

Oral History Interview
with
FRED LEHMAN TRUMAN

Mr. Truman is the second son of the late John Vivian Truman, the Presidents brother. Mr. Truman came in contact with his uncle at various family occasions. He is presently an engineer for the Black and Veatch Company.

Leawood, Kansas

December 30, 1975

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

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

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: Mr. Truman, what was your contact and relationship with the late President Harry S. Truman prior to his election as Senator.

TRUMAN: Well, not too much contact. I was his nephew, and he was out at my grandmother's some and I saw him there; and out in Independence once in awhile and saw him there.

STILLEY: When he became President, did you see him any more then than you did before he became President?

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TRUMAN: No, because I was in school and in the Army during that time.

STILLEY: Did you go to the White House at any time?

TRUMAN: Yes, I visited him once in the White House.

STILLEY: What was the reception like? Did he spend very much time with you?

TRUMAN: Well, as much time as you would expect. He was busy at that time.

STILLEY: How did the relationship kind of change with your father, with his brother? Did they meet very often once he became Senator?

TRUMAN: Well, yes. I mean the only thing was, it's quite a ways to Washington.

STILLEY: Did your father visit his brother very often in Washington?

TRUMAN: I don't know what you'd call very often,

STILLEY: Several, times.

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TRUMAN: Several times, yes.

STILLEY: After he left the White House did you visit him very often then?

TRUMAN: Not very often, no. We'd go down to the house once in awhile.

STILLEY: Would you say his type of personality was pretty typical, of, say, your Aunt Mary Jane Truman, and your father, and your grandmother and grandfather Truman?

TRUMAN: Well, that's a good question. I wouldn't venture to say that, no. See, he was more of a studious type than my father was. He wore glasses from the time he was pretty young, and at that time they didn't have these nonbreakable glasses like they have now, so he couldn't take part in sports. So, his recreation was reading.

STILLEY: When you first learned that your uncle had become President, what was your first reaction?

TRUMAN: Well, I don't know.

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STILLEY: Was it, "Oh, my goodness?"

TRUMAN: No, it was just one of he was, that's all...

STILLEY: Were you pestered a lot by reporters and . . .

TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: You weren't?

TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: Did it seem to affect your father in any way?

TRUMAN: Not really, no.

STILLEY: Did you ever happen to hear your uncle say that he served on the Hickman Mills School Board back in 1916 for a few months?

TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: I know over in their school minutes, they talk about that he was appointed to the Board in July of 1916, and by the spring of 1917 he isn't mentioned in the minutes.

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TRUMAN: At Hickman Mills. I think you'd find that he was out of the district, 'because the farm was not in the Hickman Mills District, it was in Grandview. Now maybe they changed the boundaries on it, I don't know. But I know when we were living out there the farm was not in the Hickman Mills District.

STILLEY: There was a Hornbuckle that was on the Board at that time...

TRUMAN: Well, he's dead now I expect. I don't know which one it was. Was it Roy?

STILLEY: I can't quite remember at this time.

HILL: Did the family as a whole, were they affected in any great way by his becoming President?

TRUMAN: No, not at all.

HILL: Are there any instances that you remember about Mr. Truman, like the qualities about him that you think led to his success?

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TRUMAN: No, I think he did just go ahead and do his work. He was in politics here for a long time.

STILLEY: Did your father ever consult with his brother on any decisions while he was President?

TRUMAN: I wouldn't know.

STILLEY: Do you happen to know, let's say, when he was ready for the atomic bomb, did he contact his mother or his brother?

TRUMAN: Not that I know of.

STILLEY: Did the family have much influence, or did they take part in his campaigns, help him campaign in any way?

TRUMAN: Oh, not out of state at least.

STILLEY: Did you help him?

TRUMAN: No, I didn't, I was in the service.

STILLEY: But did your father help when he ran for Presiding Judge, or . . .

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TRUMAN: Yes, he worked for the county then. He was working in politics, and some of the leaders around he'd help.

STILLEY: Did your father have a county committee post?

TRUMAN: No. No, never had anything like that. He was acquainted with all of the people who did that.

STILLEY: When your family sold the property for the Truman Corners Shopping Center, what did your father do then, just retire; or did he have another position?

TRUMAN: Well, he had retired by that time. He quit farming.

STILLEY: Was he Director of the Federal Housing Administration?

TRUMAN: Yes. Yes.

STILLEY: He was director of the Kansas City . . .

TRUMAN: Kansas City, yes,

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STILLEY: Were there any particular, oh, let's say family get together that you remember most with your uncle present?

TRUMAN: Well, when we had Thanksgiving dinner at my grandmother's he was generally there.

STILLEY: Were there any particular jokes he liked to tell his nephews or his niece?

TRUMAN: Not that I know, no.

HILL: Did he ever attempt to give advice to his nephews?

TRUMAN: No, not ever.

HILL: How would you describe President Truman's personality just as an individual, like at these family get togethers and this type of thing?

TRUMAN: Well, he was just one of the family is all, one of the group.

HILL: Did you notice any change in his personality, at any time during his life, while he was President or afterwards?

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TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: Did you see the play, "Give 'Em Hell Harry?"

TRUMAN: Yes, I did, I saw the stage play,

STILLEY: The stage play. What was your general impression of it?

TRUMAN: My general impression was that it was very good.

STILLEY: I know we've received some comment in our previous interviews where they disagreed that he used as much foul language as what they portrayed in the play.

TRUMAN: You boys haven't been in the Army yet have you?

STILLEY: No.

TRUMAN: In the context in which it was presented, I see nothing wrong with it. I don't think you'd find anybody in the Army that don't cuss quite a bit.

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HILL: Then you feel that that was an accurate portrayal?

TRUMAN: I think it was a very good portrayal. In fact, I was amazed that the man came across like he did. In fact, in places he portrayed it practically perfectly, for a few seconds at a time. The other times he was very close. You know, his timing was just a little bit different, but at times you would have thought it was Uncle Harry.

HILL: Have you read the book Plain Speaking?

TRUMAN: No, I haven't, I haven't read that yet.

HILL: What has been the general impression of the family about the new interest in President Truman? Has that affected the family in any way?

TRUMAN: No. I get asked a few questions every once in a while, a little oftener than I did for a while, being related to him.

STILLEY: Has being nephew to a President, has that really in some ways been kind of a disadvantage.--

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pestering you a lot with interviews and...

TRUMAN: No, I could turn them off if I wanted to. No, I really haven't been. See, that was before some of this stuff was coming up like it is now, so they really didn't need the protection they do now.

STILLEY: At the time that President Truman was President was your father afforded Secret Service protection?

TRUMAN: No, he wasn't. No.

STILLEY: Was your Aunt Mary Jane?

TRUMAN: Part of the time because of her mother. She had protection for her.

STILLEY: Did that seem to bother your grandmother a lot that she had Secret Service around?

TRUMAN: Well, no, not very much; it had to happen.

STILLEY: Did they try certain ways to avoid the Secret Service?

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TRUMAN: Well., they did for awhile, but then, found it was necessary.

HILL: Is there any one event, like any particular time that you saw President Truman that stands out in your mind? When you think about him is there this one event that . .

TRUMAN: No, except he pinned my bars on me when I was commissioned.

STILLEY: Was he President at that time?

TRUMAN: That was 1944.

STILLEY: What division, or branch of the service did you serve in?

TRUMAN: Well, I started in the Signal Corps and wound up an MP.

STILLEY: Did you serve here in the United States or overseas?

TRUMAN: I served in the United States, they were too

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busy shipping to get me overseas.

STILLEY: Your brother J.C., was he a Postmaster?

TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: What was he?

TRUMAN: He was a clerk of the court.

STILLEY: A clerk of the court, I see. Then your brother Harry served in World War II also?

TRUMAN: Yes.

STILLEY: And your sister--sorry I can't remember your sister's name.

TRUMAN: Martha.

STILLER: Martha. Was her husband in the service, or ...

TRUMAN: Yes, I think he was, I don't know what branch he was in.

STILLEY: And then your brother Gilbert, was he too

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young for the service at that time?

TRUMAN: He didn't go.

STILLEY: Did he stay with your dad until they sold the farm for Truman Corners? Did he help him in the farm?

TRUMAN: Actually he ran the farm while the rest of us were in the service; and he and my younger brother ran it for awhile after the war.

STILLEY: Would you say that President Truman made decisions fast, or do you think he studied the situation a lot?

TRUMAN: Well, he had all the available information before he made a decision.

HILL: Did the Truman family ever get a--if he made a decision that someone disagreed with, did they ever tell, you that they disagreed, like . . .

TRUMAN: Well, you could read it in the paper any morning you wanted to.

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HILL: Did you ever have people say, "Tell him not to do this," or "Tell him not to do that?"

TRUMAN: You better not. He made up his own mind.

STILLEY: Were there any times of frustration among the family when they said, "Well, I wish Uncle Harry," or "I wish my brother wasn't President?"

TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: When the attempted assassination in the Blair House happened, did that seem to affect him or make him more cautious or a little bit more afraid that somebody might get to him, or ...

TRUMAN: I don't think so. They had to run him away from the window, I understand.

HILL: Did that have an effect on the family at all, his mother, or ...

TRUMAN: Well, of course, it did some, yes; but not in any great effect, no. It's one of those things that go on, that's all.

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STILLEY: Was the rest of his--I mean his brother, and maybe you, in on helping with designing or planning for his library?

TRUMAN: No.

STILLEY: Did he have any of you help on collecting items for the Library?

TRUMAN: Well, I've given him a few things that I had. Some of the things that were in the family are over there. Other than that, no.

HILL: After President Truman left the White House did he still take an active interest in politics and decisions that were made, or did he concentrate more on just the Library and let other people run it?

TRUMAN: Well, he was interested and all that, yes; but his main interest was the Library and setting that up as a historical and a studying place.

STILLEY: I understand that he tried to save the family

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home at the farm there in Grandview, but realized that ...

TRUMAN: It's still there.

STILLEY: It's still there?

TRUMAN: Yes.

STTLLEY: It's still standing?

TRUMAN: Right.

STILLEY: Oh, we thought it was taken by ...

HILL: Where is the family home at?

TRUMAN: It's right on Truman Corners, there are two houses there, right there on Blue Ridge Boulevard.

STILLEY: Did your father live in that until the War? Did your father have a separate home, or was it the same home, or ...

TRUMAN: No, he had a separate place. The one to the north is my father's. The one on the south was the Trumans.

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HILL: Is the home a museum or anything like that?

TRUMAN: No, it still, belongs to some of the family.

STILLEY: Are there plans at this time to make it into . . .

TRUMAN: No. No.

STILLEY: Well, I believe that just about does it.

TRUMAN: Okay.

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