

Oral History Interview

With

PHILIP D. REISTER

Truman Family Physician, 1955-1970.

Overland Park, Kansas

June 20, 2001

by Raymond H. Geselbracht

The Harry S. Truman Library

Independence, Missouri

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Conducted by
Raymond H. Geselbracht, Harry S. Truman Library

GESELBRACHT: It's June 20, 2001, and with me is Dr. Philip D. Reister and I'm going to ask him some questions about his relationships with President Truman and Mrs. Truman and with Dr. Wallace Graham, President Truman's physician. Dr. Reister, could you, just for the record, tell your name and the date and place of birth, your educational background, and how you began your career in Kansas City.

REISTER: It's Philip with one L, and Douglas after Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., who was doing Liberty Bond drives and my folks saw him and decided to name me after him; and my last name is spelled R-e-i-s-t-e-r, which is pronounced Reister (rye-ster) accurately, but my family pronounces it Reister (ree-ster) because there was so much anti-German sentiment during World War I.

I was born November 9, 1918, in Lansing, Michigan and then I lived in Charlotte, which is 18 miles from there. I always worked two or three jobs from the time I was about 10 years old. I worked at a drug store and that's where I served a pharmacist apprenticeship. And then I went to Michigan State College when it had 3,800 students, and now it's close to 100,000, I think. I got my bachelor's degree in chemistry and bacteriology and then I worked with the Michigan State Public Health Laboratory and the Lansing, Michigan, branch of Bell Telephone. And the NYA [National Youth Agency],

the famous program that Roosevelt instituted, helped put me through college. And then I took ROTC for additional money and came up with a second lieutenancy, and then that made me eligible for military service as soon as I finished school. I entered the Army, went to the field artillery in 1942, then was sent to the 79th Division at Camp Picket and was with the 79th Division throughout the war in Western Europe. We went over with an advance party on the Queen Mary from Ft. Hamilton to Greenwich, Scotland and wintered there. Then we went in at D Day plus eight and fought throughout the European campaign and I got out without being wounded. I earned a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and a Croix de Guerre, as well as a unit presidential ribbon.

After this, I went to Washington University at St. Louis on the GI Bill. I earned my medical degree there. Then, during the Korean War, I went back into the service at Walter Reed Hospital, where I took my internship. That is where I met Dr. Graham, he was chief of a general surgical section, which was a part-time position, and was also physician for the White House. And during the time I worked with him, he offered me the position as assistant physician to the White House, which I turned down partly because, as Dr. Graham said, Vice President Barkley wouldn't follow his medical advice. Also, a good number of the people we treated at Walter Reed were Senators who were there for imbibing too much. And I thought life was a little too short to do that sort of thing, so I turned it down. When I finished my residency, which included four years in general surgery and four months in oncological surgery at Ellis Fischel Hospital in Columbia, Missouri, I joined Dr. Graham in 1955 here in Kansas City. I began to have contact with Mr. and Mrs. Truman. Initially they came into the office occasionally, and then I made a few house calls out at the Truman home.

It's interesting that I came to Kansas City not too long after Dr. Graham had done the cholecystectomy on Mr. Truman and he ended up with a pseudo membranous in his colitis. He almost died. Dr. Graham was so harried, he was getting calls from all over the United States telling him how to treat Mr. Truman. The press was there at old Research Hospital. He had to go out the back door to avoid the press, they were really hounding him. But Mr. Truman survived with Dr. Graham's care and went on to live a number of years.

I did see Mr. Truman on occasion at Walter Reed Hospital. There was a presidential suite upstairs. There were no handles on the doors, it was just one big hall, and unless you knew how to get in, it was a more or less secret entrance.

When Mr. Truman was treated in Kansas City there was always a T-man [a Secret Service agent]. For example, Mr. Truman was involved in dedicating the new Research Hospital, and when he was there as a patient, there was always a T-man sitting in the hall, so we always knew where Mr. Truman was because the T-man was sitting out there. And on one occasion when the beds were full, they put Mr. Truman in pediatrics. (Laughter) It was always a private room, of course.

On another occasion when Truman was in the hospital, Mr. Nixon was the President. Mr. Truman didn't have much respect for Mr. Nixon, he called him, personally I heard him call him, "Tricky Dicky." (Laughter) I had a Nixon campaign button in my lapel at the time and my scrub nurse, the circulating nurse, made me take it off because she knew what Mr. Truman's feelings were about Mr. Nixon.

When I made the house calls it was interesting. Mr. Truman had an old timer that was a driver, I don't remember his name, and he was always present out around the

grounds there or in the garage.

GESELBRACHT: Was that Mike Westwood?

REISTER: Yes, Mike Westwood, right.

My children were fortunate to be able to visit Mr. Truman in his home early in my acquaintance with him, and they have pictures of themselves draped around him, sitting around his chair in his living room. This is really a nice personal photograph.

Mrs. Truman had over the years written a cook book, which was published in...I've got a copy of that and also a number of copies of items by Mr. Truman. I went to several dinners with Mr. Truman. On one occasion his aide...the general, what was his name?

GESELBRACHT: Harry Vaughan.

REISTER: Harry Vaughan, General Vaughan, sat next to me, and we were taking about the deep freezer incident, and he said it was just cardboard and his wife "kicked a hole in the damn thing" to quote him. (Laughter) But Mr. Truman, on occasions when he was asked a difficult question about a decision he had made, such as that to drop the atomic bomb, would say, "I made my decision based on future generations." And most people are aware of the fact that he said he slept well after he made the decision to drop the atomic bomb because he saved not only American lives, but actually Japanese lives too, because they would have fought to the last man, woman and child.

GESELBRACHT: Dr. Reister, you mentioned that you treated President Truman a few times at Walter Reed Hospital.

REISTER: No, I didn't treat him, I saw him at Walter Reed. I didn't treat him until I came to Kansas City. He had some pulmonary congestion and so forth. Along that line, he had fallen at home and cut his knee. Mrs. Truman and Mr. Truman were to go to Florida for the winter and he had sutures in his knee and Mrs. Truman ended up taking his sutures out for him down in Florida.

GESELBRACHT: When did you first begin to treat him?

REISTER: That would have been after '55 and continued for about another 15 years after that. But Mrs. Truman, when she came to the office, most of the time it was for her arthritis, affecting her knees. And I injected her knees because she said my partner hurt her and I didn't.

GESELBRACHT: Did she start coming to you about the same time, 1955?

REISTER: Yes.

GESELBRACHT: Did you usually treat her?

REISTER: It depended. If she came for her knee problem and needed an injection, that might be uncomfortable, and I gave it to her. She requested me. For routine things, Dr. Graham would generally treat Mr. Truman. But I would see him and he was always very friendly and not only with me, but with everybody, he was just a friendly individual, with our staff people and so forth.

The last time I saw Mrs. Truman was in the basement of Research Hospital. I had gotten a divorce and I knew how she felt about divorces and I was trying to avoid her. She saw me, and said, “Dr. Reister, you come here.” I thought, “Uh Oh, I’m in trouble.” (Laughter) She said, “How come you didn’t come over and speak to me?” I told her I hadn’t seen her.

She was a very modest woman. She would not allow Dr. Graham, or me, to do a pelvic examination or check her breasts. And it because of this, when she finally came in to see us in May 1959 she had a lesion in the left breast that was literally grapefruit size and it was a cystosarcoma phyllodes, which can be benign or can be malignant. Well, the good Lord was with her for it turned out benign. But it was literally grapefruit size. And when we put her in the hospital and did the surgery, Dr. Graham deferred to me because I had this special oncological training at Ellis Fischel. But anyway, before surgery I went ahead and took a photograph of this breast with the lesion in it.

GESELBRACHT: That’s the photograph that you gave to the Truman Library that shows Mrs. Truman lying on the table?

REISTER: Yes, it’s the only such photograph in existence, as far as I know.

GESELBRACHT: And presumably Mrs. Truman did not know she was being photographed.

REISTER: No, she did not. And, then when the pathological report came out, the tissue reports came out, and when they sliced the tissue and so forth, I took a photograph of that too and you have this photograph of the lesion itself after it was removed.

GESELBRACHT: How long would Mrs. Truman likely have been aware that she had that growth?

REISTER: She probably had it for several years. But she chose not to call either Dr. Graham's or my attention to it. As I say she was an extremely modest woman...and to a fault.

GESELBRACHT: Could she have hidden a growth like that with her clothing?

REISTER: She managed. I guess she must have worn loose clothing. She wasn't like present day women who tend to make their mammary glands prominent. Mrs. Truman was a very likeable woman, she was very direct.

Dr. Graham didn't care too much for Margaret, and therefore I didn't, because she was not at all, what shall I say...she didn't pay any attention to her mother really. She just neglected her entirely. In the last year of Mrs. Truman's life, Margaret did not bring

the grandchildren in at all and I think she came in once, but I can't recall for sure how many times. She was like that through the years, and for that reason Dr. Graham didn't care much for Margaret.

GESELBRACHT: From what you saw of the interaction between the two of them, was there any anger.

REISTER: There wasn't anger, it was they just didn't seem to care for each other. I think it was more Margaret than Mrs. Truman. But it was a sad situation.

I know you've been to their home, it was Margaret who painted the kitchen chartreuse. The public is not allowed to go upstairs because Mrs. Truman said in her will that she wanted the upstairs reserved so that if Margaret came to visit there'd be a place for her to stay. Of course, she's never done that. So, the upstairs is off limits. It's that way in her will.

GESELBRACHT: Could you describe the progress of former President Truman's health during the years you cared for him?

REISTER: Well, one thing I did note, and it's often true with people, is when Truman's best man died and when his brother-in-law died and all these friends of his died, you could see it cause him to age, take a little knick out of him every time. And of course the other thing that is notable, when he'd have his birthday parties, his friends tended to offer him liquor, whiskey, and if he wasn't careful, the whiskey took its toll.

GESELBRACHT: What do you mean?

REISTER: Well, he'd get in his cups. He could get in his cups. Because, as I say, these people, his friends, were being, you know, solicitous, but it wasn't the right thing to do. As he got older, he did not tolerate alcohol. That was one of the things that was notable.

But he was so friendly. Everyone knows that when he took his walks around his home in Independence, he greeted everyone. And it was a mutual thing, he was respected.

But, the main situation was—and this was true when Dr. Graham was out of town in particular—I was treating Mr. Truman for a pulmonary congestion, you could call it pneumonitis. The press claimed that I had studied medicine at Johns Hopkins Hospital, which wasn't true; I attended Washington University at St. Louis. And they also said I lived in St. Louis and was traveling back and forth to treat Mr. Truman, which wasn't true. I lived in Kansas City. I have the newspaper article that has all these mistakes in it.

GESELBRACHT: I've read that President Truman fell in his bathroom in the fall of 1964.

REISTER: That was when he cut his knee, and Mrs. Truman took the stitches out down in Florida.

GESELBRACHT: Historians have noted that from that point he seems to have declined

fairly rapidly. Do you know why?

REISTER: Well, maybe the fall called attention to his being somewhat frail. I think it was that more than anything else. But, I suppose it should be off the record, but he had a little...imbibement when he fell. That's not been generally known. But anyway, he didn't have a head injury or anything. The fact that he fell probably was evidence that he was beginning to fail some, physically.

GESELBRACHT: He lived another eight years. Can you characterize the progress of his health over those eight years.

REISTER: Well, I wasn't taking care of him at that time, so I couldn't tell you from personal experience. Dr. Graham and I broke up because one of the gals that worked in our office would go between the two of us, carrying tales, and making things up, and it turned out in the long run that the man she married ended up taking a good deal of money from Dr. Graham and she was a troublemaker. I chose to go out on my own.

GESELBRACHT: Do you remember what year that was?

REISTER: About 1970.

GESELBRACHT: Do you remember the last time you saw President Truman?

REISTER: I think, I'm sure that it was when I made a house call, but I don't remember what year it was, and I don't remember whether it was a minor situation or a major one that took me to his house. I don't recall exactly why I made that house call.

GESELBRACHT: Let me ask you some of the same questions about Mrs. Truman. You started treating her in the mid-1950's as well.

REISTER: Right.

GESELBRACHT: What was the course of her health over the years?

REISTER: She seemed to hold her own pretty well. She was a strong individual, mentally and physically, and she didn't show the deterioration Mr. Truman did. Mr. Truman, as he got older, tended to slump a little bit, because of osteoporosis and the aging process. He had always been so straight, and his carriage was excellent, but he showed a little bit of kyphosis, which is round-shoulder-ness, before he died. And if you have seen Thomas Hart Benton's black and white pen drawing of Mr. Truman that he made late in Truman's life, you see that the drawing made him look like he was ready to be buried. I had a chance to get a copy of it and my wife said we don't want to remember Mr. Truman that way, and so I never bought it. It really made him look old. So in Benton's picture you can see the aging process. But again, a lot of it was related to him losing friends, it makes you feel vulnerable.

GESELBRACHT: Do you know how his mental faculties were in the last two or three years of his life?

REISTER: As far as I know, from Dr. Graham and so forth, I don't think he showed any Alzheimer's or that type of thing. He may not have been as acute, mentally acute as he was at an earlier age, but I think it was more physical weakness that caused this lack of acuity.

GESELBRACHT: I believe Mrs. Truman suffered a stroke in 1981?

REISTER: Right. I stopped by and saw her.

GESELBRACHT: When was the last time that you saw, treated her, except for that?

REISTER: Well, the last time I treated her was when Dr. Graham and I split.

GESELBRACHT: About 1970?

REISTER: About 1970. But I did for reasons of courtesy and so forth see her when she was in the hospital. And then again, I don't think Margaret even came in to see her mother when she had that stroke in 1981. It seems to me that was one of the things that bothered Dr. Graham. She was very indifferent to her mother.

GESELBRACHT: What was the condition of Mrs. Truman's health in about 1970?

REISTER: She was in good condition. As far as I recall, she didn't have any hypertension, diabetes, or anything like that. I mean everyone with time shows some aging and frailty, but she wasn't suffering anything outstanding that way. She was doing very well. As a matter of fact, the last time I saw her in the hospital—she was in a wheel chair, I don't know why, I think she was just being taken to an x-ray—she was bright and had good hearing and good vision, and so forth.

GESELBRACHT: And that was right at the end of her life?

REISTER: Yes.

GESELBRACHT: I think she was in that wheel chair permanently, after she suffered the stroke in 1981. From what I've heard at the Library she was wheel chair bound her last year.

REISTER: I couldn't be sure of that, but I know she was in a wheel chair the last time I saw her. And it was a T-man that was pushing her around.

GESELBRACHT: You mentioned that you got involved in some other of Dr. Graham's activities, for example, those regarding President Trujillo of the Dominican Republic.

REISTER: There were a lot of things about Dr. Graham that were very outstanding. He was very brave. He was a paratrooper doctor during World War II and he had made some parachute jumps and ended up with some high explosive fragments in his buttocks and hand and so forth. And when President Roosevelt died, and Mr. Truman remembered Dr. Graham's father from the World War I period and so forth, he chose Dr. Graham to be the White House physician. Well, Dr. Graham at first didn't want to leave his unit and he rejected the offer, but he was told in no uncertain terms you don't reject the request of the President of the United States, so he became the White House physician.

I'll tell you a story about Dr. Graham. We put in hours at our office you wouldn't believe. It was eight, nine, ten o'clock at night often times when we left there. Dr. Graham in particular would spend an hour with a patient and as a result the schedule was always behind. And one night as he was leaving the office at about ten o'clock, somebody was hollering "help" outside the building. A man apparently tried to rob someone and was running away. Dr. Graham chased and caught him in an alley and hit him, knocked him senseless, I guess. Dr. Graham was held at the police station for about five or six hours being questioned, and in the meantime the robber had gotten off and gone away. But that's the way Dr. Graham was. I mean he was very brave, to a fault.

I'll tell another story. Sinusitis is common in Kansas City. Well, on one occasion, Dr. Graham happened to walk into my office, and my patient was complaining of sinusitis. After the patient left, Dr. Graham said why don't you use the Proetz maneuver where you take salt water, saline, in your hand and have the patient say, "K K K" and suck the saline into his sinuses. So he was demonstrating it to me and he ended

up with acute sinusitis that stayed with him for six weeks. I think that ended that.

And then when the dietary drink Metrical came out, the detail man left several cases of it. And a few weeks after that, Dr. Graham said to me, “This stuff isn’t worth a damn,” he said. “I’ve been gaining weight on it.” I said, “Wallace, have you been drinking it instead of a meal, or in addition to a meal?” (Laughter) He’d been drinking it in addition to his meal.

His funeral was really something. You know, he had a Scotch Heritage and they had the pipes playing and so forth and each of the children gave a eulogy. Oh, it was really striking, you know. It was an unforgettable type of thing because of the pipes and the like. Dr. Graham was a bit on the stocky side and he would eat late and he wouldn’t get home until nine, ten or ten-thirty and Velma, his wife, would feed him, and then he’d get the reflux, and so he ended up with a reflux esophagitis. He was having trouble with that even when we were together, because he’d overeat and then go to bed before he’d had a chance to digest his food. So he ended up with a real severe esophagitis and eventually, cancer of the esophagus, which is quite common.

The surgeon who did the operative procedure on him, chose to do it from the abdominal side rather than the chest and thoracic, so she could get a better junction on the anastomosis esophagus to the stomach. And as a result, it broke down and leaked and so forth, and this is what caused his death. He had mediastinitis and so forth. He died from infection and complications of the surgery. Esophageal cancer is rather treacherous, but he might have survived that.

That’s the basic story of Dr. Graham. I can give you some of his personality and so forth. He took friends of his to South America on a tour before World War II. He was

in Germany and was picked up by the Nazis because they thought he was spying, but he got out of that. And then when he was at the White House, Mr. Truman sent him on a special mission to Arabia to carry some messages and so forth, some papers. And one night, when he had those papers in his jacket, somebody came into his room and took them. And he had the feeling that that was a prearranged deal because they didn't do anything to him, you know. He took care of Ibn Saud, who was the King of Saudi Arabia, and was offered, when he was preparing to leave the country, a camel and a man servant. He tried to explain tactfully that we didn't have camels in this country and that we didn't have man servants, so Ibn Saud gave Mrs. Graham a very beautiful set of pearls, which she still has. She's still living, she's a wonderful gal. She had to put up with Dr. Graham's hours and eating habits and so forth.

Dr. and Mrs. Graham had the three children. One was born at Walter Reed Hospital. Dr. Graham had use of a green house there because one of his hobbies was to raise orchids. He had a hundred and some varieties of orchids when he was there. The oldest son is an architect out in New Mexico, the daughter is married to a doctor in Columbia, Missouri, and she's a nurse. And then the youngest son is an excellent gastroenterologist—he's a surgeon actually. He walks just like his daddy, military style, click-click-click, and you'd think it was Dr. Graham Senior coming down the hall and he's got Dr. Graham's same loss of hair and so forth, and he looks a lot like his dad. Dr. Graham had wonderful children. Mrs. Graham lives with Bruce now, the youngest. That pretty well fills us in on the Graham family.

GESELBRACHT: Dr. Reister, did you ever treat or see any other members of the

Truman family?

REISTER: Mary Jane Truman, President Truman's sister, had the exactly the same eyes, the same refraction error and the same bottle bottom glasses that magnified her eyes that her brother had. They made her look very intense and looked like she was looking through you. She fractured her hip and was being treated in the new Research Hospital. She was being fed supine and she got a real bad esophagitis and, and in consulting on it, I had her elevated when she ate, and antacid and so forth, and that cleared it up pretty well. It happened because she was supined with a fractured hip complication.

GESELBRACHT: Dr. Reister, you wanted to tell me something about President Truman and the Golden Gloves Award.

REISTER: Mr. Truman and I had some social contacts, at dinners, and Mr. Truman liked the Golden Gloves and Dr. Graham had been a heavyweight champion in the Golden Gloves. And so the three of us attended the fights and Mr. Truman had a security guard with him and a youngster came up to have Mr. Truman sign his autograph and the security guard pushed the young man away. Mr. Truman really reacted to that. He turned livid and he was angry and he said to the guard, "Don't you ever do that. If these youngsters want my autograph, I'll give it to them."

GESELBRACHT: Do you remember about what year that was?

REISTER: It's probably middle 1960's, something like that.

GESELBRACHT: Thank you, Dr. Reister, for allowing me to interview you.

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