

Oral History Interview

With

Harry L. Abbott

Member of Masonic lodge #76 in Fairmount district of Independence, Missouri; canvasser in Fairmount for Harry S. Truman in county elections of 1922; and overseer of drivers in 1922 campaign.

April 4, 1990

Niel M. Johnson

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Harry S. Truman Library

Independence, Missouri

Oral History Interview

With

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April 4, 1990

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JOHNSON: Mr. Abbott, would you tell us where and when you were born?

ABBOTT: I was born March 12, 1894, in Chester, Pennsylvania.

JOHNSON: When did you move out here?

ABBOTT: I moved out here in November of 1912.

JOHNSON: With your parents?

ABBOTT: My parents were in Pennsylvania at that time.

JOHNSON: Oh, you came out here by yourself?

ABBOTT: I came out here by myself.

JOHNSON: What were your parents' names?

ABBOTT: Thomas Perry Abbott.

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JOHNSON: And your mother's name?

ABBOTT: Her name was Greer.

JOHNSON: And your full name is Harry . . .

ABBOTT: Harry Lambert Abbott.

JOHNSON: So you came out here by yourself in 1912.

ABBOTT: Yes, my father was here at that time in Sugar Creek. He worked for the Standard Oil Company. I came here to be with him, which was a short time.

JOHNSON: What was his position with Standard Oil?

ABBOTT: He was operator of the process department at that time.

JOHNSON: Didn't they bring in some immigrants, especially Croatians and Serbs, to operate the equipment over there?

ABBOTT: To do the heavy work, yes, they did. They brought in a lot of immigrants.

JOHNSON: What did you do after you got here? You worked for the Standard Oil, you say, for a short time?

ABBOTT: I went to school. I went to a business school, Spaulding Commercial College; I believe it was at Tenth and Oak at that time.

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JOHNSON: So you went to Spaulding.

ABBOTT: I took shorthand, typing, English. I graduated from that school.

JOHNSON: What year did you graduate?

ABBOTT: That was in 1913.

JOHNSON: Did you know that Harry Truman attended Spaulding?

ABBOTT: I didn't know him at that time, no.

JOHNSON: But he did attend the college back in 1901.

ABBOTT: Yes.

JOHNSON: When did you first meet Harry Truman?

ABBOTT: I first met him when I was working in politics. I was young and ambitious, and I got acquainted with him in the Masonic Lodge.

JOHNSON: Oh, in the Masonic Lodge. Which lodge was that?

ABBOTT: That was my first acquaintance with him, which wasn't too personal at that time. I had numerous talks with him when he ran for County Judge. I polled and practically ran that district in north Fairmount. I talked to him a number of times during that period.

JOHNSON: Now, how about the lodge, just to back up a little

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bit. Which lodge did you and Harry belong to?

ABBOTT: I belonged to 76, which is 75 years ago, and he belonged at that time to Grandview. Grandview at that time was pasture land; now it's taken into the city. His home I think is still there, an historic home.

JOHNSON: Yes. What was your occupation, or your job, at this time? What were you doing for a living after you graduated from Spaulding?

ABBOTT: Well, at that time, jobs were hard to get, especially for a man. They were part time and the teacher that I graduated under, Mrs. Moore, advised me to go to the Government and sign up as yeoman and make a career out of it. I still wasn't too old yet, and when I brought the paper home for my father to sign, that caused a little disturbance. He didn't like that very much.

So, from there, I worked at the Kansas City Southern [Railroad].

JOHNSON: But did you work for the Federal Government, for a while?

ABBOTT: No, I passed the test.

JOHNSON: But you didn't work for them?

ABBOTT: I didn't work for them because my father had to

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sign the papers, and he wouldn't sign them. I was under age.

JOHNSON: So then you took a job at the Kansas City Southern.

ABBOTT: I went down there and I worked there for a while, and then at the Standard Oil for a while. I left there and came back under the same payroll number. Those days they didn't have very good bookkeeping; it was pretty crude. That place started up in 1904 and this is not too much later.

JOHNSON: But your job with them was what; was it bookkeeping or accounting?

ABBOTT: With Standard Oil, no. I started out as a laborer, pipe laborer. If I remember correctly, it was \$1.90 a day, ten hours.

JOHNSON: Ten-hour day.

ABBOTT: I was pretty ambitious and I advanced. I got promoted to the process department and then from the process department I went on up to night superintendent.

JOHNSON: Did you serve in the Army, or serve in the Armed Forces in World War I?

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ABBOTT: No, I was exempted by Standard Oil, because so many of the young men had been in Class A, which I was in too, and they went into the Armed services, but they exempted me. They couldn't afford to clean house and they had to have people that knew what was going on. They thought I was more valuable there.

I worked under the FBI during World War I at the plant and again in World War II.

JOHNSON: You were kind of a look-out for them? You watched. . .

ABBOTT: I was on their rolls. We had a lot of ethnic people there and they didn't even go under their own names. About half of them had a different name. And they were from countries that weren't very friendly to us at that time. My job was to keep a check on them.

JOHNSON: Were there any cases of espionage, or sabotage, anything like that?

ABBOTT: That was very much on the mind of the Government at that time. A lot of these men worked under me and I got pretty well acquainted with them, and I knew which ones might cause trouble and those that wouldn't. I had several sessions with the FBI, but nothing really bad ever turned up.

JOHNSON: So you stayed with Standard Oil then for a long,

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long time, is that true?

ABBOTT: I went there the first time in 1913, and I stayed then and I retired in September 1958.

JOHNSON: From Standard Oil?

ABBOTT: Yes. That's 31 years ago.

JOHNSON: And you're here in Sugar Creek all that time?

ABBOTT: I lived in Fairmount all that time, within about three blocks, for the entire time.

JOHNSON: Is that right?

ABBOTT: Early in life, when I could get things together, I didn't like paying rent and I built my own home.

JOHNSON: Oh, you did?

ABBOTT: I'm still living in that home today. That's 60- some odd years old.

JOHNSON: I'll be.

ABBOTT: I didn't like debt, and never did, my whole life. Well, if you didn't have the money to pay for it, you didn't need it. That was my attitude.

JOHNSON: You didn't borrow much, then.

You say, you first met Truman in 1922 during that

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campaign. Was that the first time you met him?

ABBOTT: Well, I'd seen him in lodge previous to that.

JOHNSON: Yes, sure.

ABBOTT: I got on a talking basis with him during the campaign because he was out checking all the time, and he was worried about the district I lived in because it was about three-to-one Republican. I carried that for him; I carried that big. By the way, I got fired doing it.

JOHNSON: Now, you say you carried it. Did you . . .

ABBOTT: What I mean, I went from place to place and told them why we thought we should have Truman. He was a man of his word; we needed a lot of work done in that district, and he'd do it. And it turned out that I was right.

JOHNSON: And the reason you were doing this was that you had become acquainted with Truman through the Masons. That's how you got acquainted with Truman.

ABBOTT: Yes.

JOHNSON: Well, what were your early impressions then of Truman? When you first got acquainted with him in the Masons, what were your impressions of him? How did he

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impress you at the time?

ABBOTT: He was just a man among men. If you'd talk to him and you began to learn about him, you was for him all the way. He was honest, he was decent, he was loyal and he was for the average man. Someone you could depend on.

JOHNSON: So you helped him then in that 1922 election in Fairmount. Is that a precinct or a ward?

ABBOTT: The precinct was in Fairmount. Well, the building is the same that was there in 1922. I stood out in front and talked with him several times, in regards to the political situation over in that part of the country, what we needed.

JOHNSON: What did you feel you needed at that time?

ABBOTT: Well, we needed drainage bad. See, at that time, north of Kentucky Avenue was what was called the McElroy farm. That was all vacant; there were only two houses there; that was the McElroy mansion, and the caretaker's place. That mansion sat up on the river, up on the bluff. The area began to build up after he was elected; it began to build up over in there and they sold a lot of property, almost like it is today. However, today I understand that is set aside for redevelopment, but they have never done nothing about

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it.

I don't know whether I'm connecting anything in these things up or not, whether they mean anything.

JOHNSON: There aren't many people around; there are few people around, that remember the 1922 election. You're one of the very few that were involved with that.

ABBOTT: Let me tell you this. This is kind of funny. I had ideas of my own. I tried to listen to everybody and then I used my own judgment. I used my own judgment in taking a Democratic car that was paid for downtown by Pendergast and his outfit. They didn't like that, but it was all right with Les Byam; he was the master boy out here at that time. But downtown got a hold of it somehow, and at 3 o'clock in the afternoon they came to me and said, "You can't do this." I said, "Listen, these people are going across the line [party] and voting for Truman; that's my interest in this." Nevertheless, they told Byam, "Pay him off; get rid of him."

So, I went over to the drug store with him, and I received \$7. In that little vault, there were stacks of bills; heaven knows how much money was in there. I said to Les, "Les, what in the name of God are you going to do with all that money?" Well, he was pretty tight-fisted; after it left Pendergast, it never went

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back.

JOHNSON: This is Pendergast money?

ABBOTT: And that learned me a whole lot about politics.

JOHNSON: Money talks.

ABBOTT: I wasn't naive any more.

JOHNSON: Well, now, you mentioned the drug store. Les Byam, did he have a drug store?

ABBOTT: Yes, he owned the drug store there on the corner.

JOHNSON: In Fairmount.

ABBOTT: Les was a pretty good friend of mine, and we talked things over many times after they put him out of politics. We'd laugh about it. He'd laugh about firing me that day.

JOHNSON: How about this car you're talking about? Was this a car that was to be used for campaigning purposes?

ABBOTT: It was a car that was hired to bring in their own people.

JOHNSON: Okay, these were cars . . .

ABBOTT: But they didn't want Republicans riding in a Democrat car.

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OHNSON: Well, sure.

ABBOTT: That was a stain on them. That wasn't the way I looked at it. What I was looking at is to elect Truman.

JOHNSON: So there were Republicans, evidently, who voted for Truman.

ABBOTT: Oh, yes.

JOHNSON: And you were bringing these people, who were Republicans, but wanted to vote for Truman.

ABBOTT: The people that was driving the car, I'd tell them to go pick them up.

JOHNSON: Oh, okay. But you knew that they . . .

ABBOTT: I wasn't driving the cars, I was just overseeing it.

JOHNSON: But you were confident that these people would vote for Truman?

ABBOTT: Oh, yes, very much. I knew them.

JOHNSON: Were these veterans, for instance? Masons and veterans voted heavily for Truman, I guess. How did you know these people were going to vote for Truman?

ABBOTT: I trusted them. They trusted in me.

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JOHNSON: They weren't necessarily veterans of the war, or Masons then. They were just people that you knew.

ABBOTT: No, the Masons didn't have a thing to do with it. That was a personal thing between I and Truman. I never let that interfere with anything. That's personal, and on the side.

JOHNSON: Sure. Do you remember what the vote was there in that Fairmount district?

ABBOTT: I don't recall the vote, but it was practically a landslide.

JOHNSON: Would you say it was three to one?

ABBOTT: I would say it was at least three to one. Where it had been three to one the other way, because they voted straight tickets over there. But this time they jumped.

JOHNSON: But Pendergast didn't reward you. He punished you instead.

ABBOTT: Well, everything that I'd done went from Byam to Pendergast in a roundabout way. As far as Pendergast is, I never spoke to him in my life.

JOHNSON: You never met him?

ABBOTT: Never met him.

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JOHNSON: How about Jim Pendergast, the one over here. Now, Tom was over there, but wasn't Jim Pendergast, his nephew, kind of important over here?

ABBOTT: They finally got next to him and got him out. But in them days politics was awful corrupt.

JOHNSON: Okay, after Les Byam paid you the \$7, did you ever get involved again?

ABBOTT: No.

JOHNSON: That was your last involvement with politics?

ABBOTT: Les took me off to one side and said, "Harry, these people don't operate the way you think they do." He said, "You've got to vote straight tickets to even work for Pendergast." I said, "Les, I've never voted a straight ticket in my life. I've got the right to do as I see fit. When I read and find out all I can about both sides," I said, "I vote for the man." I've done that all my life. And this country would be in better shape if it was general.

JOHNSON: Yes. Do you remember any of your conversations with Truman during that campaign, in that 1922 campaign?

ABBOTT: I can't recall it very clearly, to state a fact on it anymore than that it was politics and I was working

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for him and I went all out to see that he got in. I followed him all the way through his political career. I think he was a wonderful man.

JOHNSON: After he was elected in 1922 as Eastern Judge, did he come back to you and say, "We have a job for you," or did he ever offer you a job?

ABBOTT: No, I had a job at the plant. I was secure down there. In fact, when I was fired out of politics, I was a little bit naive at what was going on. But when I saw what was going on, I didn't want any part of it.

JOHNSON: That money that you saw, how was that being used? You mentioned all that money that was in that vault.

ABBOTT: Well, Les said that Pendergast sent it out and it was up to him to swing that district on the money that was given him. I would hate to say he got it, but it never went back to Kansas City.

JOHNSON: Well, you didn't get too much. Seven dollars even then wasn't a whole lot of money.

ABBOTT: Well, I'll tell you, times was hard them days. They were using my zeal just as gratitude.

JOHNSON: Sure. Did you ever patronize the haberdashery, Jacobson-Truman's haberdashery?

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ABBOTT: I never bought anything there, no.

JOHNSON: Did you ever go down to visit?

ABBOTT: No. I think Harry was furnished his clothes after he went to Washington. Harry wasn't a rich man. Harry didn't have too much.

JOHNSON: But he dressed well.

ABBOTT: That haberdashery kept him in clothes while he was a Senator.

JOHNSON: Well, Jacobson went back into business over there, but of course, Truman had to pay off all these debts, you know, from that bankruptcy.

Were you acquainted with some of his friends, like E.M. Stayton? Were you acquainted with Stayton? You know, Stayton and Veatch are the ones who planned the road building program.

ABBOTT: Well, there was a lot of scandal about that at that time. See, Truman promised roads in Jackson County. When he went in, even in Fairmount, there was a dirt road down the middle of Fairmount. The streetcar ran down the middle, to the park. He promised roads for all that district, and he lived up to it. He's the father of the concrete roads.

JOHNSON: Yes.

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ABBOTT: Previous to that, the best roads we had were asphalt, but the asphalt the oil plants furnished them days was pretty poor. But it kept you out of the mud. I think Truman's philosophy was "Get out of the mud."

JOHNSON: Oh yes. Yes.

ABBOTT: And he done it. Of course, Pendergast profited by the sale of . . .

JOHNSON: He was in the concrete business.

Do you remember Leo Koehler, who was the highway engineer in the early 1920s?

ABBOTT: Yes, I do. But as I said, I got out of politics when I saw what was going on. I accomplished the job I started, and I was satisfied.

JOHNSON: In 1924 when Truman lost to Henry Rummel--were you involved at all in that election of '24?

ABBOTT: That's quite a bit to hold in your head. I got out of politics after that one time, so I didn't follow it very much. I believe in being independent.

JOHNSON: You didn't care whether you were a Rabbit or a Goat or a Republican.

ABBOTT: It didn't make any difference to me. I don't think a man can do justice to his country any time he votes a

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straight ticket. That's my personal view.

JOHNSON: Did you ever meet Truman again then after that? Did you remain a member of the Masons then for a long time after that?

ABBOTT: Yes. I don't know how to start this, but I was at different places when Truman was Grand Master of the State of Missouri.

JOHNSON: After the 1922 election, what occasion did you have to meet Truman? Was it just at Masonic events?

ABBOTT: Yes, occasions like that. Not politically at all.

JOHNSON: Or even personal?

ABBOTT: No.

JOHNSON: You never visited with him at the house up here?

ABBOTT: No, that one period in there was the only time I really talked on an equal basis with him.

JOHNSON: Did you know his brothers-in-law, the Wallaces? Bess' brothers, the Wallaces?

ABBOTT: No, I didn't know the Wallaces. They lived right there by that mansion, back of it.

JOHNSON: Right.

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ABBOTT: I didn't know them, no.

JOHNSON: Apparently one of his brothers-in-law helped him organize that campaign in 1922.

ABBOTT: When you get to be 96 years old your mind is not as active as it was when you're about 40 or 50.

JOHNSON: Well, you certainly are fortunate to be in such good health, being 96. You're 96 years old now?

ABBOTT: Yes. I had a birthday the 12th of March, this year.

JOHNSON: You are to be congratulated. Is your wife still living?

ABBOTT: She's been in the Plaza Manor Nursing Home over there by St. Luke's Hospital for six years.

JOHNSON: How old is she?

ABBOTT: She's 92. She'll be 93 June 4th, and heavens knows, I don't know how she has ever made it. She's got Alzheimer's illness, and it has taken its toll.

JOHNSON: Oh yes, I'm sure. I'm sorry to hear that. Did you ever come out to the Library to visit Truman when he had an office out here?

ABBOTT: I've been up here. I've brought my grandson up,

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and I've brought people up here that was visiting me. They used to stay up here at the old hotel on the square, which is gone now. On the other side of the old hotel was the White Elephant.

JOHNSON: Is that right.

ABBOTT: Have you ever heard anything about that? That was the gossip place of the town of Independence.

JOHNSON: I see.

ABBOTT: I knew when I came in here I didn't have much to tell you, but I kept the appointment.

JOHNSON: Well, by golly, you helped Truman get going. You know in that 1922 primary election, he didn't win it by all that much. He was running against [Emmett] Montgomery. Do you remember Montgomery?

ABBOTT: Yes.

JOHNSON: Let's see, I've got a figure here. In 1922 he beat Montgomery by only 279 votes, so the votes you got for him in Fairmount were very crucial. That was, of course, a Democrat primary in August. In the general election, against a Republican, Arthur Wilson, he didn't have much trouble. But in the primary, in 1922, it was a close race. Do you remember the name Montgomery?

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ABBOTT: Yes, I remember it.

JOHNSON: Did you know Montgomery?

ABBOTT: No, not personally.

JOHNSON: So, if he hadn't won that election, you know, who knows what would have happened.

ABBOTT: Sometimes I wonder myself. Without it being called to my attention, I've forgotten, because I cleaned myself of politics when I saw what was going on. I went in it with a big heart and trying to do the right thing. And when you get into those things and see what's going on, it kind of turns you sour.

JOHNSON: You say you went from house to house; you knocked on doors?

ABBOTT: You bet I did.

JOHNSON: And you talked to the people directly.

ABBOTT: You bet I did. And most of the time there was nobody home in the daytime but the wives. I had them thoroughly convinced.

JOHNSON: Well, women were voting, then, weren't they?

ABBOTT: Yes, they were voting.

JOHNSON: Did you notice if the women were voting pretty

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heavily there in 1922?

ABBOTT: Yes.

JOHNSON: So they made the difference.

ABBOTT: Sure they did.

JOHNSON: The women's vote?

ABBOTT: I don't know how much it benefited Harry, but I made up my mind I was going all out in helping him. That's what I got into it for, and I wanted to do it right and just.

JOHNSON: So most of them were housewives that you talked to.

ABBOTT: Yes.

JOHNSON: I see.

ABBOTT: Now, I didn't get to see the men; mostly I'd see them when I'd pass them or over to the restaurant or different places. But there's nobody any better than a wife to influence the husband to vote. You can learn that early.

JOHNSON: That's right. Sure. Did you have any literature to pass out; did you have any brochures? Did you pass out literature in those days?

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ABBOTT: Oh, yes, there was always brochures. You know, that's the sad part of election, having these people, even the Presidential election, stand out in front of a polling place and hand out things. That insults my intelligence. I don't like that.

JOHNSON: In some places it's not legal.

ABBOTT: I don't like that.

JOHNSON: No, I don't like it either. Do you have anything from those days? Do you have any brochures or any papers, or literature from those days?

ABBOTT: No, I never saved any of those things. I had a lot of pictures and I gave them to my daughter. She's down in Texas.

JOHNSON: What were these pictures of?

ABBOTT: They were of times back in those years, pictures and places . . .

JOHNSON: Around Fairmount?

ABBOTT: Around Fairmount. The man that's got the actual things, he worked for Standard Oil. It's real interesting, but he's incapable of getting out now I think. His name is Emil Onko. He worked at the plant for years and he's got a room where the walls are just

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full of old-time pictures and places.

JOHNSON: Around Fairmount, Sugar Creek?

ABBOTT: Yes, anybody's looking for some of that time, just take a visit.

JOHNSON: The County Historical Society would be interested in that.

ABBOTT: Yes, they would.

JOHNSON: What's his name again?

ABBOTT: Emil Onko. He lives in Blue Springs. His father came over here from Europe and he was marshall of Sugar Creek, and some young lad killed him, with his gun still in his holster.

JOHNSON: Was it kind of wild over there at Sugar Creek, like on Saturday nights, weekends? Did it get a little wild there downtown in Sugar Creek? Were there problems with law and order over there?

ABBOTT: Well, in the early years, you know, it was funny about these ethnic people. There's Bulgarians, Slovaks - all types down there. I used to teach some of them. They were still cleaning, doing the dirty, heavy work; nobody would do it but them. Some of them just got over here from Europe and all they could say is

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"Hello." I taught quite a bit, and in turn they taught me. A lot of times I wish they hadn't, because I had many threats. [Laughs]

In those days, they took care of themselves. I remember two of the principal men who ran Standard Oil at that time was J.H. Moffett and George Swann. Swann was the assistant. These ethnic people would go to the saloon and they'd stay all night and wouldn't come to work the next day. Well, this George Swann was a big, raw-bone man; he was rough and tough. When it got to a certain time he'd just take them by the nap of the neck and throw them out in the street. He'd say, "You go on home, and you better be at work in the morning."

They policed themselves.

JOHNSON: Yes, right.

Do you recall the last time that you met Truman or had a chance to talk to him? Do you remember when that would have been?

ABBOTT: The last time I talked to Truman was during that election, when he was elected.

JOHNSON: In 1922. But now, how about some of these Masonic functions?

ABBOTT: I've been in lodge where he was at. I was the original member of the Shrine Drum Corps here in

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Independence at that time. Look how it's grown.

JOHNSON: We had somebody come in some time back and they had a little trumpet. He was a Boy Scout trumpeter and he was hired to go out, or walk down Main Street in some of these small towns and blow his trumpet, his bugle, and attract attention. Then, some other Scout would walk behind him with a sandwich board, one of these signs, you know, over the shoulder, announcing that Truman was going to speak that evening at the school, or at the hall, or whatever. Did you see any of that kind of campaigning in 1922, where a kid would walk down the street blowing a bugle?

ABBOTT: No. Mostly it was people standing with ballots out in front. I don't remember anything about using a trumpet.

JOHNSON: Yes. The main means of campaigning was to go door-to-door?

ABBOTT: That was the type they used mostly in those days. That was more effective than anything you could do, I found that out. And it paid off.

JOHNSON: Did Truman ever give a talk over there in that Fairmount district? Did he ever give a speech?

ABBOTT: Yes. He talked over there.

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JOHNSON: Where would they meet? Do you remember where they would meet?

ABBOTT: I believe mostly at that time they met in Mount Washington, down there on the old road, on Wilson Road. Do you know where the Wilson Road is?

JOHNSON: Is that the one down at the bottom of the bluff?

ABBOTT: It goes across the Missouri tracks there at Fairmount. That bridge that goes over there wasn't even there.

JOHNSON: I see.

ABBOTT: It's been built since.

JOHNSON: Would these be open air meetings, or would he have a hall there that he . . .

ABBOTT: That was Boss Hall, they called it.

JOHNSON: Boss Hall.

ABBOTT: As I recall. The Masons and Eastern Stars met there for years. And the Post Office was there.

JOHNSON: That's where Truman would give his talks?

ABBOTT: Yes.

JOHNSON: He'd come out to speak. They would meet in Boss

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Hall, they called that?

ABBOTT: Yes. But that wasn't done as much in those days as it's done now. Really, the fire and brimstone guy was [James A.] Reed. He would throw his coat on the floor and take his necktie off and he'd really explode.

JOHNSON: You never talked to Truman then while he was President?

ABBOTT: No. No, I expect he forgot all about me.

JOHNSON: Well, he had a long memory.

ABBOTT: Well, without your getting into their attention every day, you know, why . . .

JOHNSON: He had thousands of people, of course, and he had to try to remember who they were.

ABBOTT: They drift apart.

JOHNSON: Yes. Thanks very much.

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