

Oral History Interview
with
PAUL MIKE WESTWOOD

Mr. Westwood is a former employee of Jackson County and a lieutenant with the Independence, Missouri Police Department. He drove Mr. Truman occasionally before President Truman became President. After the President returned to Independence, Lieutenant Mike Westwood was assigned to the detail of guarding the President. Lieutenant Westwood retired from the Independence Police Department in 1973.

Independence, Missouri

December 30, 1975

by Jerald L. Hill and William D. Stilley, William Jewell College

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
July, 1985
NOTICE

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STILLEY: Mr. Westwood, when did you first meet President Truman?

WESTWOOD: Well, that's been years and years ago, you see. When he was a County Judge I worked for the County, too, and we were friends then. I drove him when he was a County Judge when the regular driver for the County Court was off sick or on vacation. The man who did all

the driving for the County Court was Hunter Allen, and they were Army buddies. And that was the beginning of my time with former President Harry Truman.

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HILL: Did he ever talk about his future or anything at that time?

WESTWOOD: No, he never did. During that time he never talked about anything beyond getting these main crossroads and things like that into the county. He worked very hard on that and you will find that the different roads, the slabs on cross sections of the county, for instance Buckner-Tarsney Road, the extension of Noland Road, extension of Sterling, and those--Blue Ridge Cutoff--those roads were designed and put in while he was the County Judge, which made it more convenient for people to get around into the county than it was. Before they had to go on a lot of dirt roads. I think 150 [Highway] runs out of Greenwood west and that was one of the crossroads that he put in, I think south of Lee's Summit there.

HILL: How much contact did you have with President Truman after he left County Judge, while he was Senator and while he was President?

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WESTWOOD: Well, all of the time that he was Senator when he would come home from the White House, if he came on the train rather than drove, why, I would always be one of several people who would meet him at the train. I had a station wagon and I always handled all of his baggage. Even after he was President when he came home, if he came home on the train, or a plane, why I would meet him over at the depot or the airport and pick up his baggage and bring them; to Independence.

One incident that happened when he was President, the first time I guess he came home. I was detailed to go and pick up his baggage over town, so I loaded them in the station wagon, and I just took out for home like I had when he was Senator, and I noticed in my rear view mirror that there was a black car following me. I thought, "Oh, no, somebody wants to get hold of the President's stuff." So, knowing the northeast district like I did, why, I finally lost the big black car. And when I got to Independence, to the "White House,"

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the Secret Service was waiting for me. And they said, "What did you go off and leave that black car for?"

I said, "Well, I thought they were after me, so I just thought I'd ditch them."

They said, "They were Secret Service, and they were supposed to follow you out and see that nothing happened to the baggage." From that time on, there was always a Secret Service man rode in the car with me, and I didn't have any black car following me.

HILL: When President Truman came back from being President, back as a citizen, you were his personal chauffer, is that right?

WESTWOOD: No, I was detailed down there to look after the property and to look after the family at the Little White House there at Truman and Delaware. But it got so bad and there were so many hunters for, oh I would say, a little something. Like they would tear limbs off of the tree, and they would

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pick up leaves, and try to tear the fence down. We had to file with the city to put a detail down there. You see, when he came back from the White House, there was no array of Secret Service taking care of him. The bill had not been before Congress until after Johnson got in, and there was a bill passed that the Secret Service should take care of the President and the First Lady, if they wanted them. So we had a detail down there, around the clock, and I was in charge of the detail.

As far as driving him is concerned, the Highway Patrol--Colonel Wagner was the colonel of the Highway Patrol. at that time--appointed Sergeant Bell, from the Troop A area down here to take him back and forth from Independence to Kansas City. His office was in Kansas City at that time, and they had quite a deal on that. He stayed over there with him, and then Kansas City also had a detail there at his office all the time.

HILL: How much contact did you have with President Truman after he came back? You saw him, you were

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there daily at the house?

WESTWOOD: Oh, yes, we were with him. One of us took a walk with him every morning. There was one incident. We had quite a few people that would come there and try to get in to see the President. They would say that they were sent here, they had a vision, and things like that. We had quite a few nuts around here at that particular time. And of course, we had to check them all out, and naturally that takes time when you start checking somebody out like that, because you have to write to the city where they came from, and find out all the information. Now, the Secret Service, since they've been here, why, we could check somebody out in less than five minutes. They teletyped it to Washington and put it on the computer and in less than five minutes why the information is back all about the guy, where he comes from and what he had done, who he is, and how much he's worth, and his whole life history.

HILL: When did the Secret Service first come to protect

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Truman as a former President? How did your duties with the President change when the Secret Service came?

WESTWOOD: Well, when they first passed that bill in Congress for the Secret Service to take over the protection of the President and the First Lady, if they wanted them, there wasn't any question there, it was just that they came out and took over. They didn't ask him whether they wanted them or they didn't want them. So I was relieved of that duty then and the Secret Service claimed that there was no way that they could keep me down there. So I was put back to the Police Department where I had been authorized by the City and the Council to look after the President on this detail, back on the job with the City, and I was available to the Court. In about three days, I think, after they had taken over, why, he called me--or called out to the house and talked to my wife, and said to have me get in touch with him right away. So I called him, and I was in

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court, I came down out of the court case office and I talked to him and he said, "You want to pick me up in the morning?"

And I said, "I sure do."

He said, "Well, I just relieved all the Secret Service." So then I went back on the job taking him wherever he wanted to go. See, I was a liaison officer between the City of Independence and the President, besides being the chauffeur and bodyguard, and they didn't seem to think they needed me; and so then he didn't seem to think he needed them at the present time. But later on, after a year or so, why Johnson became the President, he called him and asked if he couldn't send down a Secret Service man to help out with--we talked it over and I said, "I think it's a good idea, because you see, the Secret Service can chase down anybody," and like I said, in only a very short time, where it takes us three or four days as a police department to run anything down like that.

So then, we had one and then we had more, and

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then we had around-the-clock, and now they have all three shifts, which they've had for the last, oh, several years, quite a few years. There's been a complete detail of Secret Service men, and they watch over Mrs. Truman now since the President has passed on,

STILLEY: Were there any actual threats on the President's life after he came home to Independence?

WESTWOOD: No, there wasn't anybody who really threatened him; a lot of people wanted to see him. There is only one instance I know of, that he let somebody come in out at the Library

and as we checked him out we found that he had a pistol on him, and he said that was to protect his money. He was from back east somewhere. He had got out of an institution and he did have quite a bit of money on him, but he said he didn't come to harm the President, he came out here to see him. So, the Chief of Police at that time, contacted his folks and, of course, they had the Chief bring

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him back to this particular town in the east and he was put back into the institution. But as far as anybody trying to harm the president, there was nobody really trying to harm him. There were lots of people had threatened, but threatening and fulfilling it is two different things. And I had no trouble whatsoever with anybody.

HILL: Was President Truman pretty free with his time after he came back to Independence, like if people called up and said they wanted to meet him did he make an appointment, and this type of thing?

WESTWOOD: Well, he never took appointments over the phone, he never talked to anybody; but there's no time that I know of that anybody that came out to the Library that wanted to see him and he knew about it, that they didn't get to see him. His office was in the Library on the northeast side where the office and administrative door is on the north. And he always was real friendly, when we would take walks, with people that would

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stop and want to shake hands with him and chat with him; and he never, ever, that I know of, ever turned down a child that asked for his autograph, or a picture. He loved children, he loved these very, very much; he was very graceful, gracious to all of them. To me, he was one of the greatest men that ever--other than my father, of course. Naturally I thought my father was the greatest--but next to my father, I think President Truman was one of the finest and most courteous, and equal. He was down to earth, he treated everybody alike and he never forgot his friends. That's one thing about it, he stuck by his friends all the way through.

HILL: Have you seen the play or the movie "Give 'Em Hell Harry"

WESTWOOD: No.-I haven't, and I'm not going to see it because I don't appreciate the things that that guy says on television. I don't know that I ever in all the time that I was with the President, heard him say some of the things that I've heard that was said on the show. A lot of times

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he had a few choice words, but never harsh. He didn't have to use those kinds of words to get people told. If he wanted to tell somebody off, he had a nice smooth way of going about it, but after he got through you knew that you were told off. And I just don't appreciate that kind of stuff at all.

HILL: He didn't use the profanity as is portrayed in

WESTWOOD: I never, never heard him all the time I was with him, ever call anybody the things they said that he did on this picture and in this book. I just don't think much of it.

HILL: What was his personality like? Did he joke quite a bit with the people around him?

WESTWOOD: Oh, yes. He was real cheerful, joked. He was well-dressed. You never caught him without a tie or a coat on, even when he'd go home for lunch he'd wear it. Nine times out of ten he

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always was well-dressed; he was a perfect gentleman all the way. He treated everybody just that way. He was kind and good to everybody.

STILLEY: Are there any particular jokes that he liked to tell you, or that you remember?

WESTWOOD: No, I can't remember any.

STILLER: Any funny stories or something?

WESTWOOD: Well, there was one instance that was kind of amusing. We were on our way to Lamar to the dedication of his birthplace, and then on the way back--he loved sorghum, and we saw a sign where it said home made sorghum, and so we pulled in there to get some sorghum. And this guy, as he went out of the car and walked over to the stand, he said, "You look like Harry S. Truman."

And he said, "Well," he said, "you know, a lot of people have told me that." And he went ahead and we bought some sorghum and paid the man for it, and the guy stood there a little

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while and he said, "By so and so, you are Harry S. Truman," He said, "Here, take your money back, I'm going to give you this."

The President said, "No, you're not going to give it to me. I've already bought it." So that was one incident.

We told lots of good jokes to and from on trips. He loved to drive, but he would drive maybe thirty minutes or maybe forty-five minutes and then he'd turn the wheel back over to me out on the highway. He was a very, very good driver, and he was very careful and courteous to other motorists.

HILL: How much contact did you have with Mrs. Truman when you were working at the house?

WESTWOOD: Well, we had just about as much--anytime that she wanted to go anywhere, I always took her. We always took her to the beauty shop on Wednesdays and Saturdays and then he and I would take a ride out in the country. He loved to ride

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out in the country, and he was quite a farmer himself and he enjoyed being out and around the scenery and seeing the new roads. Every time we'd have a new housing project that I heard about it, why, we'd have an hour while she got her hair fixed, why, we'd go out to it, and he'd notice the farmland being used up for housing and he enjoyed seeing the new additions and things like that.

HILL: What was Mrs. Truman's personality and mannerism? Was she as open and as joking with other people as the President was?

WESTWOOD: Well, she didn't make the contacts that the President did. She kind of shied away from all of that. She didn't like to have her picture taken, for one thing, and she didn't like interviews. She was very gracious; she was a very lovely woman and she was always very, very kind to me. Anything that she wanted done, she knew all she had to do was ask, that they weren't forcing it on me, I would do it because I wanted to do it, and do it for

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her. She is the type that was appreciative of anything that you did for her, and she was very, very sweet.

STILLEY: Do you still drive for her very often?

WESTWOOD: No, I haven't driven for her since I retired two years ago. you see, after I became retirement age for the City of Independence, then I had to retire, and the Secret Service was there. They just automatically took over, which I was very grateful that they were able to do that for her, because she needs people around her. We used to go to the store about four times a week, but people wouldn't bother her too much; they'd speak to her and she'd speak back. A lot of times they'd ask for autographs and I don't know of any time that she ever turned anybody down that asked for her autograph at the store, or wherever we would go shopping. We'd go to the Mall or we'd go to Kansas City, and always she was very, very kind to all the people.

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HILL: Just out of curiosity, when you drove for the President, did they have a car that you drove, or did

WESTWOOD: They owned their own car, and she still owns her own car. They had two cars at that time, and she drove. Before the Secret Service came into the picture, she did her own driving, and she'd go wherever she wanted to and do whatever she wanted to, and after she got up in years then she just quit driving and I drove her then. She usually got--the President got a new car, bought it himself, and paid for it out of his own money; and they made him a real good

deal, got a really good trade-in on his own car, but it was still his car and automatically after he passed away, it was hers--well, it was both of them car as far as that goes, joint tenancy. So he furnished his own car, paid for his own gasoline and everything, and the Government never paid anything on it at all. After the Secret Service came into the picture, he could have had a Lincoln

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Continental free of charge, paid by the Department of the Secret Service if he had wanted it, but he just didn't want it that way.

HILL: Did President Truman, after he came back, did he like to go and visit friends and this type of stuff, at their houses very often?

WESTWOOD: Oh, yes, we went lot of times, I'd take them to various people's homes in Kansas City. We'd go to some very good friends of theirs. We'd go up to the north part of Missouri to some friends; and then she had some cousins that lived over at Liberty and we made a lot of trips over there. They'd go over and visit for thirty minutes to an hour and then we'd come on back.

STILLEY: Would you go in with them, or . . .

WESTWOOD: No, no, I'd stay outside. They were willing for me to go, and they always asked me to come on in, and the people wherever we were, would say, "Come on in;" but it was their visit and I

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didn't feel like I should interrupt their conversation. You see, if you don't know anything you can't tell anything, So that was always my theory, that whenever he would go to meet somebody and talk to them, I would stay away. I wouldn't hear the conversation, so if somebody would ask me, I could say, "I don't know what was said. I wasn't there." I always found that the less you hear the less they can pump you, because you might accidentally make a slip. I didn't repeat anything that he ever told me that I know of and I never repeated anything that I heard if I happened to hear anything. But I always tried to make it possible not to be around so that I wouldn't hear what was going on.

HILL: What part did you play, when visitors would come in to see President Truman? Would you meet at the airport if someone from Washington flew in?

WESTWOOD: It all depended on who it was, and what the situation was. Sometimes I would go meet

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them, and a lot of times they would go with me. If it was somebody real special, why, they would go, and we'd bring them back home, or back to the Library, whichever they would prefer. But ninety percent of the dignitaries, like foreign dignitaries, were escorted by Government

agents, and they had their own agents with them, too. They would come into the airport and, for instance, the Mayor of Kansas City would meet them at the airport and bring them out to the Library, or the Secret Service or the FBI, or anyone who might be that was looking after them while they were in this country. You see, any foreign diplomat or any foreign executive always has protection from some department of the United States when they are in this country. That's one thing that helps, because they have all the cars that they need and all the men that they need and it always makes it more convenient.

HILL: What one quality or personality trait did you admire most about President Truman?

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WESTWOOD: He was pleasant and kind and considerate to everybody. And he would talk things over with you. If I thought I had a problem, I could talk to him just the same as I talked to my father. He would iron it out, if it needed ironing out, or else he'd say, "You don't have a problem there, figure it out yourself"---if you didn't have a problem, if you just thought you had a problem. But he was always kind and considerate, and I think that was his greatest quality, and he never, that I know of, ever hated anybody.

STILLEY: Would he try to deal with your problems, when you had some problems, or . . .

WESTWOOD: Well, if I had one, yes, if I'd ask him for it; and if he thought that he could give me advice to help me, why he did. Which he did on a lot of occasions, for instance, on different financial deals that I was going to make. I would talk to him about it, just like I would talk to my own father, and he would advise me

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what he thought on them.

STILLEY: Well, one final thing. You said before an incident that happened when you were taking him to Jefferson City, some cattle or some hogs were out on the highway.

WESTWOOD: Yes, we were going down--that was a trip to Lamar, too. There was a woman down the road had some hogs out and she was trying to get them in, back through the fence where they came out, and he said, "Pull over here, Mike," he said, "we'll help that lady get those hogs back in."

So, we pulled over and him being a farmer, why, naturally he knew how to handle the situation. And he'd say, "Mike, move over this way," and the lady'd come around this way, and then move over that way, and it took us about, oh, would say five minutes to get them back in, because he knew what he was doing. And the lady turned to him--to us rather I should say--to thank us, and just as she did, she said, "Oh," she said, "you're president Truman. Thank you,

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thank you, thank you," she said. That was just one of the instances.

HILL: All right, thank you very much,

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