

Oral History Interview
with
MAY C. HOWARD

An acquaintance of Harry S. Truman and member of a family active in Truman's first campaign in the Lee's Summit area.

Independence, Missouri
August 19, 1985
by Niel M. Johnson, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
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JOHNSON: I would like to start, Mrs. Howard, by asking you to give us your parents' names, and where and when they were born.

HOWARD: My father was Nathan Corder. He was born in Kansas City. He was a brother of Joseph Corder, who was Recorder of Deeds in the county at the same time that President Truman was in office.

My mother was Rosa Harris, who is from the long-time family of Harrises in Lee's Summit. The Harrises will celebrate their 75th reunion this September.

JOHNSON: I think I was reading about that in the paper the other day.

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HOWARD: It's in memory and honor of my grandfather, great-grandfather and grandmother.

JOHNSON: What were their names?

HOWARD: William and Rosa Harris.

JOHNSON: And you say that they were founders of Lee's Summit?

HOWARD: No, my husband's grandfather.

JOHNSON: Your husband's grandfather was considered the founder of Lee's Summit, and what was his name?

HOWARD: William B. Howard. The Harrises were one of the people that first came to Blue Springs and Harrisonville, Missouri. In fact, there is a link between the name of Harrisonville and the Harris family.

JOHNSON: What year did they come to the county, and where did they come from, do you know?

HOWARD: They came from Virginia, and my grandfather Harris, John Harris, was the first of the family to be born in Jackson County. He was born in Lone Jack. He

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used to have a deer farm east of Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: Do you remember what year they came to the county, the Harrises from Virginia?

HOWARD: No, I don't.

JOHNSON: Do you know if any of your ancestors or relatives had any acquaintance with any Truman ancestors, like Solomon Young or John Anderson Truman?

HOWARD: I don't recall any Howard, but practically everyone in Jackson County is kin to the Harris family, because I think at one time not very long ago they said there were 1,500 descendants and in-laws living in Jackson County.

My husband's father was Robert M. Howard; his mother was Irene Taggart Howard, who died at a very early age.

JOHNSON: Your husband is still living isn't he?

HOWARD: Yes, he's very ill.

JOHNSON: How old is your husband?

HOWARD: Eighty-one.

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JOHNSON: Okay, he was born in 1904. What is your birth date and birthplace?

HOWARD: My birthplace is Lee's Summit and I was born May 21, 1914. My husband's father was president of the Bank of Lee's Summit at the time of his death. He farmed on the William B. Howard farm north of town and my husband grew up on this farm.

JOHNSON: Your husband's father, you say, was a farmer and banker?

HOWARD: A farmer, and he was president of the Bank of Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: At the time of his death. What year was that?

HOWARD: 1936, '37 I believe. Somewhere along there.

JOHNSON: When did you or your husband first get acquainted with Harry Truman?

HOWARD: It's so long ago. Harry Truman was a household word. I really couldn't tell you, because I grew up in a very, very strong Democrat family. I mean, as far as my dad was concerned there wasn't anyone

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but Democrats. And it was the same with my husband.

JOHNSON: About your father, did he ever talk to you about Harry Truman? Do you recall anything that he might have told you about Harry Truman?

HOWARD: He really liked him very much, and he told us different stories, particularly about how he improved the highways in Jackson County.

JOHNSON: Would your uncle, the Recorder of Deeds, have been perhaps better acquainted with Harry Truman than your father?

HOWARD: Than my dad, yes.

But the Howard family had much more of a connection with Mr. Truman than my family did. However, my family lived on a farm, and therefore, they were strong Democrats but did not work as actively. In fact, my husband's father, Robert Howard, was a political boss in Lee's Summit. There were no two ways about it; if you wanted a job working for the county, you went to see him. And many a time, my husband tells me about President Truman coming to their

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farm home asking for support, and they backed him. Only one time he did not support him.

JOHNSON: What time was that?

HOWARD: It was the year he was defeated.

JOHNSON: 1924.

HOWARD: And the reason he did not was over a county road. You know, people used to use political pull, definitely, in getting these county roads repaired, and whether they would take part of their property, the land for the road, off their property, or not. And there was just a little bit of misunderstanding, but then afterwards he was a strong supporter.

JOHNSON: So Harry Truman went to visit your father-in-law?

HOWARD: Yes, often.

JOHNSON: And where did he live then in Lee's Summit?

HOWARD: North of town, on the old William B. Howard farm. The Howard family cemetery is there, and it's right across from the Woods Chapel Golf Course. Right across from Lakewood.

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JOHNSON: Was he involved in factional politics?

HOWARD: He was a Rabbit.

JOHNSON: He was a "Rabbit," and not a "Goat."

HOWARD: Let's see, who was a Goat? Who was the head of the Goats?

JOHNSON: Well, the Pendergast people were.

HOWARD: Oh yes. No, Robert Howard was a Rabbit.

JOHNSON: As far as you could tell, did it make any difference to Harry Truman whether you were a Rabbit or a Goat?

HOWARD: It certainly didn't make any difference when he was running for election and he wanted your support, and they certainly did back him.

There are two political names, two people's names, that I can always remember as the names politically as far as my family was concerned. One of them was Jim [James A.] Reed and Harry Truman, always.

JOHNSON: They were always loyal to those two.

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HOWARD: Yes, very much so.

JOHNSON: Was your father-in-law, Robert Howard, the one that helped arrange that first speech by Harry Truman in 1922 in Lee's Summit?

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: Do you want to tell us what you remember or know about that episode?

HOWARD: My husband would have been 18. And he went with his dad to this meeting, and he said he can remember it very plainly that President Truman was very nervous and very excited, and got up and asked for them to back him in this election.

JOHNSON: So your husband remembers.

HOWARD: Oh yes.

JOHNSON: Was he impressed with certain personality characteristics or traits? Did he think of him as a sincere and honest person right at that point, or...

HOWARD: Yes, he did. Of course, first of all, as I

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say, my family were such strong Democrats. The first thing that impressed him was that they were Democrats, and they were very impressed. I know my husband's father, Robert Howard, was very impressed with Mr. Truman. He always liked him, thought he was a great person.

JOHNSON: You brought a picture postcard of the building in which Harry Truman gave his first political speech. Do you know anything about that building or how that event was arranged?

HOWARD: This was a public building in Lee's Summit where young boys -- my husband went there often -- played basketball. Lots of houses then were not modern, and it was where they had baths, where they could go and take baths, and it was just a recreational place for the young people to go. In the front part of this building later on, they had a library, and that's where we lost most of our books on the history of Lee's Summit. The library burned. But this hall was the place for people to really go and enjoy themselves. At one time it was called the BO

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Hall (Benefit Others); it was a building in the town that was for the young people to go.

JOHNSON: Was the library put in there after '22?

HOWARD: Yes, after '22.

JOHNSON: I see. So it was sort of a public auditorium for Lee's Summit.

HOWARD: Yes, it was.

JOHNSON: Do you know anything about the crowd? Was there a good-sized crowd?

HOWARD: A big crowd.

You know, at that time, most of Lee's Summit were Democrats. There would be 300 Democrats to five Republicans. In fact, the Republicans you could name on one hand, and you knew who they were definitely. It was just a definite Democrat town. And they asked to use this, and I think later on there was a little bit of a discussion over whether they should have used this. It was turned then into a Legion Hall, a post.

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JOHNSON: Later on.

HOWARD: Yes, an Army post, an auxiliary of some kind. And there was a little bit of misunderstanding whether this should have been used for a political event. I suppose the one Republican in town objected to it, and Mr. George Rhodes at the time was in charge of this. He had been in service, and in the *Lee's Summit Journal* they wrote an article saying that he should not. However, I think that the discussion came from out of town. I don't believe it came from Lee's Summit, that he should not have let them use the hall for a political gathering.

JOHNSON: Was there a Lee's Summit newspaper? Would they have covered this event?

HOWARD: Yes, it is covered.

JOHNSON: Do you have the article?

HOWARD: I can get it for you.

JOHNSON: Yes, whatever material you have we'd like to have.

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HOWARD: I can copy it. They let me research the *Lee's Summit Journal* because I do it for historical purposes, and they are very good to let me do it. I'm sure anyone from the Library could do it too, as far as that is concerned, but I'd be glad to.

JOHNSON: Is that paper still being published?

HOWARD: Oh yes.

JOHNSON: Does your library down there have microfilm or...

HOWARD: They don't have anything.

Also in the film "Give 'em Hell, Harry," they state in there that the Ku Klux Klan meeting was in a building in Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: Oh, in a building rather than out in the open?

HOWARD: I understand it's above Hartley's. I've always understood it's above where Hartley's Furniture store is now that they had their meeting and he came to the meeting.

JOHNSON: Is that the meeting that he came to and gave them h---?

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HOWARD: Yes. Over having this meeting.

JOHNSON: And that building's still there?

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: You say it's the Hartley Drug Store now?

HOWARD: It's the Hartley Furniture store, upstairs. The outside of the building has been remodeled but that building is still there.

JOHNSON: How about that building that he spoke in in 1922. You mentioned a fire.

HOWARD: It burned.

JOHNSON: Do you remember when that happened?

HOWARD: I would say 1940.

JOHNSON: Do you have the address on the building, or what's on that site now?

HOWARD: Mr. Arnold, Joe Arnold, gave the new building to the City of Lee's Summit to use for recreational purposes and to be used as a community building, and

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they have never used it for a community building. It has been rented out to the Gas Company to store meters, and such, in it. They get good rent. The rent is used for other purposes. We do not have a community building, and it's too bad. But we do have that building marked.

JOHNSON: Okay, what's its address?

HOWARD: It is between Green and Douglas on Third, on the south side of the street. The Historical Society marked it.

JOHNSON: Did your husband get involved at all with Truman in politics after that?

HOWARD: He worked actively in his campaign for him to be elected each time, and...

JOHNSON: So he canvassed the precincts in Lee's Summit.

HOWARD: Yes. Yes he did. My husband worked for the county and he always went around to see that everyone was properly registered.

JOHNSON: He polled the precincts and wards.

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HOWARD: And worked very actively and always was in the political party.

JOHNSON: We did get your husband's name did we not?

HOWARD: William T. Howard.

JOHNSON: So he remained loyal to Truman all through the years.

HOWARD: You bet so. He can tell me of stories when Mr. Truman would come out and ask Mr. Howard to vote for him and work for him actively in his campaign. And then he ate dinner with them. My husband's father always told him that he would help him, except this one time.

JOHNSON: In 1924, and that...

HOWARD: Was all over a road dispute.

JOHNSON: You don't recall the details of the dispute?

HOWARD: No, he thought that he had not received the help that he should have received from him. And that's the reason. However, the next time he ran

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for an office he was working for him again.

JOHNSON: In 1926, and remained a supporter from then on.

HOWARD: You bet.

JOHNSON: Of course, in January of '27, you know Truman was sworn in as Presiding Judge for a four-year term, and then was reelected. You would have been twelve years old when he ran in 1926.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: And so you would be rather young to remember any of that period, that eight years that he served as county judge, but do you have any recollections, faint or not, of Judge Truman and his reputation in those days?

HOWARD: Of course, politics were discussed all the time in my home, and I can remember it being discussed when Truman was Presiding Judge.

JOHNSON: And he backed the bonds, all the bond issues, as far as you know?

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HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: Not only for the roads but the hospital and court houses and so on?

HOWARD: Everything.

JOHNSON: And then how about the New Deal: When the New Deal came in would you describe your husband and father-in-law as the ones active in politics? Did you say your father was not so active?

HOWARD: He was not too well, and he was a young man when he died.

JOHNSON: So, your father-in-law and husband, you say, talked politics a great deal and were very much interested in politics. Would you call them conservative Democrats, liberal Democrats, middle-of-the-road? How would you describe them?

HOWARD: They were not middle-of-the-road, I'll tell you that. They weren't.

JOHNSON: But how about the New Deal, how did they react to the New Deal? We know how Harry Truman reacted;

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he supported it at least 90-95 percent of the way. How about the Howards, did they go on with Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal?

HOWARD: To a certain extent. When it came to killing livestock and things like that they were not interested in that at all.

JOHNSON: Do you remember that episode when they had to kill little pigs and then plow up cotton to reduce production?

HOWARD: Yes. They were not too happy about that.

JOHNSON: In other words, would they blame it on Henry Wallace, or would they blame it on Roosevelt?

HOWARD: If he was a Democrat they didn't blame it on him.

JOHNSON: Well, did they have little pigs that had to be slaughtered?

HOWARD: No, they never did. I don't know about the Howards, but my family did not.

JOHNSON: And so as far as you know, they supported not

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only Harry Truman in his job as Presiding Judge, but also as Senator then?

HOWARD: Yes, you bet.

JOHNSON: Did they have any correspondence with Truman?

HOWARD: No, I don't think so.

JOHNSON: You have no letters from the Judge period or the Senatorial?

HOWARD: I know, I myself was real, real happy that once in my lifetime I could go to the polls and vote for someone for President of the United States that I knew.

JOHNSON: Not too many people have that privilege.

HOWARD: Yes, knew him personally.

JOHNSON: Do you have a recollection of when you first met Harry Truman?

HOWARD: I really couldn't tell you. I just knew him all my life, and had heard of him all my life.

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JOHNSON: And when he came back, as in '34, when he campaigned for the Senate, and of course again in 1940, did he campaign in Lee's Summit?

HOWARD: Oh yes.

JOHNSON: While he was running for the Senate?

HOWARD: He would call on all of these politicians to back him and get out and help him personally.

JOHNSON: Do you remember the names of some of the other people, politicians down there?

HOWARD: Yes. Steve Land. He was the Rabbit and I knew him well. Mr. Howard and Mr. Steve Land had more or less the political control of the town.

JOHNSON: Any other names that come to mind?

HOWARD: I know of some Goats, R. J. Stuart, who lived south of Lee's Summit and was very active in politics.

JOHNSON: Truman would consult these people when he came to Lee's Summit?

HOWARD: Oh yes, very much so. You had to contact these

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local politicians so they would get out and help you. You know at one time political jobs were really important. If you could get a political job you had a good job and believe me you towed the line, and voted the way you were supposed to. If you didn't, you didn't get the job, and you didn't keep the job either.

JOHNSON: Yes, there was more patronage.

HOWARD: You bet so, than there is now. A political job doesn't amount to anything now.

JOHNSON: Did they have a headquarters building or place in Lee's Summit then where the Democrats had their campaign headquarters?

HOWARD: Not too much, they never have. They just get out and really work hard for their party.

JOHNSON: But they would work through what might be called precinct bosses, or ward bosses, these people that you mentioned?

HOWARD: And they would tell them to get out and vote and get your friends to come and vote and you know what's he's done for us, and...

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JOHNSON: And so they kind of work out of their own homes? Is that the way these politicians did it?

HOWARD: Yes. On Saturday night everyone came to town. On Saturday night, you know, in a small town, there was a lot of politicking going on then. You met your friends and you told them to vote for Harry Truman; he's a good person. He's what we need, he's helped build our roads, we really need him; now get out and work. You get your friends and go to work.

JOHNSON: So Saturday night in town would be an occasion to get the word out.

HOWARD: And then we did have fairs. I can remember when they used to put up a bandstand, and these politicians would get up and talk. And we never had a picnic or a county fair that they all didn't come and get up and make their speeches. Stand at a podium and speak.

JOHNSON: They had bandstands down there then, and they'd stand on them?

HOWARD: You see, we have a Lee's Summit Park in Lee's

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Summit. My husband's grandfather provided the land at the time Lee's Summit was first founded and they always had the Jackson County Fair there. They didn't have the parades through the town like they have now, but believe me, those politicians mingled in the fair all during the fair and talked with the people.

JOHNSON: Were they ever given a chance to speak from the bandstand?

HOWARD: Yes, got up on the bandstand and made their speeches -- and what they stood for and what they didn't stand for.

JOHNSON: Do you remember Harry Truman ever speaking from that bandstand or platform?

HOWARD: I remember that shortly before he was President, he rode in a parade -- short parade -- and he spoke at this fair. In fact, I can remember him riding around in the arena where they showed their horses.

JOHNSON: This is a minor thing, but did he wear a hat

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at all at this time? Do you remember him wearing a hat or was he hatless?

HOWARD: Well, I think he wore a hat. You know in those days people always wore a hat, men and women.

JOHNSON: If you wanted to have any class at all you would wear a hat.

HOWARD: Yes, always by all means, you certainly didn't wear jeans and a T-shirt.

JOHNSON: Any other recollections you have?

HOWARD: Well, after he retired from being President, he came to our county fairs, and rode in the fair.

JOHNSON: The Jackson County Fair?

HOWARD: The Jackson County Fair. You see, the Jackson County Fair up until a few years ago was always held in Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: Are the grounds still there and the bleachers and...

HOWARD: The park is still there, some of the grounds are

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there, but they have ruined our Lee's Summit Park. The park has been named Harris Park, which is named for my grandfather, but it should not be named that because the people of Lee's Summit bought the park. But the grounds are still there; they have messed it up to the point that there isn't space enough for a fair now. It's too bad.

JOHNSON: Are there any other names you can think of, of people in that area who were rather active in helping Truman get the vote out?

HOWARD: Well, of course, we had J. J. Pryor in Lee's Summit. Pryor was in with Pendergast. He was Pendergast's partner.

JOHNSON: Why don't you say a little bit more about him?

HOWARD: Served time in the pen. Don't you remember?

JOHNSON: Did he get involved in the...

HOWARD: Pendergast deal.

JOHNSON: Did he get involved in that kick-back, the insurance schemes, kick-backs, the betting, and that...

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HOWARD: I think so, he had a liquor factory, or income from a...

JOHNSON: Distributorship?

HOWARD: Yes. But they lived there in Lee's Summit, at J. J. Pryor's Dixie Stock Farm, and he was a Goat, but they really controlled politics in Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: This is in the thirties now you're talking about?

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: And yet Harry Truman never seemed to get tarnished by connections with Pendergast.

HOWARD: No.

JOHNSON: Pendergast was a Goat at that time.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: Did anybody ever raise that issue that you can recall of Truman being a friend of Pendergast?

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HOWARD: No one but a Republican. I don't think so particularly. Listen, people in Lee's Summit really liked J. J. Pryor. He did so much good, and she did so much good.

JOHNSON: For the town.

HOWARD: For the town. I remember one time that I had a sister that was in Arizona and I wanted to go see her so bad, and I didn't have the money to go. And someone told Mrs. Pryor about this, and she bought my ticket so I could go see my sister.

JOHNSON: Well, that's what gets loyalty all right.

HOWARD: Right, you bet so, you bet it does. For awhile I had visited in the Pryor home. I knew Mrs. Pryor, and when Pendergast was in trouble, they had these beautiful portraits of Pendergast and when I visited there all these beautiful, beautiful pictures were turned to the wall, still hanging but turned to the wall. Beautiful gold leaf frames.

JOHNSON: And they did that for what reason?

HOWARD: Well, because he was in trouble, and Mr. Pryor had

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gotten in trouble with him and they still would not take them down, but they hung them to the wall.

JOHNSON: They just didn't want to be reminded any more than necessary.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: Now, that's interesting. So J. J. Pryor then was a Lee's Summit...

HOWARD: Politician, I mean one of the biggest of all.

JOHNSON: So you do recall Harry Truman doing some politiking in Lee's Summit before he became President?

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: And was there anything else now before we get into the Presidency that you might recall for the record? Any other impressions or any incidents involving Truman that happened before he became President? Anything we haven't discussed?

HOWARD: The only thing that I have, I can remember his daughter visiting in Lee's Summit, and she was a

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friend of -- he was in business in Independence. His uncle was mayor, and they have a building up here. I cannot think of the name.

JOHNSON: Was that a Sermon?

HOWARD: Sermon, Roger T. Sermon; an aunt of his lived in Lee's Summit. She was Mrs. Lampkin. And Roger T. visited down there often and Margaret Truman visited down there too, and I remember seeing her as a child.

JOHNSON: Was she a friend of Mrs. Lampkin?

HOWARD: She was a friend of Mrs. Lampkin's nephew and she used to come down there.

JOHNSON: Oh, a friend of her nephew, of Roger Sermon.

HOWARD: And I used to be invited to birthday parties and she was there.

JOHNSON: So this was when she was a teenager?

HOWARD: Little bitty, eight years old.

JOHNSON: What was Mrs. Lampkin's first name?

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HOWARD: Izza Lampkin, Mrs. Fred Lampkin, and she is in a nursing home here in Independence someplace. She was a sister to Roger T. Sermon's wife, Mrs. Sermon.

JOHNSON: Okay. Do you recall the day that Harry Truman became President?

HOWARD: You bet I do. I remember the man living across the street from me saying, "Roosevelt has died. Oh, my God, what is the country coming to?" He was a Republican. "That old Truman is President. An old farmer up there in Washington, D.C. running our nation."

JOHNSON: This was an old Republican you say across the street.

HOWARD: You bet so, across the street; he told me this.

JOHNSON: How about the others, friends or neighbors of Truman's, how did they react? Do you recall some of their reactions?

HOWARD: They thought he was very capable of doing it. They grew up with him and had liked him as Senator

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and through all of his political work. And it certainly proved that you don't have to have money, you don't have to be high up, a really reknown person, to become President of the United States.

JOHNSON: How about your husband?

HOWARD: He was tickled to death. Good old Harry.

JOHNSON: What was your husband's occupation?

HOWARD: Farmer; and he worked for the county office.

JOHNSON: What kind of a job for the county?

HOWARD: He worked out at the county home, firing the furnace; it was a labor job. And then he worked on the roads as an inspector.

JOHNSON: Inspector on the roads. So he got to inspect the roads that Truman helped get built.

HOWARD: Yes, a good political job. Good easy political job.

JOHNSON: Apparently they were well built, is that the impression?

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HOWARD: Oh, yes, this book was put out, called *Results of County Planning*, and you know we really had beautiful highways and roads in Jackson County. People who had gone through mud roads and been stuck, and then all of a sudden we get beautiful roads and you know you're going to make a name for yourself.

JOHNSON: So your husband went out while they were building it probably, and inspected the work they were doing.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: Do you remember him ever rejecting any work that was being done or forcing the contractors to redo any work that was being done on the roads?

HOWARD: No, he was to inspect and see about the hours the people put in and if they were doing their work correctly and all that.

JOHNSON: So he was kind of a personnel supervisor?

HOWARD: Yes. His father farmed -- we were not married at this time -- and he wanted my husband to stay home and

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farm and my husband didn't want a job farming. He didn't want to wait six months for a crop to materialize; he wanted a job. So, when he was about 21 his dad said, "All right, if you want a job, go get a job." So, that's what he did.

JOHNSON: But he still lived on the farm.

HOWARD: Lived on the farm.

JOHNSON: And helped take care of it.

HOWARD: He and his father lived there together.

JOHNSON: What was your marriage date?

HOWARD: February 2, 1938.

JOHNSON: Do you have children?

HOWARD: No, we have no children. We raised two but we have none of our own. We raised one that is superintendent of schools in Lee's Summit, and the other one is a Republican, state senator for Atlanta, Georgia. And if George Bush is ever in office this boy will be in Washington, D.C.

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JOHNSON: A friend of George Bush.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: These are foster children?

HOWARD: No, we gave them a home; they needed homes badly, and we gave them homes. The first one was Paul Coverdell. The school asked us if we would like to take a nice boy and do something for him; his father had deserted him. And the next one was a friend of Paul Coverdell and he knocked at our door one day and asked if he could come live with us.

JOHNSON: And what was the name of the second one?

HOWARD: Stanley Magady.

JOHNSON: Do you remember the Truman Committee that was to investigate the defense program?

HOWARD: I'm not too familiar with it.

JOHNSON: That, of course, was one of the things that really got him national attention.

HOWARD: Yes. Yes, that's right.

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JOHNSON: I guess we're up to the Presidential period, or the time he became Vice President. Did your husband have any involvement at all in that convention in 1944?

HOWARD: He did not attend any convention. His work was all done at home.

JOHNSON: Was there quite a bit of surprise around here when Truman was named Vice President?

HOWARD: You bet there was.

JOHNSON: That was more surprising than him becoming President?

HOWARD: It was a little surprise and there was a lot of doubt also, as to whether he was capable of doing it.

JOHNSON: And I guess once they got used to that idea, then they decided he was capable of being President.

HOWARD: You bet so.

JOHNSON: They got used to the idea of him being Vice President?

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HOWARD: I expect it would have been a hard climb for President Truman had he run for the Presidency from the very first and been nominated.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, it's not likely he would have become President had he not been Vice President in '44, when President Roosevelt backed him.

Did I ask you what your husband's reaction was when he became President?

HOWARD: He was happy, really happy. He thought that "Gee, being he's a farmer, all these farmers are going to profit and all these roads are going to be improved."

JOHNSON: All around the country.

HOWARD: All the way around the country.

JOHNSON: After he became President, do you recall him ever giving a speech or being in a parade or train in Lee's Summit, as President of the United States?

HOWARD: No. I can recall him coming back and being in a parade after he retired.

JOHNSON: After he was President. You mean after he left the Presidency?

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HOWARD: Yes. He came back one time.

JOHNSON: How about the Presidential years? Even though he didn't show up in Lee's Summit he did, of course, come back to Independence and Kansas City.

HOWARD: People came to Independence, and I don't think they felt the need of him coming to Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: Did your husband ever have any idea of maybe getting a job in Washington or benefiting from his friendship? I guess you would call him a friend of Harry Truman, wouldn't you?

HOWARD: You bet so. No, he never particularly did. He was a person that wasn't interested, wouldn't have been interested.

JOHNSON: He never would have approached Harry Truman about a job for instance in Washington or anything like that?

HOWARD: No.

JOHNSON: Do you know anybody from your area that did approach the President for a job, or try to capitalize maybe on his friendship or acquaintance with Mr. Truman?

HOWARD: I can't recall right now.

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JOHNSON: There was no one from Lee's Summit that you can recall particularly that went to Washington?

HOWARD: Not that I know of that went to Washington.

JOHNSON: Probably a bunch of them did go to the inauguration, on the train that went from Independence.

HOWARD: Yes. You know, William Randall, Bill Randall [former Congressman] is a cousin of mine. He's a Harris.

JOHNSON: Was that his first political job, as Representative?

HOWARD: No, he was a judge, Eastern judge.

JOHNSON: You and your husband talked to Congressman Randall about Truman every so often, I suppose.

HOWARD: Always, yes.

JOHNSON: Did any of the people you know have any objections to the way President Truman was operating or the decisions he was making?

HOWARD: No, they thought he was a fine President. The greatest of all. Another thing, may I say this;

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Mr. Rufus Burrus, who I know was a good friend, is also a friend of the Harris family.

JOHNSON: Oh, he's one of the clan too.

HOWARD: Yes. He attends the Harris reunion every year.

JOHNSON: So the Harrises and the Trumans have had some linkage here over the years.

Did you know any of the Truman family? Were you acquainted with his mother or his sister?

HOWARD: I knew his sister. I had seen her at a few Eastern Star functions.

JOHNSON: Are you a member of the Eastern Star?

HOWARD: No I'm not, but I attended -- was invited as a visitor to a meeting.

JOHNSON: Were you a friend of Vivian, his brother?

HOWARD: No. My husband was, but I was not. Vivian Truman was not as popular a person as President Truman, from what I get from my husband.

JOHNSON: You say you don't remember the first time you met

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Harry Truman, but can you remember one of the times when you did, maybe shake his hand or say hello to him?

HOWARD: I can remember one time after he was President, and he was standing, waiting to be in line at the Lee's Summit fair and I shook hands with him. I told him that Joseph Corder was my uncle, and he said to me, "A finer person never lived than Joseph Corder."

This was after he retired from the Presidency.

JOHNSON: Were there any other occasions that you can recall in which you met or spoke to the President?

HOWARD: I attended many parades and things in Independence. My husband and I always came to parades. I attended a dinner one time and it was a political dinner. I think it was in the RLDS Auditorium one time and he was there. And I attended many a thing in Independence.

JOHNSON: And you were well enough acquainted that he would recognize you when you were there, do you think?

HOWARD: Maybe not; he would recognize my husband.

JOHNSON: Well, he probably felt a little in debt to your husband because you say your husband's father helped arrange that first speech, that political speech.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: And who else might have been involved in that?

HOWARD: Mr. George Rhodes, in Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: George Rhodes.

HOWARD: They have their insurance company there. It was the Legion Post Building at the time, and he was the one that made the arrangements.

JOHNSON: It was the Legion Post Building at the time that Truman gave the talk there?

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: I see. And before that it had been just a general community building for Lee's Summit. How many people lived in Lee's Summit, say in 1922? How big a population did you have?

HOWARD: Five hundred. Maybe more.

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JOHNSON: What is it now?

HOWARD: Thirty-five thousand. You know, John Knox has really made our town grow. So many of the people out at John Knox are Republicans, too; it's a Republican...

JOHNSON: Enclave. You mean they are still mainly Democrats in Lee's Summit, do you think?

HOWARD: Oh, yes, a lot of old-timers there. But they'd better get busy, they don't work very hard.

JOHNSON: It isn't like the old days.

HOWARD: Oh, no.

JOHNSON: Your western boundaries, do they go up to Cave Spring?

HOWARD: Almost.

JOHNSON: Almost to Cave Spring. You know one question that we have been asked, and I guess we haven't been able to answer it is: did Harry Truman ever picnic out on Cave Spring grounds? Would you have anything about that?

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HOWARD: I wouldn't know.

JOHNSON: Well, reputedly it was a stopping or watering place on the trails, the Oregon and Santa Fe trails.

HOWARD: We had the Jefferson trail through Lee's Summit.

JOHNSON: Jefferson trail?

HOWARD: It was from New Orleans to Canada, and the symbol for it was "Palms to Pines," or "Pines to Palms."

JOHNSON: Oh, a north-south trail, from New Orleans. What year, or what decade, or what period of history are we talking about?

HOWARD: Oh, way back before the Civil War.

JOHNSON: In other words, during the years of the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails?

HOWARD: Yes.

There is a little schoolhouse over here at the jail, you know, the little schoolhouse.

JOHNSON: Yes.

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HOWARD: This is the little Howard schoolhouse. My husband gave it to the Jackson County Historical Society and they restored it.

JOHNSON: And that's the full size? I mean they didn't cut it down?

HOWARD: Full size. No, that's the size and there were four or five Howard children that were educated in that schoolhouse.

JOHNSON: There's only room for about 10 students isn't there in that school building?

HOWARD: You see, it was private. It was private, and the teacher lived in the Howard home and taught the children outside in this schoolhouse.

JOHNSON: I went to a country school; it was a little larger than that.

HOWARD: Yes, I went to a country school, too.

JOHNSON: Which one was that?

HOWARD: Wright School, in Lee's Summit.

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JOHNSON: How many rooms?

HOWARD: One.

JOHNSON: A one-room country school.

HOWARD: They maybe alternated some of the grades, but they taught clear to the eighth grade. It served the country district.

And then finally my dad and mother moved to Lee's Summit so we could go to school in Lee's Summit schools. They thought the boys were too rough in the country school.

JOHNSON: Well, I know that there were some that were in those days. I recall an instance -- this was in the early 1900s -- in my father's country school where they actually bodily took the teacher out of the school and locked the door so she couldn't get back in.

HOWARD: I don't doubt it. My husband tells the story about him coming home and having a welt across his face and his parents asked him what happened, and he said the teacher hit him. He perhaps asked for it, and anyway the next day they said nothing more, but the

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next day got a horse and rode over and said to the teacher, "I don't care if my son needs a whipping; I want you to whip him. But you take him out of the seat and whip him where he's

supposed to be whipped and not across the ear." She proceeded to say, "You're not a gentleman; you're not a gentleman at all." And he said, "Yes I am; you do as I say, and whether it's my child or whoever it is, don't you hit him over the ear anymore with a ruler."

JOHNSON: And he probably could make it stick too.

HOWARD: Yes.

JOHNSON: Okay, anything else that you can think of that relates to the Truman years? Did he ever go back and visit the building where he gave that first talk?

HOWARD: I doubt if he did.

JOHNSON: Of course, you say it burned down in 1940.

HOWARD: Yes. They said he was so frightened and so scared [in 1922] that he didn't know whether he made a speech or whether he didn't.

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JOHNSON: He kind of admitted that himself I guess, that being his first speech, but he seemed to catch on pretty quickly, didn't he. It wasn't very long speech, but it apparently did the job.

HOWARD: Yes, that's right.

JOHNSON: There are no other speeches in Lee's Summit that you can recall that he gave?

HOWARD: Not that I can recall. And if it has been a Democrat speech I think I would have been there. I am sure I would have been; my husband would have been there too.

JOHNSON: Okay, thank you.

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