

Oral History Interview
with
ROBERT P. KENNEDY

Personal chauffeur for former President Harry S. Truman for a series of special events in connection with Veterans Day and the rededication of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, November 10-11, 1961.

Kansas City, Missouri
September 28, 1976 by James R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
March, 1978

NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for the Harry S. Truman Library. A draft of this transcript was edited by the interviewee but only minor emendations were made; therefore, the reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word.

RESTRICTIONS

This oral history transcript may be read, quoted from, cited, and reproduced for purposes of research. It may not be published in full except by permission of the Harry S. Truman Library.

Oral History Interview
with
ROBERT P. KENNEDY

Kansas City, Missouri
September 28, 1976 by James R. Fuchs, Harry S. Truman Library

[1]

FUCHS: Mr. Kennedy, would you tell us a little bit about your background?

KENNEDY: My full name is Robert Preston Kennedy. Preston is my mother's family name. I was born in Kansas City about 45th and Olive, attended Sanford Ladd Grade School and Central High School, graduating in 1936. I went one year to the University of Kansas City, Missouri and one year at the University of Missouri, Rolla, two years at the University of Missouri, Columbia, and did not

[2]

graduate, but received an infantry ROTC commission in the summer of 1940. I was called to active duty in November of '40 and remained on active duty three years in the infantry and 18

years in the Air Corps and U.S. Air Force, retiring in January, 1961. I returned to Kansas City and was immediately employed by H.O. Peet & Company as a stockbroker, and have been ever since.

My oldest friend in Kansas City is named Armand Glenn; he lives out in Leawood, and in the particular year in question he was president of the City Central of the American Legion Posts. And it's my understanding that the Armistice Day* parade that year was the last parade appearance that Mr. Truman participated in. It was also the weekend that Joyce C. Hall, of Hallmark, had a

*The events described in this interview occurred on Friday, November 10 and Saturday, November 11, 1961, and relate to the Veterans Day parade and the activities of that weekend, which included the official rededication of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City (address by former President Eisenhower) and attendance by ambassadors and diplomats from 65 countries. The Memorial was rededicated as a symbol of international understanding.

[3]

banquet and dinner for about 90 members of the United Nations. Mr. Truman was to entertain the members of the United Nations out at the Truman Library also.

It was a long weekend, starting, I guess early Friday morning. Anyway, I was invited to participate as the personal chauffeur for Mr. Truman, and as such, they delivered to me a brand new Lincoln Continental to be used.

Well, at that time I lived in Red Bridge at 411 East 108th Street and Mr. Truman, of course, lived in Independence. Well, he got up early in the morning and I got up even earlier to get from Red Bridge over to Independence, but I never got there until after he had had his morning walk.

I'm not positive of the chronological order of which this occurred, but I did take Mr. Truman to the dining room on top of the Hallmark Co. at about 22nd and Grand; Mr. Truman participated there, and I picked him up and took

[4]

him home that night.

The next morning was Saturday morning. I went over to Independence and picked up Mr. Truman at the Library for him to participate in the Armistice Day parade. One thing I do remember is that driving on Truman Road we stopped for a stoplight and it was at a corner where there was a filling station, and all of the workers in the filling station knew Mr. Truman. He was sitting in the right rear seat, and they all came over to the curb to say hello to him. And that sort of struck me -- he was real friendly.

We drove on and I let him out at the head of the parade at approximately 9th and McGee. He got into an open touring car of some kind, and I hightailed it to the Liberty Memorial. Of course, there was much speechmaking and so forth, and then I picked him up and took him back to Independence.

[5]

That evening I picked him up again, with Bess and a Colonel and Mrs. Rufus Burrus. You must know them.

FUCHS: Yes.

KENNEDY: The five of us came into the Muehlebach, and at approximately 7:15 in the evening, Mr. Truman entered the Muehlebach from the Baltimore side. At approximately 11:45 that night, he reentered my car and I drove the four of them to Independence. And that was where I picked up two items of information, one of which I don't remember too clearly, but it was something to do with the fact that Harry Truman never believed that anybody else should be forced to launder another person's personal clothing, such as their undershorts and socks. I don't know whether they were pulling my leg, but I was given a pretty distinct impression that he attempted to do such for himself all his life.

[6]

I drove fairly slowly, the way I was instructed -- 25-30 mile an hour -- out to Independence and took Bess and Harry home. The four of them were older than I was and they were tired. They'd spent a long evening with Harry and Bess on the speaker's platform; and he never got off of it. But Bess Truman, under her breath more or less, mumbled something to the effect that she thought she would skip church that morning, Sunday morning. And almost in a follow-up tone of voice mumbled something and Rufus asked her to repeat it. Well, it dawned at that time, and Harry backed Bess up, that ever since they had been married she had always fixed Harry's breakfast personally. And that particular Sunday morning, even though she decided not to go to church, she was still going to get up and fix Harry's breakfast and then return to bed for some more sleep. The way she put it was just as cute as anything. And apparently Colonel and Mrs. Burrus didn't know

[7]

that.

Well, the next afternoon, or one afternoon in there, Harry entertained the members of the United Nations at the Library. My wife was invited as she was to many of these things that weekend; and what really struck my wife was the cake that Bess served with the ice cream and the tea and the coffee. It was an iced flatcake, but the principal ingredient was tomatoes, and neither of us had ever had any tomato cake before. It seems that Bess had -- possibly herself, but, at least, her friends in Independence had handmade all of the cakes that were served that afternoon.

Oh, yes, I overlooked one thing: Eisenhower visited the museum out there with Roy Roberts of the K.C. *Star* and Joyce Hall, and, of course, quite a few other dignitaries. He didn't participate in the Armistice Day parade on Saturday. But the

[8]

interesting thing about it was the TV and news reporters didn't know exactly where he was going, and there was a mad scramble of news personnel's cars following the entourage of

Eisenhower out to the museum. I understand one reporter, if memory serves me right, had a car wreck and got injured slightly. They got out to the museum and Eisenhower and Truman disappeared into Harry's office by themselves. Up to that time there had been a little bit of disagreement between Mr. Eisenhower and Mr. Truman. But they emerged smiling from the office, and at that time in the anteroom Harry had everybody present sign their names in the guest book. Then Eisenhower and Roy Roberts, and Joyce Hall, got in their cars and went, I think, back to the airport.

Well, present at that instant was myself, my wife, Harry, one of the Truman Library guards, and, unbeknownst to Harry, one reporter that had

[9]

missed his car was over in the corner writing some notes. And Harry looked at me and he glanced around and went over to the guest book and he said, "Well, if anything's missing, we know who took it."

He saw the reporter at that instant and he said, "Don't you dare repeat that." Well, that was real cute.

That just about covers everything I know on that weekend. I ran up something like 380 miles on that Continental going first here and there and everywhere. But it was a very enjoyable weekend and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

FUCHS: Had you met the President before?

KENNEDY: No. And at the tea party -- I guess I could say cocktail party but I don't remember any cocktails being served at the Library -- that late afternoon my wife got Harry to autograph a picture for each of our daughters, and one for me. I still

[10]

have that at home and framed, and it's written to "Major Robert Preston Kennedy." There's a lot of Robert Kennedys but that may make it a little bit different.

I guess that's about all.

FUCHS: Did Mr. Truman have any remarks about your driving?

KENNEDY: No. I used to say -- I'm getting a little old now, I'm 57 -- I can operate anything that has wheels. I was a pilot in the service, and I worked as assistant post engineer, and anything that's got wheels I can make move fairly carefully. I think Rufus Burrus did give me a compliment on my driving at someplace during the weekend.

FUCHS: Were the Burruses with the Trumans when you picked them up or did you go to their home?

KENNEDY: No, everybody was at the Library when I

[11]

picked them up to go into the Muehlbach. How they got to the Library I don't know, but I was excused for a couple of hours in there to go home and come back.

FUCHS: You don't recall anything else that he remarked about?

KENNEDY: Those were the principal things: the humorous incident about looking at the guest book and commenting that if anything's missing we know who took it.

FUCHS: Well, thank you very much.

KENNEDY: Okay.

[12]

INDEX

American Legion, City Central Post, 2
Armistice Day Parade, *See* Veterans Day parade

Burrus, Rufus, 5, 6, 10
Burrus, Mrs. Rufus, 5, 6

Central High School, 1

Eisenhower, Dwight D., meeting with Harry S. Truman at the Truman Library, 7-9

Glenn, Armand, 2

Hall, Joyce C., dinner given by, 2-3, 7, 8
Hallmark Cards, 2, 3
H. O. Peet and Company, 2

Kennedy, Robert P.:

- biographical information, 1-2
- Central High School, attends, 1
- H. O. Peet and Company, employment as a stockbroker, 2
- Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) receives infantry commission in, 2
- Sanford Ladd Grade School, attends, 1
- Truman, Harry S., as chauffeur for, November 1961, 3, 4-5, 6, 9, 10
- U.S. Air Force, duty in, 2
- U.S. Army Air Corps, duty in, 2.
- university education, 1

Kennedy, Mrs. Robert P., 7

Muehlebach Hotel, 5, 6

Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), 2
Roberts, Roy, 7, 8

Sanford Ladd Grade School, 1

Truman Harry S., 9

Eisenhower, Dwight D., meeting with, at the Truman Library, 7-9

Kennedy, Robert P., as chauffeur for, November, 1961, 3, 4-5, 6, 9, 10

Muehlebach Hotel, attends dinner at, November, 1961, 5, 6

United Nations' members, entertains, 3, 7

Veterans Day parade, Kansas City, 1961, participates in, 2; 4,

Truman, Mrs. Harry S., (Bess Wallace), 5, 6, 7

Veterans Day, parade, Kansas City, November 11, 1961, 2, 4