

Oral History Interview
with
Flavius B. Freeman

Attorney; neighbor and friend of Ralph and Louis Truman; Chairman, Democratic Central Committee of Greene County, Missouri, 1958-60; acquaintance of Harry S. Truman; toastmaster at dedication of the Ralph Truman National Guard Armory, 1963.

April 26, 1990
Niel M. Johnson

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[1]

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Springfield, Missouri
April 26, 1990
Niel M. Johnson

JOHNSON: Mr. Freeman, just a little background on you, on your own life. When and where were you born and what were your parents' names?

FREEMAN: I was born May 30, 1911 at Elwood, Missouri, which is a small town just outside the Springfield city limits over on the west part of the county. My father was Dr. Samuel Flavius Freeman. He was a medical doctor that had lived here all of his life and had been born here and was a strong, strong Democrat. My mother was named Bennett. She was a country girl.

JOHNSON: What was her first name?

FREEMAN: Leila Jessie. Her father and most of her brothers and sisters were very strong Republicans. They lived west of Springfield. My father and mother met and

[2]

married, and dad opened up his office in Elwood, where I was born.

I should say, too, that both the Freeman family and the Bennett family were in Greene County as early as, and before, the Civil War. The Freemans came from Bertie County, North Carolina in 1832. They came to Greene County; we have some records and things that document that. One of our family was a soldier in the Revolutionary War. He fought there and his remains were first buried here in Greene County. They were removed 50 years ago and buried as the only Revolutionary Army soldier in this part of the county. He was buried in the National Cemetery.

JOHNSON: You say your mother was a Bennett.

FREEMAN: Yes.

JOHNSON: Was that family related then to Phil Bennett who became a Congressman?

FREEMAN: No.

JOHNSON: That's a different family.

FREEMAN: No, we're not; we're not related to Phil Bennett at all. My grandfather on the Bennett side was a farmer. He was born sometime in the 1850s, and he married a woman who was raised in Fair Grove, Missouri. I'm not sure just how they became acquainted, but she

[3]

was one of the early Drury College students. She and her brother, who later was a doctor, entered Drury in 1873 or '74. The college was founded in 1873. But, oh, on the Bennett side, I had an uncle Herschel Bennett who was a major league baseball player with the St. Louis Browns. He later ran for office here in Greene County, and was elected. I guess he was perhaps the Collector of Revenue. And another uncle on the Bennett side, Dr. Floyd Bennett, was a longtime medical doctor in St. Louis.

Now, back to the Freemans. My family lived down near the old Frisco Hospital, which was out on the north side, and our neighbor just across the street was Ralph Truman. His son, Louis Truman, who later went to West Point and has retired as a three-star general; he and I grew up across the street playing baseball together.

JOHNSON: Were the Freemans Democrats all the way back?

FREEMAN: Oh, yes.

JOHNSON: The Bennetts, were they Democrat?

FREEMAN: Oh, no.

JOHNSON: They were Republican. But you took your father's political allegiance, loyalty, to the Democrat Party. Of course, Ralph Truman and Louis Truman, I'm sure,

[4]

were Democrats all their life.

FREEMAN: Oh yes.

JOHNSON: So, you were influenced certainly by your father. Did Ralph Truman have any influence, or did Louis Truman have any influence, on your political loyalties at all?

FREEMAN: Oh, no. Oh, no.

JOHNSON: Of course, he was an Army man.

FREEMAN: Sure.

JOHNSON: Did you ever talk politics with Ralph Truman, and do you recall what he had to say about it?

FREEMAN: Well, he was too much older for me to get involved with him, but he was a pretty strong individual. I have always understood that he and the President were pretty close. In fact, after Ralph died the people around here--and it may have been the American Legion or it may have been someone else--but they concluded they ought to have a new National Guard Armory. They built one and they dedicated that to Ralph, and they named that for Ralph. The President came here for that. On that occasion, it was my good fortune to be asked by the Chamber of Commerce, or whomever was in charge of that weekend, if I would be the toastmaster

[5]

at the large luncheon we had, at which Mr. Truman was present and which the Governor, John Dalton, was present. So I had the good fortune on that occasion of sitting on the left of Mr. Truman, and on the right of Governor Dalton. Louis and I had a little fun out of it; we kind of batted back and forth. I kind of ribbed him a little bit, and the President made some remarks. I can't tell you what was said, and I can't even tell you when that took place.

JOHNSON: You mean the dedication of the building?

FREEMAN: Yes.

JOHNSON: I think it was in '63. I think 1963.

FREEMAN: I was going to say 20 to 25 years.

JOHNSON: When did you first meet Harry Truman?

FREEMAN: Oh, I first met Harry Truman, I guess, at one of the early Jackson Day banquets. I graduated from law school in 1935 and went into practice. I was active as an assistant prosecuting attorney, well, not until some of the fellows had gone to the war. I think I was the deferred one with a family. I subsequently did go to the war.

JOHNSON: Were you on the County Central Committee?

[6]

FREEMAN: Yes. I was chairman of the Democratic Central Committee.

JOHNSON: What years was that?

FREEMAN: Those two years were, I believe I'm right, 1958, '59 and '60.

JOHNSON: But now, how about the 1940 campaign? You were out of law school, and I have information here that you joined the firm of Neal and Newman in 1936, the year after you got out of law school. In 1938 you had been two years as a lawyer here in Springfield. Did you have any involvement at all in the campaign of 1940?

FREEMAN: Oh, I don't think I had any involvement other than attending meetings that were held and making speeches. It was either in the late thirties or maybe it was in '38, or it may have been '40, that I was urged to run for prosecuting attorney. I almost did, but I couldn't get the consent of my mind and the good will of my wife, so I did not, but I worked for the other boys and contended with this.

JOHNSON: Now, would that have been County?

FREEMAN: Yes.

JOHNSON: County Prosecuting Attorney.

[7]

FREEMAN: Yes, that's right.

JOHNSON: When did you start becoming active with the County Central Committee, the Democratic County Central Committee?

FREEMAN: Oh, I was active to the extent of speaking at dinners and places that they wanted somebody to go out in certain areas, but I never was on the Central Committee. Never ran for the Central Committee.

JOHNSON: You mean of the county?

FREEMAN: Of the county; until a little committee of about three of the candidates and die-hards, good people, came to me. I guess that would have been 1957, and they wanted me to agree to take over the chairmanship for that campaign and for '60 if I would. I had so much encouragement from those fellows who said to me that it looked like, if I would agree to run, that nobody would oppose me, but if I didn't run there was going to be a hassle; there was going to be two or three running and get into fights. I said, "Well, if you think I can be elected and be a help to the party, why, I will run." I did, and I had no opposition. We had a pretty good year. We elected Stuart Symington, reelected Stuart, who I thought was a great, great Senator. We were very close friends.

[8]

JOHNSON: Now, getting back to Truman. Do you recall when you first met Harry Truman. Do you have any idea when you first met him?

FREEMAN: Oh, I can remember that we almost always had the Jackson Day banquet in the old Colonial Hotel. There were some suites and some meeting rooms on the mezzanine floor where Mr. Truman was and where the other people that were important were. Some of the younger fellows, just out of school, always made an occasion to go over and speak, and get better acquainted, and talk, and "what can I do for you," and so forth.

JOHNSON: So this was when Truman was Senator. Now, you say, your first Jackson Day Dinner in which you met Truman was while he was a Senator, right?

FREEMAN: Probably.

JOHNSON: That would probably be what, like 1936, '37?

FREEMAN: I would say probably in '36. It could have been '37.

JOHNSON: As soon as you started your law practice you began to attend these annual Jackson Day events?

FREEMAN: That's right.

[9]

JOHNSON: Did they call them Jackson, or Jackson-Jefferson Day dinners?

FREEMAN: Jackson.

JOHNSON: Just Jackson. Of course, in 1940 he ran for reelection to the Senate and Governor [Lloyd C.] Stark and [Maurice] Milligan ran against him. Governor Stark had said that he wouldn't run against him, but did.

Did you do any campaigning in 1940, or any canvassing or any promoting of Truman's candidacy?

FREEMAN: I can't say that I did anything that would have been of any great consequence. But I was one of the, what you might call, regulars, that did whatever they would ask us to do.

JOHNSON: In other words, you supported Truman, the incumbent?

FREEMAN: Yes.

JOHNSON: Did any of them support Stark, from the local Democrat group?

FREEMAN: Well, there was not very much support for Stark. I know I felt, and I'm sure others did, that he had no business running, and that he wouldn't be a good man for us to send back there. So he really never did gain very much support.

[10]

JOHNSON: And Milligan, I don't suppose got much support either.

FREEMAN: Milligan was well thought of because of his job; as I remember, he was U.S. district attorney, but that didn't carry much muscle either.

JOHNSON: What reason did the people around here seem to have to like Truman? What do you think caused the local Democrats to be so favorable toward Truman?

FREEMAN: Oh, I suppose that you have to recognize that when somebody is the incumbent, and has done a pretty good job that pleases the people that are interested in the party, and my goodness, he's a common, ordinary fellow and knows everybody and he comes and parades when it is necessary--and you just know you can count on him.

JOHNSON: Well, the fact that he had been a farmer himself, did that make much of a difference?

FREEMAN: I don't remember that it ever made much difference. He was never thought of as a farmer.

JOHNSON: Even though this area traditionally was more Republican than Democrat, they did vote for the New Deal here didn't they? They did support Roosevelt and the New Deal?

FREEMAN: Oh, you bet.

[11]

JOHNSON: And so they didn't switch back to Republican loyalties until the war, I guess, until World War II. In fact, Phil Bennett, a Republican, won the Congressional election, both in 1940 and 1942. In 1942 Sam Wear ran and was defeated. He was defeated again in 1943 after Phil Bennett died. Apparently, his son also ran for that office later on. So the Republicans were kind of back in the saddle, winning the Congressional elections.

Well, you said in 1940 you weren't so much involved. In 1944 when Truman was the Vice-Presidential candidate running with Roosevelt, did you help promote his candidacy here?

FREEMAN: I was in the Army.

JOHNSON: In 1948, of course, he gave two speeches here; he appeared here twice. What do you recall of your role in that?

FREEMAN: Oh, I don't know of a role of any consequence, but has somebody told you to talk to John Hulston?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I've interviewed John and we have an interview with John. He was very much involved with that.

FREEMAN: That's right.

JOHNSON: Did you ever play poker with Harry Truman?

[12]

FREEMAN: No, I can't say that I did.

JOHNSON: But you had some conversations with him, is that right?

FREEMAN: Yes, I had.

JOHNSON: Do you remember any of those anecdotes or stories, or visits with Truman?

JOHNSON: Oh, I don't really remember. I didn't figure what I was doing was very important, and I just wanted to do what the big fellow [wanted]. Louis and I were good friends. Of course, it was a great, great compliment, and I felt very pleased when they asked me to chair that big luncheon, when I sat next to the President on one side as I mentioned, and the Governor on the other. I went over to where they did the dedicating and Louis and I had a good visit. Incidentally, Louis' sister, Henrietta, who was older than me, came here six or eight months ago to bury her friend out in the cemetery. That was the first time I had seen Henrietta in, oh my, six years.

JOHNSON: So, you were pretty well acquainted with the Ralph Truman family.

FREEMAN: Yes, Ralph and his wife had a second son after Louis was up and gone. That's Corky; I think that is

[13]

what they called him.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think I've heard of him too. Was that Olive Truman's son?

FREEMAN: Yes.

JOHNSON: You weren't on the County Central Committee until '57 or '58, is that correct?

FREEMAN: That's right.

JOHNSON: But did you do any canvassing, did you do any polling, in '48, in your ward?

FREEMAN: Yes. Not anything of any great consequence, but always, always was working in the party and helping those that were running.

JOHNSON: You helped address envelopes, to...

FREEMAN: Oh, I don't know.

JOHNSON: Did you knock on any doors, or hand out literature?

FREEMAN: Oh, I had done some, but I didn't make a career out of it.

I never ran for anything, and I never sought any appointments, so I really wasn't trying to make a career out of politics.

[14]

JOHNSON: Were you ever in Washington, D.C. while Truman was President?

FREEMAN: My wife and I were in Washington during the Truman administration because I was trying a case at the Supreme Court. It was on the day President Truman fired General MacArthur. We were on the underground shuttle at the Capital along with several Congressional staff. Some of them were very excited saying, "They're going to impeach the President." It was a very interesting time to be in Washington.

JOHNSON: When he came back here for these Jackson Day dinners, you did get a chance to visit with him then?

FREEMAN: Oh, yes. Like so many other people, never anything by ourselves.

JOHNSON: No extended conversations?

FREEMAN: No, no, I didn't know him that well.

JOHNSON: He was always busy with quite a group of people, I suppose. But wouldn't he go to Ralph Truman's home and visit with Ralph often when he was here in Springfield?

FREEMAN: He and Ralph were good friends. I think he generally registered at the Colonial Hotel and stayed there.

[15]

JOHNSON: Now, there was a parade though, I understand, maybe it was a 35th Division parade...

FREEMAN: Probably was.

JOHNSON: ...when he suddenly veered off and wanted to go by Ralph Truman's home, and I guess he confused people for awhile. Well, I don't know how well-planned it was, but it was during one of these parades that he veered off the planned route and visited Ralph Truman. I think that was while he was President. So, the Secret Service had to run after Truman.

FREEMAN: That might very well have been.

JOHNSON: But you don't recall that incident, especially.

FREEMAN: I really don't. I really don't.

JOHNSON: Did Louis Truman ever comment to you about Harry, or about what kind of feeling he had toward Harry Truman?

FREEMAN: He had a fine feeling. Yes, I visited one weekend in Washington with Louis and his wife when I was up there, oh, maybe to argue a case on the Supreme Court or for some reason. I was out to Louis' and Margaret's house at night and we went out to dinner and he always spoke very highly of the President.

[16]

JOHNSON: Do you remember any comment he might have made about Truman firing General MacArthur?

FREEMAN: No.

JOHNSON: What was your feeling at the time when Harry Truman fired General MacArthur?

FREEMAN: My sentiment was that it probably was justified, that it was something that needed to be done.

You mention Louis; my friend Louis sent me a picture some years ago where he is standing on the right hand corner [pointing to photograph on wall].

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. He's still living?

FREEMAN: Yes, he's still living.

JOHNSON: And he's living where?

FREEMAN: He's in Atlanta. The reason I know is that a local doctor called me about a month ago and said to me, "You were in our high school class, and Louis Truman was in our class, and the reason I'm calling you, we have heard from him and he's coming in June for our 60th anniversary. He specifically said, 'I want you to call Doc Freeman and tell him I'm coming and that I want to get together with him.'"

JOHNSON: Great, yes. I see you have Symington's picture

[17]

here.

FREEMAN: Oh, yes, a great, great, great fellow.

JOHNSON: Now, some people were supporting Taylor, Buck Taylor against Symington. But you supported Symington all the time, is that right?

FREEMAN: I sure did. When he ran in '58 I got him in my car and we made trips around variously. I remember I took him down to Crane, Missouri where they had a big fried chicken rally, and then we went someplace else.

JOHNSON: What was the name of that town?

FREEMAN: Crane, Missouri.

JOHNSON: Well, okay, thank you.

FREEMAN: Well, you're very welcome.

Index

Bennett, Leila Jessie, 1

Bennett, Phil, 1, 2, 11

Dalton, John, Governor. 5

Democrat County Central Committee, 5-7, 13

Freeman, Flavius, 1-2, 6-7

Freeman, Samuel Flavius., 1

Freeman, Leila J., 1

Hulston, John, 11

MacArthur, Douglas, 14, 16

Milligan, Maurice, 9

Missouri Senatorial Campaign, 9

Stark, Lloyd, 9

Symington, Stuart, 7, 16-17

Truman, Harry S, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14

Truman, Henrietta, 12

Truman, Louis, 3, 5, 12, 15, 16

Truman, Ralph, 3, 4, 12, 14, 15