

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
A. LAYLE “PETEY” CHILDERS

AUGUST 13, 1991

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-19

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #4360-4362

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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Petey Childers and Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. Their corrections were incorporated into this final transcript by Perky Beisel in summer 2000. A grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association funded the transcription and final editing of this interview.

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ABSTRACT

“Petey” Childers [26 December 1912—5 March 1997] owned and operated a pharmacy in Independence, Missouri, for approximately fifty-five years. As a pharmacist, he served the Trumans, Dr. Charles Allen, and many other notable Independence residents with ties to the Trumans. Childers discusses life in Depression-era Independence, Truman’s presidential inauguration, and later visits by Bess W. Truman after the Truman’s retirement from political life. Childers ends with a discussion of his brother-in-law, Paul Henning, a screenwriter, the local neighborhood, and the renovation of his home which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Persons mentioned: Arch Waggoner, George Porterfield Wallace, Harry S Truman, Bess W. Truman, Charles Allen, Buddy Childers, Jim Therkells, Wallace H. Graham, Stanley Green, Margaret Truman Daniel, Mary Childers, E. Clifton Daniel, Jr., Jim Pendergast, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Paul C. Ford, C. Roy Layland, Eugene W. Theiss, Harold V. Starr, Charles C. Bundschu, Frank W. Rucker, William Southern, Ellis Tyler, Charles D. Buckley, Nat D. Jackson, George Dodsworth, Floyd Warr, Dorsy Lou Warr, Alben Barkley, Homer Clemens, Roger T. Sermon, Robert P. Weatherford, Valeria LaMere, Grace Choplin, Eleanor Choplin, Louis “Polly” Compton, Robert Hart, Lawrence M. Proctor, Charlie Allis, Thomas G. Melton, Norine Allen, Barbara Allen Gard, Mike Westwood, Bill Bradley, George Carson, Drusilla Childers, George Burns, Gracie Allen, Paul Henning, and Bubby Ebsen.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

A. LAYLE “PETEY” CHILDERS

HSTR INTERVIEW #1991-19

JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Petey Childers. We're at his house in Independence, Missouri, on the afternoon of August 13, 1991. The interviewer is Jim Williams from the National Park Service, and Leslie Hagensen from the National Park Service is running the recording equipment.

I'd like to thank you for letting us come by this afternoon. Could you tell me a little bit about your background? Are you a native of Independence?

PETEY CHILDERS: I was born in Kansas City, but I moved out to Independence when I was about a year old.

WILLIAMS: When was that?

CHILDERS: In 1913, and I've lived here ever since.

WILLIAMS: How long has your family been in this area?

CHILDERS: First, they came from Kentucky to Cincinnati, St. Louis, and to Weston, Missouri, then they moved to Kansas City, and my dad went to work for the Standard Oil Company after we moved out to Independence.

WILLIAMS: Up in Sugar Creek?

CHILDERS: No, we lived in Independence, but he worked in Sugar Creek for the Standard Oil Company.

WILLIAMS: Where did you go to school?

CHILDERS: I went to the Kansas City College of Pharmacy, which is now the

University of Missouri, Kansas City, and I attended William Jewell [College] for a year. I bought a drugstore the following summer, and I've been in the business . . . My brother was a pharmacist, and so I bought a half interest in a drugstore with my brother, and it was tough times. That was '32, I believe, and everybody was broke. The banks closed up. It was a very rough time to be in business. But the following year, we started a pharmacy in the First National Bank, exclusively prescriptions. We had no money, but we had one drug firm that believed in us and let us have enough stock to start the store. It was quite an experience, but we had enthusiasm, and that's the greatest word in the world.

WILLIAMS: Where did you live growing up here in town?

CHILDERS: You know where the Allis-Chalmers plant is?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: Well, it belonged to the Mormon Church, and we were members of the Mormon Church, so we rented that property. I think there were ten or twelve acres in it, but on the very end of it, next to Cottage Avenue, was a plow factory—they actually made plows—and we farmed that. You know, we had a barn, we had a cow and a smokehouse and pigs, and a little German family lived up on the far corner, and they had a little garden. But it was like being raised on a farm. We milked and . . . I was just a little boy, I think about four. We'd churn the butter, you know? I learned so much. We had a cook stove, and there was always a pot of beans and potatoes, a piece of salt pork on the back of the stove, and we ate out of the garden. It was quite an experience. But we did have a bathtub. No running

water. We had a cistern. We had to carry the water to the bathtub, and it was made out of tin. I was a little boy, and it sloped down like this, you know. I could get up there and slide down that, you know? But when the bath was over, why, you went outside and pulled the plug, and it ran out into the garden. Nothing was wasted.

WILLIAMS: So that was down on Pacific?

CHILDERS: Pacific and Pleasant.

WILLIAMS: Not far from the Bingham-Waggoner House?

CHILDERS: Just a block. When I was a little boy, on Sunday afternoons, why, I'd run off up to the Waggoner house because they sometimes had children up there, you know, and we'd go up and play on the front porch. I remember one time Mr. Waggoner invited us in to hear the music box. You've heard of the big music box they had? And they had to hold up each one of us to see the mechanics work, you know, but it was quite a thrill.

WILLIAMS: And the Waggoner-Gates mill was still running then.

CHILDERS: Yes, it was, and when I went to . . . I went to Noland School, but gradually we moved up on South Pleasant Street by that time, and to go to school we always went down the alley and across the railroad track, and there was the big mill, you know, and the office on the right-hand side. And they baked bread every day to test their flour, and occasionally Arch Waggoner would come out and throw a loaf of bread to us kids. It was hot, you know? But he was such a nice person.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any contact with the Gates or the Waggoner part of . . .

CHILDERS: No, not at all, except I remember that when the young Waggoner boy was

killed in World War I, Mrs. Waggoner made a gift to the Christian church, I think it was, of \$10,000. If I saw them at the Waggoner house when I was in there, I don't remember.

WILLIAMS: Did you know the Wallaces?

CHILDERS: No. I knew George Wallace—that's the brother-in-law of Mrs. Truman. I worked in the drugstore, and Mr. Wallace would come by and buy cigarettes. A tall, handsome fellow. A neat dresser! Oh, he was a handsome fellow.

WILLIAMS: How did you become interested in pharmacy?

CHILDERS: Well, hopping cars, and I worked in the drugstore, and then I finally got to jerking sodas. At first, I waited on the tables, and then I got to jerk the sodas, and then I got to clerking. My brother went to pharmacy school, and he was working as a pharmacist in one of the other stores and I asked him to get me a job. And he said, "Get your own job." And so one of the boys came by the house one day, or down to the yard—we were playing—and he said, "They're going to hire a kid to hop cars. Would you like to try?" And I said, "Sure." I ran all the way up there. I was bare-footed, in overalls, you know? No shirt. And this big, tall, blue-eyed man, curly hair—oh, he was a handsome brute—I had to look up like this at him, you know? [chuckling] And he said, "You can have the job." And then he told me about "if you're five minutes early, you'll never be late." Well, being a kid, I was halfway home before I figured it out. He also told me that if I did 10 percent more work and 10 percent better work that I'd get a raise. [chuckling] Well, that first night I worked myself to death. I wanted that

raise. Well, I got it the second night.

WILLIAMS: Oh, that was quick.

CHILDERS: So I've been . . . That was what I was supposed to do is . . . and I've done it all my life.

WILLIAMS: Was that at a drugstore?

CHILDERS: Yes, sir.

WILLIAMS: Which one?

CHILDERS: That was at the Crown Drugstore, but it was previously the Clinton Pharmacy where Mr. Truman dusted bottles.

WILLIAMS: So they had carhops then?

CHILDERS: Not at Clintons, but they did when the Crown came in. It was a chain organization, a young chain, and they wanted every nickel that they could get, you know.

WILLIAMS: So the cars would just park out there in front?

CHILDERS: Angle park, you know? And I'd run out and see if I could serve them, then bring it out on a tray and hook it on the door or the window. But I didn't know a chocolate malt and a chocolate malted milk were the same thing because I'd never had one.

WILLIAMS: Really?

CHILDERS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: You didn't spend much time in the drugstores?

CHILDERS: No. No, when my brother got paid when he worked at the confectionery, why, I'd have a Swiss chocolate sundae when he got paid. That's the extent of being in a drugstore or pharmacy to know what things were.

WILLIAMS: And how old did you say you were when you started this?

CHILDERS: Twelve or thirteen. I think I was thirteen, because I had just finished my second class in Scouts and was working on first class. I had swimming done and first aid, but then I got this job and I went to work on the Fourth of July. So that ended my scouting because I worked at nights, you know, and the scouts met in the evening.

WILLIAMS: Did you work all through high school then?

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. As soon as I got out of school I ran to work, and was so thankful I had a job.

WILLIAMS: You worked at the same place?

CHILDERS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Right there at the corner of Main . . .

CHILDERS: Until . . . let's see, until '31, I think. I worked there until '31. Then my brother had this drugstore, so I worked in the drugstore, and then I went to pharmacy school.

WILLIAMS: When did you graduate from pharmacy school?

CHILDERS: I didn't graduate from pharmacy school. This has been sixty years ago, and if you were . . . You had to attend school one year, then you were qualified to take the state examination. And I qualified.

WILLIAMS: And your first drugstore, where was that at?

CHILDERS: On West Maple, 216 West Maple [see appendix, item 1]. Then we had another pharmacy in 1933 in the First National Bank. My brother and I worked there for twenty years or more, and I sold it. I retired for five years and decided I'd go back into business, you know, but . . . [interview

interrupted and tape turned off]

WILLIAMS: I guess we were talking about you retired and then came back into the business.

CHILDERS: I came back in business in '56 in Englewood, and I retired last October.

WILLIAMS: Just 1990?

CHILDERS: Nineteen ninety. Yes, 1990.

WILLIAMS: So you have been a pharmacist in Independence for . . .

CHILDERS: All those years. I don't know whether . . .

WILLIAMS: Almost sixty years.

CHILDERS: Almost sixty, about fifty-five, I'd say.

WILLIAMS: Was the First National Bank . . . is that where Dr. Allen's office was?

CHILDERS: That's where Dr. Allen's office was, and he was the nicest person. Gee, he was . . . and he worked himself to death, he really did. Those were the days that the doctors made house calls, and I remember one time—it was probably one or two o'clock in the morning—during the war, and my brother and I . . . I remember we went to work about twenty minutes to six. The doctors had called us at home. There was an epidemic on, and the older pharmacists who had the flu and didn't open their stores . . . and the other one didn't care, you know. I have to watch what I say?

WILLIAMS: It's up to you.

CHILDERS: Yes. Anyway, Dr. Allen would be out in the stormy weather making house calls, and he'd call in. I remember one night somebody was vomiting and he said, "And send a bottle of ginger ale with your prescriptions." And I said, "Dr. Allen, I have no idea where to get a bottle of ginger ale at two

o'clock in the morning." He says, "Damn it, get it." And I got it. I called one of my friends and got a bottle of ginger ale. Now, those were the days when everybody cared, you know? Even the fellow I called got out of bed to get it, and he said, "This is no time to party." And I said, "No, this is an emergency." [chuckling] Those were the interesting things. But Dr. Allen was . . . Gee whiz, I know that he made . . . Office calls were a dollar during the Depression days, and they'd be lined up down the hall. So would the other doctors' [offices], you know.

WILLIAMS: How was the pharmacy business different back in the thirties and forties?

CHILDERS: Well, we did more compounding. We have these preparations today that come already prepared, but in those days we weighed it out on the scales and took the mortar and pestle and ground it up, and had the vehicle to make it taste good, you know? It was quite a job. And not everything, but just about everything . . . that was about the time that things were coming on the market that were prepared. But we did that for many years. And the baby prescriptions, there were little powders that you dissolved in the milk or the water, and that was all handwork. You had to grind it up and weigh it on the scale and grind it up and mark it off in little squares so you could get it . . . And you had papers about three inches square that you'd rake off one on each square and then fold it into a box, you know. That's the way it was done.

WILLIAMS: First of all, what was your brother's name?

CHILDERS: Buddy Childers. That's what he was known by.

WILLIAMS: How did you get your nickname?

CHILDERS: Well, this is difficult for you to believe, but I was raised in a Catholic neighborhood, and I was such a good little baby that . . . They had studied about Saint Peter, and they called me Peter for a while, and then they kind of cut it short and called me Petey. My wife doesn't believe that today, but that's the story. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Because you were like Saint Peter?

CHILDERS: Yes, I was good.

WILLIAMS: Did your drugstore then have a soda fountain and all that stuff?

CHILDERS: Oh, no, no, it was strictly . . . The drugstore originally had one, but we finally got rid of the drugstore, and we were both employed at the pharmacy. Just prescriptions. We didn't carry baby food. We didn't carry anything . . . I think we carried Merthiolate or some of those first aid things, gauze and bandages and things like that.

WILLIAMS: So it's not like the Watt 60 up there now?

CHILDERS: Oh, my goodness sakes, no! Everything was . . . it was all medicine and things that . . . Well, to give you an instance how things have changed: those liquid prescriptions, the highest price that I remember was \$1.50. Most of them were \$1, \$1.25, and the ointments were 75 cents to \$1. And I remember ophthalmic ointments cost us 17 cents, and we sold them for 35 cents. Now, that's an item that was very important because it was for your eyes. Now that same ingredient, same tube of medicine, same identical printing and everything, now costs \$4.20 a tube wholesale. So you see how things have changed. These are things that are difficult for me to comprehend, you know.

WILLIAMS: That's quite a big difference.

CHILDERS: Quite a difference.

WILLIAMS: What's your first recollection of the Trumans?

CHILDERS: Well, he was a judge across the street from our shop in the courthouse. The courthouse is still up on the square, you know. But it was always . . . some of them called him Mr. Truman, but as the judge you'd say, "Morning, Judge," hardly say his last name, you know. But he was kind and nice and polite to everyone.

WILLIAMS: And I guess since you worked right around there most of the time, you would see him quite a bit?

CHILDERS: Yes, quite often.

WILLIAMS: Even as working over at the . . .

CHILDERS: Yes, but the most interesting part was when he became senator in 1933— isn't that what we discussed?—and he would come from the senate for the vacation and he would take his walk from 216 [North Delaware Street], uptown and around the square, you know, and he would come in the bank building. The lobby was open in the evening because some of the doctors still were working, and he would say hello to the elevator man, Jim Therkells, the colored man, and it just tickled Jim to death, you know. And he would wave, if we were not busy, as he went out the door. But he was always polite and friendly and never wanted you to think that he was somebody.

WILLIAMS: Did you know Mrs. Truman back then?

CHILDERS: Yes. Later when I opened the pharmacy out in Englewood, Mrs. Truman

would call for a few things. Then one day she came in the store for something for her teeth, and I waited on her, and she had the Secret Service with her, you know, there. They bothered the Trumans because they were always in the road, you know? And Mrs. Truman had blue eyes and that white hair, and she had the most beautiful robin egg blue coat you had ever seen. It was fall, you know. Oh, she was . . . could you say, a beautiful lady or a handsome lady?

WILLIAMS: Were they customers of yours all this time?

CHILDERS: Yes. And then when Mr. Truman took ill, why, we serviced that, and when Mrs. Truman was ill, we took care of that.

WILLIAMS: Who was their family doctor?

CHILDERS: Better cut it off while I think a minute.

LESLIE HAGENSEN: Wallace Graham.

CHILDERS: Wallace Graham, sure. Sure. Wallace has been to our house here, you know. But he was a jolly good fellow, and he took care of them. But Dr. Graham was the old school, you know, and I remember he called up one day, and I think it was Mr. Truman or Mrs. Truman had some mucous in their throat, and he said, "I've done everything. They're using the bulb syringe to pull it out." He said, "Is there anything that might help?" He said, "You've got to help me." I said okay. So there was an old product that I remembered back years ago that was called glycothymaline, and it helped remove the mucous. But that's the kind of doctor he was. "Can you help me?" Wasn't that nice?

WILLIAMS: Is that what you mean by "the old school"?

CHILDERS: Yes, he was of the old school, because he was not quite as old as Mr. Truman, of course.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned to me on the phone about Mr. Truman coming in and getting a prescription.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes! It was a Thursday afternoon, and it was miserable, and there wasn't a car on the street. It was 1933, and times were rugged, and he had been up to see the eye and nose and throat man, Dr. Stanley Green. And he came down, and he had a prescription and bought an atomizer, too—I remember it so well, like it was yesterday—and he paid \$3.85. But he paid us. And then he said . . . he thanked us, and he said, “You boys are doing a nice job.” That did it.

WILLIAMS: And he gave you a five-dollar bill.

CHILDERS: A five-dollar bill. We had change for that five-dollar bill. But many times we didn't have change, and my brother would keep them in conversation, you know, and I'd take the five and run around the corner to the bank. See, we were right in the . . . The lobby was just outside our door. And get the change and come back and nobody would know that we didn't have change for it. [chuckling] And another thing, many times in the evening when the doctors would go out to make a house call—it was \$3, yes—and many times they hadn't taken any money, and they didn't have any money, and they'd come down and borrow \$2 so they would have change for a five. I had two or three of them do that. We were all in the same boat, and nobody knew we were poor, you know?

WILLIAMS: So people just didn't have cash during the Depression?

CHILDERS: No, no cash. Gosh.

WILLIAMS: How would they pay you?

CHILDERS: Well, some of them paid with chicken, butter, eggs, you know, or would offer to do sewing. I couldn't allow that because Mrs. Childers won a prize in high school, you know, and that would be wrong. [chuckling] But they were on WPA [Works Progress Administration] and all those things that brought in a little money.

WILLIAMS: What did you do with all the chickens and butter and eggs?

CHILDERS: Took them home and ate it. That was part of our living, you know?

WILLIAMS: And I guess the Trumans never paid that way.

CHILDERS: No, they paid, but they always paid.

WILLIAMS: Cash?

CHILDERS: Cash. And then when I moved out to . . . when I was out in Englewood, why, they ran a regular account if they needed a few things. But the most interesting thing with the Trumans was when the first grandchild came. I remember sending out some storybooks, and then as they came . . . I think Margaret had four [children], I'm not sure, and each time they'd all come home—they were still babies, you know—I'd send out these storybooks to them. My daughter Mary that teaches school here would censor the books that I bought so that I wouldn't offend anybody and they'd be educational.

WILLIAMS: We have several of those books still at the house.

CHILDERS: Oh, have you really?

WILLIAMS: And they have your drugstore name imprinted on there, and I was just wondering how those got into the house.

CHILDERS: That's how they got into the house.

WILLIAMS: So you would just send those along with the prescription?

CHILDERS: Send them along with the prescription, or anything that they ordered.

WILLIAMS: Would you do that with everybody who you knew had children?

CHILDERS: Oh, sure. That was public relations, you know, and that was important because my smile, I don't think, convinced very many people to come back and come back. But when I was a small boy, I had typhoid fever and . . . Am I boring you?

WILLIAMS: No, not at all.

CHILDERS: Well, these are things that . . . I've got to have a drink of water.

WILLIAMS: Okay. [tape is turned off] Where is that in Colorado?

CHILDERS: At Estes Park, nine miles up in the mountains at 9,200 feet, and it's in a little valley, and behind us is Long's Peak. It looks like it's in the backyard, but it's eight miles. And across the street, just immediately across the street, is this Twin Sisters Mountain. It's 11,000 feet high, and the most beautiful view in the world. Flowers everywhere. Flowers everywhere. But knowing you all work for the National Park [Service], we have some acreage . . . We have two forties that border the national park.

WILLIAMS: Rocky Mountain National Park?

CHILDERS: Yes, and we'd like for the park to have it, even as a gift or something. We talked to Mr. Thompson out there several times, but when the Reagans went in they killed everything.

WILLIAMS: Yes, I know the rest of that story. They probably said they didn't want it or couldn't take it or something.

CHILDERS: Well, I guess they couldn't get a rake-off or something, I don't know. You're always suspicious, you know? But that's Colorado.

WILLIAMS: So you offered it to the park?

CHILDERS: Yes, we offered it to the park, but they said they could not maintain it because they did not have any money. And it's a natural place. It has three small streams on it, beaver ponds, moose, elk, deer. You can see all of them. And I have a salt lick in the yard out there, and you can just see them there all the time.

WILLIAMS: It sounds like a really nice place.

CHILDERS: And those elk are huge animals!

WILLIAMS: How long have you owned that?

CHILDERS: Forty-five years, I guess, something like that.

WILLIAMS: Is that before the park was there?

CHILDERS: Oh, no, the park was there in 1926 or 1927. But this was some acreage that ran along Number 7 Highway, but the park is just directly behind us.

WILLIAMS: Well, what were we talking about? Oh, the storybooks and things.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. Well, I went to one of the Truman Awards. I was on the Truman Award committee, and we were up at the library, and Mr. Daniel I had never met. But he's such a handsome fellow, I didn't forget him, you know. And we walked down the hall, and I ran into him and I said, "I'm Petey Childers, Mr. Daniel. I'm pleased to meet you." [He said,] "The storybook man." Wasn't that nice?

WILLIAMS: That's how he recognized you.

CHILDERS: That's how . . . I'm the storybook man, I'm not the pharmacist, you know?

[chuckling] But that tickled me, really.

WILLIAMS: So apparently he'd been reading some of your books.

CHILDERS: Well, I think that he probably had read to four kids the stories. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: What did you think when Mr. Truman became president?

CHILDERS: I think it was the most wonderful thing in the world. I believed in him. Why I believed, he didn't take money when it was offered to him. With the contractors on the road construction in eastern Jackson County—you've read the story, seen it on television, but it was a true story. Mr. Pendergast wanted to give it to his henchmen, or friends, you might say, and Mr. Truman said there was no way. I think it was a Kansan construction company that he awarded it to, because we wanted roads, not for somebody to take the county for money. So that was most admirable of Mr. Truman. And when he became president . . . He was vice president, and they said if something happens to Mr. Roosevelt, he becomes president. Well, it happened. Well, everybody was in a shock, but we believed that he was a natural-born leader, and we knew that he would do a good job. I think the almighty God had a part in his decisions and things like that.

WILLIAMS: Do you know when this picture was taken? Can you explain it [see appendix, item 2]?

CHILDERS: No, and this is something I'd like for you to do, because I have the best intentions in the world, you know, but I don't follow through. Every photo that's taken should have a date on the back of it, and it should be put on when they're processed. Now, can you get that moving? [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: You want a law passed or something?

CHILDERS: Well, they don't necessarily have to have a law passed. If we get one company to do it, like Eastman [Kodak], the rest of them would follow suit.

WILLIAMS: Yes, that's a good idea.

CHILDERS: It's so beneficial, you know? But this picture . . .

WILLIAMS: Do you know all the people in this?

CHILDERS: Yes, sir.

WILLIAMS: Can you go from left to right here in the back row?

CHILDERS: Yes, sir. That's Paul Ford, he was with the Gas Company; that's Petey Childers; that's Roy Layland, the banker at the Chrisman Sawyer Bank; this is Dr. [Eugene] Theiss, he was a veterinarian; that's Mr. Starr, he was secretary of the chamber of commerce; this is C.C. Bundschu. The Bundschu family had a big department store here—wonderful people. And this is Mr. Rucker, who was editor and partner with Mr. Southern in the *Examiner*; and this is Ellis Tyler, who had a gift shop; and this is Mr. Buckley, he was an insurance man; and that's Nat Jackson, he was secretary of the chamber of commerce and treasurer, I think; and that's George Dodsworth, who was president of the chamber of commerce at that time; and of course Mr. Truman. And that's just the way he was.

WILLIAMS: And you were sitting in his backyard?

CHILDERS: We were sitting in . . . It's the side yard, isn't it?

WILLIAMS: Well, the side, yes. Off to the side of the back porch.

CHILDERS: Yes, on the north side, isn't it?

WILLIAMS: On the north, yes.

CHILDERS: Yes, I remember, and the grass wasn't too long or too short either.

WILLIAMS: Was he president then?

CHILDERS: He was vice president. I believe he was vice president, but I'm not sure.

He could have been a senator, but I thought he was vice president.

WILLIAMS: So you were involved in the chamber of commerce?

CHILDERS: Yes, I was a vice president of it.

WILLIAMS: Was he involved? How did you get to their house that day, do you know?

CHILDERS: Well, we were invited. The chamber called and told us to be there, and we were there. That's a nice-looking straw hat. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Did you have much contact with the Truman family when he was president, when they were home? Did you ever go to Washington or anything like that?

CHILDERS: Well, we went to the inauguration. But I was trying to remember, one of the boys that worked for me, Floyd Warr, married one of Margaret's friends . . .

WILLIAMS: Dorsy Lou . . .

CHILDERS: Dorsy Lou Warr. And we were invited to the wedding at the Baptist Church. They had it at the Baptist Church, and Margaret sang. Her voice was very sweet and enjoyable.

[End #4360; Begin #4361] [Continuing story from gap between tape changes]

CHILDERS: He tapped on the window with his cane—a walking stick, I guess it was—and invited me in to inspect the Buicks. Well, they had a trunk in the back with leather straps on it, you know, and he put me in the front seat. [chuckling] Of course, I couldn't see over the dashboard, you know. It had vases in the back, and I remember looking up at him, and I said, "Someday

when I get rich, I'll buy a Buick." And I've bought them, and I've driven them ever since. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Really? Just Buicks, huh?

CHILDERS: Yes, sir.

WILLIAMS: Well, we interrupted you in the middle of a story about Dorsy Lou Warr's wedding.

CHILDERS: Yes, we were invited to the wedding, and Margaret sang at the wedding, and she had a very sweet voice, the kind you like to listen to. It wasn't too strong. It was just what you like to hear.

WILLIAMS: You said you went to the inauguration?

CHILDERS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: What was that like?

CHILDERS: Well, that was a dream . . . A dream.

WILLIAMS: Was that the inauguration when he was vice president or president?

CHILDERS: When he was president. There was a group from Independence, and I've got some pictures I'll show you after while. We were the youngest people. Can you imagine us young? We were young. And we went along with them. Fortunately, and unfortunately for a friend of ours who couldn't make the inauguration, so we got to get his ticket to go. Judge Curley, he had a case in federal court and just could not attend, so we filled in. We had a sleeper, you know, not a compartment. The compartments were filled with Independence people. I might say people of means, you know?

WILLIAMS: And that wasn't you?

CHILDERS: No. But I learned such a lesson. They were so nice to us. They would

have us in their compartments, and we played poker. We did a little nibbling every once in a while. But they didn't treat us as fellow travelers. We were treated as guests. Quite a lesson.

WILLIAMS: What was the inauguration ceremony and all of that like?

CHILDERS: Oh, it was wonderful. It was as cold as it could be. It was really cold, and we, I think, were four or five rows back from the big platform, and we listened to every word. And it really was cold but we were dressed pretty good.

WILLIAMS: Was there a reception or anything?

CHILDERS: Oh, yes, they had dinners for Mr. Truman and for Mr. [Alben] Barkley. You know, they called it the "Truman dinner" and the "Barkley," the vice president. The dinner was \$35 each, and Mr. Barkley was \$25 because it was a less expensive hotel, because they were all filled with celebrities, you know. I remember the president's dinner just like it was yesterday. We had eight at the table, and we had two waiters, and we had champagne. You didn't take a taste out that it wasn't filled again. I'll tell you, they were most generous and kind to us all, you know. That's one time I kind of chickened out. I went down on the dance floor, and I wanted to dance with Margaret, and I didn't have enough spunk to intervene because there were several handsome fellows around her, you know, and I . . . I kind of regretted that, you know? But we had a nice time, and we had two or three receptions while we were there. One was at the Seiferts' apartment at the Mayflower. Now, Seiferts make candy, you know, and they were most generous. I think they lived across the street from the William Chrisman

High School when she was going to school here. Very nice people, very nice. Another one was Judge Bundschu. Now, he was a Republican, you know, but he and Mr. Truman were buddies, and they had a reception there, and somewhere else I can't recall. But those were the most . . .

WILLIAMS: Did you get treated any differently because you were from Independence?

CHILDERS: No, I don't think we did. But we were recognized, I'll tell you that. It was quite a deal. And going up on the train, we were up in the mountains or somewhere in Virginia or somewhere, maybe . . . Do you go through mountains or something?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: I think we did. Anyway, the train broke in two, and it scooted on down a couple of miles or so. It was quite a grade, but it was stopped. We were in the front compartment, you know, front part of the train, and we stopped at this station, and it was smoked up. It was terrible. We thought we'd get a cup of coffee, but, gosh, it was like eating soot because it was all over you. And they finally backed down and made the connection and pulled them back on. They had the Gutenberg Bible on the train, and they had two bodyguards—Mr. Rucker was one, and Homer Clemens—Mr. Clemens just died here recently, he was ninety-some-odd years old—and they took turns. One would go to lunch. The other would stay with the Bible, because it was a very expensive thing. Once I got to hold the Bible while Mr. Rucker relieved himself, I think it was. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Were you ever at the White House?

CHILDERS: Half of Independence, on the south side of the square and South Main

Street, caught fire and burned up. And the next morning we were to go to the White House for a tour by Mr. Truman. Well, the mayor was so broke-up, that killed it. That man actually cried.

WILLIAMS: When was this?

CHILDERS: While we were at the inauguration.

WILLIAMS: So there was a big fire here in Independence?

CHILDERS: Independence, yes. And I know that our son was at home, and we got a telegram from him. [chuckling] It said, "It was a hot time in the old town tonight."

WILLIAMS: So did you all rush back here?

CHILDERS: No, we finally soothed him down. It took quite a bit of soothing, but we missed the appointment at the White House.

WILLIAMS: Who was the mayor then?

CHILDERS: Mayor Sermon. He was mayor here for thirty years or more.

WILLIAMS: The first Roger T.

CHILDERS: Roger T., yes.

WILLIAMS: When the Trumans came back from the White House and retired here, how were they different as people?

CHILDERS: They weren't any different than when they left.

WILLIAMS: That was a trick question.

CHILDERS: Why, it was a trick question, but they were just the same people. Gosh, they weren't the kind to change. Mrs. Truman, I think, was kind of bored with all the finery and put-on, I think, is probably what she would say, you know, about all of Washington and all the stuff that went on up there. But

she was just the same. She did have her bridge club up there one time, though.

WILLIAMS: To the White House?

CHILDERS: To the White House, yes, and very nice.

WILLIAMS: What kinds of contact did you have with Mr. Truman when he retired?

CHILDERS: Well, one night he was invited to Sertoma Club, and I was the greeter, you know. Mr. Truman was one of those punctual people, too, if you recall, and he was there among the first. And I shook hands, and we walked into the bar, and I said . . . I don't know whether I said, "Mr. Truman." I probably did, instead of "President Truman." I don't remember. But I said, "Can I buy you a drink?" He said, "You sure can." He had bourbon and water, and I had scotch and water. But he was a down-to-earth fellow.

WILLIAMS: Would you see him around town at other events like that?

CHILDERS: Once in a while. Not too often. I think he enjoyed resting and working on his book, but he always had time to stop and shake hands with people. Always had a kind word for everybody.

WILLIAMS: Were you involved with the Truman Library, it's building or . . .?

CHILDERS: No, but my friend Mr. Weatherford, who was mayor at that time, and he and Mr. Truman decided where to put the library—recommended, you know. And you've probably read the story many times, but Mr. Truman wanted it in Independence. And I think it's a beautiful site. Not flashy. It's their personality, you know?

WILLIAMS: And how much contact would you have with Mrs. Truman?

CHILDERS: Only to wait on her when she came in the drugstore and call on the

telephone to order something.

WILLIAMS: So she would come into the store sometimes?

CHILDERS: Oh, yes, she'd been in the store several times. But I remember that one instance with the blue coat.

WILLIAMS: Was she a good customer?

CHILDERS: Yes. Never asked for any service that anybody else wouldn't ask for, and never, "Can I have it right away?" It was always, "Thank you, Mr. Childers."

WILLIAMS: When they would call up and ask you to deliver . . .

CHILDERS: Well, you knew to deliver. That was my business to know my customers, you know, and to know their voice.

WILLIAMS: How would you deliver it to the house?

CHILDERS: Well, we had delivery cars. We had three delivery cars.

WILLIAMS: Would you drive up to the front door or around to the back?

CHILDERS: Well, Mary, our daughter—I wish she was here because she made a delivery for me. See, Mary was teaching school—not at the private school where she is now, but public school—and whenever I'd get in a jam or anything, if one of the delivery boys didn't show up or something and Mary was out of school, she would help me. And she took a delivery one night. We were so used to going in the driveway, you know, off of Truman Road, and I think that that was about the time that they installed the burglar alarm and television or something. And that was quite a shock to Mary because she had never run into it before, and the Secret Service man came right to the car. Then I had another delivery boy that was acquainted with the

Secret Service, and he took him through the house. Mrs. Truman was ill upstairs, but somehow or other, he had made so many trips, and this fellow took a liking to him, I guess, and said, “Would you like to see the Truman home?”

WILLIAMS: Did you ever have to call ahead to the Secret Service or anything when you were making a delivery?

CHILDERS: No. No. No.

WILLIAMS: They knew you were coming?

CHILDERS: They knew we were coming, or I presume that they had a listening device on the telephone or something. They always knew we were there. Many times they’d meet you, and then take it across the street for us.

WILLIAMS: So you wouldn’t always deliver it to the home yourself?

CHILDERS: No. No, after they were ill . . . After they put in the alarm and television, we would deliver it across the street to the Secret Service.

WILLIAMS: On the phone you were telling me about Mrs. Truman keeping track of the bills.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. Mrs. Truman called up one day and she said, “Mr. Childers, a man is trimming the trees and he has poison ivy, and he’s scratching so much he can’t get much work done. Would you send me something for him?” And of course, knowing that Mrs. Truman was watching her pennies—she wanted a day’s work for a day’s pay, you know—and so I sent something out for him. The first of the month rolled around, and Mrs. Truman called and she wanted to talk to the bookkeeper, and it was my sister. And she said, “I don’t understand my bill.” She said, “What’s this item down here?”

And my sister spoke to me, and I said, “Tell Mrs. Truman that that was the medicine for the tree trimmer that had the itching.” “Oh,” she said, “I’m so embarrassed. I’m so embarrassed.” But she was watching those pennies.

WILLIAMS: So was that the standard practice? You’d send her a bill every month?

CHILDERS: Oh, yes, and it would come back in one of those envelopes that said “Bess Truman” on it.

WILLIAMS: And this one is addressed to Petey Childers Drugs.

CHILDERS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: 10900 Winner Road, Independence, Missouri 64052. On the inside . . .

CHILDERS: I don’t know whether there’s anything on the inside or not.

WILLIAMS: Somebody has written “Received 2/8/73.” So she’d just have a check inside here?

CHILDERS: Have a check inside there.

WILLIAMS: There’s another envelope, while we’re at it. Can you explain . . . ?

CHILDERS: Oh, yes, that’s . . . A friend of mine gave me a first edition with Mr. Truman’s stamp on it. The first day of issue.

WILLIAMS: What kind of medications or things would they order, typically?

CHILDERS: Well, they were all prescription medications. Mr. Truman had a skin problem, and Mrs. Truman . . . They were old people, you understand, and those things happen when you get old and your skin gets dry, you know.

WILLIAMS: I guess later on, when Mrs. Truman was so ill, you would send quite a lot of things over?

CHILDERS: Oh, quite a lot, even the fortified cans of protein, you know, a lot of that. But as far as saying what kind of medicine they got, I don’t do that.

WILLIAMS: I understand. Who would take care of the business in her last years?

CHILDERS: Well, I think her companion did. And I was trying to think of her name the other day, who lived down on West Maple, and if you haven't interviewed her, find out who it was.

WILLIAMS: Was that Valeria?

CHILDERS: Valeria, yes.

WILLIAMS: We interviewed her several years ago. I didn't do it, but someone else . . .

CHILDERS: She was very nice.

WILLIAMS: Would Dr. Graham always be the one to call up and say, "Send something out," or was it . . .

CHILDERS: Well, if it was a new medication he would call, yes.

WILLIAMS: But typically who would give you the call in those last years?

CHILDERS: It would be a refill on the prescriptions that they were continuously using, and Dr. Graham would call from the home. If he was at the home, he'd call from the home to the pharmacy.

WILLIAMS: Would the nurses there ever call?

CHILDERS: No, they might call and order refills or something like that, but new prescriptions, Dr. Graham took care of it. Dr. Graham was over here on that tour when we had that '84 dinner, you know? And he was in uniform and wanted to go upstairs. He had been to a reception or something and wanted to go upstairs and change clothes. So he took care of that, and he lost a little medal of some kind. Mrs. Graham called me the next day and said, "Did you find any. . . ." I said, "No, but we'll go home and look." So, when I got off work, we came and we combed that bedroom—I mean, on

our hands and knees. It wasn't very big, but it was some medal that he had.

I never did find it. I think he probably lost it in the car or somewhere. I didn't hear from her again. But they were very nice people.

WILLIAMS: Another story you told me on the phone was about Mr. Truman and long hair.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. You know, he had those grandchildren, boys. They were all boys, weren't they?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: Yes, and it was the time of the long hair. Well, Mr. Truman didn't care for that, but there wasn't anything Mr. Truman could do about that. He could order the army out, but he couldn't control cutting the kids' hair, you know. [chuckling] And that just stuck him, you know, that he couldn't do anything about that. And to get back to the story about Mr. Truman, he was over to the podiatrist for his feet. He'd walked so long and so much, you know, he needed a little attention now and then. And this young salesman was walking down the hall, and he had . . . It was the time of the long hair, so he had this long hair, and he got about . . . oh, just about three or four feet from Mr. Truman, and recognized him, because Mr. Truman was getting very thin, you know. And he said, "Good morning, Mr. President." And Mr. Truman, always good manners, he said, "Good morning." He said, "Boy, you need a haircut." Well, he was young like you are, you know. He came across the street from the medical building and [asked], "Can I use your telephone?" Oh, he was all aflutter, you know. [chuckling] And he said, "I just said 'Good morning' to Mr. Truman,

President Truman, and he said, ‘Boy, you need a haircut.’” He said, “I’m going to get a haircut.” I thought that was funny.

WILLIAMS: I had a question, and I’ve forgotten it.

CHILDERS: No, you must remember to remember.

WILLIAMS: I will eventually, but in the meantime I’ll ask you, did you deliver to neighbors around there on Delaware Street?

CHILDERS: Oh, sure. I had a booming business. And I never felt like that I worked, I had so much fun.

WILLIAMS: If I mention some names, could you tell me what comes to mind, like the Choplins?

CHILDERS: The Choplins, yes. By the way, she died the other day. And there was a preacher across the street, Proctor. And let’s see, the Twymans lived down the street. And I’m trying to think, the Sappers on North Delaware. There was a colored family that lived way down on Delaware. I remember delivering to her. Or the Burruses, you know.

WILLIAMS: How about the Comptons?

CHILDERS: No, I never did get to sell to Polly, but he would come in the store and buy something, you know. But he had a . . . he could get it cheaper somewhere else.

WILLIAMS: I’ve heard that, that he was that way.

CHILDERS: Yes. But he did take the Reverend . . . Proctor? Not Proctor.

WILLIAMS: The Baptist minister?

CHILDERS: Yes, the Baptist minister.

WILLIAMS: Hunt?

CHILDERS: He would take him to lunch, and I'll bet he didn't leave a tip. He was a nice person, don't misunderstand me. He was nice, and he did a lot of nice things at Christmas time. He had a little shop in his basement, and he made ornaments and things like that. If you were a very special friend, he made ice cream, you know. Delicious. I never did get any of it.

WILLIAMS: I think he was good friends with Reverend Hunt.

CHILDERS: Reverend Hunt, that's who it is. But I never called him Reverend Hunt. My dad came from Kentucky, and everybody was Preacher Jones or Preacher Martin or something like that. So, as I grew up, you know—that was before this doctor stuff came to be—it was always Preacher so-and-so, and to this day, Preacher Hunt. He would come in on a Monday morning, and he would have two or three cigar boxes full, and I'd say, "Hi, Preacher Hunt. How's the flock?" And he'd say, "Mighty generous, my boy. Mighty generous." [chuckling] See I have fun. Do you understand me?

WILLIAMS: That's great.

CHILDERS: I was up at the Presbyterian church not long ago. Charlie Allis had celebrated fifty years in scouting, and I just . . . It comes out of my mouth sometimes—it happens to you, I'm sure—without even thinking. I said, "Preacher Melton, how are you?" [chuckling] Just like I was supposed to. And he's got a couple doctorate degrees, you know, but it was Preacher Melton.

WILLIAMS: And of course you know Mrs. Allen who lives . . .

CHILDERS: Oh, Mrs. Allen. I've talked to her . . . if I said thousands of times, that wouldn't be enough. Because Dr. Allen, you'd have to get permission on a

prescription, or Dr. Allen didn't phone it in when he was supposed to phone it in, and I'd call Mrs. Allen. "I'll have Doctor call you as soon as he comes back." Or, "Doctor left a note," and she would read it for me, you know. She's a dear lady. She had four daughters, or five daughters?

WILLIAMS: Four.

CHILDERS: Four. See, I'm slipping just a little bit, just 20 percent.

WILLIAMS: Well, I'm going to get to talk to Barbie, the youngest daughter. She's coming out in a few weeks.

CHILDERS: Oh, is she really? I hope to get to see her.

WILLIAMS: So that'll be fun.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: And we've already interviewed Mrs. Allen.

CHILDERS: Let's see, yes, Mrs. Allen . . .

WILLIAMS: And I guess the Watson Methodist Church was across the street on Delaware.

CHILDERS: Yes, it was. I was trying to think who was the minister at that time. It wasn't Shoengert, was it? I don't remember.

WILLIAMS: Did you go to William Chrisman High School?

CHILDERS: Yes, graduated from William Chrisman High School in 1931. And we're planning our sixtieth reunion the twenty-first of September. You know, most of them have it in the summertime, May or something like that, but these people are getting old, and they've got grandchildren and great-grandchildren that are graduating from . . . I guess high school or something, and we thought, well, you'll never get a crowd together.

They've got to take care of all these grandchildren and such. So we moved it up to September, and we're going to have it over at the Chiefs banquet room. It should be nice. We have a nice committee that's working on it. And the fact is, we've got a meeting coming up Thursday to send out another letter. We've heard from twenty-nine, so that's pretty good so far, you know. We expect probably seventy-five or more, and maybe a hundred.

WILLIAMS: How big were the graduating classes then?

CHILDERS: Well, I think it was . . . I always said 277, but it might have been a little bit more than that. But as I remember, it was . . . Now, why would that stick in my mind all these years? And people would ask me and I'd say, "Yeah, I think it was . . ." "No, Pete, it was a little more than that." And I thought, "No, I wouldn't remember 277 if that wasn't right." Bullheaded, too, you know, Irish. Couldn't give in on that.

WILLIAMS: Well, looking back on your association . . . Well, first of all, you were never actually in the Truman home when they were alive. Is that right?

CHILDERS: No, I was there the first day they opened it.

WILLIAMS: So I guess I can't ask you what it was like inside back then if you were never in it.

CHILDERS: No, but I'll bet it was neat and clean. Yes, it was nice. I was trying to think of something else that I wanted to tell you about. Oh, Mr. Truman would play poker over at Polly Compton's and would always get Mike [Westwood] to . . . You know, we had those dollar bills in packets, you know, that you just peel off like a checkbook. Have you ever seen them?

WILLIAMS: No.

CHILDERS: My checkbook's right there. You know what a checkbook is?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: You tear them out just like you . . . Well, Mr. Truman always had a packet of one-dollar bills, and he would sign "Harry S. Truman," you know. Tear it out, a souvenir.

WILLIAMS: I never heard that.

CHILDERS: Well, goodness sakes. You've never seen me before either. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Oh, I wanted you to tell us about getting those pictures while we have the tape running, the autographed pictures that you have.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. Mary got hold of Mike Westwood . . . These people we've known all our life because we were raised here, you know, and Mike used to be a policeman, so we knew him very well. We said, "Mary would like to ask Mike for a picture of Mr. Truman for her schoolhouse," the private school that she has. And she was delighted because it's an eight-by-ten, just like the one for Mr. Truman, and signed, "To Mary Childers." She was delighted. Oh, I mean, way high, you know? And about two weeks later, it was cold weather. Mr. Truman drove up and . . . Mike was driving, of course. Mr. Truman was in the car, and Mike said, "Now, boy, this is going to cost you," because it wasn't in a frame, you know, it was rolled up. He said, "This is going to cost you. You've got to get it framed, and that'll be \$50 at least." He said, "You're stuck now." Plain-talker, you know. So I knew what it was. He said, "Mr. Truman didn't think that small picture was adequate for a schoolhouse. He wanted her to have a nice size one."

So it was cold weather, and then I went out. I didn't want Mr. Truman to lower the glass. It was very cold. I didn't want him to lower the glass, but I knocked on the window, and he turned, and I said, "Thank you," and he said, "You're welcome."

WILLIAMS: And you also have one of Mrs. Truman.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. I just thought that having served Mrs. Truman and Mr. Truman, too, it took a little guts for me to mention that, because that was kind of delicate to me, you know? The housekeeper or companion called up and ordered some medicine, and I said . . . when she finished, I said, "We have a picture of Mr. Truman, but we don't have one of Mrs. Truman. We'd very much like to have one." She said, "I'll call you back in a few minutes." And it wasn't but just a minute or two, and she said, "Mrs. Truman wanted to know what size you wanted." Now, how nice, you know? And I'm just . . . I'm nobody, you know, just a pharmacist.

WILLIAMS: So you have an eight-by-ten of Mrs. Truman?

CHILDERS: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Signed?

CHILDERS: Yes, and it says not "*To* Petey Childers," but "*For* Petey Childers." Now, that goes back quite a ways in how people address things, I think.

WILLIAMS: That just reminded me of the question I forgot way back when.

CHILDERS: Great. I'm proud of you.

WILLIAMS: Did she ever send you Christmas cards or did you send her Christmas cards?

CHILDERS: No. No, storybooks was all I ever sent to the house. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: And you never got any kind of gift or anything?

CHILDERS: No.

WILLIAMS: A reward for all those deliveries you made?

CHILDERS: Oh, no, but there was always . . . When we'd deliver it to the house, there was always a "thank you" whenever you handed the package, even to the Secret Service. It wasn't not saying anything. They always thanked you. They were taught nice manners. You know, it's so important to have nice manners. It doesn't cost anything. Gee, you make somebody feel good.

WILLIAMS: I can see why you were a successful businessman. All these things you learned.

CHILDERS: I had fun. I had fun. I made it fun, you know, because the difficult people that some of the other people didn't get along with very well or were . . . they didn't click, you understand? Those were the kind of people that I thoroughly enjoyed serving them. I'd make them smile.

WILLIAMS: Well, looking back, how do you think your life would have been different if you hadn't known Harry and Bess Truman?

CHILDERS: Well, I would have certainly missed a lot of interesting things. It would have been sad. Really. Because I had a successful business and maybe I could have done it without the Trumans, but . . .

[End #4361; Begin #4362]

WILLIAMS: I'm surprised at the things people have that I haven't seen.

CHILDERS: That was the inauguration.

WILLIAMS: You have a ticket to the Truman-Barkley Club Dinner, on January 18, 1949.

CHILDERS: [reading] “Missouri delegation to President Truman’s inauguration.”

WILLIAMS: So you were part of the Missouri delegation.

CHILDERS: Yes, sir. Now, this is the group from Independence. That’s Bill Sermon, and that’s Mr. Tice—he was an attorney. And if I can remember all these, that’s Mayor Sermon there, that’s Mrs. Sermon, that’s Mrs. Childers. Where am I? I’m somewhere in there. That’s Congressman Randall, Bill Bradley, his wife, and that’s . . . I believe that’s Colonel Brady and his wife. And that was Judge Bundschu’s housekeeper. And I don’t know who this is. Maybe that’s me back there, I don’t know. But anyway . . .

WILLIAMS: You had to wear tuxedos, huh?

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. Let me tell you another story. Am I wasting your time?

WILLIAMS: No, go right ahead.

CHILDERS: Mrs. Childers had to have a little jacket, a fur jacket. Now, we never had money, you understand, but we had enough for this trip. It cost \$525, total, and I think that included some of the clothes. But I had to have a silk hat. Well, if you’ve never bought a silk hat, it’s quite an ordeal. They have a wooden thing that fits on top of your head, and it has screws all around it, wooden screws. And they set it above your ears like this, you know, and screw it in. Is this interesting enough to talk about?

WILLIAMS: Yes, it’s fascinating. It sounds painful, too.

CHILDERS: And they screw that down, you know, until it’s just right, and then they can flip a thing and there’s a piece of paper . . . Of course, I had an egg-shaped head—you know, egghead? Well, I bought the hat. It was \$35. Now, that was over and above anything else, you know? Because you could rent the

suit for . . . I think it was \$10 or \$12, maybe \$15, and the gloves, and I had black shoes and brown shoes, but black shoes. And then I had these homburgs—they were the style. I had a brown one and a black one. I've still got them. Still got the silk hat, too.

WILLIAMS: How many times have you worn it?

CHILDERS: That's the only time.

WILLIAMS: That's what I thought.

CHILDERS: It was. But they put it on display once in a while when they have something down at Mr. Truman's. Do you want to look at something else?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: I think that we were at a dinner or something . . . [reading] "Three of the faithful party from St. Louis." That's me and Drusilla. And George Carson was there, too. Here's Mayor Sermon.

WILLIAMS: So your wife's name is Drusilla?

CHILDERS: Drusilla. It's mentioned in the Bible. I know you're a Bible reader, just the one time. [reading] "Truman is in."

WILLIAMS: What's her maiden name?

CHILDERS: Drusilla Emily Henning Childers.

WILLIAMS: Henning?

CHILDERS: Henning.

WILLIAMS: Is that an Independence family?

CHILDERS: Yes. Now, I don't know whether you're old enough to remember "Beverly Hillbillies."

WILLIAMS: Oh, very much.

CHILDERS: “Green Acres”?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: “Petticoat Junction”?

WILLIAMS: All of them, yes.

CHILDERS: What’s the boy from Joplin’s name that had a series? You know of George Burns?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: Gracie Allen?

WILLIAMS: Sure.

CHILDERS: Well, Paul wrote for those people.

WILLIAMS: Who is Paul?

CHILDERS: Drusilla’s brother. And he wrote and produced those, you know. George Burns, I think, and Paul, I think, and somebody else had a company or something. But he wrote and produced those films.

WILLIAMS: Did he model those after Independence?

CHILDERS: Well, yes. “Beverly Hillbillies,” we had a Beverly Hills edition out here years ago, you know. On Paul’s show, when the pretty little girl—I’ve forgotten what her name was [Ellie May]—had chickens, or Granny had chickens out in the barnyard, you know, and they were all named after his sisters, Florence, Rose, Drusilla, all that. [chuckling] And then the banker would be named after his . . .

WILLIAMS: Mr. Drysdale.

CHILDERS: Yes, Mr. Drysdale. Well, Mr. Pendleton was the banker here, and every once in a while you would have Mr. Pendleton’s name mentioned. His wife

taught school to Paul, and he thought she was everything else, and he even flew them out one time to entertain them. But such a gracious fellow! Gee, you never asked questions, whether he's in this or in that or other. You keep your mouth shut. And it's hard.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever get to go out and watch the taping?

CHILDERS: No, but I had them all here periodically. They did some filming down at Branson, you know, at Silver Dollar City.

WILLIAMS: Yes, I remember that.

CHILDERS: And Drysdale . . . Well, they had an opening of a bank here, and it just kind of coincided, and we had them over for dinner afterwards, and Drysdale was here.

WILLIAMS: Was Buddy Ebsen?

CHILDERS: Buddy Ebsen. And he could walk through the doors and not bump his head, and he said, "Gee, this is nice! I don't have to duck." He had the raggedest pair of shoes on I've ever seen, but he was so nice. And then we had Granny one afternoon when they were flying back home, for about three or four hours, and there was somebody else, two or three of the others. But Granny was our favorite because she was a little like Mrs. Childers, you know, and she was an antique bug. She'd go around, "Mrs. Childers, what did you pay for that?" Mrs. Childers would say, "Well, you know we can't think over a couple of hundred dollars." You know, our kind of people. And maybe if you went to \$225, that was . . . you overstepped. And she said, "And we paid \$225 for the cabinet in the dining room there." "Well," she said, "you know I bought one much smaller than that, and I

paid \$750, and I wouldn't have gotten it for that if I hadn't been Granny.”

But she thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon, and we did, too. But Drysdale, Paul used to tell us about Mr. Drysdale. He said, “He really made us more money than any of the other stars, because not once did we have to make a retake on him.” He knew his lines. He knew the expression. He knew everything. He said he was perfect. But it's been interesting to have these people here, you know? And then at Thanksgiving time . . . I've got a cutout of Granny that was put out by Upjohn Company—you know, they put out a cough syrup—and it's life-size, and I bring it down from up in the hall there. It's got a box in front of it. That's where you used to put the cough syrup, you know, to sell it. And Mary has decorated it up with mud-daubers and this, that, and the other, you know. At Halloween I put it up by the front door, and the kids come in, you know? We have a ball. That's one night I get to answer the door.

WILLIAMS: Oh, Halloween.

CHILDERS: Halloween.

WILLIAMS: So the Trumans aren't the only celebrities you've known in your life.

CHILDERS: Oh, no, no. Paul is a celebrity, a super celebrity, really, because he did so much. Well, he had three shows going at a time. Now, that borders on being a genius, you know? And he had these competent writers working for him, but they were from back East, and it was difficult to keep sex and nastiness out. So, when Paul went down to shoot down in Silver Dollar City, he sent them down a week ahead of time and he said, “I want you to go to the different kinds of restaurants all over, no matter how big it is or

small, but learn how the people talk and see if they talk the way that you want to write.” That took care of it. Then Paul would stay up all night rewriting to shoot the next day. A wonderful person and most generous. Jumpsuits[pointing at the one he is wearing]—he’d send me three every year. I’ve got sixteen up there and I give them away, you know. I smoke a pipe, and I burn them up, you know? But he is so generous, and he expects nothing in return. It’s fun for him to be that way. Do you understand? We’d all like to be that way, wouldn’t we?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Well, you got up to find a book about Independence, but I guess you didn’t get it.

CHILDERS: Wait, I couldn’t find Mrs. Childers. Where did she go? [tape turned off]

WILLIAMS: We’re looking at the book *Independence*, and there’s your picture [see appendix, item 3].

CHILDERS: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: You and Mrs. Childers.

CHILDERS: Yes, and it said . . . Reading from the book *Independence*, that was put out by Barbara Potts, the mayor’s office, it said, “Boy, it was a wild day after that 1948 presidential election. It really was. Nothing was done. Nothing. We had a parade. I couldn’t believe it. Well, I believed that the results would be that way, but the rest of the people couldn’t believe it. But then they were enthused because Mr. Truman was from Independence. . . . I had \$30 at 15 to 1”—that’s the way it was—”with one of the pharmacists. That was \$450. The next day . . . he brought the money in, in cash, and I bought a phonograph-radio combination . . .” It’s of mahogany, up in the attic. It

doesn't match the wood down here, see? [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: So that's what you did with your \$450?

CHILDERS: That's what I did with that \$450. I wasn't going to spend that money. I wanted something I could look back and say, "That's what I did with it."

WILLIAMS: Thanks to Mr. Truman's election you won, you got that money.

CHILDERS: That's right. This picture here . . .

WILLIAMS: Is that in the room . . .

CHILDERS: Done right here.

WILLIAMS: Oh, here, okay.

CHILDERS: It took a couple of hours, but it's an excellent picture of two old people, you know that?

WILLIAMS: It is.

CHILDERS: We're not handsome, but it brings the features out very well.

WILLIAMS: And you've lived in this house for twenty-five years?

CHILDERS: Twenty-five years, yes, but in the same neighborhood fifty-four years, I guess. We lived across the street, then we moved up two doors. We like the neighborhood, you know? We used to walk our babies across there when the Gregg family lived here—they're all gone now—and Mr. Gregg would always have stick candy in his pocket, always had stick candy in his pocket. You know those little ones? And the girls, my two daughters, couldn't wait to come over to see Grandpa Gregg, they called him, you know, but he was no relation. But he was such a nice [man]. And we admired this house because it was so hot over here in the summertime and so cold in the wintertime. We lived there next-door here, two doors north, a

nice home. It was only ten years old when we bought it. We paid \$10,000 for it. My brother and Mr. Thomas that is associated with us said, "You'll never live long enough to get it paid for." [chuckling] Isn't that something? Then, when the house came for sale here, why, Mrs. Childers' . . . My mother-in-law was living next door, and she was seriously ill, and so we took care of her. We weren't interested because we had our hands full, you know? Then she passed away, and then the house . . . somebody bought it and lived here four or five years, and they were going to make a nursing home of it, you know. And the neighbors objected. We didn't object. We don't believe in that. That was their business. They invested and . . . So they were turned down for a nursing home. So they put it up for sale, and we bought it. And it was \$26,500. Do you want to know what the \$500 was for? That was for the dining room furniture, the table and the chairs and the sideboard, this table here, and the big piano, the square piano in the parlor. He said, "That's what we paid for it. That's what you're to pay for it." Wasn't that nice?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

CHILDERS: And you know, several years went by, and we got a big bundle in the mail. I think it cost \$4 or \$5 to mail it, and we didn't have any idea what it was. It was addressed to the family, and we opened it up. It was the original plans of the house. Now, we have them upstairs framed, you know. And one side is the room size and then the other is the exterior. So we felt very fortunate that the people thought that much of us that we should have it, you know?

WILLIAMS: Did you have to do much work on the house?

CHILDERS: On the house?

WILLIAMS: Fix it up?

CHILDERS: Well, when we moved over here we didn't have any . . . I had \$10,000 saved up, and along in the fall we had rains. It was in December . . . late in the winter. We had rains out of this world, and one night I was sleeping up there in the big bedroom and I heard water hitting the hearth. So I alerted the girls, and we all went up to the attic, and there were thirteen pans catching water. So we had to have a new roof put on, and new guttering. It came to \$9,500. Well, we didn't have any furniture except what you see, you know, what we've got. So, anyway, I wasn't going to borrow any money.

WILLIAMS: There went your savings.

CHILDERS: Yes, there went the savings. Well, that would have been enough to paper it, you know, and clean it up. And then little by little, why, we bought the dining room rug first, I think, and then the hall runners. Get one paid for, get another one, you know.

WILLIAMS: These are beautiful Oriental rugs.

CHILDERS: Oh, yes. But I've got to tell you the story about the parlor rug. That's the prettiest one and the most expensive, too. I wanted a new station wagon. That's when a station wagon would have been \$5,500 instead of \$23,500 now, and I wanted that station wagon real bad, but I only had 45,000 [miles] on it. Mrs. Childers said, "No, we need a parlor rug." Well, we got our parlor rug. It was a little bit more than that. So every time I walk in

there, I think of that Buick. [chuckling] Really, I do! It just seems like that the lights come on when I go in there. Oh, it's been fun! And then we'd buy a piece of furniture. We had a man that was an antique man, and he would call us and say, "I found a piece of furniture I think you would like. Come by and look at it. Now," he said, "take your time about paying for it." We'd go by and it would be, oh, a hall tree or something like that.

CHILDERS: Can I take this off now?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

APPENDIX

1. "To Open New Drug Store," *The Independence Examiner*, 23 June 1931.
2. "President Truman Poses with C. of C. Officials on Summer White House Lawn," *The Independence Examiner*, 2 July 1945.
3. Excerpt from Brent Schondelmeyer, *Independence* (Independence, Mo.: 1985).
4. "Petey Childers home dates to 1887," *The Examiner*, 30 June 1993.
5. "Everyone's friend, Petey Childers, dies," *The Examiner*, 6 March 1997.