

Oral History Interview

with

WILLIAM J. RANDALL

William J. Randall was Chief Real Estate Appraiser for the Jackson County Assessor's office (Eastern Jackson County), 1932-34, and appeared before Truman as a member of the Board of Equalization. He served as a member of Congress, 4th Missouri District, 1959-77.

Washington, D.C.

March 15, 1976

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

The Harry S. Truman Library

Independence, Missouri

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NOTICE

This interview was conducted by William D. Stilley and Jerald L. Hill as part of a winterim and independent study project at William Jewell College in March 1976, under the direction of the Political Science Department of William Jewell College.

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STILLEY: Congressman Randall, you said that you grew up in Independence near President Truman's home. What are some of your earliest recollections of President Truman?

RANDALL: My earliest recollection was in that very-shall I say bitter and divisive--primary campaign of 1922; and that's been a long time. It was Mr. Truman's first effort to public office, Eastern Judge of the County Court. The principal contender was a banker by the name of E. E. Montgomery of Blue Springs, Missouri. Mr. Truman at that time enjoyed the support, as he did during all of his contests, of the Pendergast faction. There

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was another faction in Jackson County of substantially equal strength known as the Shannon faction.

As you so well know, Bill, the Pendergast faction took the name of the Goats, while the Shannon faction took the name of the Rabbits. This was a very long, and very bitter primary, and Mr. Truman prevailed; but two years later--and I believe I'm correct on my dates--in 1924 he was defeated. But perhaps, or probably because of the bitterness of the campaign, he was defeated by a man by the name of Rummel, Judge [Henry W.] Rummer, who was Republican. And then he was out of office for two years and came back to win the office of Presiding Judge of the Jackson County Court.

Yes, my first recollection of Mr. Truman was as a younger man, and also his appearances in that campaign, sometimes with the late E. E. Montgomery. One of the things that I remember particularly was the caravans, the long caravans of the partisans of those two opponents. And at one point, I'm not certain whether it was Blue Springs, or at

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least somewhere in that vicinity, in the outlying parts of the county, the caravans were so long that they came almost upon a collision course with each other. They were going at right angles to each other, and I distinctly recall an arrangement was made in fairness to both of the caravans that there was not a break and one was left to pass while the other waited. To show total and complete impartiality, one car would go through the intersection at right angles to the other caravan, and then one car of the other caravan, and they switched back and forth, one car and one car, until the caravan finally cleared that intersection. I guess that's one of my first memories of Mr. Truman,

The next would be, of course, his services as Presiding Judge. I was away after our graduation in 1927 for four years in the university and, finally, I came back to know him in the fall of 1932, The election of 1932, which you so well remember was the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And then for those two or three years there was rather closely associated with him.

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Again, not closely in the sense that we would see each other every day, but I became the chief real estate appraiser for Eastern Jackson County in the Assessor's office, under Walter Miller. Mr. Truman during those two years there--really three years, '32, '33 and '34 (he ran for the Senate in 1934)--we had occasion to appear as sort of an expert witness before the Board of

Equalization during those summer months when the Board would meet on those three years, and appeared before him as a member of the Board of Equalization many times. Of course, we knew him then.

Then I think something that might not have reached the notice of too many persons, was the fact that as Eastern Judge during those years in which Mr. Truman was Presiding Judge, was the late E. I. "Buck" Purcell, known as "Buck" Purcell. Buck Purcell was my first sponsor in political life, and Mr. Truman relied on his good right arm, Buck Purcell, for many chores to be done, particularly in that 1934 campaign. I recall

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during the summer of 1934 I made several trips, several hurried trips, in the last week of that campaign to different places in western Missouri in behalf of Mr. Truman. To speak for him at the last-moment when he perhaps had planned to be there himself, or had accepted the invitation, accepted the date, and found that he couldn't do it. We did that pretty much up and down the state line there; Harrisonville, Butler; and I guess one of the most interesting, or I could even say dramatic appearances, was at Nevada, Missouri, to which we had to drive very fast one evening in order to get there in time for the meeting. We found quite a substantial anti-Truman attitude in Vernon County, largely because of his association with the so-called "Pendergast Machine." I had to do my best that night to try to say to them that not everyone associated with the Pendergast Machine were evil men, that there were many, many good men that were part of that organization, and that many honorable men belonged to it. They were not in any way associated with some of the things for which the

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organization had been criticized.

Well, Buck Purcell who was my sponsor.--I was his protégé, I suppose is the best way to put it--asked me to make trips to such places as Warrensburg and even to Clinton, in Henry County, to speak in behalf of Mr. Truman. It wasn't always easy, because he had some very formidable opposition. As I recall at that time he had a man by the name of Jack Cochran--John Cochran, who was the City Counselor of the City of St. Louis---a very formidable opponent; and he had the other--his principal opponent, Tuck Milligan,

After Mr. Truman was nominated and elected in 1934 to the Senate, of course, he left Missouri and his job was to be in Washington. Some of us didn't see him during those six years nearly as much as we preferred; he was up here in Washington. But he would come home from time to time. He knew that he was going to have a very serious campaign against him in 1940, and actually it was so close that the decision was not made until quite some time after the polls closed. He had

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running against him Governor Stark from the State of Missouri, Lloyd Stark, who disavowed many times that he would run, but yet at the last minute filed and made a very strong campaign for the Senate seat.

Hunter Allen had been Mr. Truman's driver for many years, both when he was on the County Court and during those visits home after he came to the Senate. And it fell to Mr. Allen's lot to drive him across the state in the 1940 senatorial primary.

Now the difference between those days and now is that a candidate in order to have any flair or any flamboyance, or attract attention, he always comes floating in on a helicopter, or comes in on a little plane. In the interest of saving time I suppose that had some considerations. But there was very little of that in 1940, or almost none. It meant that long distances had to be traversed by surface travel. That's all there was to it. And after the primary, not during the primary, but after the primary, Hunter Allen was so exhausted, so worn

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out, as a result of crisscrossing back and forth across the state during that bitter primary of 1940, that he simply took down ill, he was exhausted. It fell my lot in 1940 in September, and I drove Mr. Truman myself for about, oh, the latter part of the month of September.

I found him at that time to be a hard worker, a sort of never say die sort of candidate, who took all of the reverses in stride, with coolness and calm, and, incidentally, he did have a lot of reverses, plenty of them. You must recall the Pendergast machine had just become a shambles as a result of the 1939 vote frauds, and Mr. Truman had to carry and shoulder his association with that organization; and he did so, in my judgment, handled it very, very, very admirably and very well. He pretty much paralleled what we said in connection with the Watergate scandals, that here the fact that there are a few rotten apples in every barrel doesn't mean all the apples in that barrel were spoiled or rotten. The fact that there were a small handful of those in connection with the Pendergast organization who had been

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involved in certain vote frauds, didn't mean that there was many, many. In fact the great majority, the preponderance of all those in that organization, were honorable, decent, law abiding men; and that was the position he took, somewhat like some of the defenses in connection with Watergate would be, something parallel. But anyhow, I found from those weeks with Mr. Truman that he was a very unselfish person. There was no-oh, he had the ordinary necessary ego of anyone who runs for public office. It's sort of a must, it's a necessity that you must not be lacking in confidence, or not suffering from any inferiority complex; but at the same time, with it all he was a very humble man. Humility was one of his trademarks, or certainly one of his principal characteristics. And as I said, he was an unselfish person; nothing domineering about him, treated everyone as if they were his equal. He never had at any time any appearance of looking down at anyone, or looking down upon them.

In those weeks I found it was a hard job, it was a strenuous job, it was an exhaustive job. I

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have said in the record of the memorial volume which we had so much to do with the preparation of, that there at the old Pierce-Pennant Hotel, it was called.--Sinclair-Pennant later on, a large motel, I remember so well from our days at the University, painted blue and white out on old 40 Highway. We came in there that night and it was very late and he discovered that he just didn't have a clean shirt; and we managed to have one ourselves and let him have a shirt that night for his appearance, but I'll never forget his reaction was. He said, "Well, you know, there's a mark of a true friend," He said you've heard it said so many times--that "You can have all the other earmarks of true friendship, but a true friend is a man that takes his shirt off his back and gives it to you;" and he appreciated that, And many times he said, "If the occasion ever arises, you can be assured that I will reciprocate and do the same thing."

Oh, there are so many other episodes and incidents that mark the man as a down to earth

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just ordinary--some have said, "average"--American. In our judgment he was far above average. He liked to refer to himself as an average American, but he was quite exceptional in many of his attributes and certainly in his attainments.

Bill, pending my recollection of the names of some persons that I want to dictate into your oral history, I'll be glad to turn now, to jump over the Presidential years. We can't say we can jump over those. It was our privilege and high honor to attend the 1949 inauguration, with some memories I shall never forget.

The late Roger T. Sermon led a group of Mr. Truman's fellow townsmen, townspeople, here to Washington. Brought along the late John S. Theiss. Mr. Sermon you recall was Mayor. Brought along his City Council; the late Tim Nowell, one of his City Councilmen, the late Rank Jones, also a City Council man, and his brother, Bill Sermon, and his close personal friend, Alvin D. Hatten, who later became County Collector. A little group of about ten or twelve came to the City of Washington for that

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inauguration, and of course, we were given not only all of the very best considerations, not only for tickets for the inauguration, but tickets also for the inaugural ball and also the parade. I guess one of the largest crowds that was ever assembled on the east front of the Capitol was for the Truman inauguration. They've all been substantial, they've all been large, but even though we had tickets, our tickets for that inauguration really didn't mean too much, because it was sort of reminiscent of some of Andrew Jackson's inaugurations. The people simply came to Washington to see their friend inaugurated and whether they had tickets or not they crowded into the east side of Capitol Hall. To this day I can point out a little rise, a little elevation, a little mound over there

over on the northwest side of the Capitol on the Senate side that we were able to get atop of and get a pretty good view of the inauguration. Even though we had tickets they meant nothing. Then I recall one of the real great events of that inauguration, it was not the parade, not the

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swearing-in, the inaugural ball--of course, I guess one of the first times that an inaugural ball was ever held out at the new Armory, the National Guard Armory, out on East Capitol; and Mr. Truman was a very gracious host out there.

Coming back to the highlights of that inauguration, I suppose that one of the things that will always remain in the memory of those who attended was the Missouri reception. It's been traditional for a long time, for the state from which the President comes, to finance and to underwrite the cost of a large reception, for those from the state who come to the City of Washington. And, if you do not recall the fact, Forrest Smith was the Governor of our state at that time; and if my memory serves me correctly, he had just been elected in the 1948 election. This was quite a substantial victory for the Democratic Party in the State of Missouri and many, many members of the legislature had been elected. So I guess it must not have been too big a job, or too hard a job, I should say, in order for the legislature to authorize, by resolution, the expense of this reception.

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And I shall never forget, it seemed like almost the leaders from clear across the State of Missouri were in the City of Washington, not simply from western Missouri but from St. Louis, Springfield, St. Joe, all four corners of the State were at that reception that night at the Shoreham Hotel; and there was no effort to spare expense. There was good food, and good music and good fellowship and a good spirit, and I would be hard pressed to say how many Missourians attended that Missouri reception that night. I happened to have been privileged to attend the Texas reception and I can assure you that Missouri was not outdone by the Texans when Mr. Johnson went in the first time, as an elected President. It was a great reception, fine, fine evening. It will be remembered by anyone the rest of their lives who were in attendance. And our great Governor, Forrest Smith, did a commendable job of hosting that in honor of our first elected Missouri President, first and only President Missouri has ever had. And I guess that was probably the highlight of the inauguration.

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Bill, if I may, as some small miniscule contribution to your oral history of Mr. Truman, I'm willing to make a contribution that hopefully will be unique or at least an innovation, because I don't believe anyone else can fill the role of having represented Mr. Truman in the Congress, in the House, after his retirement from the Presidency.

As I've told you separately, in many instances it was a difficult job. Mr. Truman always had his very pronounced views on every issue, and he made no pretext of the fact that he felt that his Congressman should embrace his views, as a member of the House of Representatives. Of

course, I had to tell him that while we had the very greatest of respect for him, as we would have for anyone who had occupied the Presidency, that there were many others in the district who had divergent views; and that he was just one constituent, who was certainly an important constituent, but he was not necessarily expressing the views on the various issues of a preponderance of our constituents.

And as I said many times, I firmly believe

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in the proposition that the word "representative" means exactly what it says, to represent the people. Oh, I know full well the theories of Edmund Burke and others who have said "All a member of Congress, or any other parliamentary body, owes his constituents is his own best judgment." And I am so mindful of the admonitions of those political theorists--because that's what they are, political purists, so-called political scientists, that are ground out from our various universities with a degree in political science that seems to know so much about all subjects of political life, and actually know very little--that really the role of Representative is to lead his constituents. Well, my answer to that is a response that was made by probably one of the most distinguished members of the House that ever served from the State of Missouri, and I do not place him even second to Champ Clark, who later became Speaker; and I refer to that grand old gentleman Clarence Cannon, who said the job of a Congressman is to find out which way the great group of his con-

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stituents were thinking, what their thinking is and then lead them in that direction that is their view. He put it in a little more folksy Missouri language. I think what he actually said was that his job as United States Representative was to find out which way his people were marching and then just run like the dickens to get out in the front of that direction. So Mr. Cannon stayed here for 40 years, and those political purists and those great political scientists that emanate from the halls of our universities, will never be elected to office and if they are they will stay here only two years. So, all of that is a background for the fact that we've always believed that our job was to try to find the preponderant, the majority viewpoint. There's no way to please everyone, no way at all. Simply no way. Sure, there may be many ways to success, many avenues of success, but there's one certain sure road to failure of anyone in public office, and that's try to please everyone. There is simply no way. The very best you can do is to try to please the most of your constituents.

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Now, Mr. Truman had very pronounced ideas that we should follow his suggestions, not only on legislative issues, but I guess most of all with the appointments. A Member of Congress has nothing to do with appointing Federal Judges, has nothing to do with many of the--that's the prerogative of the Senate--has nothing to do with--oh, we had some voice in the appointments of the Department of Agriculture, ASCS.

Bill, I've forgotten our context because you changed the tape there, but one difficult area was the matter of Federal appointments during the Democratic administrations of JFK and LBJ. During those years we had some voice in the ASC appointments in our various counties but our principal voice was in the appointment of postmasters, and also rural letter carriers; and during those years of those two Democratic administrations, it fell our lot to recommend for appointment--and they were ultimately appointed, finally appointed and confirmed--about sixty-five postmasters in the various counties in west central Missouri which we represented.

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Let me say at the very beginning, and make this, as another President one time said, "crystal clear," but which we prefer to use the word "abundantly" clear, that some members of Congress went about making those personal appointments, in the theory that they would build up a sort of organization, particularly and peculiarly loyal to the Congressman, a sort of pro-congressional group that would ensure the remaining in office of that particular Congressman. Not so. I never regarded those as personal appointments, and in every one of those instances we went to the County Committee, because our view was that the County Committee was an elected official just the same as a Member of Congress. They happened to be elected at the primary. They had to be elected in August rather than our election in November, but they are elected, and they are elected by the people of their respective areas, whether it's a township or whether it's a county or whatever it may be. So, in every instance, our first step was to seek the advice of the elected members of the County Committee

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in that particular area. If the service area of the post office did not include a county, we didn't ask advice from the full county, but from the members of the County Committee from those townships that were served. If a post office served only a portion of another township, then we would weigh, or weight, the portion of the township, the voice of those Committeemen from that township had. In other words, they wouldn't get a full vote where a township was served totally by a post office, they would receive full weight and those that were only a portion, was weighed accordingly. And so we carried that to the very fullest measure of fairness and impartiality. Not a one of those postmasters was ever appointed unless he received the endorsement of the County Committee, And I believe that was a wise course, because someone has said that those who took the other course wound up with some twenty or twenty-five applicants for every one of those postmasterships, and I think that was probably a good average, never less than 20; but he really wound up with a successful gentleman who could very well later become an ingrate, and a lot of very disappointed

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and bitter aspirants. And so we took the position that it was the County Committee's job.

Well, Mr. Truman had several recommendations for postmasters, I don't suppose that he ever carried but one, very adamantly, and I think perhaps that's the proper word. Insistence, he was insistent, and this happened to be for Postmaster of Clinton, Missouri.

Now for the benefit of all and sundry who may not be fully advised of the political situation in all of our counties, they should know that Henry County has long been the arena of some pretty spirited political battles. It goes back many, many, many years, but there has always been two factions, or two groups that were pretty much equal in strength. I don't know whether it's that way right at this moment but the former Judge of the Kansas City Court of Appeals, Floyd Sperry, Sr. led a group, and there was another group led by other individuals. One time by former State Chairman Delton Houchins and our present Senate Majority Leader, Bill Cason, and others, that were on the

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other side of the two dominant factions. Oh, there were many others associated with both factions, but the factions were pretty evenly divided in Henry County and as you all so well know, Henry County is quite a prosperous agricultural district, the so-called "Golden Valley of the Grand River." It has two principal cities, Clinton and Windsor in the northeast corner of the county. Oh there's other cities, of course, Deepwater, and Montrose in the south, and Urich in the northwest corner, but this particular contest--like all other contests in Henry County--had been quite spirited; and we shall not mention any names because we think that some of the persons are still involved, and some may very well be living. I'm sure they are.

To make the story shorter, the two factions had agreed, one of those rare instances in which the two factions had agreed. All these were members of the County Committee. The two factions controlled all the members of the County Committee of the area served by the Clinton Post Office. All of them had completely and totally agreed on one man to be recommended--a very rare, very unique

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situation--and asked me to come to Clinton, which I did, and to meet the one who had been recommended, a fine gentleman. A gentleman who was confirmed without any problem at all. I think he later resigned for business purposes, but he served without any problems at all. He served honorably and served successfully for several years, many years.

Well, again, in order to spare the names of any individual, Mr. Truman had a nominee, suggested, recommended appointment for the Postmaster who was the son, as I recall it, of one of his World War I associates. If my memory serves me correctly, it was in the artillery and in those days the artillery, the caissons were pulled by horses, and this gentleman who was his close personal friend was one of those who tended the horses in the artillery. This gentleman, if my memory again serves me correctly, was a son or perhaps a nephew of his dear friend. And as we all know, Mr. Truman was quite loyal to his old friends. He was accused while he was President of cronyism because of that. But this

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was the case of friendship for an old friend, the relative of an old friend, and he was quite insistent that this appointment be made. I guess one of the really dramatic recollections of ours

when Mr. Truman called me out to the Library one morning, near noon, and in his quite regular choice of words, and the mannerism which he used, sitting across the desk from me, Mr. Truman said, "Bill, I have written you about this gentleman and I know it merits your consideration, and I just want to tell you that this is the way that it's going to be. You are going to appoint Mr. So and So, Mr. X, Y, Z," without mentioning names.

And I recall distinctly that I proceeded to tell him, "Mr. President, you are mindful of the situation in Henry County. You've been around a long time, and you know that when the time ever comes that you can get the two warring factions in Henry County to agree on any one man, that's almost a miracle. And you have said to me that in your words 'that that's the way it's going to be,' when you urged the appointment of another

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aspirant to that post office. I'll have to say to you, Mr. President, with all respect that I can muster, and I do respect you because you have been President of the United States. I'll have to say to you just as nicely as I can possibly put it, that that's the way it is not going to be.

And he jumped up out of his chair and walked around his desk, he walked over and looked out the window, his hands clasped behind him, turned around a time or two, and came back and sat down, obviously very, very annoyed. In a few minutes he said to me, he said, "Bill, I understand the problem that you have with this appointment." He said, "I'll just have to say to you I didn't think that you were going to have the guts to do what you did." That's the way that it was in other appointments, but not quite as much of a confrontation as it was in this one,

STILLEY: Thank you.

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