

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

MR. & MRS. RANDALL S. JESSEE

American Embassy

Copenhagen, Denmark

May 19, 1964

by Dr. Philip C. Brooks, Director

Harry S. Truman Library

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HARRY S. TRUMAN LIBRARY

Independence, Missouri

April 1966

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DR. PHILIP C. BROOKS: This will be a discussion by Randall Jessee, who has had a long and interesting association with Mr. Truman. I suggested that he elaborate on what he wrote for an article in the Danish Newspaper, *Jyllands, Posten*, on Mr. Truman's eightieth birthday.

Randall, would you be willing just to talk informally with Mrs. Jessee helping you out from time to time?

MR. RANDALL S. JESSEE: Well, the first time I ever met Mr. Truman, was right after he came home in 1948. At that time, I was News Director for WDAF in Kansas City and I'd just covered the arrival. I was present and Fred Canfil was standing outside the doorway to the Muehlebach. He was the United States Marshal, and he was quite a character. He was built like a truck, you know, and some people called him the "bull of the woods". He was a very controversial figure, very much liked by some people and disliked by others, but he was Mr. Truman's friend.

BROOKS: Was he really a pretty capable person?

JESSEE: Oh, I think so. He was a good United States Marshal. He was rough and ready and he didn't hesitate to say what he thought of people, so he made some enemies, naturally.

Well, I was standing there in the doorway when the President came in and--I've often wondered why he (Canfil) singled me out--but Canfil said, "Randall, have you ever met the President?"

I said, "No."

So he said, "Come with me."

Just then, we went into that little elevator in the corner of the Muehlebach Hotel lobby and went on up, and Fred went barging on into the Presidential suite. There the President was, sitting and talking to Tom McGee, Louis McGee's father and long time friend of the President's. So, after Mr. McGee had finished visiting with him, Canfil introduced us, told him who I was and that I was a reporter for the Kansas City *Star* and WDAF. Mr. Truman made some crack about the *Star*, I've forgotten exactly what it was. We passed a few pleasantries and so I told him it was a great pleasure to meet him and we went on our way. Mr. Truman stayed in the suite and of course, people were coming in and out all the time.

At that time I had no way of knowing, of course, that four years later, he would come back to Kansas City and Independence, and over the years we'd get to be pretty good friends and take part in many radio and TV broadcasts together.

Then, the next time that I had anything to do close to him, was when he arrived home that night in Independence in January '53. Of course, you remember, at that time we had just finished a red-hot campaign, and Mr. Truman had come in for a tremendous amount of criticism. You got the feeling, sometimes, that everyone was against him nearly, but I had made up my mind that our newsroom was going to welcome him back, even though no one else was there. It seems silly now that we actually had the idea that maybe there might be a few hundred people out at the Independence station and this was, I thought, a disgrace for the former President of the United States to be welcomed home in such a manner. But, this wasn't true at all, because there were thousands of people there when we arrived□

BROOKS: At Independence?

JESSEE: At Independence, yes. The train pulled in and I think for the first time--I've never heard of Mrs. Truman saying anything before the radio and TV people--she said something about how she was glad to be home, that it was just so good to be back in Independence again. I thought, well, this was a real television first, but NBC didn't use it. It was for the National Broadcasting Company, but they didn't use it.

Anyway, we covered the whole homecoming and as I said, there were thousands of people there. On the way back, I was driving, and Walt Bodine was sitting up in front with me and another newsman--incidentally, we had taken everybody out of the newsroom, which is always a mistake, but, we were all for Mr. Truman. We noticed a glow in the sky as we got a little closer to Kansas City. And sure enough the biggest fire of the year, I think it was one of those big lumber companies, had caught fire while we were out there and burned down. WDAF was the only station in town that didn't have a word about the fire. Anyway, we'd welcomed Mr. Truman home, along with thousands of other people that night.

Later on, I would get assignments from NBC to go up to his office in the Federal Reserve Building. We got pretty well acquainted. He was very kind with reporters and they all really thought a lot of him.

But I am digressing a little bit, because the next day after he came home, Tony Vaccaro, who was the principal one I remember, I think Merriman Smith was along, and some of the other regulars, that have covered him all the time he was in the White House . . . Vaccaro was with the Associated Press; Merriman Smith was with the United Press, and I was the NBC representative and covered the arrival.

Anyway, we had a luncheon at the Muehlebach, I think Vaccaro got everybody together and it was Mr. Truman's farewell to his White House reporters. Someway, I got in on it. Tony probably invited me, because we knew one another pretty well. Anyway, I got in on it and Mr. Truman, in making his remarks, said that--he kidded something about the *Star* again, and said the *Star's* radio station was pretty nice to him, and the TV station, so this made me feel good. And I thought, well, I have a friend here, maybe, and, then later on, NBC would have me cover lots of things for them with him and we got along famously, as he did with most reporters. So, over the years, we grew to be pretty good friends.

Then, along about in 1953 or '54, it must have been, one time I told my wife, "I think that Mr. Truman and Mrs. Truman are lonely. They don't get invited out as much as they should. I think people are just afraid to invite them out. They just think that, "Oh, they wouldn't want to come to our house."

So, she said, "Oh, well, do you think they would want to come to our house?"

I said, "Well, I don't know, but I'm going to ask them and find out." So, I asked Mr. Truman, and he said, "Well, I'll have to check with the Boss, but I think we'd like to."

The next thing I knew, my wife got a nice note from Mrs. Truman accepting and I told him that Thomas Hart Benton, a Missouri painter, would be there. Tom was a neighbor of ours. And Mr. Truman made some remark such as "Well, he's the fellow who made a mistake in painting those murals about Mr. Pendergast down at Jefferson City. I've got a long memory, you know, and I don't know whether we'll get along or not." That's what he said, "I've got a long memory."

So, then Fern got this note from Mrs. Truman, and then the fun started, because Mrs. Benton and Fern were planning this dinner. This is a story all by itself, because Rita, you know, speaks her mind and has opinions on everything. At that time, NBC was sending Dave Garroway, who was a famous TV performer, to cover the American Royal for the "Today" show. This must have been October 1953. Dave and I were pretty good friends, so I invited Dave, and Frank Blair, and Jerry Green, the producer of the show, to come to the dinner. And I believe at that dinner, Louis McGee and Carolyn Schutte were also present.

The planning on this was hilarious, because Rita--Tom's wife--got out the book of etiquette and said, "It says nothing in here about entertaining a President of the United States. Where are you supposed to sit?" They agreed, "Well, obviously, he's the most important person," so he had to sit at the hostess' right. "Then," she said, "who's the next most famous person? Well, nobody has ever heard of this Dave Garroway." Of course, he talked to millions of people every morning, but at that time the Bentons didn't have a TV set. She said, "My Tom is the next most important man to the President of the United States." And, she was right. Anyway, Tom sat on Fern's right. Then came the question of what he would like to eat. So I checked with the restaurant owner -- Max Bretton -- Mr. Truman ate there once in a while as to what he'd like to have. Max said, "Stewed chicken wings." So, we had stewed chicken wings and steak.

MRS. RANDALL S. JESSEE: Because Mrs. Truman loves steak.

JESSEE: And she doesn't like chicken?

MRS. JESSEE: No.

JESSEE: So, anyway, we had stewed chicken wings and steak, which, come to think of it is sort of a strange combination. Anyway, that's what was served and that was the first time, I think, that Tom Benton and Mr. Truman got together. And, actually, I suppose that contributed in a small way to the mural at the Library because they really got to be good friends, I felt, that night around our table, although they had known one another in the past and Tom had visited Mr. Truman in the White House at one time, as I recall.

But, anyway, they sort of picked up their relationship there that evening. We had lots of fun, as you do around both of them.

You know, this didn't happen at this first dinner, but it is sort of funny and maybe someone in years to come would enjoy hearing about it. One time, Mr. and Mrs. Truman were at our house for dinner and they had to leave and go out to Independence for some big affair later on--the Junior Service League Follies that Mrs. Truman had promised to go to--so they had to leave a little early. I think this was just before the Jack Benny concert. [1958] The other guests were

there, I've forgotten who else was there at that time, it doesn't make any difference.

Mrs. Truman asked Fern where the bathroom was before she left. We had a little bathroom right underneath the stairway. On the light, it had a little pull chain over the wash basin. Because it was an old house and it had been put in afterwards, you know. So, Fern goes in ahead of Mrs. Truman to turn on the light, and as she turned on the light, there the President stood. So, Fern was trapped in between the two of them, so she turned off the light. And Mr. Truman made the obvious remark, "I couldn't find the light. I had to go and I couldn't find the light."

MRS. JESSEE: I said, "Oh, excuse me," and started to back out, and Bess said . . . [?] "Weren't you about through anyway?"

JESSEE: Fern came out sort of shaken and she was much more disturbed than either Mr. or Mrs. Truman, I think. A number of things like that happen once in a while.

I remember a good remark that he made to me one time. When I was asked by NBC to interview him, regarding the Republican idea that they would like to call the Democratic party the Democrat party. In those days, Mr. Truman was still down in the Federal Reserve Building and he would drive into his parking lot there a block and a half from the Federal Reserve Building, promptly at about a quarter to eight every morning. A lot of the reporters wouldn't get up that early to come down and see him, or they would be late or something and he was always on time. Anyway, he came wheeling in that morning, driving his Dodge.

He said, "Randall, what are you doing here?"

I said, "Well, NBC would like to find out what you think of the Republican idea about changing the name of the Democratic party to the Democrat party.□

He said, "Well, I think that's all right, under one condition, if they'll make a trade with us and let us call the Republican party the Publican party. You know about those Publicans in the Bible-- they were tax collectors and that sort of thing."

So, I thought this was a pretty good crack..

BROOKS: This always reminds me of when I first met Randall Jessee, when I first went to Kansas City, in March 1957. I went out with Dave Lloyd and Wayne Grover on the plane on March 11. Tom Evans took us up to the Kansas City Club, and Wayne and I stayed at the club for about a week. Well, the next morning Grover took me around to meet Mr. Truman. We went into the front office, in the reception room where Frances Myers sat at the desk. There was some man sitting in a chair, just sitting there, waiting, and we stood there a little while. Mr. Truman was busy. Finally, this gentleman spoke up, introduced himself and said, "I'm Randall Jessee. I work for a television station here."

I didn't realize then how good a friend of mine this person would become. And pretty soon, as was normal -- but I didn't know it was normal -- instead of our being ushered into the august presence of the former President, Mr. Truman came walking out into that outer lobby with a

smile on his face, and shook hands.

Then he said, "Come on, I've got to go get Margaret's wedding presents out of storage."

I walked up the street with him from the Federal Reserve Building around through the Federal Building, 911 Walnut Street, where all the museum things that had been stored--since he got out of the White House--down in the basement, in what had been built as a vault for the bank. This was the first experience I had had of walking with him on the street and having just odd people along the street say, "Hello, Harry," and, "How are you Harry," and just shake hands. It was quite an experience. The first thing we saw when we walked into the storeroom was a great big 14 foot assemblage of pieces of wood from the construction of the White House. The main unit was the beam that had the crack that had let Margaret's piano sag, which in turn, led to the renovation of the White House. I just wondered what in the world we were going to do with all that stuff. I found out in due time.

JESSEE: Including the barber chair. You know, one thing that a lot of people don't realize is how considerate Mr. Truman is.

BROOKS: This has struck me often. He's a very thoughtful person.

JESSEE: Well, he called up one time, when our son came home from Germany, as an American Field Service student.

He said, "I know your parents are awfully glad to have you home. Your parents are the best friends you'll ever have, Randy." And so on and so forth. He took the time one Sunday morning to call up just over another kid, who had come back from Europe after a trip.

I think the greatest joy along these lines was after Mr. and Mrs. Truman had been, as I recall with Mr. Woodward and his wife on their first trip to Europe, as civilians, you might say. I asked NBC to send me all of the film that had been taken by the NBC stringers all the way across Europe, which they did and Sammie Feedback and I edited it, put it in sequence, you know, because we had little clips from all over. We presented it to President Truman on behalf of NBC. So, a few days later, he called us up and invited us to come out in the backyard--and Sammie was there too; he ran the projector--Sammie's wife and our children; and Vivian, the President's brother and his wife were there and so was Miss Mary Jane, and I believe Mrs. Truman's brother, George, next door. So we showed this film and then had some ice cream afterwards and were sitting around the lawn. It was outside of the house in the back, a summer night. Our little girl kept talking about the befeater's hat that he had worn, when he had received the degree at Oxford. It made an impression on her and she called it his king's hat--Mr. Truman's king's hat--and she kept talking about it. She was about three or four years old at the time. So he excused himself after a while and went into the house. Then, in about five minutes, we looked up and here walking across the lawn in the moonlight, was the former President of the United States, completely decked out in all the beautiful red robes of Oxford and the black befeater's hat and he came walking in, as he does, and said, "Well, I think any little girl that's so interested in the robes of Oxford should be able to see the real thing."

BROOKS: Do you remember, Randall, when you first heard about the Library, or the project to build the Library? What was the general impression of people around Kansas City or Independence?

JESSEE: Well, as I recall, the first big argument was that the University of Kansas City tried to get it out there. This was when it was first mentioned--I don't remember the exact occasion but when it was first mentioned, the University of Kansas City took quite substantial steps, as I recall, to get it out there. But Mr. Truman said that he wanted it in Independence.

BROOKS: Did he always say that?

JESSEE: As far as I can remember, he did.

BROOKS: I've often thought that that part of Kansas City, now the University of Missouri at Kansas City, just really isn't part of Mr. Truman's country. He wouldn't be at home there. You know, the University of Missouri wanted it and there was a good deal of talk about that, and, at one time, it was definitely planned that it should be at Grandview. And Ed Pauley offered him a house if he'd put it at the University of California at Los Angeles.

JESSEE: Yes, well, he didn't want that either. It seems to me, now that you've mentioned this, that he's told me he thought it was going to be out at Grandview at one time.

BROOKS: Oh, it definitely was planned to be there.

JESSEE: Yes, he told me that's where it was going to be. And, he thought it was going to be there. Maybe Bob Weatherford talked him into moving it to Independence.

BROOKS: Well, somehow, after all this conversation, Tom Evans told me one time that he was talking to Mr. Truman about it. And Mr. Truman said that he really would like to have it in Independence. A good deal of planning and discussion had gone on for a long time, but Mr. Truman just hadn't wanted to rock the boat by insisting that it be put somewhere else. To me, this is one of the illustrations of the fact that many times, he will not express his opinion vigorously because he doesn't want to offered somebody else's plan. And sometimes, outspoken a person as he is, sometimes it's difficult to find out what he really would like, because he . . .

JESSEE: He doesn't want to hurt anybody's feelings.

BROOKS: May I ask you, when did you first hear about the idea of the mural? You see, when the building was built, it was not designed with that mural in mind. I think it was shortly after the building was dedicated that the plan was worked out that Tom Benton should paint a mural in our building. He has told us since that he had to worry about how to take care of the perspective, and all, the high walls, and the door because the building was not designed with the mural in mind. But one time, in 1959 or 1960, I think, Dorothy and I were at a dinner at the Bentons with Dave Lloyd, Wayne Grover, the Franklyn Murphys, and the Milton Perrys. Dave Lloyd and Wayne Grover each one claimed some credit for the initiation of the mural.

JESSEE: Well, they may have mentioned it to Mr. Truman, which prompted him to make a remark to Tom Benton. But I'm sure that this is what happened. It may have been that first night when they met at the house, because there was a lot of talk about the Jeff City murals and Tom likes to talk anyway, so there was a lot of kidding back and forth about that. And I think that night, Mr. Truman said something like, "You ought to come up to my Library and paint a mural."

So their friendship developed and a couple of years later, someone, I think it was Dave Lloyd and Wayne Grover, decided they'd like to have a mural out there at the Truman Library. Someone, I don't know who it was now, suggested maybe Tom should do it. Mr. Truman said, "Well, we'll talk it over."

I sat with Tom Evans and Mr. Truman and Tom Benton, and I believe Dave Lloyd was there, when they were discussing the mural one day at the Kansas City Club. They'd raised part of the money for the mural.

Tom says, "I know you fellows want to get me on the dotted line and get that mural started and then you want me to contribute some of the money or something myself. I'm a commercial artist."

Well, anyway, it was a good-natured meeting and finally Tom halfway agreed to do it.

Then Mr. Truman said, "Oh, we'll raise the money for it. Don't worry about that, Tom."

So then the mural was really started right there. But it all began in our house there at 3658 Madison in Kansas City, Missouri, when we got the two together.

Later on Tom had my wife pose for the central figure in that mural. We'd driven a long way up to visit the Bentons, up to Martha's Vineyard. That's a long way from Kansas City. She'd been ill and she was feeling a little better. She'd been in the hospital for two weeks before we left.

Tom said, "Fern, you look like a pioneer woman. Get out of there, we're going to the brush."

So he didn't even give her a chance to rest or anything. He took her down and put her on a tree stump out there in the woods behind the house, there at Martha's Vineyard, and did a sketch of her. And that sketch turned out to be the pioneer woman in the mural.

Later on he said, "I think I'll have somebody in the mural that looks like somebody."

So, over to the right, there's a man leading a yoke of oxen and that's me with my big stomach and my pug nose and everything else on there. He put long hair on me. I look like a county judge.

Then the kids even posed for some of the Indians in there, because he used their arms or their legs or their feet, you know. My boys would pose for some of that over in Tom's studio. They lived right around the corner from us. So the Jessees had a little part in the Truman Library

Mural.

BROOKS: You were involved pretty heavily in the plan for the conduct of the dedication of the building weren't you?

JESSEE: Oh, yes, Phil Koury and I were handling the press. I think I had radio and TV press and Phil had the newspaper press, as I recall. There were a lot of people out there. I'll never forget that I was looking for Mr. Basil O'Connor, who was the master of ceremonies. I asked Mike Westwood, "Have you seen Mr. O'Connor anywhere?"

He said, "Oh, he was around here a minute ago."□

So, he goes around shouting, "Basil, Basil, Basil."

I wouldn't have called Mr. O'Connor, Basil, But Mike felt that he could.

We went into the reproduction of the President's White House office which was then unfinished as I recall. It was just a vacant room.

BROOKS: It was finished at the last minute.

JESSEE: Well, they were just sitting around in there. It was completed, but it wasn't decorated or anything. I went in there and here seated all in a row--and I'll never forget--it took a good deal to startle me in those days, but just suddenly bursting in on President Hoover, Mrs. Roosevelt, Sam Rayburn, Chief Justice Warren, all that bunch sitting right there in a row did it. No one else, except all these famous figures. It looked like a wax museum or something, you know.

I said, "Oh, excuse me," and "Hello," and backed out. It was such a strange experience.

BROOKS: That was the time when Mr. O'Connor was at a meeting of the Polio Foundation in Switzerland. He flew overnight home, back to Independence and conducted this dedication ceremony--that was Saturday--and on Sunday he was back in Switzerland.

JESSEE: My goodness. It was a very hot day, I know, and Mr. Hoover--I'll never forget it--I was worried about him, because he was up in years then, close to 80. He very sensibly, just pulled his hat down over his eyes, and I couldn't swear to it, but I think he slept through a little bit of the ceremony, taking it easy.

BROOKS: It was a very long ceremony.

JESSEE: It was a very long ceremony, and Mr. Hoover pulled his hat down over his eyes to keep the sun out, because they were all facing the sun.

BROOKS: Then Mr. Truman called on President Hoover and Mrs. Roosevelt during Mr. Truman's time. He gave part of his time to each of them. Each one of them did a very good job.

JESSEE: You know the only time, in my experience with Mr. Truman, that he ever lost a little bit of his confidence, was after he was ill.

BROOKS: In 1954?

JESSEE: Yes. The first illness, when he was allergic to antibiotics, I believe it was . . . He developed an allergy in addition to the operation and had a pretty rough time. It was just the first time he came out in public, as I recall; it was on Election Day and we were all wondering whether or not he was going to come out to vote or vote an invalid ballot. Well, he came out to vote and he looked bad, lost a lot of weight and he really looked bad. He went in and voted. Then when he came out, he started down the street, and I happened to be the closest one to him and he said, "Randall, I don't feel very good. I feel pretty weak" (or something like that). "Would you walk back to the house with me?"

So I said, "Certainly." I walked back to the house with him. I remember we discussed a book that we'd both just read called, *Joe Shelby, Unsundered Rebel*, by Mr. O'Flaherty. I brought up this book and he said, "Oh, yes, I just finished it."

So I thought that would keep his mind off of his feeling bad and we walked a block and a half or two blocks to the house. He went in the north gate there at the house. He said, "Well, I'll see you later."

That's the only time I've seen him when he didn't just exude confidence. I guess he did feel pretty rocky. In looking back at some pictures that were taken at that time, he did look very bad.

BROOKS: Were you in at the beginning of the series of birthday luncheons that friends in Kansas City organized?

JESSEE: Oh, yes. Mr. Talge, of the Rival Manufacturing Company, would take the lead in these and they grew to be quite fancy affairs. They were always way too long, I thought.

As I recall, the first one I can remember was along in about 1954, 1955, 1956, somewhere along in there. That's the first one I remember. I think I was in on them from the beginning.

BROOKS: The first one I attended was in 1957 at the Muehlebach. [This was the first one that was held. PCB] George Goldman was master of ceremonies and Randall Jessee was reading communications, I guess. You read a telegram from Churchill's secretary, giving greetings to Mr. Truman.

JESSEE: Yes, well, that's right. We got messages from all over the world for that one. I was usually put in charge of this phase of it--and later on, we had a film clip made, you know. I just ran across, in my files the other day, a letter from now President Johnson, then Senator Johnson, who said that he was very happy to have participated in this. Speaker Rayburn was in it, Congressman Dick Bolling, Senator Symington . . . Tom Hennings, I think was ill, and didn't get in on it. We had quite a number of people who gave their greetings on film. That was two or

three years later after the first one.

BROOKS: I remember that at the 1957 luncheon, too, Chief Justice Warren gave his greetings on the telephone. Didn't you tell me something the other night about the time that President Kennedy gave his greetings on the phone?

JESSEE: Mr. Truman's birthday luncheon (1961) was on the same day that the first astronaut led the parade in Washington--Alan Shepard, and President Kennedy took time out to call President Truman up, and I was the one who had to talk. In other words, I was talking from our end on the white telephone and there was a Major Dalton on the other end. One time in Copenhagen he saw a picture on my wall of this event, and he said, "Well, I'm the fellow who was talking Kennedy into it in Washington." □ He was going to send me a picture of his end of that event, but I haven't received it yet.

Well, anyway, that was the time that President Kennedy said, "We're keeping your house in good order." It was right after Caroline had said that something about his house--I've forgotten now, what it was.

I know what a joy his grandchildren must be to him, because he's always liked our children. he wasn't close to them really, but, he was always considerate of them. I know Jana, our little girl, was the first person to get an autographed copy of his *Memoirs*.

BROOKS: He still has those little souvenir coins he gives out to small children when they go out to see him.

JESSEE: Well, he gives them out to pretty big kids, too. I have two or three of them.

MRS. JESSEE: One of the more interesting birthday parties was the first year that he was a grandfather, you know. At this party at the Muehlebach they had baby bibs at each plate and they said, □ "Congratulations Grandpa," on the front of the bib.

JESSEE: Of course, this was right after Margaret's first baby was born. I don't know why it reminds me of this, but the only time actually that I've ever played poker with Mr. Truman, Eddie Jacobson asked me to go out with them. I was over to his store buying a shirt or something. And Eddie said, "What are you doing this evening for dinner?"

And I said, "Nothing."

They were going out to the Oakwood Country Club and he said, "Well, the President's going to pick me up here in a few minutes. Why don't you come out and eat dinner with us?"

I did. Mr. Truman picked us up. Mr. Truman drove and we got out there. and finally, I think it was Mr. Truman or Eddie one, said, "Would you like to play poker with us tonight?"

I said, "Well, I have a 10:30 newscast. If I can get somebody to do it, sure." I happened to be sitting next to Mr. Truman at this dinner. Could I digress a moment? That was the night when

they got to talking about Kfar Truman, and Israel, and someone said, "How many people have been to Kfar Truman?"□

This Oakwood Country Club has Jewish members, and the only two people in the group who had been to Kfar Truman were Louie McGee and Emmett Scanlon, two Irishmen.

I said, "Sure, I'd like to play poker." Mr. Truman always has one drink, usually, one charge of bourbon, but that night for some reason, he had two. So we were having lots of fun.

He said, "Randall, what are you jumping up and down so much for?"

That's when I was making calls, trying to get someone to make my newscast for that evening.

I said, "Well, I'm trying to get someone to take my newscast, so I can play poker with you this evening."

He said, "Oh, don't worry about that. You're doing the right thing, playing poker with me. Whenever you're in doubt, just tell them to go to hell and do what you think's right. That's the way I settle these things. Just go on, go on, you can play poker with me if you want to."

BROOKS: Is he a good poker player?

JESSEE: No, no, I don't think he is, if this one experience is any example, because he stayed in every pot when he should have gotten out of a few. My theory is that the election of 1948 ruined him. He thinks he can draw out on anything after that and so he stays in the pot when he should back off a little bit once in a while. But he didn't play very well that evening, and that's all I can say.

BROOKS: He's famous enough for being a poker player, so that somebody, a biographer or somebody, is going to want to know if he's a good one or not.

JESSEE: Well, I don't think that he is. But they played some wild game called Vinson. It was Justice Vinson who started this, and it's low ball, high ball, I never did understand. He was pretty good at that, because nobody else understood what we were doing. So every time we played Vinson, he would win. I know I never did figure out what it was. It was dealer's choice, you know. So, Mr. Truman, about every time he was dealer, he'd say, "Well, we're going to play Vinson now."

BROOKS: Do you have any explanation for the fact that in the press, it's always seemed to me that the people he likes best are the photographers, the next best are the working reporters, and the ones he likes the least are the editors?

JESSEE: Yes, I think he thinks--and with some justification--I was told--I presume this is just for scholarly use, not for the public, isn't it--well, I was actually told by my boss at WDAF to not cover Mr. Truman, when he came home that night, because at that time, you remember, we were involved in an antitrust action and they blamed Mr. Truman for this antitrust action.

BROOKS: Oh, they did.

JESSEE: Yes. I don't think that Mr. Roberts would ever have said this. But my boss, who was the manager of the radio and TV station says, "We don't want to take any pictures." I violated that, because I felt we should. I went ahead and did it anyway, but I was actually told this, which shows how silly some people can get. Here's a former President of the United States coming home to stay for the first time in many years, about fifteen years, Senator, then Vice President, then President. The only one from Missouri we've ever had and we were not supposed to take any pictures. So I went on out and we took them anyway, and nothing was ever said about it.

MRS. JESSEE: I was thinking about an interesting trip you took with Mr. Truman to Newport, Tennessee.

JESSEE: Yes, my sister lived in Newport, Tennessee, and he was invited down there to a "ramp" festival, "ramps" being horrible things that grow up in the mountains and are used as sort of herbs by some of the mountaineers in east Tennessee. This "ramp" festival is held up near Newport in east Tennessee. He knew I had a sister down in that country, so he said, "Randall, Governor Clements wants me to come down to his 'ramp' festival. Would you like to go down with me?"

I said, "Yes, certainly."

So, we took off and it was a night when the President of Puerto Rico made his speech at the Muehlebach, because I know that we had to wait to leave, until Mr. Munoz-Marin made his speech, so we left the Muehlebach about eleven at night to drive out to Grandview. It was pouring down rain and we got on the plane, and it was rough weather. I wondered if we were going to take off, but anyway . . . It was an Air Force plane, and the Adjutant General of the State of Tennessee was aboard, representing Governor Clements and Mr. Truman, and me, and there was one other--it was another representative of Governor Clements. It took us forever to get down there. The pilot told me afterwards, he'd had to dodge four tornadoes on his way, and he had been almost to New Orleans before he had ever landed at Knoxville.

That night when we went to bed--we had four bunks in the plane, and I was just hanging on for dear life--Mr. Truman went back in the washroom to change into his pajamas and they had donkeys all over them. He came back and showed us the donkeys. About one minute later, he was asleep. I didn't sleep five minutes all night, because I was up in the air and everything else. When we landed it was still just raining cats and dogs, about seven o'clock in the morning. So, in the car driving in to Don McQueen's house for breakfast, I said, "It's too bad you had such a bad day, with all this rain."

Mr. Truman said, "Oh, don't worry about that. When I get up there in those hills and walk on that platform, the sun will be shining."

I said, "I don't see how it can be."

He says, "I'll bet you two dollars it will be."

I said, "Well, that's the safest bet I've made." He took two dollars out of his pocket and I did too, and I guess he held the stakes.

We went on up, and it rained all morning in varying degrees. I think it was about 11 o'clock in the morning, when he was going to speak. I felt sorry for these people because they'd planned on eating a lot of ramps that day. Why they wanted to I don't know. They had stands all around, sort of a carnival atmosphere, up in the Great Smoky Mountains. So I was sitting down in the front row and it finally quit raining, just before the dignitaries walked onto the platform. About five minutes later, the clouds began to break up, and by the time he walked on the platform, sure enough, the sun broke through. There must have been about ten thousand people there. They were all cheering, even though it is a Republican county--it's always gone Republican--they were just--Carroll Reece was there, by the way, too. Mr. Truman hardly paid any attention to them, but he had my two dollars in his side pocket, he brought that out and he saw me down in the front row and he showed me that two dollars. He was right again, you know.

One hectic time was during Margaret's wedding, the preparations for it. Of course, there were many, many press people, and the Trumans wanted just a little private affair. It even got to be a big deal on what type of wedding cake--taking pictures of the wedding cake got to be of major importance. Mr. Truman had invited Fern and me to the reception, but he said, "You're not invited as a reporter. You're invited as a friend."

So I told NBC at noon, or whenever it was, just before the reception started, "Well, I'm going to be finished as a reporter then," because they had pool people to cover the reception. I went across the street, catawampus across from Mr. Truman's house, Lou Choplin's house and changed clothes. Then we went on to Margaret's wedding reception. Margaret Hamilton was there. She was the pool reporter for the newspapers. Fern was all dressed up, so she was jotting the names down of everybody and she stopped Fern and she said, "Now, what is your name, please? Where are you from?"

Fern says, "Well, I'm Randall's wife."

Well, anyway, that was a great reception, and I felt that it was a real privilege to be there with the family at what was pretty much a family affair, as much as a thing like this can be. I know Mrs. Perle Mesta came out, expecting to be invited to the wedding. She wasn't invited to the wedding either. It was just the family, that's all there was to it. And poor old Alfred Eisenstadt, of *Life*, got in trouble with Mrs. Truman a little bit, because she had on her old clothes and she asked the reporters not to take any pictures, when she came out to take some of the things--gifts, flowers and stuff coming over the fence--and they were all respecting this. But Eisenstadt obviously hadn't heard this instruction. He'd been out somewhere else, so he comes dashing up, just as she is reaching over for something, he takes this picture and Mrs. Truman was a little unhappy with Alfred.

BROOKS: We've heard quite a story from Sue Gentry about that, because the Trumans first said

they would not give out any word except through Sue Gentry, and she was to pass it out to everybody else. She had to arrange a press conference that Clifton and Margaret had in the Memorial Building.

JESSEE: Another time, during the Benny concern with Mr. Truman, when he took in about \$50,000 for the Kansas City Philharmonic. Esther Van Wagoner Tufty, a lady correspondent from Washington, that had known the Trumans a little bit and during his Administration, was visiting in our home and the Trumans had been there for dinner that night with Esther, and I said she would like to see the Library. Mr. Truman said, "Well, Sunday morning at ten I'm taking some other people through, why don't you bring her out?"

And, the other people turned out to be Jack Benny and one of his producers from Hollywood. So he took them through the Library, and we all trailed along with them. Dr. and Mrs. Brooks were with us, as I recall. Mr. Truman said, unexpectedly--it was about 11:30--quarter to twelve, "Well, why don't you come over to the house for a few minutes?"

So, we went over to the house.

Mrs. Truman called me out in the kitchen and said, "Randall, do you suppose these people want a drink at 11:30 in the morning?"

She didn't think they should have, but it'd be all right if they wanted one.

I said, "Well, yes, I think they probably would."

She said, "All right, I'll take the orders, and you tend bar."

So that's what we did. She took the orders and I tended bar for Mrs. Truman and she served the drinks, and I think I helped some. Esther Van Wagoner Tufty talked a lot. Esther was there to address the Matrix Dinner. Everything was going on that night, the Junior League follies, the Matrix Dinner, the Benny concert, and people, who could, would attend one, then would go over to the other, and Benny appeared a little bit at the Matrix table along with Mr. Truman, and then they went over to the concert and was highly successful.

The fact that I wanted to bring out was that Mrs. Truman was doing her own work and I was tending bar for her and she was waiting tables and taking orders, and so we just did the whole thing there in short order with no trouble at all. She's always told me that he washes the dishes for her quite often and fixes his own breakfast, I believe. She's told me that.

Anyway, it's remarkable that here the people that have had everything in the world done for them, for seven years, that they come home--I know when she first came home, the first morning that she was home, we were all outside the fence, just staring through the fence, and she came out to get the morning paper, and she said, "Wouldn't you know it, they always throw it under the bushes," and here she'd had the paper brought to her in bed for so long.

In 1955 my wife and I went out to Hawaii. We flew from Kansas City. I didn't know that I had

told Mr. Truman that I was going. Naturally, I didn't know that he paid much attention to it really, but when we walked into the Surfrider Hotel there, suddenly, we had all sorts of red carpet treatment and I couldn't figure out what was going on, until I asked, as I always do, at the desk if there was any mail for me.

"Yes."

And there was one with Mr. Truman's name on it, Harry S. Truman, Federal Reserve Bank Building. I opened it up and there was a copy of a letter from the President, that Rose had sent me, to the Surfrider--a copy of Mr. Truman's letter to Edward K. Hastings, vice president of Matson Hotels.

And it said, "Dear Mr. Hastings: A friend of mine, Randall Jessee, is coming over on the *Lurline* and will stop at the Surfrider Hotel. He's one of the local newsmen of the Kansas City *Star*, and puts on national programs once in a while, some of which I've been on. He's a very fine person and one that you can trust as I've given him off the record information and he has never misused it. Any courtesies that you can extend to him, I will highly appreciate."

Well, here he's doing something--I'm not in a position to do anything for him or anything else--but he took the time to write a letter to Ed Hastings, just because he's a nice guy, and wanted to help out a friend. This sort of thing is always amazing, I think, when you find it in a public figure, the stature of Mr. Truman.

I remember one time, when evidently someone had said something to him about me. Maybe he had been upset by something, but I walked into his office one morning and he was very serious. He handed me a blotter and it was an advertising blotter from some firm.

He said, "Here, Randall, read this."

There was a quotation attributed to Abraham Lincoln on it. And it said, "If I was to try to answer all of the criticism raised against me, I might as well close up for business. I merely try to do the best I can and will keep on doing so until the end. If I am right, so be it. If I am wrong, then angels in hell, saying I was right, would make no difference."

He said, "I've kept one like this in my desk drawer and look at it every once in a while. You do the same; it's good advice."

I kept that for many, many years, and had it up on my wall. here he was advising and giving me advice that he thought was quite good.

Also, I might bring out the item about Frank Bourgholtzer (NBC commentator) that we were talking about, you know, on election eve. Frank Bourgholtzer on election eve, 1948, came in--I was down at the radio station--and he said, "Randall, borrow, beg, or steal all the money you can get and bet it on Harry Truman. He's going to win this election tomorrow.□

I said, "Well, I think you're crazy, Frank. I'm going to vote for him, but I don't think he'll win."

In fact, recalling now, there were a lot of people who said this same thing, "I'm going to vote for him, but I don't think he'll win."

But anyway, Frank says, "Yes, he's going to win. He's won it in the last two weeks. I've been with Tom Dewey and Truman, both, and Truman has won this thing in the last two weeks. I'm even going to vote for him."

I said, "Well, Frank, I thought you were a Republican."

He says, "Well, I was, and maybe still am, when we were through"--I believe Ohio--well, anyway, Frank's home State, he said, "When we were going through my home State, the President called him back to his private car and he says, "Frank, doesn't your mother live in Ohio" (We'll say it was)?

He said, "Well, yes she does."

"Well, would she like to come aboard and meet me? I'd like to meet her."

So, Frank says, "Of course, yes she would."

He said, "Well, wire up ahead and send word to her some way so she can come aboard and we'll have a little visit at our next stop."

Now remember, this was right in the middle of a heated election campaign, one of the most dramatic and critical campaigns in history.

Frank said, "Do you know that man sat there and talked to my mother for about fifteen minutes, while there were thousands of people waiting outside to greet him, he was sitting in there talking to my mother."

Then, afterwards, he says, "Frank, never forget your mother. She's the best friend you'll ever have."

And he says, "Do you think I could vote for anyone but Harry S. Truman?"

And he was the only person, actually, now that a lot of people said, "Oh, yes, I knew that Truman was going to win," after the election; but Frank was the only one that told me before the election that he thought he was going to win.

BROOKS: Bourgholtzer was then with . . . ?

JESSEE: With the National Broadcasting Company. We were an affiliate of NBC, so whenever the guys who were traveling with President Truman on the campaign--well, they'd usually come in and visit with the local boys, of whom I was one, and later on, I did a lot of work for NBC as

their principal "stringer".

At the time of the 1952 convention there was great consternation over the person that Mr. Truman would pick as the candidate. I know that Alben Barkley was very prominently mentioned at that time. We did an interview with Mrs. Barkley and the Vice President.

BROOKS: You were doing this for NBC national coverage?

JESSEE: NBC national coverage, and we did an interview with Mrs. Barkley, who was, by the way, a Kansas Citian, for that part of the country. Her father lives in Kansas City. Yes, her father was in Kansas City at that time.

Anyway, there was great discussion about the person that Mr. Truman would pick. And there was tremendous interest in Tom Gavin that year, who was the President's alternate. There was a great TV coincidence on this, because at the same instant that Tom Gavin was rising on the convention floor to cast his vote, President Truman was getting on the plane in Washington to come to the convention, and they were able to superimpose these two pictures, which just by pure coincidence happened at the same instant.

But in '56, there really was a great deal of interest in the person that Mr. Truman would give the nod to. He held a press conference there in the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago and it was the biggest mess I've ever seen. TV was fairly new and the old big cables were just running all over everywhere, and there was not much pool coverage or anything, and everybody was fighting to get in there, and movie cameras, and it was, I think, undoubtedly, the largest, most crowded press conference that's ever been held. That was, then, when he came out and surprised everyone by coming out for Under Secretary of State Harriman, at that time, Governor Harriman. Of course, he was not successful in pushing Mr. Harriman into the nomination, but he tried because Mr. Harriman was his friend, and he'd been advised by some people not to support Mr. Harriman. Mr. Harriman was a friend of his so he stood by him. It's an indication of his loyalty to a man, too.

In that convention, a very unusual thing happened, which shows again that he remembers his friends and keeps his promises. The "Today" show was an early morning show, which ran from seven to nine o'clock, both in New York and the Midwest, and so this meant it was a three hour show, actually. I'd arranged, and I was working for the "Today" people, I'd arranged for Mr. Truman--well, he had consented to do it, I should say--to do the first live television coverage of his famous walk. So we had parabolic reflectors stretched all the way down Michigan Avenue.

BROOKS: Early in the morning.

JESSEE: Early in the morning. He was to come out of the hotel at seven o'clock, go across Michigan Avenue, turn right, and go down by the park. After he crossed that other little street, whatever street that is that the Blackstone's on; after he'd crossed that street, he was supposed to be picked up by Frank Bourgholtzer with a microphone and Frank and I were to interview him as he took his morning walk, and it was televised live all over the country. Well, the thing worked like a charm. Mr. Truman, as usual, was very prompt. I was at his door at seven o'clock that

morning. We came out, and they started televising us, as we left the Blackstone Hotel with Garroway doing the commentary in New York. We walked from the hotel, across Michigan Avenue, and then to my horror, instead of turning to the right down Michigan Avenue, Mr. Truman just kept on walking up the hill, there's a little bridge at the top of the hill, and he just kept walking up that direction, so I didn't know what to do. Poor old Frank Bourgholtzer was standing across the street and Garroway was getting ready to switch it to him, because Garroway was narrating over our walk. I ran up to Mr. Truman and tapped him on the shoulder from behind and said, "Mr. President, would you mind going across the street, we have a broadcast?"

He said, "Randall asked me to walk through the park."

And I ran around in front of him and said, "No, this is Randall, and I asked you to walk down by the park."

So he says, "Well, I'll go up to the corner, then cross the street, and come back."

I said, "Well, that'll be fine."

But, in the meantime, here's Bourgholtzer standing down there, and they didn't know what was going on. Here they'd (NBC) had made all these preparations, costing thousands of dollars, and they're seeing the President vanishing over the hill.

I see a kid standing there with a brown paper sack in his hand. I'll never forget him. I thought, well, the only way I can communicate with Frank is to send this kid running down there. I reached in my pocket and all I had was a ten dollar bill, so here this kid is, gawking at Mr. Truman, then a stranger comes up and gives him ten dollars and says, "Run down there and tell the fellow standing on the corner with the microphone, that we'll be back in two minutes."

So, this kid took off like a shot and ran down and told Frank, and I think he was greatly relieved. So Garroway padded his show on out and Mr. Truman, just like he said he would, crossed the street and came marching back down, just the way he had come and we picked him up and had a very successful broadcast.

LIST OF SUBJECTS DISCUSSED

Barkley, Alben W.
Barkley, Mrs. Alben
Benny, Jack
Benton, Thomas Hart
Benton, Mrs. Thomas Hart (Rita Benton)
Blair, Frank
Bodine, Walt
Bolling, Richard
Bourgholtzer, Frank

Bretton, Max
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Canfil, Fred
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Eisenstadt, Alfred
Evans, Tom L.

Federal Reserve Building, Kansas City, MO.
Feedback, Sammie

Garroway, David
Gavin, Thomas J. (Tom)
Grandview, MO
Green, Jerry
Grover, Wayne C.

Hamilton, Margaret
Harriman, W. Averell
Harry S. Truman Library
Harry S. Truman Library dedication
Harry S. Truman Library mural
Hastings, Edward K.
Hoover, Herbert

Independence, MO
Independence and the Opening of the West by T. H. Benton

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Jessee, Jana
Jessee, Randall S.
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Johnson, Lyndon B.

Kansas City Club
Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra
Kansas City *Star*
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Kfar Truman
Koury, Phil

Lloyd, David D.

McGee, Louis
McGee, Thomas
Mesta, Perle
Muehlebach Hotel, Kansas City, MO
National Broadcasting Company

Oakwood Country Club, Kansas City, MO
O'Connor, Basil

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Rayburn, Sam
Reece, Carroll
Roosevelt, Mrs. Franklin D.

Scanlon, Emmett
Schutte, Carolyn
Shepard, Alan
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Symington, Stuart

Talge, Henry
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Today Show-TV, appearance on the, 1956
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