

Oral History Interview
with
WILLIAM H. FOSTER

Retired university professor, acquaintance of President Truman, and son of David K. Foster, Baptist minister, who hosted Harry S. Truman during appearances in Caruthersville, Missouri, from 1934 onward.

Independence, Missouri
June 14, 1983
by Niel M. Johnson, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library
Independence, Missouri
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JOHNSON: Dr, Foster, we will start by getting some background information on yourself. Would you tell me when and where you were born and the name of your parents?

FOSTER: I was born at Success, Arkansas in 1910, on April 1. I sometimes say that I came in on Halley's comet and Mark Twain went out on it. Then we moved very shortly to a little place called Callao, Missouri, that's in north Missouri. Then later to Bloomfield, Missouri back down in the southeast corner, to Doniphan and Caruthersville, and we lived there the longest.

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JOHNSON: Caruthersville?

FOSTER: Yes. My father was pastor of that church for 27 years.

JOHNSON: Do you remember what year you moved to Caruthersville?

FOSTER: 1921.

JOHNSON: Your father was a Baptist minister?

FOSTER: He started out as a schoolteacher and Baptist minister. When I was born he was teaching school in this little town of Success and minister of the church too.

JOHNSON: We'll be talking a little bit more about him later. So you're up to Caruthersville in 1921; you're 11 years old at the time.

FOSTER: Yes sir.

JOHNSON: You went to school there; then you went to college apparently.

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FOSTER: We had a junior college there at the very time I graduated in '28, It lasted four years. It couldn't survive the depression. Anyway, I went two years and then I transferred to Murray State College (now Murray State University), in Murray, Kentucky, and I got my bachelor's degree there, in 1932.

JOHNSON: Were you intending to be a teacher?

FOSTER: I was intending to teach and coach.

JOHNSON: Your majors were what?

FOSTER: English and physical education and I taught both.

JOHNSON: You started out teaching where?

FOSTER: At Wardell, Missouri.

JOHNSON: You got that job right in the middle of the depression?

FOSTER: Right in the middle of the depression. There were fifty applicants for the one position that

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I had.

JOHNSON: You were there for how long?

FOSTER: I was there for one year as teacher and coach and then I went to Portageville, Missouri as teacher and coach for two years. Then I went back to Caruthersville, my home town, as elementary principal for two years, after which I returned to Wardell as superintendent of schools for nine years -- from 1937 to 1946.

JOHNSON: And then after that?

FOSTER: After that I went west. My wife became ill and we went out there for her health. I came back to Missouri in 1966.

JOHNSON: I think you told me you were in Hobbs, New Mexico.

FOSTER: I was in Hobbs, New Mexico, and Carlsbad, Raton and Farmington -- all in New Mexico.

JOHNSON: Was it in 1966 that you joined the faculty

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at Warrensburg, as a professor in the education department?

FOSTER: Yes.

JOHNSON: You were there for how long?

FOSTER: Nine years -- until retirement in 1975.

JOHNSON: All right, let's talk about your father, We'd like to have, of course, your father's name.

FOSTER: David Kirby Foster, "D.K," he was called. He was born in Pitman, Arkansas in 1882. He grew up there and he went to a little Ouachita College in Maynard, Arkansas, It's defunct now, but that's where he got his education, He was trained for the ministry. He began teaching and preaching all at the same time and did that for three or four years, then he went full time into the ministry.

JOHNSON: Your father served in several parishes before he came to Caruthersville?

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FOSTER: Yes, he started out in Maynard, Arkansas, and then to Success, and later to Callao, Missouri near Moberly. Later he served in Bloomfield, Doniphan, and Caruthersville -- all in Missouri. He retired from the ministry in Caruthersville.

JOHNSON: What church was it that he had?

FOSTER: The First Baptist Church, in Caruthersville,

JOHNSON: Your father was, of course, minister there in 1934 when Harry Truman was running for the Senate. Among the places he visited was Caruthersville. Would you explain as much as you can recall, about that event, how your father got acquainted with Mr. Truman and what resulted from that

FOSTER: When Mr. Truman came to Caruthersville, he was unknown. About the only thing that was known about him was that he was connected in some way with the Pendergast machine. He went to see the local Democratic politicians, but they weren't interested. In the conversation with one of them,

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it was suggested that since he was a Baptist, or had been one, that he go to see the Baptist minister who took some interest in civic and political affairs. So he did. And my pop (as I called my father) liked him immediately. Truman said, "Well, I'd just like to be able to speak to a group here."

My pop said, "Well, I'll go to work and we'll see that you do."

He called the county presiding judge and asked for permission to use the circuit court room; then he began calling friends and everybody that he could think of and he got a pretty good turnout for Mr. Truman there that night. That was the introduction, and Mr. Truman never forgot the favor.

JOHNSON: What kind of impression did he make?

FOSTER: He made a good impression, Everyone came away from there saying, "Well, this man is straight-forward. He seems to be honest, and he's capable, We think he will do a good job." He won many votes right there that evening.

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JOHNSON: But you were not there yourself?

FOSTER: No sir, I was in Portageville at the time.

JOHNSON: Your father must have talked to you about that.

FOSTER: He told me about it.

JOHNSON: What happened right after that then, anything special?

FOSTER: After that, of course, he was elected to the Senate. The fall following his election he was invited to come back to Caruthersville by the American Legion, who sponsored the county fair, and speak at the fair. He accepted the invitation, and that became an annual event. He would

always go to my dad's church on Sunday. He would come down on a weekend, then he would go home with my father for dinner in the parsonage, after church.

JOHNSON: What time of year was that?

FOSTER: Usually late September and October, It started

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in the last week in September, and continued into early October.

JOHNSON: So Mr. Truman made a practice of coming down there every year?

FOSTER: He did it every year.

JOHNSON: And he would first come to your father's house?

FOSTER: I suppose that after he became well acquainted with the Democratic leaders that he probably went to them first, but he always came to my dad's church, He would go home with him for dinner after church, and then we'd go on out to the fair.

JOHNSON: Do you remember the names of some of those local leaders who were influential?

FOSTER: Yes, I do. Neal Helm was one. Jim Reeves was another, along with Everett Reeves his brother, Jim Ahern was still another one, and there was Dyer Byrd, the mayor of the town, I would say

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that they were probably the foremost of the Democratic leaders in that area.

JOHNSON: Did your father mix a little politics with religion, or how did this work?

FOSTER: Actually, he didn't, except that he was interested in it. Somehow or other he got the reputation of having a big vote following, and many candidates for state office would come to see him, even before Mr. Truman did. My father would always greet them cordially, and he would say, "I really don't. I've never told anyone how to vote." But he said they'd say, "Oh, Reverend Foster, we know better than that; we've been told that you control a thousand votes." He would laugh and dispute this, but it had no effect whatsoever. He still had a reputation of controlling a thousand votes.

JOHNSON: If you had to label him politically, would he be liberal politically?

FOSTER: A liberal Democrat.

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JOHNSON: And strongly pro-New Deal?

FOSTER: Yes. Very strong. He was a liberal for a Baptist even in his religion, I always thought.

JOHNSON: In fact, I am wondering what might have appealed to the people in Caruthersville other than Truman's sincerity. What do you think did impress them?

FOSTER: His sincerity and straightforward talk and conversation were the things that put him across in the beginning.

JOHNSON: And did they favor strongly his policies?

FOSTER: Yes.

JOHNSON: Was there a very strong New Deal sentiment in that part of Missouri?

FOSTER: Yes. They were ready for it, I remember in the depression we had a pretty bad time down there. I remember seeing, oh, 35 or 40 men, threatening to break into a grocery store to

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get something to eat for their families.

JOHNSON: Did you actually see that, or did...

FOSTER: I saw it; I was downtown and saw it. They didn't do it. They were talked out of it. But they were threatening to, and they said, "We're not going to stand by and see our families starve." So things were in bad shape at that time, as you know, and everybody else living at that time knew.

JOHNSON: They were even worse in some places than others. Would there be any reason why Caruthersville, in the "bootheel," might have suffered more than other areas?

FOSTER: I would say because it was then almost 100 percent agricultural, and it was heavily a cotton country. Most of the land was farmed by what we called sharecroppers. Of course, when the price of cotton went down, they were out of work and in that area there was what they called "gin whistle terms." That's to say, the sharecropper would be

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advanced his groceries and the seed and feed, and then he would pay back when the gin whistles blew, or in other words when the cotton was ginned.

JOHNSON: Does that mean that there were a few big landlords and a lot of sharecroppers?

FOSTER: Yes, there were then.

JOHNSON: So that probably added to their irritation. Would it be fair to say that the big landholders still did reasonably well, but the sharecroppers did not?

FOSTER: The sharecroppers did not do well. Of course, the volume of business depended upon the consumption of goods and services by the laboring group. When they didn't work, it affected everybody -- the merchants and all kinds of businesses.

JOHNSON: Were they, too, dependent upon one crop then?

FOSTER: They were then; there isn't any question about it.

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JOHNSON: Did they try diversifying?

FOSTER: They have since then. In fact, when I was a boy there must have been eight or ten cotton gins in Caruthersville, and a friend of mine told me that there was only one now in my hometown of Caruthersville, and it operates only on a limited basis. They have switched mainly to soybeans, alfalfa and crops that are less expensive to raise.

JOHNSON: As I recall, Henry Wallace, who instituted the agricultural program for Roosevelt, directed farmers to plow up every other row, or every third row of cotton.

FOSTER: That's right, they did that.

JOHNSON: There is a story that the mules probably got psychological problems because they had to walk on the rows rather than between them.

FOSTER: That's right.

JOHNSON: Did you see them plowing up those rows?

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FOSTER: I've seen many an acre plowed up, you bet.

JOHNSON: Back there in the mid-thirties, '33 and '34?

FOSTER: Yes.

JOHNSON: That may have been a little difficult to do, but they saw that they had to do it.

FOSTER: They were willing to do anything to get relief, anything reasonable.

JOHNSON: So they apparently were very strong for the Triple-A program?

FOSTER: Very strong for it, you bet.

JOHNSON: Just out of poverty if nothing else.

FOSTER: That's right.

JOHNSON: I guess when Truman came back every year, he probably talked about agricultural policy for the most part.

FOSTER: Talked a great deal about that, because that

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was the foremost industry there.

JOHNSON: Did you ever hear one of his speeches?

FOSTER: Oh, yes.

JOHNSON: What was the first speech you heard of Mr. Truman's?

FOSTER: I guess it was the first year after he was elected Senator. He came back in the fall, in October, and held make a speech at the county fair every time, and I heard that one.

JOHNSON: That would have been his first speech at the county fair?

FOSTER: Yes, sir.

JOHNSON: Did you hear most of the later speeches?

FOSTER: No, I didn't. I was away from there working and couldn't get there, but I heard the one when he was President.

JOHNSON: The one in '35, do you have any impressions of that?

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FOSTER: Well, my impression is that he very specifically told them what he was doing, and what has plans were to give them relief on their problems. He was very forcible and he got a great hand, many, many times.

JOHNSON: Did he speak off-the-cuff, do you remember

FOSTER: Off-the-cuff. He didn't use any notes at all that I remember.

JOHNSON: Do you know if there would be a record of that speech?

FOSTER: I suppose a summary of it, or at least a part of it might be found in the local paper, if one would go back there and look at the files.

JOHNSON: If you happen to come across that you might have a copy made.

FOSTER: I'm going down there and ask for some of these pictures, and I'll ask about that too.

JOHNSON: That would be fine. Did your father ever go

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to Washington?

FOSTER: No, he had planned several times but never did go.

JOHNSON: So each time he met Truman it was on his own ground, so to speak.

FOSTER: That's right,

JOHNSON: In 1945, after he becomes president, I notice that he was the speaker again at the Pemiscot County Fair in Caruthersville on October 7. He mentions Jim Ahern and...

FOSTER: Jim Ahern was president of the Fair Association, and of the American Legion, both. He was quite prominent in introducing the president that day.

JOHNSON: I notice that President Truman said, "Once again I am your guest at the American Legion fair. It is a customary procedure for me. This is number twelve." So he didn't miss a year apparently.

FOSTER: No, I don't think that he did.

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JOHNSON: Were you there to hear him in 1945?

FOSTER: Yes. I was superintendent of schools at Wardell, Missouri, and our school band played for him. We had probably the leading school band in that part of the country. They came down and played for him and without being asked, he autographed each band member's program. He just started around and said, "Would you like to have my autograph?" He took time to do that for every one of those band members.

JOHNSON: It seems that he always did appreciate musicians.

FOSTER: I suppose that was one reason he took that time to do that. Of course, you know how they felt about getting his autograph; they were delighted and elated.

JOHNSON: No doubt there was a huge crowd because that was when he was there as President for the first time.

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FOSTER: I remember that the grandstand was filled, and it seemed to me that all the standing room around it and what was to be the infield of the race track was pretty well filled.

JOHNSON: He announced some pretty important policies on that occasion, You have given me here a three-page summary of reminiscences which I believe we will make an appendix to this transcript.

Is there anything else that comes to mind?

FOSTER: Yes, I had a personal experience with him. Once, when I had gone to bed at Wardell, Missouri, there was a knocking on my door about 1 o'clock and there were several local politicians at the door. I said, "What are you doing here at this time of night?"

They said, "Well, we had an argument with the County Committee all evening about who was going to run for Lieutenant Governor of the State of Missouri. When your name was mentioned, you were a unanimous choice."

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I said, "Well, go on home and sober up, and I'll talk to you later."

They said, "We aren't drunk; we are serious about it."

I went over to see my father the next day and I said, "What do you think of it? That's all pretty big and startling to me."

I remember he called Neal Helm and Jim Reeves, and they said, "Well, get him on up there for the filing deadline."

They had been promised a state office in southeast Missouri for doing so well on the vote in the Democratic Party, and they had never put up anyone.

So, finally it appeared that the Lieutenant Governorship would be open and the powers that be in the state said, "Well, go for that and we'll help you." They waited until the next to the last day to tell me, and I went to Jefferson City and filed, When President Truman came back to the State

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Democratic Convention, I met him there and he said, "Well, good luck." My familiar name is "Dub," and he said, "Good luck Dub, stay with it".

There was a judge in St. Louis who finally filed an hour before I got there. The filing closing, as I remember, was 10 o'clock at night on whatever date it was in the spring. I asked if anyone from St. Louis had filed, and they said, "Hell, there was a man who waited around here all day and no one showed up, so he filed." It was thought that he would withdraw, He really didn't want to run, I think, but he stayed in. I wasn't in a position financially to run a race like that. You get a lot of promises but you have to have more than that, so after about three months I withdrew, before the primary.

JOHNSON: What year was this?

FOSTER: That was in '44, as I remember. That was a very memorable personal experience that I had with him. He came down, as I say, for the State

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Democratic Convention in Jefferson City.

JOHNSON: And that's when he said, "Good luck."

FOSTER: Right. And I needed that, and a whole lot of other things.

JOHNSON: So you almost got into the political arena.

FOSTER: Almost.

JOHNSON: In 1946 there was another very memorable event that occurred in, which you were involved. Maybe you could tell us about that.

FOSTER: In '46 my father had written to him to ask his help with a problem that a personal friend had. In reply, President Truman said that he was going to be in Jefferson City with prime Minister Winston Churchill on a certain date, and that my father could see him in his private railroad car if he would come down to the railroad station. The car would be on a rail siding in Jefferson City. He said that his letter would serve as my father's

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pass through the guards to the car.

I went with my father. We showed the letter to the guards -- they were lined up all the way around that railroad station, They let us through and we went right up to the train, We were invited to come in and have a seat, We met Winston Churchill, and then my father, after we had visited a little bit, talked to the President about the problem, and they agreed on what they would do about that, So we shook hands all around again and left, and as I was leaving, Mr. Churchill gave me one of his big long cigars, and I made the terrible mistake of smoking it. Today, I'd like to have it for a souvenir. But that was a big occasion for me, and a very memorable event.

JOHNSON: It sure would be, What were your impressions of Winston Churchill?

FOSTER: Again, here was a man of great force, and very friendly, I was surprised; he was very cordial and very affable. I can understand how

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those two got along well together, because they were alike in many ways, or I thought they were. They were both forceful and very direct, but friendly. I know, in President Truman's case, all the people I've ever known who knew him like we did down in southeast Missouri on those occasions would say over and over again, "He's very direct. He means what he says, and he carries through what he says he will." This is a reputation that he had. And I felt the same way about Churchill.

JOHNSON: This was in Jefferson City. They were on their way to Fulton at the time?

FOSTER: Yes sir.

JOHNSON: And this was a stop that they made there?

FOSTER: He had his private car sided there at Jefferson City, Then they drove on over to Fulton, and we did too.

JOHNSON: They got to cars there and went on over to Fulton?

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FOSTER: As fair as I know they did. So my father and I drove over there also and we listened to his famous "Iron Curtain" speech, not knowing how famous that speech would become as the years rolled by.

JOHNSON: When did you see Truman again after that?

FOSTER: I don't think I saw him anymore after that.

JOHNSON: That was the last time that you saw him?

FOSTER: I left the state after that because of my wife's health and went to Arizona and New Mexico, so I didn't see him anymore. My father did, however.

JOHNSON: I notice that we have a letter here, April 12, 1945, the date that he became President. This is a letter from your father to the President, and he mentions them lingering at the dinner table. You have that, of course, in your possession.

FOSTER: Right. I remember that discussion when he was Vice President. My father said to him, "Harry,

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you're going to be President right away," Mr. Truman replied, "That's what I'm afraid of."

JOHNSON: This was in October '44, and you were there at the dinner?

FOSTER: Yes sir, when he was Vice President.

JOHNSON: So you were in on the conversation?

FOSTER: Yes, sir.

JOHNSON: It was brought up -- the possibility of his becoming President?

FOSTER: He sat around after dinner, oh, I would say, an hour or maybe an hour and a half and talked with us. It was then that my father said that, and Mr. Truman replied, "I'm afraid this may happen."

Pop said, "Well, you'll be a good one, and you'll carry right on, and we'll all be behind you." and Mr. Truman answered, "Well, I know you will."

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JOHNSON: He wasn't elected yet as Vice President, but it was probably assumed that Roosevelt would be reelected.

FOSTER: Right.

JOHNSON: Anything else about the Fulton "Iron Curtain" speech?

FOSTER: I remember that we had to stand on the outside and listen to the loudspeaker. We couldn't get in. We didn't lose any time but still the auditorium filled up, and we saw them come out.

JOHNSON: There was a parade wasn't there?

FOSTER: Yes, we didn't make it. I know we got into a traffic snarl, there were so many cars; we didn't even get to see the parade.

JOHNSON: Do you remember anything that your father said about Mr. Truman after this event in 1946?

FOSTER: I have a summary statement here that I'd like to give you, and which you said would become an

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appendix to the transcript. It explains how my father and I felt about Mr. Truman.

JOHNSON: Once he was your friend he was always your friend, is that the impression?

FOSTER: Right.

JOHNSON: We also have a letter here in June of '47. Apparently your father had an accident.

FOSTER: He had a head-on auto accident and it broke his leg and some ribs and an ankle. He was finally sent to Campbell's Clinic in Memphis, Tennessee. While there he received one day a bouquet of flowers from President Truman and a telegram. So the doctors, nurses, and the orderlies came in droves, almost, to my father's room to see who this man was, who would get flowers from the President.

JOHNSON: Did they continue to meet after '47? How about the '48 campaign?

FOSTER: I was out of the state then, but I'm sure

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that they did, yes.

JOHNSON: Did your father ever talk to you about that '48 campaign?

FOSTER: Oh my, yes. That was a great delight of his life. He talked many times about the paper, the Chicago *Tribune*, which came out and said Dewey had won.

JOHNSON: A little premature.

FOSTER: He said, "I think that's one of our greatest victories." He enjoyed the triumph, and talked about it many, many times.

JOHNSON: After he left the Presidency, did they maintain their acquaintance or their friendship?

FOSTER: Yes they did. But there again, being away from the state, I don't know just what did happen.

JOHNSON: Do you know if your father came up here to visit Mr. Truman here at the Library or at his office in Kansas City?

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FOSTER: I don't believe he did.

JOHNSON: Okay, is there anything final here that comes to mind that we can add to the record?

FOSTER: I really don't know of anything except to say again what a great friendship formed between my father and Mr. Truman. My father always spoke to him as "Harry," and when he spoke about him he referred to him as "Harry." Speaking of Truman, he would say, "He never meets a stranger; he's one of the most personable men I've ever known." He often said that, and he said there was never a better President.

JOHNSON: It didn't bother him -- these reports about his poker playing and drinking a little bourbon?

FOSTER: No,

JOHNSON: Some people were critical of that, some Baptists in particular.

FOSTER: My father knew about that, but he said that Mr. Truman was never a man of excess. He had

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faith in him to know about how far to go in any of those things, He said that none of us are perfect, and that Truman had so much on the positive side for him that those things were meaningless

JOHNSON: I want to thank you for your cooperation.

FOSTER: Well, thank you Mr. Johnson, I really appreciate the opportunity.

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