I guess you would call it a ghost-writer, or . . .

DONNELLY: Public relations.

MEISBURGER: Public relations man, writing speeches

[52]

for the colonel, and going on the Missouri River we had an inspection boat that took parties of Congressmen and everything out. So they ran a trip from up here down to there, and one of those days we invited Mr. Truman, and I remember we picked him up right here at the corner of 10th and Grand in the Corps of Engineers car that morning and took him down and got him on the boat. Of course there was a lot of festivities on the boat, there was a bar there with a couple of river sailors manning it, and people that Truman knew. So we went up where the pilot was up on

the upper deck in the forefront. There's a couple of seats back there and the division general from Omaha with the Corps of Engineers . . .

DONNELLY: General. Pike wasn't it?

MEISBURGER: I don't remember his name at that time. Might have been. Anyway he came up and took a seat right alongside Truman and they had little drinks with them, The general talked to him, but before, he said, "What the hell can you talk about

[53]

to the former President of the United States?" And I said, "Oh, don't worry about that, he knows this river from one end to the other, and he can name all of the places right along it." So they sat there and the first thing Truman's glass got empty and I went down the steps and got him a refill and brought it back and he raised his glass to the general and the general raised his, and he said, "Here General, here's to you." He said, "I hope you live to be 80 years old and get convicted of rape." From then on the general was at ease. He wasn't worried about what to say to him.

And then we had an old river rat on board that sat out on the deck with Mr. Truman in a folding chair while it was coming down the river. This old boy was a regular river rat, he knew every bend and turn and everything. Truman beat him to the draw every time, and then he got down here to this landing by Independence where we unload the boat. I don't know what they called the landing. Truman made a little talk there and I

[54]

remember part of the talk, he said, "Here's where some hairbrain Governor of Missouri ran the," -some religious sect that was active in Missouri at that time--oh, the Latter Day Saints. He said, "Here's where some hairbrain Governor of Missouri made the Latter Day Saints move out up to Iowa," or somewhere. You know, things like that. He had them all in his palm hand before the trip was over. He preserved his dignity, but still he could adjust himself to any kind of surroundings.

STILLEY: After he became President, did your relationship change any? Would he call you very often, or meet him very often while he was President?

MEISBURGER: As I say, I'm getting my daughter fixing up a bunch of scrapbooks on various things and one of them is a longhand letter written on blue White House stationery--I think I was in Minneapolis working on the paper when they were still in Kansas City--about four pages long in longhand which we're preserving. He asked about our sons and what they were doing and I think Gene may have

[55]

the same thing and a lot of people would. I never did visit the White House while he was in there myself. I guess Evans did, and some of those fellows.

DONNELLY: I was back there three times.

MEISBURGER: Were you?

DONNELLY: Yes.

MEISBURGER: I wasn't there until the inaugural in '49. I did visit there when [Lyndon B.] Johnson was there.

DONNELLY: Ed McKim used to invite Truman when he was Senator and myself and Leo Gent and Fred Canfil, used to invite us up to a football game at Lincoln. We would go to Omaha on Friday night and have a party at McKim's house, and then drive to Lincoln the next day. I know what a thrill I had when we went to lunch with the Governor of Nebraska at that time, Governor Cochran, and when we finished lunch it was time to move over to the football

[56]

field and we got in the Governor's limousine and went through the gate and down to the Governor's box on the 50-yard line. That was a great thing for a young Irish boy.

MEISBURGER: I remember one time after he came back from President, Gene, and I guess he had a birthday and we decided to send him something as a Battery, and you suggested going over to Wolferman's store here and getting him some beverage. I asked the man that ran the place what Mr. Truman liked and he said, "Oh, he likes Kentucky sour mash." And Gene said, "Well, we'll get a case of that from the Battery and we'll have you deliver it out to Independence." And you called the Captain or President at his office in the Truman Library that time, and he said, "Oh, that's wonderful, fine, but let me tell you something. Don't have them deliver it to the house, have them bring it here to the Library, and I'll get a truck and sneak it into the backyard out there and into the basement of the house so I'll know

[57]

right where it is." And he said, "You boys come out sometime and have a nip." We never did get a nip of it, but he got it in there all right.

HILL: Mr. Donnelly will you tell us what a visit to the Truman White House was like? What his manner was at the White House?

DONNELLY: Well, the first time I went in there Matt Connelly was his Appointment's Clerk, and his desk was right outside the Oval Office, and Matt said, "Sit down there now, sit down, he'll see you in a few minutes." All of a sudden the door opened and the President and [Dean] Acheson were standing in the doorway, and he introduced me to the Secretary of State-I guess that's what he was at the time. Big thrill for me, and then I was taken into the Oval Office and sat there and visited with him.

You knew the President and you knew the people in his office. I was down there on behalf of a man in the wooden handle business, making axe handles and trench shovel handles in World

[58]

War II. He needed some money to finance him, and they had this Reconstruction Finance Company at the time, and so I agreed to go down to Washington with him. I used Matt Connelly to kick a door open for me so we could get to talk to the head man at the Reconstruction Finance Company. That was my first trip to Washington. Then later I went back a couple of times, and just dropped in as a matter of courtesy, visited with him for a few minutes. Your time is limited with a man in that kind of a position, because he's got a daily program that he tries to adhere to. Well, I guess that's about it.

MEISBURGER: Yes, some of it's memories, some of it's a matter of record. I know Mr. Truman said one time--I don't know whether he was still in Washington, or whether he was back here---he said, "Some day we ought to get all the guys we can out of the outfit around in a room and get a tape recorder and have them all tell about things that they remember and done; but that never did

[59]

transpire, which it should have probably, but we never did get at it.

HILL: Thank you very much.

STILLEY: Thank you.

-INDEX-

Acheson, Dean, 57
Allen, Charles, 5-6
American Legion Convention, Kansas City, Missouri, 1921, 31
Anderson, Adolf F., 24
Argonne, France, Battle of the, 12, 22-23, 25
Armistice, World War I, 24, 28-30
Artillery gun, French 75 mm., 11, 12
Atlantic Monthly, 5

Baldwin, Lawrence J., 28
Battery D, 129th Field Artillery,
 campaigns in France, World War I, 22-27
 commanders of, 5-6
 night marches of, 20-21
 organization of, 8-9
 personnel, high caliber of, 6-8, 45-46
 political support for Harry S. Truman, 38-39
 reunions of, 32-35, 47-48, 54-56
Truman, Harry S., attempted imitation of, 13-15
Battery D Association, 35
"Battle of Who Run," 17-19
Beatty, David, 31
Bowling Green, Missouri, 50
Bowman, Frederick J., 46

Camp Coetquidan, Angers, France, World War I, 1, 9-10, 13
Camp Doniphan, Oklahoma, World War I, 3, 11
Camp Valdahon (France), World War I, 11
Canfil, Fred, 55
Chaney, Verne E., 46
Connelly, Matthew J., 57, 58
Corps of Engineers, U.S., 51-52

Diaz, Armando, 32

Evans, Milton, 45, 46

Foch, Ferdinand, 29, 31

Gent, Leo, 55

Hoover, Herbert, 42
Householder, Victor H., 28

Jacobson, Edward, 3-4, 31
Jacques, Baron, 32
Jordan, Gordon B., 28

Kansas City Star, 48, 50

Klemm, Karl D., 26-27

Ku Klux Klan, 39

Lee, Jay, 22

McKim, Edward D., 55

Marks, Theodore, 37

Marshall Plan, 43

Metz, France, 24

Miller, Merle, 38

Milligan, Maurice, 49

Missouri, U.S. Senatorial election, 1940, 49-50

Muehlebach Hotel, Kansas City, Mo., 31, 33, 34, 36, 47

Murphy, Thomas E., 6

129th Field Artillery canteen, Camp Doniphan, Oklahoma, 3-4

Order of Kentucky Colonels, 45

Pendergast, Tom, 50

Pershing, John J., 29, 31

Pickwick Hotel, Kansas City, Missouri, 34

President Hotel, Kansas City, Missouri, 33

Quinn, Charles L., 14-15

Reconstruction Finance Corporation, 58

Ridge, Albert A., 7, 37, 44, 45

Ritter, Rollin, 6

Roberts, Roy A., 47

Rockhurst College, Kansas City, Missouri, 19

Roosevelt, Eleanor, 43

Roosevelt, Franklin D., 42

St. Mihiel, France, battle of, World War 1, 12, 20, 22

Secret Service, U.S., 36, 38

Stark, Lloyd C., 49, 50

Thacher, John, 4-5, 6

Tiernan, L. Curtis, 18

Truman, Bess Wallace, 36

Truman Committee, 42

Truman, Harry S.:

 anecdotes concerning, 51-54

Battery D, as commander of, 2-3, 8, 13-15
Battery D, announces armistice to, World War I, 28-29
Battery D, political support for, 38-39
Battery D, relationship with members of, 31-38, 47-48, 54-57

-62-

campaigns in France, World War I, 25, 26-27, 40
disciplinarian, as commander of Battery D, 13-15
Donnelly, Eugene, first acquaintance with, 3
evaluation of place in history, 42-43
funeral of, 41
history, knowledge of, 44
Meisburger, Edward, first acquaintance with, 1-2
Presiding Judge of Jackson County, Mo., record as, 50-51
profanity, use of, 15-16
reelection to U.S. Senate, 1940, 49-50
Truman Library, dedication of, 42-43

Uncles, John, 8, 45
United Press, false armistice report, World War I, 30

Verdun, France, 12, 20, 23, 28
Vosges Mountains, France, 12, 17

Whitmore, James, 16, 18
Yeates, William, 4