

Oral History Interview
with
KEITH WILSON, JR.

Attorney, civic leader, City Counselor, City Manager, and acquaintance of Harry S. Truman.

Independence, Missouri
March 8, 1989
by Niel M. Johnson, Harry S. Truman Library

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Summary Description: Topics discussed include the Wilson lumber business; Harry S. Truman and Claire Booth Luce; Truman's memoirs; Truman home in Independence; election for Eastern Judge in Jackson County in 1922; Harpie Club; Republican party in Jackson County; city politics in Independence, Missouri; law firms in Independence; the Jaycees organization; visit to Oval Office in 1946; use of the atomic bomb; U.S. intervention in Vietnam; postwar population growth in Independence; Kroh brothers construction firm; and the patronage system in Jackson County politics.

Names mentioned include Arthur L. Wilson, Keith Wilson, Sr., Roger Sermon, Spencer Salisbury, Kenneth Bostian, Perry B. Wilson, Arthur Mag, Harry S. Truman, Francis Heller, Claire Booth Luce, Samuel Rosenman, Henry Haskell, George Hare, Tom Pendergast, L. Curtis Tiernan, James E. Latimer, Charles Binaggio, Elmer Ahmann, Art McKim, Ed Carroll, Paul Coker, Robert Weatherford, Roe Bartle, Rufus Burrus, George Armstrong Custer, George Lehr, Alvin Hatten, Henry McKissick, and Mark Eagleton.

Donor: Keith Wilson, Jr.

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JOHNSON: I'm going to start out by asking you when and where you were born, and what your parents' names are.

WILSON: I was born March 3, 1928, at 719 South Park in Independence, Missouri. That was the house of my grandfather, Arthur L. Wilson. I grew up next door at 721 South Park, in the house of my father, Keith Wilson, Sr. My great-grandfather, P.B. Wilson, lived up the street on the west side of Park, and I lived for much of my married life at 701 South Park, in a house built by Billy McCoy, the first Republican mayor of Independence. He was a student with Frank Lloyd Wright under Louis Sullivan, and it's a Wright design at 701 South Park. So, my daughter is the fifth generation of the Wilson family to live on one street, in one block, in

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Independence, Missouri.

JOHNSON: All right, you mentioned your great grandfather, but now your grandfather...

WILSON: Arthur L. Wilson. My grandfather Arthur L. Wilson was in the AEF [American Expeditionary Force] in 1917-1919. He was one of five officers of the rank of captain to return to the city of Independence, the others being Harry Truman, Roger Sermon, Spencer Salisbury, and Kenneth Bostian. Sermon, Truman, Salisbury, and Bostian were all in the 35th Division; Art [Arthur L. Wilson] served in the Forestry Division of the Engineers; he ran a sawmill back from the front, which was preparing duck boards and so forth which they utilized in the trenches. He was in the Forestry Division of the Engineers.

JOHNSON: He was in the lumber business later on?

WILSON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Was that inherited?

WILSON: Oh, yes. Perry B. Wilson, my great-grandfather, and his brother Benjamin Wilson came from Cleveland, Ohio. There is a subdivision of Cleveland called Wilson's Mill; that was the Wilson family lumber mill. Perry

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left after the Civil War -- his father served in the Ohio Volunteers -- and in the '90s he [Perry] and his brother came west. Benjamin went down to the Lake of the Ozarks and most of his farm is where Bagnell Dam flooded the land. Perry went to Manhattan, Kansas, and then went into the lumber business and had lumber yards in Indian territory, and in Kansas and Arkansas. He also had a lumber yard in Independence, which finally was inherited by Arthur, and ultimately by my dad, Keith Wilson, Sr. It closed in the 1970s.

JOHNSON: Bess Truman's grandfather, George Porterfield Gates, was in the lumber business in Illinois and then came out here and apparently provided lumber for the Hannibal Bridge. He then got into the milling business here in Independence. Do you know whether your great-grandfather was acquainted with George Porterfield Gates?

WILSON: Oh, I'm sure, because Perry was quite active in Independence. Wilson Road, which was the main east-west thoroughfare, was named after Perry. When I was a little kid, we had a lumber yard over on Wilson Road, facing what is now the Sheffield Steel works of Armco. He had a lumber yard there; he had a lumber yard at Bunston, Missouri, and one in Independence, which was

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the last one. He had retail lumber yards at railheads throughout Indian territory [in Oklahoma], places like Okmulgee, Ada, Wewoka, Weleetka...

JOHNSON: Oh, you had a chain, a chain of lumberyards.

WILSON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Where was it located here in Independence?

WILSON: It was just a block south of the Square, at the corner of Kansas and Liberty Streets. It was there all of my lifetime. I think it was put in there in the '20s, and Arthur ran it after he returned from France in 1919.

JOHNSON: Well, how far away is that from the old Waggoner-Gates Mill?

WILSON: It's about two blocks.

JOHNSON: You got your education here in Independence?

WILSON: No, my folks got divorced when I was nine years old, and I went to Florida Military Academy in St. Petersburg, Florida. That's where Art always wintered. He liked to play golf and fish; so I went to Florida Military Academy, and then I went to the University of Kansas. My father had attended the University of

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Kansas; I went there as an undergraduate, and then went through its law school. I went to work, out of law school, at the Stinson, Mag law firm in Kansas City. Arthur Mag was Mr. Truman's local attorney. While in law school I became a very close personal friend of Francis Heller, who was employed by *Time* and *Life* to assist President Truman on his memoirs. Interestingly enough -- do you like anecdotal material?

JOHNSON: Sure.

WILSON: Heller told me about the early weeks of Mr. Truman's employment by Time-Life, Inc. to write the memoirs. He mentioned that Mr. Truman always was very sensitive to any slights delivered toward his family, and Mr. Truman never forgot, when he was in the Presidency, that Clare Boothe Luce, Henry Luce's wife, when she was in Congress had referred to Bess Truman as a "dowdy housefrau." So, that while he remained in the White House, Mr. Truman excised Mrs. Luce from any invitations to Congressional receptions at the White House.

Then, after Truman left the White House, and was officing down at the Federal Reserve Bank Building, he cut a deal [for his memoirs]. As I recall, Heller said that Truman's principal lawyer was Judge Rosenman.

JOHNSON: Sam Rosenman, yes.

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WILSON: Rosenman, in New York City, and he had worked with FDR. Arthur Mag was sort of local counsel, but his principal legal adviser was Judge Rosenman. Heller said that after Truman had cut the deal with Time-Life, that Time-Life then employed Heller to be of assistance. He said that Henry Haskell -- whom I believe had the title of Assistant Publisher or Assistant President or something at Time-Life -- that Henry Haskell, whom Heller described as an "effeminate Victor Mature," came to visit Mr. Truman at the offices in the Federal Reserve Bank Building in Kansas City. And, he continues, "this 'effeminate Victor Mature' said to Mr. Truman, 'We're happy to welcome you to the Time and Life family, and you'll be pleased to know that Mrs. Luce will accept your apology for what you did to her'." After the guy left, Truman blew up. He went right through the ceiling and said, "Get Judge Rosenman on the phone; I don't give a goddamn if I signed it, I'm breaking the contract. I will not tolerate that shit." Haskell, hearing of this, retracted his offer to accept the apology of Mr. Truman. But the whole deal almost fell apart on that note.

JOHNSON: Mrs. Luce apparently never apologized for her characterization of Bess.

WILSON: No, she did not. By the way, Heller, who is a

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fascinating guy in himself, was born in Vienna, and he was actually, as a young man, manning a machine gun on one of the bridges into Vienna at the time of the Anschluss of 1938. He then left the country, came to the United States, won a battlefield commission in the U.S. Army in World War II, and then taught at the University of Kansas in the Political Science Department. He is a brilliant guy; I not only was a close friend of his, but my late wife, who was from Dodge City, Kansas, was a friend of Heller's wife, who came from Garden City. Heller's was one of the few units in the Army Reserves that was recalled during the Korean conflict, because he ran such a tremendous unit, spic and span, and they pulled him in. Heller just recently retired over at K.U. and, again, he has had a fascinating career in political science and in constitutional law; he's a lawyer.

JOHNSON: When did Truman first come to your attention?

WILSON: Well, of course, as a kid, I was aware of the Truman family, and I was around Independence in the summertime when Harry came to the "summer White House" [the home on Delaware Street]. Later, as City Manager, I was involved in dialogue with the Park Service on removing the lead paint from the Truman Home on Delaware, and

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what no one realized is that I was the kid that had delivered that lead paint. It was painted while he was in the Presidency, and they used Dutch Boy white lead paint which was handled by the Wilson Lumber Company at Kansas and Liberty. I used to deliver the paint during the summer over there when they were painting the place white.

JOHNSON: This would have been, what, 1947?

WILSON: It would have been '46 or '47, along in there. Dutch Boy white lead, that's what was on it.

JOHNSON: Was it white previously?

WILSON: Oh, yes, brilliant white.

JOHNSON: You don't remember it being any other color than white?

WILSON: It has always been white since I can recall.

JOHNSON: Was your family Republican over the years?

WILSON: The family was always Republican. As a matter of fact, I have a pass that Perry B. had to the Republican Convention that nominated McKinley. Still, until this day I am the only Democrat in the family. As I have frequently said, it was by choice and not by inheritance

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that I'm a Democrat.

JOHNSON: Arthur L., who is your grandfather, when did he die?

WILSON: Art died in 1942. He died at an early age. If Art had been sick today, he would not have died. He was a big, husky guy and he ate everything in sight. He had gallbladder difficulty and it got him; he died of jaundice and complications, which would be a routine thing to remedy today, but it wasn't in the '40s.

JOHNSON: Did you talk to him, before he died, about his political career?

WILSON: Oh, we were very close. I used to go fishing with him in the summertime. Basically, the campaign of 1922, when he was the Republican opponent to Harry Truman, was interesting in that, prior to that time, Mr. Truman had been involved in a variety of failed enterprises. Everybody is familiar with the haberdashery in which he was a partner with Eddie Jacobson. Beyond that, there were other enterprises, and my knowledge of this comes from my acquaintanceship with George Hare, who was the son-in-law of Spencer Salisbury, and Spencer Salisbury was involved in a business association with Mr. Truman in the '20s. Salisbury had a lot of papers and things

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relating to his relationship with Truman. Truman had tried his hand at selling life insurance; he tried his hand at selling memberships to the Missouri Automobile Club. And due to the fact that Battery D was all Irish Catholic Kansas Citians, which was the political base of Tom Pendergast, Tom very brilliantly saw that Harry might be an opportunity for the Goats, which were the Pendergast branch of the Democrats, to pick up the Eastern Judgeship. The eastern part of the county was always allied with the [Joseph] Shannon, or Rabbit faction. So Tom Pendergast felt that he had a few blocs of votes in the eastern part of Kansas City that would have voted in the primary election for Eastern Judge, and that with Truman as a veteran in 1922, which was a mesmerizing political plus, and the Rabbit candidate was a non-veteran, that Truman would get the Goat votes. Truman's Army buddies and the veteran's vote could carry it over the top. So, Pendergast won the Democratic primary by not too many votes, 300 or so, and Truman beat the Rabbit candidate.

The Republicans did not have enough membership in the eastern part of the county to hold a primary election, so the central committee of the Republican Party asked Art Wilson if he would stand as the candidate, the Republican candidate, in the general

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election against the Democrat, who was Harry Truman. It's my assumption that they felt that they had to have a veteran running against a veteran. Art said that he would stand for office, but he said also that he wasn't a politician and he wouldn't campaign; he went fishing, and Truman beat him by 2700 votes in the general election.

JOHNSON: All right, these are figures that Mr. Truman wrote on the back of a note that you have there.

WILSON: Yes, George Hare gave me something that was in the archives of Spencer Salisbury, and it was a letter that Truman had penned to the chaplain of the artillery regiment, the 129th Field Artillery, Father [L. Curtis] Tiernan, asking him to attend the opening of the Memorial Building. Basically, he said he tried to reach him and please call, telegraph, or something, if he could come. I do have somewhere in my archives a pamphlet relating to the opening of the Memorial Building, and Father Tiernan did come and give the invocation; so Truman didn't send that letter. [See Appendix I] It's been my observation, having been involved in politics, that politicians always retain scrap paper, and on the back of that letter, which he never mailed to the

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Father, Truman enumerated the vote count in the general election of 1922 and 1924. It's in Truman's handwriting. [See Appendix II] What was interesting to me, and the reason that I was happy that George Hare gave it to me, is that it shows Truman putting down the vote count when he beat Art Wilson by 2700.

JOHNSON: 2764.

WILSON: 2764 votes in 1922.

JOHNSON: It appears here that Truman got 9,073 and your grandfather got 6,319.

WILSON: I think the Republicans were right, that a veteran did have a chance against a Democratic candidate, although in those days -- I think Mr. Truman himself said this -- that Missouri was sort of like Mississippi, that the Democratic nomination was tantamount to election.

But I think Art made a good showing.

JOHNSON: Did your grandfather and Harry Truman ever socialize, or converse with each other, that you know of?

WILSON: Oh, yes. As I'm sure you know, Truman was a member of the Harpie Club; they used to play poker up on the

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Square and drink a little bourbon whiskey. Art was also very active in the American Legion and the 40 and 8 [Club], and Art Wilson was the second or third commander of the Tirey J. Ford Post of the American Legion. Truman was a Legionnaire and used to socialize; they used to bump into each other. As I say, they were not exceedingly close, especially after Mr. Truman went on to Washington, but my grandfather was very active in the civic affairs of Independence, in the Chamber of Commerce, and as I say the Legion and the 40 & 8, and he was friendly with the Trumans. As I say, the Trumans bought their paint from the Wilson Lumber Company.

JOHNSON: There was another Arthur Wilson, an Arthur W. Wilson, who was in the 129th.

WILSON: No relation.

JOHNSON: We have to keep those two separate.

WILSON: Okay, Arthur L. is my grandfather.

JOHNSON: You don't know of any correspondence between your grandfather and Harry Truman?

WILSON: No.

JOHNSON: Did your grandfather ever visit Truman when Truman was in Washington in the Senate?

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WILSON: No. My grandfather died in 1942, but my father, Keith Wilson, Sr. and "Honey" Latimer were very close, and I can recall a trip when the Trumans were in the White House that my father, my stepmother and Honey Latimer and his wife, and myself, visited Truman in the White House. Matt Connelly also made appointments for us to see Congress and the Senate and the Library of Congress and...

JOHNSON: So you did visit the Oval Office?

WILSON: Oh yes, absolutely.

JOHNSON: Just once, or more than once?

WILSON: Just the one time.

JOHNSON: Do you remember when that was?

WILSON: Oh, gee, I think it was in the spring of '46 or thereabouts.

JOHNSON: "Honey" Latimer, what's his real name?

WILSON: James E. "Honey" Latimer. Mr. Truman always drove Dodges or Chryslers, and there's one in the Truman Library, and that was from the Latimer Motors in Independence; that was Honey Latimer. Honey always made sure that Truman always drove his products.

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JOHNSON: And you're a good friend of Latimer?

WILSON: Oh, yes, my dad was very close to Latimer. As a matter of fact, my dad had, during the war, a sort of a quasi-barter arrangement with Latimer. During the war my father foresaw the scarcity problem in the supply of lumber, and so he went to Oregon and became a one-third owner of a timber mill in Eugene, Oregon. So, during the war period the Wilson Lumber Company always had access to Douglas fir products since we were vertically integrated. Equally, this lumber was in huge demand in the Detroit area, so my dad struck up an arrangement with Mr. Latimer whereby my dad would produce a carload of 2 x 4s for Latimer to ship to Chrysler, and Latimer always saw to it that my dad drove a Dodge or a Chrysler during that same period.

JOHNSON: Back in the '20s, the politics of the '20s, did your grandfather drop out of politics after that 1922 election?

WILSON: He was never really in it. As I said, he was solicited by the Central Republican Committee to stand for office, and he was never a doorbell ringing ward boss type of politician. He was always a Republican; he would contribute money to the party. And my dad was

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always a Republican. They would always kick in, but they never ran for township office or anything. I am the only member of the family that's been actively involved in politics. I ran for prosecuting attorney in Jackson County in 1960, and then later I was the city attorney for Kansas City under Roe Bartle. I've served twice as City Manager of Independence, most recently from 1980 to 1986. I'm the second-longest tenured City Manager that Independence has had since they've had the Charter.

JOHNSON: Do you know anything about Republican politics in this county, let's say in the '30s and '40s? Did they have a county committee that remained active over those years?

WILSON: Oh, yes, they were always active, but they were always vastly in the minority. I think that the time I switched parties was right after Charlie Binaggio got executed on 15th Street, and Roger Sermon had died about the same time and Bob Weatherford was the Democratic candidate for Mayor of Independence. I was still at the University of Kansas but I decided to become politically active back in Independence. I met with the Republican Central Committee, which included Art McKim, George Hare, and Ed Carroll, an attorney. The candidate for

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Mayor of Independence, the Republican candidate, was Elmer Ahmann. So I volunteered my services as a writer and so forth in the city campaign of Elmer Ahmann against Bob Weatherford. I utilized some graphic arts talents which I had. I used a cartoonist from Lawrence, Kansas; his name was Paul Coker and he did the cartoons for a brochure which I was proposing that they could utilize in the Mayoral campaign. Coker founded the humorous line of cards at Hallmark. He's made a lot of money and is still a major artist for Hallmark Cards, and draws most of *Mad* magazine. He also had a syndicated cartoon strip. So I produced great art for the Republican group. Having put this together, and driving back and forth to Lawrence, having busted my buns to assist the election of the Republican mayor in Independence, when I had the Central Committee review what I did, they rejected it. I thought that was a monumental act of stupidity, and I thought at that time, well maybe the Democrats -- some of them -- are crooked, but they're not stupid. So I switched parties. I've been a Democrat ever since.

JOHNSON: And Weatherford...

WILSON: Weatherford did win.

JOHNSON: And how did you feel about Weatherford as Mayor?

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WILSON: I liked Weatherford. I didn't know him at the time; I was trying to help the Elmer Ahmann campaign, but I later got to know Bob Weatherford and I really enjoyed my acquaintanceship with Bob. He became City Manager of Kansas City in Bartle's last term, and I went with Bob to Kansas City and became the City Attorney, what was then the City Counselor, of Kansas City. The job was vacant, and Bob felt comfortable with an Independence lawyer to back him up. So after Bob left, got hired away to work with the Arizona Public Service Company in Arizona, I stayed on for the rest of Roe Bartle's term -- as the City Counselor of Kansas City. Bob Weatherford is the reason I went there in the first place. So I became very close with Bob.

JOHNSON: When did you get your degree from the law school?

WILSON: Oh, I graduated in 1951 from the University of Kansas Law School.

JOHNSON: And then you went with Mag?

WILSON: I then went to work with Stinson, Mag and actually I stayed with them through my military service. During the Korean conflict I was on active duty at the Infantry School at Ft. Benning, Georgia. After I exited service -- it was the summer of '53 or '54 -- I decided not to

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go back to the Mag office. I came to Independence and I did work briefly at the lumber yard. I also started in the formation of one of the first law firms in Independence; it was known as Newhouse & Shaffer & Wilson -- Jack Newhouse, Jim Shaffer, and myself. So I started practicing law in '54 in Independence.

JOHNSON: That was the first law firm with several partners?

WILSON: That's right.

JOHNSON: Otherwise these were all just single?

WILSON: That's right; everybody else had just been a single operation. Everybody was a solo practitioner in the old days: Llewellyn Jones, Russell Gabriel, J. Marcus Kirtley...

JOHNSON: Rufus Burrus.

WILSON: Rufus. Olney had his name on the door, but Olney was in his eighties or nineties. Also, Rufus had his brother Harvey on board briefly until Harvey died. But the first law firm with partners and associates was Newhouse & Shaffer & Wilson. We had the top floor of the First National Bank Building.

JOHNSON: Was this visit to Washington in '46 your first actual meeting with Harry Truman?

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WILSON: Yes, I think it was, because when I was delivering paint over there, he was in Washington, I'm sure. So this was the first time I really met with him. After he returned, after he was out of office, I was very active in the Jaycees in Independence and I remember spending most of an afternoon with him over in his office in the Federal Reserve Bank Building. At that time we were seeking him to make some awards to the Jaycees.

He was always very accommodating as President. He would hand out awards at the Sheriff's Patrol, and the Optimists, and the Rotary, you name it. I did spend some time with him chatting about things a young person would. I do recall that I asked him what was the most enjoyable thing he did as President, what gave him the most amusement or fun, and he very quickly responded that the most pleasure he got as President was reading the secret files in the National Archives. I was a little bit shocked and I said, "Secret, in the National Archives?" And he said, "Oh yes; even some folders dating back to the Civil War are still classified." I said, "You can't be serious. Give me an example." He said one folder that he enjoyed scanning, which at that time was still classified, was a report of a Board of Inquiry in the closing days of the Civil War, a Board of Inquiry relative to then General George Custer in Phil

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Sheridan's campaign, which ended at Appomattox Court House. I said, "A Board of Inquiry?" He said, "Yes." Truman said that George Custer had recruited I think a dozen or more prostitutes and put them in his entourage as they went into Virginia. And on the Federal payroll he had listed the girls as "mule skimmers." He was not court martialed for this aberration, but the Board of Inquiry did cause him to pay the money back.

JOHNSON: I think they usually listed them as "laundresses" in those days.

WILSON: Well, anyway, they were on the Federal payroll and I thought that was very innovative. Anyway Truman got a big kick out of reading about Custer's womanizing.

JOHNSON: That would have occurred about 1954, or '55?

WILSON: Yes, along in there.

JOHNSON: Well, on this visit in '46, what do you recall about that visit?

WILSON: Well, we did see him in the Oval Office very briefly. He was very busy as you can imagine in '46, and most of our Washington stay was arranged by Matt Connelly. I do recall Mr. Connelly making arrangements for us to see literally everything. The "us" is J.E.

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"Honey" Latimer, Honey and his wife, and my father Keith Wilson, Sr., and my stepmother Virginia, and myself. We went to Detroit, picked up a new Chrysler, and drove to Washington. Mr. Connelly arranged for us to see the Senate, Library of Congress. I do recall I had gone to an event -- and I forget what it was -- but the rest of the party, the Latimers and my folks, went somewhere else and I had the use of a black limo. I was taken, I think, over to the museum or something and returned to the White House. I can recall waving at the tourists standing outside the gate, as the gates opened; I was in the back seat of the black limo, and went in and that was a high. I did the crown prince bit, and waved at the girls that were looking through the gates at the White House.

JOHNSON: Well, did you hear him give any of his '48 speeches, his whistlestops?

WILSON: No. In '48, during the election, I was up at the University of Kansas and wasn't back...

JOHNSON: In other words you didn't hear Truman give a speech live until...

WILSON: Well, I did attend the first press conference, when he was President, in the Memorial Building. I did

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attend that, and that was quite a fascinating thing. So I did hear him speak, but I didn't hear any of the Whistlestop campaign of '48.

JOHNSON: Your father, Keith Wilson, Sr., would you consider him to have been a friend of Harry Truman?

WILSON: No, because my father's politics were really -- he would have looked at Ronald Reagan as a "commie pinko." As the old saying goes, I never argued with my father because we got to the point where we just didn't speak. His politics were really rightwing. As I said, I became a Democrat by choice and not by inheritance. The year that I ran for prosecuting attorney in Kansas City, most of my support for the Democratic nomination was in Kansas City. Again, I was trying to emulate Mr. Truman in that I had downtown Kansas City support, but I lived in the eastern part of the County. I hoped to pick up votes that otherwise would not have gone to a Kansas City-backed candidate. So I was courting the Black vote and the liberal vote, and my dad about the same time announced very pleasingly that he had just mailed off a \$500 donation to Governor Barnett of Mississippi who was trying to turn back the clock. I blanched, and I said, "I hope you didn't use your real name; that it was an anonymous gift." But my dad never understood that.

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JOHNSON: Did you ever talk to Harry Truman about campaign technique, the tactics of campaigning?

WILSON: Unfortunately I didn't. My conversations with him, which was mainly as a Jaycee, are related to what he enjoyed at the White House. I didn't really get into strategy, but obviously he was a genius at strategy. I think equally he was very masterful in his retrospective handling of his own affairs and papers and so forth.

JOHNSON: Of course, you were rather young while he was President, but in Independence what seemed to be the reaction, as you recall, to the politics of the Fair Deal?

WILSON: Well, you have to understand Independence. Independence is unique. There are enclaves of people that hate each other in Independence. As City Manager I used to always comment that to really understand Independence you had to look at the Woodlawn Cemetery. The tallest monument in Woodlawn Cemetery is to the Confederate war dead. So Independence is historically a Southern town, and it is a church town. But a lot of people don't understand that even though the RLDS members are given credit for much of Independence because of their high profile, the largest religious

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membership in Independence is the Southern Baptist. The second largest is the Roman Catholic membership, and the RLDS is in a tie for third with the Christian Church. So you have a diverse religious membership in Independence, and you do have some folk that really don't like each other. So really -- Independence is not made up of happy campers.

I know Rufus Burrus frequently comments for attribution that the only good governor we ever had in Independence was Lillard Boggs who published a fiat that Mormons and Indians are to be shot on sight, and that invariably makes Barbara Potts tremble. [Laughs] But again, Independence is just that way. There always have been a lot of range wars going on in Independence, always a lot of fist fights on matters of religion, politics, civil rights; you name it.

JOHNSON: So you met with Truman in his office at the Federal Court House. How often would you say that you got to meet with him?

WILSON: Oh, I probably had two or three meetings with him. The one that I recall, hearing about the National Archives, I must have spent the whole afternoon with him. He was showing me the painting that Dwight Eisenhower had given him, and talked about Churchill.

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He was not a great admirer of General Eisenhower.

JOHNSON: You have mentioned Truman's memoirs, and his contract with Life-Time. In spite of the controversy over Mrs. Luce, the contract must have remained in force.

WILSON: Yes, it stayed in force and Truman produced his memoirs. The thing I think that most people are so appreciative of is that Truman never profited from the office. If he hadn't written the book, he would have been basically broke, because there was no pension at the time. I think he had the franking privilege, and he got a little money for secretarial purposes. But I know from my experience as City Manager that if the City of Independence had not detailed Mike Westwood to Mr. Truman's service, he would have had no security at all. I think the invidious comparison is that now other ex-Presidents, namely Jerry Ford, have net worths that have climbed into the tens of millions of dollars as they serve on boards, and they foster golf tournaments and so forth and so on. But Mr. Truman never made a dime by being ex-President. He wouldn't serve on any Board of Directors. He spoke without honorarium at such places as the Independence Jaycees and the Jackson County Sheriff's Patrol and so forth, and he never would accept

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an honorarium for that work he did.

JOHNSON: You were with the Jaycees?

WILSON: Oh yes.

JOHNSON: And so you helped arrange several speeches.

WILSON: Yes, several speeches to the Jaycees.

JOHNSON: Were these off-the-cuff, or were these written speeches?

WILSON: Always, off-the-cuff.

JOHNSON: In other words, we don't have a record necessarily of those speeches.

WILSON: I'm sure that you don't, because usually when he met especially with young people, it was ad lib, ad hoc. Principally, he liked to answer questions and he would routinely, when a group of kids were going through the Library after the Library was built and open, he would come down and fire away. He was at his finest mettle when he was doing that type of thing.

JOHNSON: Did you meet President Truman after he came to his office here, at the Library?

WILSON: Oh, yes, a number of times.

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JOHNSON: In his office, or out in the museum?

WILSON: Both. He would basically visit with anybody, and he took the time to meet with anybody and would sign any picture, sign any autograph; he was always happy to accommodate. I think, again, it was his dedication to the process, and to history. He was rare in that he was concerned about facts being available; as he said frequently, he enjoyed history "warts and all."

JOHNSON: Did he like to talk history when you were with him?

WILSON: Yes, sometimes, and especially with Heller. I trust you do have Heller's reminiscences because Heller as a foreigner, as an American by choice and not by birth, as a Viennese, who had an attention for history, even though his academic credentials were in political science and as an international lawyer, still Heller was in awe of Mr. Truman's self-taught knowledge of European history. [This knowledge included] the dates of treaties and really what would be trivia today, such as the Treaty of Rastatt. How many people have even heard of Rastatt. I've been there so I do recall Rastatt, but Truman picked up on those things and...

JOHNSON: Well, your view of Truman as a President, did it evolve, did it change from the time he was President

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until the fifties, or sixties?

WILSON: I think it became enhanced, from my meetings with him, and from my studies, especially. I wrote a treatise fairly recently for a veteran's publication on his National Guard service. I think that the major thing he brought to the office was the old soldier's determination that a wrong decision is better than no decision. Really, some of the major questions that today in retrospect are agonized over, you know, whether or not to drop the bomb [date back to his administration]. This came in a conversation I had with him; he looked at the decision as to whether to give marching orders to the Enola Gay and to drop "fat boy," and the atomic bomb, to Harry Truman, it was just a different form of artillery. He was a dedicated artilleryman; he studied it. He got a promotion; he had honorable service in the Argonne campaign, and it was really not a spiritual-intellectual debate that went on with him. We had a better weapon, a bigger

bang, and so there was nothing that he would do other than say "Go for it," because it was another form of artillery, longer-range, and a bigger bang. So that some of the agonizing, philosophical dialogues we have today about whether it should have been dropped, whether it could have been something else, the atomic waste, the fallout,

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Truman made, I think, the right decision. Everybody concurs, but he made it quickly and decisively as an old soldier should.

JOHNSON: In the speeches that you heard him give, in those question-answer periods, did that question come up?

WILSON: Oh, with some frequency. And his answers, at least the ones I heard, said, "Well, it ended the war. We were looking at losing a million dead American boys." As a commander, as having had combat experience, he had to be concerned about loss of life.

JOHNSON: The major issue in the 1960s was, of course, the Vietnam war, the roots of which go back to the Truman period. Did you foresee, in the early 1960s, American intervention in Vietnam?

WILSON: No, I did not, and I, as an amateur military historian, am rather submerged right now in reviewing some of that particular lengthy and complicated situation. It's interesting to me to note that lay persons mostly look at Lyndon Johnson as having got us really embroiled when he landed the Marines, and it was a discovery to me to see that it was really John F. Kennedy who put massive military on the ground in Vietnam, mainly Air Force. But that really is not

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something that was at all in the media at the time it was happening.

So some of the problems that we wrestle with on a daily basis today were really items that may have dropped through the cracks at the end of World War II. I think that Mr. Truman's posture on these things -- you know, he said frequently he didn't seek this office out. With most of his great political victories, he was dragged screaming into the arena. He didn't want to go for the U.S. Senate; he wanted to be County Collector, and he really didn't seek out the Vice-Presidency. So I think that he had a reverence for the offices he held, and as he said himself when he became the President with the death of FDR, "There may be a thousand men that could do this job far better than I, but I have the chore and I'll do my damndest." I always liked the commentary of the tombstone that he read out in Arizona, "Here lies Jack so and so; he did his damndest." I think that was Truman's attitude. Having the chore, he didn't shirk it. I think that there are a lot of things that with 20-20 hindsight we see such as Vietnam, that really weren't high priority things at that time. Specifically, if we had it to do all over again, we would have foreseen that especially in the Pacific basin, much of the world was looking to a rise in

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nationalism, and so the fact that the French came back and sought to reinstitute colonialism, the people of that peninsula [felt they] were trading Japanese masters for French masters.

The thing that is staggering to me now, in reviewing some of the Vietnamese episode, is that one of the things that the French did when they reoccupied Indochina was to rearm the Japanese soldiers that had surrendered and utilize them in combat against the Vietminh. This really doesn't have much to do with Mr. Truman but I think that part of the problems we've had in postwar period are some ante-problems, that when Franklin Roosevelt met with Winston Churchill and they signed the Atlantic Charter, and they had that lofty rhetoric in it -- that nations have the right to choose their own governments, that we have freedom of religion and freedom from fear, and from want, that there should have been a footnote. If Churchill and Roosevelt had not gotten wrapped up in the lofty verbiage, they would have put a footnote on the Atlantic Charter that would have said something like this: "This does not apply to gooks, woggs and niggers."

JOHNSON: Yes, there were exceptions, it does seem like.

WILSON: I think that's Martin Luther King's great thesis in

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the "I have a dream" speech; that some day this country will live up to its stated principles.

JOHNSON: In the Junior Chamber of Commerce, how long did you work with that?

WILSON: Oh, you are active until you're 35, which would have been '63 I guess. Yes, I was born in '28.

JOHNSON: So you were really active until you were 35.

WILSON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Well, do you recall them lobbying for legislation in Washington?

WILSON: No, the Junior Chamber usually stayed clear of lobbying postures. They did, in the '70s, lobby against being forced to take women in, but that is another story. The Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Jaycees, were sort of a booster organization. It was a good excuse to have a beer bust and get away from the wife.

JOHNSON: Do you recall if the Junior Chamber, or the Chamber of Commerce, thought of Truman as a good friend of small business?

WILSON: Oh, yes, always. And again, you see, Independence was a small town up until the end of World War II. The

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population of Independence was about 15,000, all the way to 1945. It was only after World War II, principally in the northeast quadrant of Independence, that the big expansion of population occurred. That mainly occurred by guys that served the war out as carpenters and builders out at the Lake City Ordnance Plant, such as the Barnhart Brothers, and Andes and Roberts. After the

war they used every paragraph in the FHA regulations to build Government subsidized housing. That almost emptied the apartment buildings on Armour Boulevard and in Kansas City, Kansas, and everybody came out and bought a one-family, one-story house with attached garage in eastern Independence.

JOHNSON: So that was the first building boom after the war?

WILSON: Right. In the late '40s and '50s, in Independence, the population just went up geometrically.

JOHNSON: Did you ever hear Truman comment about how the Square had changed, or Independence had changed?

WILSON: Well, not really, because it really didn't change that much. I would say that the Square began to change, oh, in the '60s. The biggest change is when Bundschu's and Macy's closed, and it was the rise of the regional shopping centers. The first one was the Blue Ridge

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Mall, and that took a lot of the retail trade away from Independence. The nail was put in the coffin with the Independence Center. Interestingly enough, the first enclosed mall shopping center in the metroplex was done by developers that also got their start in Independence, the Kroh Brothers. The Kroh Brothers built Golden Acres in the '40s, and that was the first nice subdivision in Independence. The Kroh Brothers built the first enclosed-mall shopping center in the world, and that was Ward Parkway Shops.

JOHNSON: Is that right?

WILSON: Yes.

JOHNSON: When was the last time that you got to see Harry Truman?

WILSON: It was here at the office; it may have been '66.

JOHNSON: When did you become City Manager?

WILSON: I became City Manager in the spring of '67, and then I left in '68 after the election. I became City Manager again in July of '80 and stayed on until '86.

JOHNSON: But your first involvement with Independence politics was in...

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WILSON: Well, I was sort of the Leon Jaworski of Independence; I was employed as a special prosecutor by the City in '66. So I had been involved in Independence politics sort of on the periphery, but I was actually paid by the city as a special prosecutor in '66. Then, I became City Manager, and left in May of '68.

JOHNSON: Before that you had been City Counselor in Kansas City.

WILSON: Yes, I was City Counselor in Kansas City from 1960 to 1963, three years.

JOHNSON: Okay, in '63 to '66 you were...

WILSON: I was practicing law here.

JOHNSON: I see. So in '63 you really become more Independence oriented or centered.

WILSON: Yes. Well, I still had my law office here. City Counselor of Kansas City was a part-time job.

JOHNSON: Did you deal with the County Court in those years?

WILSON: No. Although Alvin Hatten was long a friend of mine and still is; he's still alive.

JOHNSON: When did you go from the three man county court to the...

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WILSON: They went when George Lehr was Presiding Judge. He left being Presiding Judge and became the first County Executive; I think that was like '74, thereabouts. That late.

JOHNSON: And that's when we got the legislature, the county legislature.

WILSON: Yes.

JOHNSON: Do you think Truman deserved the reputation he has as a county Presiding Judge?

WILSON: Oh, without question. The three-judge county court was far more efficient and less expensive than the nine member county legislature, which was 15 members before they reduced it in size.

JOHNSON: But there was a lot of patronage in those days. They appointed all of these road overseers, and a lot of others.

WILSON: Well, there's a lot of patronage now. The merit system doesn't run county-wide, and even in merit systems there is a lot of patronage as to who gets appointed. Equally, the famous Missouri court system is supposed to take the judges out of politics, but it is so political now. For instance, Governor Ashcroft is a

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rightwing "Holy Roller" minister. He is a minister ordained from the same church that Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye Bakker belong to down in Springfield. The result is that the word is out that nobody will become a judge in Missouri if they aren't a) a working card-carrying Republican and b) aren't really of a rightwing fundamentalist religious faith. If you're a

Democrat, don't apply, and if you're a Catholic or a Presbyterian, don't apply. And it's a little bit scary, but that's just widely known amongst attorneys.

JOHNSON: It would be another subject, how county politics has changed, say, since the '30s, from the '30s to the '80s, in Jackson County.

WILSON: Well, I don't know that it's changed; it's been moved around a little bit. You used to have the Italian enclave, the north end, with Charlie Binaggio, Alex Presta. A lot of the Italians have moved south to Foxcroft and Red Bridge. There used to be white politicians, such as Henry McKissick, that delivered the Black vote. Now there are Black bosses that deliver the Black vote. You had the Sermon machine out here; that's been restructured. I don't think the basics have changed much in that you still have power brokers; you still have people that can come together and deliver x

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or y votes at this or that election. The faces have changed.

JOHNSON: And maybe not as highly organized as, say, the Pendergast organization.

WILSON: Yes, it's not as highly organized. Tom Eagleton's brother, Mark, the doctor -- I was with Mark down at the Jackson Day function in Springfield [years ago] He ran out of bourbon and I ran out of scotch and we traded; we were talking. Tom had won the nomination for Attorney General of the State of Missouri, and Mark told me that Henry McKissick had told them that he would deliver the votes in the Democratic primary and he would deliver 8,000 votes, and he wanted \$8,000 to do that. Mark had paid him, and Henry had delivered 8,125 votes in the Democratic primary. Tom won statewide by about 4,000 votes. Mark Eagleton said the man was as good as his word, you know; "I paid him for 8,000 and he gave me 8,125."

Now, that precision does not abound today, but equally within some parameters on this or that issue, if you put out the money, allegedly to get the workers out, or pay for the printing or whatever, whatever you want to call it, you can go out and spend the money and deliver a raft of votes for either candidates or issues.

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JOHNSON: I see what you mean.

Well, thank you very much.

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