

Oral History Interview

With

JOHN A. EARP

Sound car operator for Harry S. Truman during the 1940 senatorial campaign.

Independence, Missouri

January 3, 1979

by Benedict K. Zobrist, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library

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Oral History Interview

With

MR. & MRS. JOHN A. EARP

Independence, Missouri

January 3, 1979

by Dr. Benedict K. Zobrist, Harry S. Truman Library

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ZOBRIST: Mr. Earp, I am pleased to have you and Mrs. Earp with us this morning. Why don't you identify yourself and tell me a little bit about that period?

EARP: We are John and Vernia Earp, and at the time of the 1940 senatorial campaign we lived in Jefferson City. At that time I came to the Kansas City office of the Senator to try to contract my sound car for his campaign. I got

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the job over some people who were trying to buy it and it didn't cost me a cent.

But many things happened during the campaign that are very typical of Mr. Truman. He was a very humble man, would take time for anyone, and he often made the remark that he never met a man that he couldn't learn something from.

So, as the time went by, about six weeks during the primary campaign, and another six weeks during the general. After the primary was won, we traveled the entire state, often making as many as eight stops a day.

ZOBRIST: Did you travel alone or did the two of you travel together?

MRS. EARP: On one or two occasions.

EARP: Usually I arrived at towns ahead of the Senator and his driver, so that I could publicize the meeting and get people out.

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ZOBRIST: How did you get your instructions? Were the instructions directly from Mr. Truman or were you working with Mr. Canfil and some of the others?

EARP: I received very little specific instruction. I had the itinerary for the whole campaign. I knew the dates and the times that I was supposed to be at each place, and I'd try to get in there an hour before the Senator did and run around the streets to get a good crowd for the meeting -- let people know he was coming.

On one such occasion, up in Hannibal, Missouri, there was a judge there, whose name I have forgotten, who was supposedly a very loyal friend and booster of the Senator. I got there ahead of Mr. Canfil and Mr. Truman, and went down to see the judge. The judge assured me that everything was arranged. But something led me to question that, although I had no reason

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to doubt his loyalty except it just didn't ring true to me.

I went down to the Police Department to see if it was as represented. And sure enough, they told me they had a warrant to pick me up as soon as I started the sound equipment on the streets. The warrant had been issued by the same judge who had assured me that everything had been arranged. That incident made Mr. Truman just a little bit puzzled shall we say.

We went on through the state, and it was a very grueling experience for both the Senator and myself, and for his driver and other people involved.

We'd start out by sunup every morning and usually wind up about midnight. Often during the course of the day we'd travel three or four hundred miles and usually made about eight stops everyday. He gave more or less the same speech. But he didn't read it off per se; he'd

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put in a little local color, things he knew about a particular area. I have never known a man that knew so much about the politics of Missouri as Mr. Truman did. He knew every little detail.

On one occasion that dates back to the 1934 campaign when my partner was running the sound car, he started through some little southern town in Missouri playing "Marching Through Dixie" on the sound equipment. Here came Harry running out, waving his arms, "Get that _____ thing off." He said, "They'll kill me down here." He knew the history of every little vicinity, the characteristics of the people. And furthermore, they knew him. There was no doubt about anybody knowing Harry Truman. They either liked him or they didn't, there were no lukewarm responses. In the primary we beat Stark and Milligan, much against everybody's predictions.

ZOBRIST: As I understand it, the primary was the real contest, and the final election was just

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not as controversial as the primary.

EARP: Not really. Milligan was stirring up a lot of business in the primary, and of course the Stark people would say anything, and there were no ethics involved.

ZOBRIST: Pretty rough and tumble I take it.

EARP: They'd make their accusations and Harry would ignore them. He never recountered. They'd say he was a Pendergast man, but he didn't say pro or con; he'd let it go. He won strictly on his own merit, not because of what the others did or did not do. He told people what he would do and they believed it.

MRS. EARP: On one occasion I was with Mr. Truman and my husband when he made a speech. He came up to me after he gave the speech and he said, "Mrs. Earp, how did you think the people reacted to my speech? Do you think they were for me or

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against me?" Of course, I told him I did not hear anyone say anything against him, and I thought it was a wonderful speech. Now, I think that takes a big man, to come and ask me -- after all, I wasn't a well-known person -- to ask me what I thought his speech was like. He was a really humble man.

EARP: Responses were always good. He constantly asked the crew traveling with him if there was anything he could do to improve himself, if he was doing anything wrong. We were frank in telling him and he did gain a little polish.

ZOBRIST: Tell me about the word that was suggested that he not use.

EARP: On one occasion, I think it was Fred Canfil that had the nerve to open up and say it. He said, "Yes, for God's sake, Harry, quit using that word assinine."

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We agreed with him that it wasn't a very good word. He didn't use it so much, but it kept creeping out in the future; and that continued even through his Presidency when he would occasionally use it. He had a bad habit at first of emphasizing by slapping his hands together. So, during one of those sessions, when he asked about what he could do, I said, "You could refrain from slapping your hands together in front of the microphone, that makes the speaker cones jump right out and grab the audience." Once was enough on that. He developed pretty good microphone techniques, so much so that when some local politician often blew into the microphone to see if it was hot, Harry told them to just begin speaking in a normal voice.

ZOBRIST: In this period, perhaps you wouldn't call him a polished speaker, but how did he speak? How did he relate to the crowd?

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MRS. EARP: Very well, I thought.

EARP: He had a message; he didn't pull any punches. He delivered it and it was short. He always cited an old Baptist minister he knew that said no soul was ever saved after twenty minutes. So he cut his speeches to twenty minutes; on that I could depend right on the dot. I could set the controls on the sound equipment and go buy a coke or something, come back nineteen minutes later and be there to wind things up.

MRS. EARP: I thought he was a wonderful speaker.

EARP: Well, he was effective. He wasn't what you might call a good orator by any means, but he was effective.

ZOBRIST: I think after the people of the United States got to know Mr. Truman, they compared him unfavorably with Franklin Roosevelt who

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was such a polished speaker, and had such a gift of English. The reason I'm asking these questions is that I don't think that Mr. Truman was a speaker of that type, but on the other hand, as you're stating, the way he put it people listened.

EARP: He used common language that people understood, and he was in sympathy with people, obviously.

ZOBRIST: I think that probably he touched on issues that the people understood as well.

EARP: He knew the local issues as well as the statewide issues, and he didn't ignore them when he spoke at a small town someplace out in the corners of the state.

ZOBRIST: With how large a staff would he usually travel?

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EARP: Regularly, there were only his driver and myself.

ZOBRIST: Who was that, do you recall?

EARP: In the primary his driver was Fred Whittaker. In the general, it was Bruce Lambert.

ZOBRIST: Bruce Lambert?

EARP: Yes, Bruce Lambert of Independence.

ZOBRIST: Well, what role did Mr. Canfil play? Was he there sometimes and not at other times?

EARP: He was running the Kansas City office while the campaign manager was in primary campaign headquarters in Sedalia. When he could he'd come out to the various places; he kind of served as liaison. He made, perhaps, a third of the engagements. But he played it very low key; he didn't want to be too prominent. As a rule people didn't understand Canfil's ways,

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his blustery voice. He felt that he could be embarrassing to Harry in some circumstances, and no doubt he could.

ZOBRIST: Did Mr. Truman's secretary -- whose name escapes me -- play any role in the campaign at all?

EARP: Oh, definitely.

ZOBRIST: Who's the individual I'm thinking of?

EARP: I can't remember his name, but I'll speak in very definite terms if you want it that way.

ZOBRIST: I certainly do.

EARP: This man apparently was dealing with one of my competitors in Jefferson City who wanted this sound job. He was trying to pay this secretary for the job (the reason I know that I'll get to later), but I got it and I didn't pay for it. Some time later, after the campaign,

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this individual in Jefferson City came by to see me and asked what the job cost me. During the general campaign this secretary disappeared. He was out, I don't know why.

ZOBRIST: Well, I know enough of the history of this early period to know there was a falling-out. I don't know the details, but perhaps this was when the fight came on money.

EARP: There were a lot of coattail riders that took advantage of Harry and, being loyal to his friends, sometimes he didn't see it. However, I wouldn't question the loyalty of most of his followers. There were a few cases however, where Harry's loyalty didn't come free.

After he became President, I went down to the Muehlebach when he was here to see him. In those days it wasn't easy to get in to see him. But he found out I was there and he had me ushered right in. There must have been a dozen

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or more people there, of whom I was the least important. At that time he asked me what he could do for me, and I said, "Harry, there isn't anything I want; I just came down here to see what a President looks like."

He said, "Well, John, I want you to know that if there's anything I can do for you, I'll do it." He said, "I mean anything." Never once did I ask him for anything. But I valued his friendship and I felt like he was honestly a good friend.

ZOBRIST: Did you ever know John Snyder?

EARP: The name is familiar but...

ZOBRIST: He was later Secretary of the Treasury, and he was also an Army colonel as well. He and Mr. Truman had been at summer camps together and I thought perhaps that he may have...

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EARP: I can't recall him. I can't recall ever meeting him.

ZOBRIST: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

EARP: Oh, I could go on and on, but those are the highlights.

ZOBRIST: I appreciate your doing this for us. How about you, Mrs. Earp?

MRS. EARP: I haven't anything else to say, except that I'm so glad that he got to be president.

EARP: We certainly liked that man.

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APPENDIX

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THE 1940 SENATORIAL CAMPAIGN

By

John Alex Earp

Sound Equipment Operator

I first knew Mr. Truman when he ran for re-election to the United States Senate in 1940. The nature of the man was apparent to me early in the campaign, and my regard for him grew rapidly as time progressed.

I had never taken an active role in politics at that time, or since, but having sound equipment for hire, I decided that I wanted to campaign for Mr. Truman. With no political influence whatsoever, I contacted the Senator's Kansas City office. I was received rather indifferently by his campaign manager, but I met and liked Mr. Fred Canfil, who also was in the office at that time. I think that it was largely through the influence of Mr. Canfil that I got the job I did not meet Mr. Truman at that time, and did not meet him until I joined him some time later on the road.

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A few weeks later, a competitor in Jefferson City whom I knew had tried to out-bid me openly asked me what that job had cost me. This made it apparent that he had offered someone in the Truman organization a kick back -- most likely the campaign manager. This was the first indication I had that some of Mr. Truman's followers were less than loyal. This man remained in the office through most, if not all, of the primary campaign, but when the time came to start the campaign for the general election he was gone. His going was without explanation, and I didn't ask.

The primary campaign was a grueling experience for all of us. Only four of us were directly involved on the road trips: Mr. Truman, his driver Fred Whittaker, Mr. Canfil, and myself. Mr. Canfil was present at only about half of the road engagements. The daily routine began with breakfast about 6 a.m., followed by as many as eight towns and eight speeches by Mr. Truman each day. The evening engagement was usually in one of the larger towns, followed by a public dinner and "smoke-filled

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rooms" which often kept us going until after midnight. Sometimes there was more travel after that. Daily distances were as much as four hundred miles.

Lloyd Stark, former Governor of Missouri, and Maurice Milligan were the candidates running against Senator Truman in the primary. Both of these men had strong political affiliations and heavy regional support. Since Harry was known to have had the endorsement of the Tom Pendergast Organization in Kansas City when he became a judge in Jackson County and later when he was elected to the United States Senate in 1934, neither of these candidates gave anyone a chance to forget it. Tom Pendergast had been convicted for income tax evasion, and any tie to

his organization was strong ammunition for the opposition. In spite of the continuous "mud slinging" by both of the opposing candidates, at no time did I hear Harry make a derogatory remark about either of them, nor did he make any reference to the Pendergast

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matter. His speeches were brief, concise, and addressed to the issues of the time -- even in the Stark and Milligan strongholds. He wasted no time on denials and accusations. It was rapidly becoming apparent to all that no one "owned" Harry Truman, even though we all feared that the Pendergast Organization support might cost him the election. This period convinced me that Harry was capable of making his own decisions and that he had the courage to act upon them as he considered proper.

In spite of his humility -- or perhaps because of it -- Harry Truman was unquestionably a great man. He was not a skilled orator, of which he was aware, and he made no effort toward sophisticated rhetoric. He used the language of the people, looking them straight in the eye and telling it like it was. There was no doubt that he believed what he said -- and his audiences believed it. If this man, indeed, had anything to hide, he was obviously the greatest con man of his day. He not only made his own decisions, but he accepted

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full responsibility for the outcome -- a quality which was to accompany him through the White House and beyond. The somewhat garish sign, "The Buck Stops Here," which first sat on his desk in Kansas City and went with him during his entire tenure in public office made little impression on me when I first saw it there, but it later became obvious that this was a small token of a philosophy characteristic of the man.

Campaigning in 1940 consisted largely of long hours and routine hard work, accompanied by hot weather and roads that did not compare favorably with those of today. Even the major highways were two narrow lanes, and long stretches of gravel were not uncommon. Cars were not air-conditioned, nor were most of the hotels where we stayed. Nevertheless, there were interesting highlights during the campaign, some of them illustrating that Harry's loyalty to those he considered friends was not always well placed.

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In one instance, at Hannibal, Missouri, a known stronghold of Lloyd Stark, I was traveling ahead of both Harry and Fred Canfil with instructions to contact a prominent judge there to determine the details of the local engagement. Most larger towns have ordinances prohibiting use of sound equipment on the streets, but never before had I considered it necessary to obtain approval. For some reason, however, I was prompted to ask in this instance. The judge assured me that everything had been arranged. Harry believed this judge to be a loyal friend and staunch supporter -- and I certainly had no cause to doubt it. However, something -- perhaps a subtle inflection on the word "arranged" -- caused me to check with the police. When I inquired at headquarters the desk sergeant informed me that he had a warrant to pick me up as soon as I started the sound equipment on the street. He admitted that the warrant had been issued by the same judge that assured me that everything was arranged. Upon receiving this information I decided to drive out

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to the edge of town and wait for the Senator; however, Fred Canfil arrived before Harry. Fred could not believe my story and tried to convince me that there had been some mistake, telling me to go ahead as I had always done before. I refused, however, insisting there was no mistake. I did not see Harry until after the meeting that night when he came up and shook my hand, thanking me for being alert to that one. He said that it saved him a lot of embarrassment and inconvenience. Later that night, after a dinner meeting, Harry was in a rage -- the only time I ever saw him turn purple.

In every city and town across the state there were those politically inclined individuals, coattail riders and favor-seekers as well as loyal supporters. Harry had a unique ability to "separate the wheat from the chaff," but as time proved, he was sometimes wrong. However, the loyalty of his followers in most instances was amazing. The people loved him. His simple and often colorful language made friends for him in

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every gathering, and I could sense the favorable response of the crowds -- so overwhelming that the few would-be hecklers were suppressed.

Often after an evening meeting and sometimes at lunch on the road Harry asked us what we thought of his public response, his speech, and what he was doing wrong -- and he expected our frank comment. On one such occasion Fred Canfil responded, "for God's sake, Harry, stop using that word assinine." Harry admitted that it was not a very good word, but although he used it less often after that, he never completely eliminated it from his vocabulary. During one of these sessions I mentioned that his habit of slapping his hands together to emphasize a point was very hazardous to the loudspeaker cones and that the resulting sound could be irritating to the audience. He never did it again.

Local people who came to the rostrum to introduce the Senator very often blew sharply into the microphone to see if the sound equipment was turned on, forcing me

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to retard the gain control to protect the loudspeakers. I mentioned this to Harry, not believing that he could do anything about it. But he did. After that he always told them that the equipment was on -- to just start talking in a normal voice.

One of Harry's colorful expressions was to refer to people who were undecided as "mug-wumps." He defined a mug-wump as a bird who sits on a fence with his mug on one side and his wump on the other, ready to fly any way the wind blows. Harry Truman certainly was not a mug-wump.

Harry's decisions were always timely, but were not made without consideration of the consequences. In later years as President of the United States when he "fired" General MacArthur -- using his own term -- he knew his action would be controversial, but he knew it had to be done, and he offered no apology. When he activated wage and price controls during the

Korean conflict, he knew that, too, would arouse criticism. All of his actions during his tenure in public office

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illustrate that Harry Truman was not a man to shirk his responsibilities.

During the final days of the primary campaign Harry had doubts that he would win, although he did not disclose those doubts to anyone. He wanted to be re-elected because he felt that his experience was needed during that time when World War II appeared imminent. However, those of us who knew him so well and had observed his campaign had confidence that he would win despite the obstacles.

I think that Harry felt a little more confident, as we all did, when we started the campaign for the general election. Although the issues had shifted more toward the National level, the pattern was much the same as that of the primary. Wendell Willkie was making a strong bid for the Presidency, therefore the re-election of President Roosevelt became the principal issue. I think Harry liked that because he didn't like to talk about himself.

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On the eve of the election, after all returns were in, I sent Harry a congratulatory telegram, as thousands of others did. A few days later I received a reply -- evidently a form letter, but penned across the bottom was "I couldn't have done it without you." I knew that I had done nothing special. Someone else would have been there if I had not, and Harry's sincerity would have won that man's loyalty, just as it had won mine.

A few months later when he became Vice President under Franklin Roosevelt and later succeeded to the Presidency, I think only Harry was surprised. As it is often said that one great man recognizes another, President Roosevelt's decision on Harry could not be unexpected. He knew that he was unlikely to live throughout his last term and that Harry was the only man of that day capable of meeting the challenges of the office during those wartorn years.

When Harry ran for re-election to the Presidency in 1948 few people thought he could win. I doubt that

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Harry thought so himself, but he felt that he was the best man for the task, and as such, his country needed him. His campaign pattern was much the same as that of 1940 -- and the people responded in like manner. Having been through one campaign with him, and having observed this one, I was one of the few who felt that he would win -- even though early vote returns gave Dewey a large majority. My wife, having been with us at a few of the 1940 engagements, felt equally confident that the late rural returns would turn the election in Harry's favor.

As in previous elections, Harry went to bed on election night, not confident that he would win, but knowing that he had done his best and confident that the people would make the proper decision. I remember well his broad grin the next morning as he held a New York paper

announcing that Dewey had won. The computers had been wrong again. Harry must have felt very much like Mark Twain, when he said "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

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I do not believe that Harry wanted to become President of the United States, especially from his own personal point of view. He did want to do all that he could for the people, and if that called for his becoming President, he was willing to do it. I remember on one occasion during the 1940 campaign when he complimented my sound equipment, I remarked that the next time that sound car went on the road the signs would read "Truman for President." He scoffed at the idea as being impossible. Although the sound car never went campaigning again, it wasn't necessary.

I kept in touch with Harry during his Presidency, but did not presume upon his time and asked no favors. I went to see him on one occasion when he was in Kansas City. Being amply protected by Secret Service men, it was not an easy matter for just anyone to see him. However, Fred Canfil was there. He told the President that I was outside, and Harry ordered that I be admitted. After a cordial greeting it was necessary that he divide his attention between a large

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number of people who were in the room. However, a short time later he retired into his bedroom for a hair cut. I was included among four or five of his closest friends whom he asked to join him. At that time he asked what he could do for me. I replied, "Nothing sir, I just came down to see what a President of the United States looks like." He returned, "John, if there is anything I can do for you, just let me know -- I mean anything." I again assured him that there was nothing. I was always interested in what I could do for Harry, but not in what he could do for me.

Beyond the faithful discharge of his responsibilities as a Jackson County Judge, United States Senator and President of the United States, Harry Truman was, above all, a loyal friend to all of us who were fortunate to know him. This loyalty, so characteristic of the man, sometimes led to his embarrassment during his political career. He was not quick to question the loyalty of those whom he considered friends, and he

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was fair to all, even those whom he knew did not wish him well.

I am confident that history will deal kindly with the Presidency of Harry S. Truman, but to me, his greatness as a man and loyalty as a friend far exceed the impact of his political career.

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