

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MARCIA ARMSTRONG

AUGUST 13, 1991

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-18

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #4357-4359

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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Marcia Armstrong did not return any comments on the draft of this transcript. Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. His 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.

## **RESTRICTION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Marcia Armstrong, employed by Upjohn, worked as a nurse for Bess W. Truman from September 1980 until Truman's death in 1982. Armstrong describes the care Truman received, the layout of the home, and the use of various rooms by Mrs. Truman. Included in her interview are descriptions of other nurses, Secret Service agents, and privately employed persons, all dedicated to the well-being of Bess W. Truman.

Persons mentioned: Harry S Truman, Bess W. Truman, Dale Armstrong, Brian Armstrong, Amy Armstrong, Valeria LaMere, Larry Goddard, Tim Barry, John Gerber, Art Minklein, Jack Lemmon, June Allyson, Clark Gable, Margaret Truman Daniel, Rhonda Welch, Doris Miller, Rosalyn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Betty Ford, Rufus Burrus, May Wallace, Andrew Gray, Georgia Neese Clark Gray, Wallace H. Graham, Robert R. Shemwell, E. Clifton Daniel, Jr., Petey Childers, Edward Hobby, Lucy Land, Jimmy Carter, Henrietta Allen, Winston Churchill, and Grandma Moses.

## ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

### MARCIA ARMSTRONG

HSTR INTERVIEW #1991-18

JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Marcia Armstrong. We're at the Truman Library on the morning 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.

Well, first of all, I'd like to find out more about you before we get to your experience with the Trumans. Are you a native of Independence?

MARCIA ARMSTRONG: Yes, I am, I've been born and raised here.

WILLIAMS: And so how long does that make you a resident?

ARMSTRONG: That tells my age, doesn't it? Forty-one years.

WILLIAMS: Okay. You went to school here?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I did. I graduated from Van Horn High School.

WILLIAMS: Okay. What part of town did you grow up in?

ARMSTRONG: I grew up in the Englewood district.

WILLIAMS: Had you ever seen the Trumans before you began working at the home?

ARMSTRONG: No, I had not. My aunt had seen Mr. Truman, but I had never met the Trumans before I started working for Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: What did you know about them before you began working there?

ARMSTRONG: I think the thing I probably remember the most, from what everybody that had met them just on the street or in offices, etcetera, was how kind and down-to-earth they were.

WILLIAMS: And you're married?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I am, I am married. My husband's name is Dale and we have two children. Brian will be eleven this week and Amy is nine.

WILLIAMS: And he works for the city of Independence?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, he does. He works for the fire department.

WILLIAMS: Did he have any contact through the fire department with the Truman home through the years?

ARMSTRONG: No, he has not. Well, occasional alarms there, yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, how did you become involved with Mrs. Truman, and when was that?

ARMSTRONG: That would be in 1981, 1980, the fall of 1980. I started doing private duty nursing for Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: Are you a registered nurse?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I am.

WILLIAMS: And where did you go for that training?

ARMSTRONG: I went to Saint Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, for that training, graduated in 1975.

WILLIAMS: So you had been a nurse for several years.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I had been.

WILLIAMS: And who called you about working at the Truman home?

ARMSTRONG: I applied at a private duty agency, Upjohn, and they happen to have just received Mrs. Truman as a client and asked if I would be interested, since I lived so close to her, if I'd be interested in working for her.

WILLIAMS: Where were you living at that time?

ARMSTRONG: I was living off of Chrysler on South Avenue, which was less than a mile away.

WILLIAMS: Could you walk to work?

ARMSTRONG: I did not.

WILLIAMS: So did Mrs. Truman call, or who arranged . . .?

ARMSTRONG: No. No, the Secret Service agency was working with the private duty

agency in lining up nursing personnel.

WILLIAMS: How did they explain what Mrs. Truman needed, as far as nursing care?

ARMSTRONG: They explained that she was just, you know, to have a companion and a nurse to monitor all of her medical conditions, that she did have some medical problems, and we were there to monitor and assess those to see that she got quality care, and that we were to take our meals with her and become a companion as well as a nurse.

WILLIAMS: How often were the nurses there at the house?

ARMSTRONG: We were there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

WILLIAMS: So that was three shifts?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it was.

WILLIAMS: And which shift did you work?

ARMSTRONG: I worked all three.

WILLIAMS: So there was no set shift you worked?

ARMSTRONG: Normally I worked 3:00 to 11:00, except that I did do . . . weekends I did days, and then occasionally I did some night shifts.

WILLIAMS: So that was 3:00 in the afternoon, and 11:00 . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Who else was working at that time, that you recall, in the Truman home?

ARMSTRONG: Valeria was there as her companion and business executive, taking care of all the business ends and seeing that the supplies and necessary items were purchased and in the house. And then we did have a cook for a while, whose name was Wanda. She was a very, very nice lady and would cook all the specialties that Mrs. Truman liked.

WILLIAMS: What were some of those specialties?

ARMSTRONG: She loved custard and she loved . . . She had a recipe for Jell-O that you used sherbet with when you made the Jell-O, instead of cold water, and

she really loved that. She loved gazpacho.

WILLIAMS: These sound all kind of like foods that are easy to chew or eat.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she had to have very soft foods.

WILLIAMS: Did she have any particular favorite flavors of the Jell-O or anything?

ARMSTRONG: Orange.

WILLIAMS: Were there other foods that she liked? Did she prefer sweets over other things?

ARMSTRONG: No, she was not a big sweet eater, did not eat a lot of sweets, besides the custard, which of course isn't real sweet, and occasionally she would eat some ice cream. But she was not a big sweet eater.

WILLIAMS: So what were her main courses? Like for lunch, what would she have, or dinner?

ARMSTRONG: Usually Wanda would have a soft meat dish cooked up. We would either, you know, grind the meat or have a soft meat dish, and then she would have either like a baked potato or a mashed potato and a vegetable and then the custard or Jell-O.

WILLIAMS: So your basic kind of Missouri meat and potatoes. [chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, basic meals, yes.

WILLIAMS: What did she like to drink?

ARMSTRONG: Ice water was probably the thing she drank the most of.

WILLIAMS: Never would have tea or coffee?

ARMSTRONG: Occasionally tea, seldom coffee.

WILLIAMS: Soda pop?

ARMSTRONG: No.

WILLIAMS: Lemonade?

ARMSTRONG: Don't really remember us having lemonade at all either.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Well, back to the . . . What was your reaction when you were

asked to work for Mrs. Truman?

ARMSTRONG: I was ecstatic. I was just really thrilled that I had, you know, felt quite honored that I'd even been asked to work for her.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember your first day at work?

ARMSTRONG: My first day at work I was so apprehensive, extremely apprehensive, not having met Mrs. Truman and knowing that this was our first lady, and knowing also that, you know, it did require, a lot of thought in the sense that, you know, I don't want to do anything wrong or make mistakes or, you know, I don't want to drop anything on her foot, etcetera. Definitely a lot of apprehension. But she was an extremely *gracious* and kind lady, and made you feel *extremely* comfortable, if she liked you.

WILLIAMS: Do you think she liked you?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I do.

WILLIAMS: How did she let you know that?

ARMSTRONG: You could tell when you came on duty if there had been somebody before you that she did not like. She was extremely uncooperative with anybody she did not like. She would do nothing for them. She would not help them in transferring her from chairs or anything else if she did not like them. And the look in her eyes when you came on, if she'd have somebody she didn't like, you could tell instantly. And it would take you maybe an hour before she relaxed and became herself again when you were working with her.

WILLIAMS: So there were nurses or nurses' aides that she didn't particularly care for?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, definitely.

WILLIAMS: Did the Secret Service have to check you out?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they did.

WILLIAMS: Do you know what was involved in that process?



ARMSTRONG: No, I'm not sure. We were never told. We were just told that we would be checked out, and we were not approved to work for Mrs. Truman until we were checked out. We had to go through that procedure first.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember how long it was between when you were told you could work there?

ARMSTRONG: It was just like three or four days before I got the notification that I was acceptable.

WILLIAMS: How much dealings did you have with the Secret Service agents?

ARMSTRONG: A lot. The Secret Service gave us our orientation to the Truman home. As they said, you know, working for Mrs. Truman, you're going to want to tour the house; and rather than you touring the house on your own, we would like to take you on a tour. And as a new employee they would take each of us as we came on duty on a tour of the house. They were quite colorful in their tours of the house. I'm sure some of what they said was quite ad-libbed and not necessarily true.

There was one incident upstairs in Mrs. Truman's bedroom. There's a little hallway that goes to another adjoining bedroom, and there was a mirror at the end of that hallway. And as I received my tour from the one Secret Service agent, he said, "Now, down that hallway is what we call the ghost of the Truman home." And of course you could see a reflection as you walked by then into the mirror, you know. So they made it quite a colorful and interesting tour.

They did give us some of the history of the back staircase that would go down into the kitchen area, and how the servants had used the back entrance going down into the kitchen area, and did tell us some of Mr. Truman's room versus Mrs. Truman's room, and how they had lived there in the Truman home, trying to make us feel comfortable and

answering curiosity questions that anybody might have.

WILLIAMS: This tour of the house, how much of the house did you see?

ARMSTRONG: All of the house.

WILLIAMS: From the top to the bottom?

ARMSTRONG: We didn't go to the basement.

WILLIAMS: Were you ever in the basement?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I was.

WILLIAMS: How do you remember what the basement looked like?

ARMSTRONG: The basement had a very ancient furnace in it, is my biggest remembrance.

WILLIAMS: Was there a lot of stuff down there?

ARMSTRONG: [sighing] There was some. I don't remember . . . I don't really have a vivid memory of how much. There was some stuff there.

WILLIAMS: Did anyone ever go down there regularly?

ARMSTRONG: Just the Secret Service, if there were problems. If we had furnace problems, which were routine in the winter, the Secret Service would go down and attempt to bang on this or that to get it working. We did have to have space heaters during the winter because the furnace did not adequately heat the house.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we have a few of those, too.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I did have one Secret Service agent that . . . I don't know if I should say that or not, bless his heart, commented on women's pantyhose were probably the best form of insulation during wintertime to keep your legs warm.

WILLIAMS: As if he knew that from personal experience?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Okay. Do you remember any of the agents in particular, their names?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I do.

WILLIAMS: Who was in charge?

ARMSTRONG: Larry was the Secret Service agent. I'm sorry, I don't remember his last name. He was in charge.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Do you remember other names, even first names?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm. Tim was one of the Secret Service agents. John Gerber was one of the agents. I can remember . . . I think his name was Art. I can remember his face quite well. I think his name was Art. Those are the ones that come to mind quickly.

WILLIAMS: Was it kind of scary or did you ever feel awkward working with the Secret Service?

ARMSTRONG: No, they made you feel quite at ease.

WILLIAMS: So . . .

ARMSTRONG: You felt comfortable in the sense you knew you had backup. If you needed help or if anything went wrong, you knew that all you had to do was pick up the red phone and you had back-up. And then they did indeed spend the nighttime hours there in the library at the home while we were working, so you knew you had help there right in the home if you had a problem at nighttime.

WILLIAMS: So there was a direct line over to the Secret Service house?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, there was.

WILLIAMS: Where was that in the house?

ARMSTRONG: It was in the living room area, which was right adjacent to the bedroom Mrs. Truman was using on the main floor.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever have to use the red phone?

ARMSTRONG: Occasionally.

WILLIAMS: For what reasons?

ARMSTRONG: Anytime that we needed to contact the physician or a pharmacy to have anything delivered to the home, we notified Secret Service so they would be aware that someone indeed was coming to the home. Anytime anybody made a phone call in regards to a visit to the home, we had to notify them. Also, I did use it at one point. Mrs. Truman had not been feeling well and I had attempted to take a blood pressure and could not obtain a blood pressure, and I, needless to say, used the phone to contact Secret Service. As it turned out, our blood pressure equipment had quit working. But Mrs. Truman was not responding to us either and would not answer us or anything, so being there alone and being uncertain . . . and so I did indeed use the phone and they did call an ambulance who came. And her blood pressure was indeed okay, but she was definitely not feeling well and had not been responding at all, so I was quite concerned.

WILLIAMS: So there were kind of emergency situations like that where you'd call on the Secret Service?

ARMSTRONG: Occasionally, yes. Yes.

WILLIAMS: Were you ever over across the street in the Secret Service headquarters?

ARMSTRONG: No, I was not.

WILLIAMS: They didn't take you on a tour of that?

ARMSTRONG: No, they didn't. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: How would you describe their attitude toward Mrs. Truman as a protectee, I guess is what they call them?

ARMSTRONG: I think that they were very gracious with her. I think they definitely recognized that she was a lady, and they treated her with respect and admiration. And I think they really sensed that even though it was a job that didn't have a lot of challenge to it, I think they definitely still felt it was a necessary job.

There were times that she did receive threatening mail, not so much against her but against other members of, the current president or dignitaries of our country. And why people with warped minds would mail these things to her, but it would happen occasionally, and they did share some of these with us from time to time that, you know, indeed there were some things. All the mail was scanned before it was brought to the home, and there were indeed some threatening and . . .

WILLIAMS: So they would take those letters out before Mrs. Truman . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Yes, she was never allowed to see those letters.

WILLIAMS: Did they ever mention a genuine threat to her through the years, or Mr. Truman?

ARMSTRONG: No. No. Not to her, to Mr. Truman. They had talked about at one point years earlier where there had been a threat, but they never mentioned anything about a threat against her.

WILLIAMS: Were you ever afraid that something might happen?

ARMSTRONG: No. No, I was never afraid there.

WILLIAMS: What was the day-to-day routine? Or when you would come on your shift, could you go through what would happen?

ARMSTRONG: During the summertime and good weather, Mrs. Truman's favorite place was on the back porch. And indeed when I would arrive, if she was not on the back porch, which she frequently would take an afternoon nap, and if she was still napping, then I would get her up and we would go to the back porch. And we usually stayed on the back porch until it was just too dark and we'd have to come in. We'd usually eat her meal there on the back porch. We watched more Royals baseball games on the back porch than anything. [chuckling] She was a *tremendous* baseball fan. She was not a television fan. She didn't really like a lot of television, except for

baseball. She *loved* baseball. And I do remember one movie we watched with Jack Lemmon and June Allyson, the name escapes me. She absolutely loved that movie. She just laughed and laughed. It was a remake of a Clark Gable movie. She really, really enjoyed a good, old movie with a little bit of comedy through it. But past that she was not a tremendous television fan, really did not care for television. We didn't even watch the news routinely. Baseball games were the big thing.

WILLIAMS: So was there a portable television?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, there was, that we kept on the back porch during summer.

WILLIAMS: Did she seem to keep up with . . . I guess it was the Royals that she was watching?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, the Royals.

WILLIAMS: Would she read the newspaper to keep up with them?

ARMSTRONG: We would read the newspaper to her, yes.

WILLIAMS: So she did keep up that way, also.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: But she didn't watch the news routinely?

ARMSTRONG: Not routinely, no.

WILLIAMS: Would you read that part of the newspaper to her?

ARMSTRONG: Not on a routine basis. If she would express an interest in it, then yes, we would, but not on a routine basis. We did read short stories to her, and again, mysteries were her big favorite in the books that we would read. And we would read short stories to her, and she did enjoy that.

WILLIAMS: When you came on shift, did you have to sign paperwork and do that kind of thing?

ARMSTRONG: We didn't sign-in per se. We had no sign-in sheets as far as when we came on and off, but we did have routine nursing notes and medication

sheets, of course, that we would fill out.

WILLIAMS: Similar to like a chart they would keep in the hospital?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, very much a chart.

WILLIAMS: Was Valeria sort of your supervisor? Would she report who was there and who wasn't to the Upjohn people?

ARMSTRONG: No, the Secret Service would do that. They kept track of who came and who went.

WILLIAMS: So how much supervision did Valeria have over the nursing staff?

ARMSTRONG: Minimal.

WILLIAMS: So she wasn't your boss?

ARMSTRONG: No, she was not. Not at all.

WILLIAMS: What was her function in the house?

ARMSTRONG: Valeria took care of all the bills and paperwork that came in, the mail, and she saw that all of our supplies and needs were met and that anything we needed for Mrs. Truman was obtained.

WILLIAMS: And was she there most of the time you were there?

ARMSTRONG: She would be there during the daytime, Monday through Friday.

WILLIAMS: How was her relationship with Mrs. Truman, as far as you could tell?

ARMSTRONG: She seemed to be fairly close to Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: So if you would come on at 3:00 and spend the evening or afternoon and evening on the back porch, would you eat dinner out there then?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we would.

WILLIAMS: In the wintertime, how was the routine different?

ARMSTRONG: We usually would go to the parlor then instead.

WILLIAMS: Which room is the parlor?

ARMSTRONG: The parlor is the room with the baby grand piano in it, and we would usually go in there. And of course there was a television in there, and if

there was something worth watching, which again she didn't like a lot of television, and so frequently we'd just sit in the parlor and talk and visit.

WILLIAMS: How would you know what she wanted to do, if she wanted to watch TV?

ARMSTRONG: Facial expressions. She was very good at letting you know what she liked and didn't like.

WILLIAMS: So I suppose you would ask her, "Would you like to watch this?"

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And she'd let you know.

ARMSTRONG: She certainly would.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever get the feeling that she lost her decision making or her will power?

ARMSTRONG: No. No, I never once got the feeling she lost her decision-making ability.

WILLIAMS: Even when she couldn't really communicate verbally?

ARMSTRONG: Even when she couldn't communicate verbally, it was very easy to tell what she did or did not want.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember some of her favorite books or any particular moments when she seemed to light up when you were reading to her or anything like that?

ARMSTRONG: I would say probably, you know, the Agatha Christie murder mysteries. She of course enjoyed those extremely well. And then we used the Reader's Digest condensed books because of the shortness of them, and she did enjoy a lot of those.

WILLIAMS: Did you like to read before you started to work there?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I did.

WILLIAMS: So that helped, I guess?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Where would the books come from?



ARMSTRONG: The library there.

WILLIAMS: Who would get them?

ARMSTRONG: We would. We would make . . . You know, the nurses would make a selection.

WILLIAMS: Would you check them out yourself, or did she have a library card that you'd use?

ARMSTRONG: No, we didn't . . . No, we just would go to the library and pick out a book. And we didn't leave the home with it; it stayed in the home.

WILLIAMS: And this was the Mid-Continent Library?

ARMSTRONG: No, her library there.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I see.

ARMSTRONG: Mrs. Truman's library.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I thought you meant you'd go to the public library.

ARMSTRONG: No, no, her library.

WILLIAMS: So you never brought in books from outside?

ARMSTRONG: No, we did not.

WILLIAMS: What happens if you had . . . Did you ever exhaust the supply of books in the house?

ARMSTRONG: No, that would have taken a long time.

WILLIAMS: Did people ever send her books in the mail?

ARMSTRONG: I don't remember us ever getting a book in the mail, no. Valeria, I think, occasionally would bring one in.

WILLIAMS: There are some that are fairly recent, in the seventies and even eighties, so I just wondered how those may have come into the house. Did you ever read any of Margaret's books?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I certainly did. And Margaret did encourage us to feel free to have use of any of the books in the house for our own personal use. She even

gave us permission, if we chose to take some home and bring them back, that it was perfectly acceptable with her.

WILLIAMS: So you met Margaret?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I did. I met her on three separate occasions.

WILLIAMS: When was the first time?

ARMSTRONG: The first time was shortly after we started working with Mrs. Truman. She did come back to check how things were going, and then she did come back at a Christmas time one year, and then when they had the presentation here at the library that Margaret . . . in May. Margaret came back that month, of course, to give the presentation here at the Truman Library.

WILLIAMS: And you said you started working in 1980?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Which month?

ARMSTRONG: I'm thinking it probably was September or October.

WILLIAMS: Were you part of the first Upjohn nurses?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Yes, I was one of the first. There were three or four of us that were the first nurses.

WILLIAMS: And how long did you work at the house?

ARMSTRONG: I worked there up until . . . on a routine basis until May of '82, and I became pregnant while I was working there and my daughter was born June 6th, and then I just worked . . . I was off for a few weeks after that and then I went back and worked infrequently that summer until she passed away in August.

WILLIAMS: So you were there off and on until she died?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: So the Upjohn nurses were there about two years?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Who were some of the other nurses that you worked with?

ARMSTRONG: Rhonda Welch was one of the other nurses that I worked closely with. She worked the night shift. Karen, and I don't remember Karen's last name, worked days frequently. We were the three that started with Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: Were all the nurses from Upjohn?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And were they all registered nurses?

ARMSTRONG: No, there were some LPNs also.

WILLIAMS: What level of nursing care would you have to give? What were some of your routine duties?

ARMSTRONG: Routinely it was just seeing that her diet was adequately met and that her bowel and bladder regime . . . She did have a catheter, so it involved catheter care, because her kidneys were not in good condition, and so she did have to have a catheter. And later she did have to have a feeding tube, so we did have to take care of the feeding tube and all that entailed, and replace the feeding tube and catheter as necessary, and then just routine care.

WILLIAMS: Bathing and . . .

ARMSTRONG: Bathing and good skin care, and . . . She had no breakdowns, and it was important that we saw that she have no breakdowns.

WILLIAMS: Did she have false teeth?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she did. She didn't like them either.

WILLIAMS: She didn't like to wear them?

ARMSTRONG: No.

WILLIAMS: My grandma doesn't either. She's quit. [chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: Yes, a lot of older people, I know, give up on them and don't wear them.

WILLIAMS: I guess they start to hurt or they're just too much of a bother.

ARMSTRONG: Well, then I think, you know, they get them made when they're younger, and then they lose weight and lose structure and I don't think they fit anymore.

WILLIAMS: Was Mrs. Truman concerned about the way she looked?

ARMSTRONG: Very much so. I mean, she wanted to look nice, and she did have . . . We saw to it that she was . . . Usually we just kept her dressed in her gowns and house dresses, and then we used bed jackets and . . . You know, she had nice bed jackets and we made sure she was well-groomed.

WILLIAMS: Did she still wear make-up?

ARMSTRONG: We saw that she still wore make-up, and her beautician would still come in and do her hair on a weekly basis when she was up to it.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember who that was, the beautician?

ARMSTRONG: I see her face but I don't recall her name.

WILLIAMS: Was it Doris?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, Doris.

WILLIAMS: Would you have instructions then to take her blood pressure every so often?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, that's part of our routine nursing care that we would check her blood pressure every shift.

WILLIAMS: And in the evenings, when would she go to bed?

ARMSTRONG: Usually around 9:00, maybe 10:00.

WILLIAMS: And when would she get up in the morning?

ARMSTRONG: Seven or eight o'clock.

WILLIAMS: So she was a fairly early riser.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: When she was asleep, what kind of care was involved?

ARMSTRONG: Just turning her every two or three hours. If she didn't turn herself, then we would go and see that she would turn so that she wouldn't have any skin breakdown, and just monitoring her.

WILLIAMS: Was she in a wheelchair the whole time that you were there?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she was. We would transfer her from the wheelchair to an easy chair so that she wouldn't have to sit in the wheelchair all the time.

WILLIAMS: An easy chair, meaning one of the chairs . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: One of the chairs in the house, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did she have a favorite room or chair?

ARMSTRONG: We usually would sit her in the parlor, and there was a gold chair in there we would usually sit her in.

WILLIAMS: The big front room?

ARMSTRONG: The one with the baby grand.

WILLIAMS: Oh, okay. Did she sit in what we call the living room very much, the one with Mr. Truman's portrait?

ARMSTRONG: We would sit her in there . . . Yes, we would sit her in there occasionally.

WILLIAMS: Did she like to sit at the window and look out, or did she seem interested in what was going on outside?

ARMSTRONG: Not a lot. Of course, when they had the Halloween parade, we did, you know, pull her up to the window, and she did sit at the window and watch the parade.

WILLIAMS: What did you do for holidays?

ARMSTRONG: Holidays were really pretty routine. Her birthday probably stands out most in my mind. I did work the day shift that day, and there were numerous visitors to the house to see her, of course. And then we did get phone calls from the current first ladies that were still living at that time.

They all did call and ask to speak with Mrs. Truman, and did speak with her briefly. Rosalyn Carter and Nancy Reagan and Mrs. Ford, Betty Ford, they all did call and talk to her on her birthday, so it was a very special day. Family phone calls weren't there. There were no phone calls from the family, and Christmas there weren't any presents from the family. She did get lots of gifts from around the country. She would get boxes of oranges and grapefruits from California, and hams and all kinds of food stuff. And flowers, my goodness! Lots and lots of flowers.

WILLIAMS: But not really from the family.

ARMSTRONG: None from the family.

WILLIAMS: Who were some of the people that would visit her most often?

ARMSTRONG: Rufus Burrus would of course come and visit on a routine basis. Her sister-in-law May would come over and visit on a routine basis, and then other ladies that she had played bridge with would come and visit.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember the Grays visiting?

ARMSTRONG: The Grays?

WILLIAMS: Andy and . . . From Topeka?

ARMSTRONG: I don't remember them visiting.

WILLIAMS: What about Dr. Graham?

ARMSTRONG: Dr. Graham would come on a routine basis.

WILLIAMS: What, once a week?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, not that often. No, I'd say more like once a month. Except for the time period when he was working on his memoirs, then he would come a little more frequently to have access to the library there in the home.

WILLIAMS: Would you talk to him very much on the phone?

ARMSTRONG: Only as needed; not really all that frequently.

WILLIAMS: So he wouldn't call, or somebody from his office wouldn't call every day?

ARMSTRONG: No, not routinely. No, definitely not. No, his office usually did not call. We initiated the calls if we felt there was something we needed to call him for, which was not real frequent.

WILLIAMS: Were there other doctors involved with her care?

ARMSTRONG: The only other doctor would be a podiatrist that did come on a routine basis to take care of her toenails. We were not allowed to trim those. That was done by a podiatrist.

WILLIAMS: Is that Dr. Shemwell?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: I was up at his house the other day.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever meet Dr. Graham in person?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I did, many times.

WILLIAMS: I'm sure you've known a lot of doctors in your nursing experience. How would you describe him?

ARMSTRONG: I think he was very caring. I think he personally very much cared for the Truman family, as far as not just as a physician but as friends, and felt like that he knew them quite well, and I think he was very concerned about her care.

WILLIAMS: Was he an easy doctor to get along with?

ARMSTRONG: I had no problems getting along with him.

WILLIAMS: My father's a doctor, so I know how . . . I've heard some nurses.  
[chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: And I have heard some say that he's not easy to get along with, but I had no problems getting along with him.

WILLIAMS: Let's go ahead and change tapes.

[End #4357; Begin #4358]

WILLIAMS: Would the staff have parties, special things like that for Mrs. Truman?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we would. We had a Thanksgiving dinner there at Mrs. Truman's home for her, which the staff and Secret Service were invited to. We also had a birthday party for her on her ninety-seventh birthday. Dr. Graham did come to her birthday party, and the staff and the Secret Service came to the party. I did make a cake, a decorated cake and take, and then we had a separate cake that wasn't decorated that we put ninety-seven candles on. And Dr. Graham and myself and one other nurse worked rapidly at lighting ninety-seven candles and taking them in to her. She got quite a chuckle out of that. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: It didn't set off the smoke alarm?

ARMSTRONG: No, it didn't. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Where were these parties held in the house?

ARMSTRONG: In the dining room and in the living room areas.

WILLIAMS: Did you decorate?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we did.

WILLIAMS: What would you use to decorate?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, we would just use crepe paper streamers and the cardboard pre-printed decorations.

WILLIAMS: Happy Birthday and stuff?

ARMSTRONG: Happy Birthday and the turkey for Thanksgiving.

WILLIAMS: Did you decorate for Christmas?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we did. We had a little Christmas tree, and it was just a small . . . you know, what, two or three-foot Christmas tree, but we did decorate a little Christmas tree.

WILLIAMS: It was a live tree?

ARMSTRONG: No, it was not; it was an artificial.



WILLIAMS: Did it belong to her?

ARMSTRONG: No, it's one that we had brought in. And we made ornaments. I sat there of an evening, and there were two or three of us nurses that would do that, just with Mrs. Truman we would sit there and make ornaments for it and decorate it with ornaments that we had made.

WILLIAMS: Did you know how she liked to have the house decorated for Christmas, or did you just use your own judgment?

ARMSTRONG: We just used our own judgment. We really had no one that told us how she had decorated in the past, so we just used our own judgment.

WILLIAMS: There's that little tree under the glass dome.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Was that there when you arrived?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it was.

WILLIAMS: Where was it most of the time?

ARMSTRONG: In the living room area is where I remember it being.

WILLIAMS: All year round?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, yes.

WILLIAMS: Would you put up anything outside?

ARMSTRONG: No, nothing was put up outside.

WILLIAMS: So basically it was just a small tree in the living room and . . .

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, yes.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember the angels on the mantelpiece?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I do.

WILLIAMS: Were those there?

ARMSTRONG: All year round.

WILLIAMS: Let's talk some more about Margaret. You said you met her three times.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I did.

WILLIAMS: And that was all while Mrs. Truman was alive?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: How much contact did she have with the nursing staff for her mother?

ARMSTRONG: She was very, very nice to the nursing staff; at least where I was concerned she was exceptionally nice. She would invite me to have lunch with her, and usually Valeria would have lunch with Margaret also. She would invite me to have lunch with them. I can remember one incident when I was pregnant and I was not supposed to have caffeine, and the coffee that Valeria had in the house was regular coffee. And I refused a cup of coffee and explained to her that I wasn't allowed to have caffeine. She insisted that Valeria go out and buy decaffeinated coffee that day so that I indeed could have coffee, too. I mean, she was very nice to us.

WILLIAMS: So on these three occasions, she stayed at the house?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she did, she would stay in the house.

WILLIAMS: Which room was hers?

ARMSTRONG: Upstairs, the southwest room was hers. That had been hers. Yes, that had been hers when she was a child, and it had many of her toys that she had had as a child in it. It had one big tall snowman that was absolutely beautiful that was hers as a child, and . . .

WILLIAMS: Would she talk to you about growing up or what her parents . . .

ARMSTRONG: No, not at all.

WILLIAMS: No reminiscing?

ARMSTRONG: No reminiscing at all.

WILLIAMS: Did you get the feeling that was a . . . oh, how do you say it?

ARMSTRONG: I felt like that was not a topic that was open for conversation. That was definitely the feeling that was there.

WILLIAMS: So when she was home, did she seem cheerful or melancholy?

ARMSTRONG: I think she felt like it was a necessary thing, that she needed to come home. I'm not sure that it was where she would have chose to be.

WILLIAMS: Would she sit and visit with her mother?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she would, she would sit for hours and hold her mother's hand. And she would read books, not necessarily aloud, or sometimes aloud to Mrs. Truman, but she would read books and sit there for hours with her. She was very attentive.

WILLIAMS: And how often did she call when she was in New York or wherever?

ARMSTRONG: She did not.

WILLIAMS: Do you know why? Just because her mother couldn't talk?

ARMSTRONG: I have no idea. Probably.

WILLIAMS: But you said the first ladies would call.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, on Mrs. Truman's birthday they all called.

WILLIAMS: Would they just say, "I wanted to wish you a happy birthday" or . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, they would . . . Of course, the White House or whomever would place the call and state that it was so and so for Mrs. Truman. And I would indeed explain to them that Mrs. Truman could not talk adequately and usually would not, because talking, she couldn't talk plain. Because of the stroke, she did have difficulty with her speech, and she would prefer not to talk to some people because of the difficulty that she had with speaking, and she would frequently refuse to talk. And so I would explain to whomever was calling that she definitely could understand them and to feel free to talk to them, but she would probably not answer back. And then I would kind of half listen with the phone at Mrs. Truman's ear to see when they had finished speaking, and then I would let them know that yes indeed she had understood what they had said.

WILLIAMS: She would smile or . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: She would smile; she would nod. I mean, there was definite understanding and recognition there. There was no question of that. Just her capabilities to answer back to them was really limited.

WILLIAMS: When Margaret was there, did she ever bring her husband or any of her sons?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, he came with her. I don't remember her sons coming at all, but Mr. Daniel did come with her a couple of times.

WILLIAMS: What is he like?

ARMSTRONG: Very nice, very down-to-earth, just a very, very nice gentleman.

WILLIAMS: When they were there, was it just like they blended right in?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Of course, they were gone a lot. They would go out of an evening with friends, out for dinner. And of course the upstairs was theirs when they were there. Mr. Daniel had the northwest bedroom. Originally when we were hired on, we were told that there was only one bathroom on the main floor, and of course that was adjacent to Mrs. Truman's bedroom there, so we were told that we would need to use the restroom that was upstairs at the end of the hallway, which we did, of course, but when Mrs. Daniel and Mr. Daniel came, we would indeed use Mrs. Truman's bathroom. But at other times we did indeed use the restroom upstairs.

WILLIAMS: Was that the only time you were usually upstairs?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: To use the bright-blue bathroom. [chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Yes.

WILLIAMS: What was your reaction when you saw the little bedroom with Mr. Truman's clothing?

ARMSTRONG: I think shock. I think quite shock at the fact that this was the bed, this was the bedroom that our President had indeed used as his own room? I think

it was disbelief.

WILLIAMS: Were there ever spooky moments in the house when you would hear things?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, it's an old house and, yeah, you would hear things, but I never was afraid there, I knew it was secure. There was one incident that was . . . Of course, the Secret Service prided themselves, you know, that nobody could come without them . . . And indeed, if somebody did pull into the driveway, they would be on the phone asking you, you know, "Who's there? What is this?" etcetera. But there was one time when we had ordered medication from a pharmacy we didn't usually do business with because it was the only one we could find open at that time when we had needed something, so they were special-delivering this medication to us. And we had told them what door to go to, but it was an older gentleman that was delivering it, and he very obviously got lost. And there's the little door underneath the stairwell where Mr. Truman's hat and their coats would hang? All of a sudden I heard somebody knocking, and it took me a while to figure out what door, and that was the door indeed that this delivery man had found. And he had been wandering all over the yard, and the Secret Service hadn't even found that he was wandering over the yard. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Whoops. [chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: So there was the one incident where somebody did get through, you know, and that's the only incident I ever remember anybody stepping foot on the property and them not knowing it, you know. This little guy was just lost and wandering all over, didn't know where to go.

WILLIAMS: Who was the regular pharmacist that you used?

ARMSTRONG: Petey Childers.

WILLIAMS: We're speaking with him this afternoon.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Were there doors in the house that you were told not to use, or anything like that?

ARMSTRONG: Basically, you know, we used . . . The back door from the kitchen was the door that we came in and out of, and that's the door we were instructed . . . We parked back behind the garage and we were instructed to come in and out of that door. I don't know that anybody said not to use any doors, except that we were told that there were alarms that would go off if doors were opened.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever hear alarms, or were they silent?

ARMSTRONG: They were silent. I never heard any.

WILLIAMS: What was it like driving down that driveway into the back? Did you ever have any problems maneuvering? [chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: No, never had any problems. The biggest problems we had was in wintertime. The one winter it was so very, very cold, and we did have trouble getting cars to start, and indeed my car didn't start that shift either, and the Secret Service would come over and jump-start our cars for us.

WILLIAMS: Would they shovel the walks and do things like that?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they would. Yes, they would.

WILLIAMS: Was that part of their duty, or did they just do it?

ARMSTRONG: They performed it. I don't know if it per se was part of their duty, but they did indeed perform it.

WILLIAMS: Were you aware of the other security measures, like the motion sensors or the cameras that were set up around the house?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. And they had told us at one point in time that they had even had an alarm on the stairwell when Mrs. Truman was still going up and down the

stairs, to where it would sound off at the bottom when she would start up the stairs, and in so many minutes if the top one hadn't sounded, they would come over for fear she had fallen, because they had them set to where in so many minutes the top alarm would go off if she hadn't stepped on it.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I hadn't heard that. That's interesting. In the summertime, were there people around taking care of the yard or the maintenance?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they had someone that did come and do all the yard work for them.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember who that was?

ARMSTRONG: I do not.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever—

ARMSTRONG: He was a black individual, a very nice man, but I do not remember his name.

WILLIAMS: I think it may have been Reverend Hobby.

ARMSTRONG: Reverend, yes. The minute you say "Reverend," yes.

WILLIAMS: So that's what people called him?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they called him Reverend.

WILLIAMS: And was he inside as well as outside?

ARMSTRONG: He would come in and take care of plants or . . . Wasn't inside much at all, most of his work was outside, but he would occasionally come in. If we needed something done inside, he . . .

WILLIAMS: I've heard that he would flip mattresses or do things like that.

ARMSTRONG: Anything like that we might need, he would take care of, yes.

WILLIAMS: Would the Secret Service help with those kind of things, too, the maintenance?

ARMSTRONG: If we really asked them, yes, they would. I don't think any of us tried . . . There were a few times when Mrs. Truman was difficult to move, or with

a certain nurse maybe would be uncooperative, and they would have to help pick her up.

WILLIAMS: And you say they would spend the night in the house?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they would. They would stay in the library. We were warned that we were not to go near the library without letting them know nice and loud and clear that we were coming near the library.

WILLIAMS: So that would mean going to the kitchen, and you'd have to . . .

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: You'd have to be loud as you were walking.

ARMSTRONG: You'd have to be loud as you were walking so that they would be aware of the fact that, yes, indeed you were going by.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned it was very cold in the wintertime.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it was.

WILLIAMS: Could you just describe what you would do to counter the effects of that?

ARMSTRONG: Well, we had the space heaters—you know, where Mrs. Truman was, we would keep a space heater—and as long as we kept the space heater, we were fine. I think most of us grew accustomed to wearing two pair of socks, because we did—you needed to in order to stay warm—and of course we wore sweaters on top of our uniforms.

WILLIAMS: So you would wear uniforms?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we would.

WILLIAMS: The white nurse . . .

ARMSTRONG: The white uniforms.

WILLIAMS: White shoes and all that?

ARMSTRONG: White shoes, the whole bit.

WILLIAMS: Would you ever build fires in the fireplace?

ARMSTRONG: No, we never built a fire, never.



WILLIAMS: Were there just space heaters then in the bedroom?

ARMSTRONG: Bedroom and in the living room. We had a space heater in there also.

WILLIAMS: Electric ones?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, electric ones.

WILLIAMS: Did they look new, or were they old-timers?

ARMSTRONG: They weren't real old, but they were not new either.

WILLIAMS: In the summertime, did it get unbearably hot?

ARMSTRONG: No, it really was not unbearably, because it's an old house with high ceilings. We would use an air conditioner in Mrs. Truman's room, but it was a window unit and it's the only air conditioner we used, and it really was not unbearably hot. And of course we spent so many hours out on the back porch, and there was an ancient ceiling fan on the back porch that we would use.

WILLIAMS: Would you ever use the attic fan?

ARMSTRONG: No, I don't remember us using the attic fan.

WILLIAMS: Were you ever up in the attic?

ARMSTRONG: No, I was not in the attic. Take that back. Yes, I was once.

WILLIAMS: Was something going on up there?

ARMSTRONG: I went with somebody else—whether it was Secret Service, I don't remember—but I remember we went up looking for something. There was old, old suitcases, and trunks, and boxes and . . .

WILLIAMS: It's kind of neat up there.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Well, let's see, when you look back on your experience with Mrs. Truman, how would you describe it?

ARMSTRONG: I feel quite honored that I had the privilege of working with and for her. Of course, being from Independence you're always proud of the fact that

the Trumans were from Independence. And I think probably I have even more pride in our city and in our country, having worked for her and known how gracious indeed she was.

WILLIAMS: When all these people would call or send flowers, do you remember in particular were they dignitaries, names that you recognized?

ARMSTRONG: Some were dignitaries and names you would recognize; some were just citizens that admired the Trumans.

WILLIAMS: So she would get a lot of flowers?

ARMSTRONG: She would get a tremendous number of flowers.

WILLIAMS: Did people seem to know her favorite?

ARMSTRONG: Yellow was her favorite. She loved yellow roses.

WILLIAMS: Would she get a lot of those?

ARMSTRONG: She certainly would.

WILLIAMS: What would you do with all the flowers?

ARMSTRONG: We would set them up around the house as we could, and of course in the hospital setting they would be given to other patients throughout the hospital.

WILLIAMS: So she was hospitalized?

ARMSTRONG: She was hospitalized two or three times while we were taking care of her, and we would continue to provide care for her in the hospital setting.

WILLIAMS: Oh, really?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm. The Secret Service—

WILLIAMS: How did that work with the regular hospital nurses?

ARMSTRONG: We had no problems whatsoever. Needless to say, the Secret Service would have chairs and they always had lounge chairs that the hospital provided for them that were right outside the door. Of course, she had a private room, but they had their little station set up right outside the door.

The hospital staff catered to the Secret Service. They were provided with all kinds of food and beverages, and . . . You know, really, we had tremendous cooperation from the hospital because we did private-duty her in the hospital also.

WILLIAMS: Was this at Research?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, it was.

WILLIAMS: So their nurses really weren't involved?

ARMSTRONG: They would monitor and they would come in, because obviously, you know, they are in charge of all patients, but we did the direct care.

WILLIAMS: Why was it arranged this way?

ARMSTRONG: They felt like it was better for Mrs. Truman to have the continuity of having the same nurses care for her.

WILLIAMS: So, instead of going to the home, you would just go to the hospital for your shift?

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

WILLIAMS: How long would she stay in the hospital?

ARMSTRONG: Average stay was five to seven days.

WILLIAMS: Why was it necessary to take her to the hospital?

ARMSTRONG: Usually because she developed either a kidney infection. Her kidneys were just not real well. They didn't function real well.

WILLIAMS: So it was something that could be taken care of in a week or so.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And then she'd come right back home?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Did she seem to mind the hospital?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she was very eager to go home.

WILLIAMS: And she would get a lot of flowers and cards?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she would.

WILLIAMS: Would you read the cards to her?

ARMSTRONG: We certainly would read the cards to her. The same at Christmas at home, we would read the cards to her.

WILLIAMS: And what happened to all of the flower pots from the flowers that people had sent?

ARMSTRONG: I don't know. Valeria was in charge of that. I have no idea.

WILLIAMS: Because there are hundreds of them.

ARMSTRONG: [chuckling] I can imagine.

WILLIAMS: In the basement.

ARMSTRONG: I can imagine. That's obviously where they went. I think Reverend took care of a lot of that, too, because he did care for a lot of the plants and all in the house.

WILLIAMS: Were there a lot of plants in the house?

ARMSTRONG: Not a lot. There were some, but not a lot.

WILLIAMS: But you very definitely knew that she liked flowers?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, yellow roses.

WILLIAMS: Would you ever bring in flowers from your yard or anything like that?

ARMSTRONG: Occasionally. I think all of us would from time to time.

WILLIAMS: Would you ever bring in goodies that you had baked?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Oh, we were all very much good at doing that. And on weekends or if the cook wasn't going to be there, we would fix her meals for her and try to fix things she liked.

WILLIAMS: Who was on duty, I guess, on October 18<sup>th</sup>, '82, when she died?

ARMSTRONG: Lucy . . . I don't remember Lucy's last name. Lucy Land, I believe. Her husband's a barber here in Independence.

WILLIAMS: So you were not? That wasn't your shift?

ARMSTRONG: No, it was not my shift.

WILLIAMS: Had you worked earlier that day?

ARMSTRONG: Earlier that week, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did any of you seem to sense that this was about to happen?

ARMSTRONG: I think so, yes. We knew she definitely had been deteriorating for the last few months. She so much wanted to live to be 100, and that was a goal for her to live to be 100.

WILLIAMS: How did you know that?

ARMSTRONG: She had expressed that, and other people had told us that, and, you know, we would mention it to her and she would shake her head yes. I mean, that was a goal with her. She really wanted to live to be 100.

WILLIAMS: Were you there when President Carter visited?

ARMSTRONG: No, I was not.

WILLIAMS: It must have been just before you.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I guess she couldn't really mention Mr. Truman, but did you ever get the feeling that she was thinking about him?

ARMSTRONG: Especially at Christmas time, because he died right at Christmas time, and she was definitely melancholy about Christmas time. It was not a special time for Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: I can understand why.

ARMSTRONG: Right.

WILLIAMS: And Margaret was there for one Christmas?

ARMSTRONG: For one Christmas. I think it was right before, a week or so before.

WILLIAMS: But it wasn't a big celebration.

ARMSTRONG: No, there was no celebration.

WILLIAMS: But she would get gifts and—

ARMSTRONG: No.

WILLIAMS: No?

ARMSTRONG: No, there were no gifts. I remember that visit we discussed the fact that she needed some gowns and bed jackets and stuff, and Margaret had said that she would take care of seeing that she got some. And I know that after Christmas Valeria did go and purchase some, but there were no gifts. I know we bought her a bed jacket for Christmas that year, a quilted one, an extra-warm one.

WILLIAMS: You've already described her as gracious. Are there other words that come to mind to describe Mrs. Truman?

ARMSTRONG: She was very friendly, if she liked you. If she didn't like you, you got no cooperation from her whatsoever. I was expecting my second child while I was there. She would frequently pat my tummy and just smile, you know, just ecstatic. And I had a lot of problems with that one where I would have to make mad dashes to the restroom, and she would just chuckle. [chuckling] But she was very kind, had a wonderful sense of humor.

WILLIAMS: I have heard from other people that she had pretty bad arthritis.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she did.

WILLIAMS: And she couldn't write very well.

ARMSTRONG: That's correct.

WILLIAMS: So did you ever see her write or . . .

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she would attempt to write notes to us, and sometimes you could read them and sometimes, no matter how you tried, you couldn't read them. And she would become so *frustrated* when she tried and you couldn't understand it. And the same with talking. And she finally would just almost quit talking and would seldom even try to talk, because it was

just too frustrating for her. She became quite angry at herself and her incapacitations.

WILLIAMS: So she wasn't answering mail or signing letters?

ARMSTRONG: No, she was not. Not at all.

WILLIAMS: Would Valeria write back and . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Valeria would take care of all of that, yes.

WILLIAMS: Do you have some questions? You've been scribbling over there.

HAGENSEN: Well, I was wondering if the families of the nurses had access to come in and look at the house, also.

ARMSTRONG: Occasionally, yes. My mother was allowed to come in and had a tour of the house and met Mrs. Truman. My son was just a year old, and Mrs. Truman held him two or three times and very much enjoyed little children.

HAGENSEN: I was just wondering, because I have a friend that was another nurse for Mrs. Truman, Henrietta Allen.

ARMSTRONG: Okay.

HAGENSEN: I don't know if you . . . Do you know her?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

HAGENSEN: And she said her daughter was able to come and go up in the attic and look around and all of that once, and I just wondered if there were any kind of restrictions, you know, by the Secret Service or anything for—

ARMSTRONG: They eventually did abolish that privilege, and I'm not sure why. But indeed, you know, my husband and my mother and my little son indeed did tour the house and meet Mrs. Truman. And as I said, when my husband would take me to work occasionally, which wasn't often, but if he would, you know, Brian would come in and she did indeed hold Brian two or three times, and really enjoyed little children.

WILLIAMS: Were you all sort of like her surrogate family?

ARMSTRONG: I believe so. Obviously we had a lot closer contact than her family did. Not that we replaced, but we did build good bonds, good friendship, good relationships with her.

WILLIAMS: It seems like since she was quite old that most of her friends had already died.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And she didn't have too many visitors.

ARMSTRONG: No. The only time, really, we had visitors besides May was holidays, for the most part.

WILLIAMS: So, between those special occasions, the people she saw mostly were you.

ARMSTRONG: Were us, yes.

WILLIAMS: And the Secret Service.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I learned to play solitaire well after she went to bed at night, because I would not go . . . and I am real sure most of the nurses would not. I would not leave the living room area, where we could indeed see her bed from where we would sit, to go to another room to watch television or anything.

WILLIAMS: Was there just one bed in that bedroom?

ARMSTRONG: Originally there were two twin beds in that bedroom, and then we had both of those taken out and stored upstairs and put a hospital bed in that bedroom. But originally there were two twin beds in that bedroom.

WILLIAMS: Where were they stored?

ARMSTRONG: In the attic or . . . I don't remember if it was there or in the hallway from the back stairwell that went down to the kitchen. One of those two places.

WILLIAMS: So there was a hospital bed?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, there was.



WILLIAMS: Have you seen a picture of the bedroom as it looks now?

ARMSTRONG: No, I haven't been back.

WILLIAMS: We have twin beds in there now. I guess when they took the hospital bed out, the twin beds came back, and there's some dispute as to where these twin beds started out and where they were—

ARMSTRONG: Well, there were twin beds in that room when we started there.

WILLIAMS: Do you know, was it soon after you arrived that you . . . Did you request a hospital bed?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, we very much needed the hospital bed and did request it.

WILLIAMS: Did Mrs. Truman seem to care one way or the other about that?

ARMSTRONG: For a long time they left . . . For several weeks they left one of the twin beds up in that room, because she was really reluctant, I think, for us to take that out. But then it did indeed get taken out later.

WILLIAMS: So were there chairs in there that you could sit in, in the bedroom?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: With the twin beds there's not much room for chairs.

ARMSTRONG: Right.

WILLIAMS: Is that why you had them both taken out?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: So there'd be room.

ARMSTRONG: So there would be more room for us, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did you bring in then the easy chairs from the living room?

ARMSTRONG: We brought in just one, but we brought in an easy chair.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember which one it was?

ARMSTRONG: One of the wingbacks, and I don't remember which one, whether it was the gold one or . . . but it was one of the wingbacks that was brought in.

WILLIAMS: It wasn't the flowery chair?

ARMSTRONG: No, it wasn't the flowery one.

WILLIAMS: Mr. Truman's chair.

ARMSTRONG: I think I was amazed at the furniture, noticing that they had feather cushions. I think that probably amazed me about the furniture more than . . . You know, I expected the old Victorian pieces, but the feather cushions really amazed me. I was surprised.

WILLIAMS: Did you like the big sofa in the window?

ARMSTRONG: We just really never sat on it.

WILLIAMS: Now that you mention it, going into an ex-president and first lady's house, did you expect it to be grander?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I did.

WILLIAMS: What were some of the things that you noticed?

ARMSTRONG: The kitchen probably [chuckling] totally amazed me. I was not prepared for the kitchen. You know, you walk in and of course the linoleum is nailed down in a couple of places because it was so rough and you could have tripped and fallen. And that just kind of amazed me that it was such a plain kitchen. Of course, I expected the rest of it to be old, and it was. Of course, the wallpaper was quite faded-looking, and, you know, you could tell that once it had been quite grand. The bedrooms upstairs was the next biggest shocker. You know, I really was not prepared for that, nor in the disrepair, the state of disrepair that like the drapes and all were in, especially upstairs, big rips and all. I was not prepared for that. I expected more than that.

WILLIAMS: What surprised you about the bedrooms?

ARMSTRONG: Well, the simplicity of Mr. Truman's, needless to say. And of course hers was not any more grander, and it was so small. Her double bed, you know, filled the room, quite basically. I just expected probably more

plushness than what was there in the bedrooms.

WILLIAMS: I try to tell people when they ask about the upstairs, “You’d be disappointed. It’s really very plain.”

ARMSTRONG: Yes, you really would be because it’s not at all what you would expect. Not at all. You know, the portraits were gorgeous, and I really . . . you know, the portrait of Khartoum by Winston Churchill, you know, I enjoyed . . . that was just . . . you know, seeing these. They were really wonderful, to see these things that were so great. I enjoyed the portraits immensely. They were beautiful. And there were many a night when the Secret Service and I, we would pull out the doors that closed off the parlor, etcetera, just to see the things that, you know, normally were kept closed and all.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever look through the books in the library and find signed books or . . .

ARMSTRONG: Yes, there were numerous signed books, and we were allowed to take books. When the library here started doing an inventory of all the books, books that weren’t signed that were going to be given away, we were allowed to have our choice of any of those books we chose to take.

WILLIAMS: So people did take them?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, indeed.

WILLIAMS: So the library used to have more books than it does now?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. The upstairs, when you go upstairs, the little alcove area was full of boxes of books, and the little tri-corner cabinet up there was full of books.

WILLIAMS: So they sort of thinned them out.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, the library did a total inventory on all the books there and then what was going to be given away. Anything that had signatures in it that they did not want to keep the book, they would tear those pages out, and then

we were allowed to take our choice, and then the rest were donated.

WILLIAMS: I had a question, but, well, . . . let's put on another one and talk about the photographs.

[End #4358; Begin #4359]

WILLIAMS: You have some photographs, I guess, that you took while you worked at the Truman home.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I do.

WILLIAMS: Would you like to look through those and just tell us about them?

ARMSTRONG: Valeria did give us pictures of Mrs. Truman. These were pictures that she had used when somebody would request an autograph that were given. Mine didn't get autographed, but anyway . . . Basically I just have pictures of the home, for the most part, the front door and the beautiful mirror and sconces that were there, and a portrait of Margaret that hangs as you come in the front door, and the stairwell. I thought the stairwell was so pretty. It's such an unusual material.

WILLIAMS: Let me ask something. Her wheelchair is underneath the stairs?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, her wheelchair was stored underneath there when it wasn't in use.

WILLIAMS: And her coat would hang . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, her coat and hat would hang. And when Margaret would come back for visits, she would hang her full-length fur coat there on that coat rack also.

WILLIAMS: Is that where the telephone . . . Was there still a telephone under the steps?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, there was still a telephone underneath the steps. We didn't use that telephone, but there indeed was one still there.

WILLIAMS: Where were the other phones?

ARMSTRONG: We had a telephone right there in the living room, on the little round table

by the chair where we would sit. There was a regular telephone as well as the red phone that connected to the Secret Service, and there was one in the library also, a telephone. I don't remember if there was one in the kitchen or not.

WILLIAMS: Could you move it around? Were there jacks?

ARMSTRONG: No. No, we didn't move them. I don't know if there were jacks. We did not move them around, and I don't know if there were jacks or not.

WILLIAMS: And I assume her number was unlisted.

ARMSTRONG: I assume so, too. [chuckling] Definitely. The picture of the baby grand piano with all the portraits that were on it.

WILLIAMS: Was it typical for this armchair to sit next to the piano like that?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Yes, that was the position that it was kept in.

WILLIAMS: That's not there anymore. It's in a different place, I guess, to get it out of the doorway.

ARMSTRONG: Well, that's the position that it was in.

WILLIAMS: And there's the Grandma Moses painting.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: That we don't have anymore. [chuckling]

ARMSTRONG: Right. I have a closeup of that one, too. And there's the picture of Mrs. Truman, the copy which hangs in the White House, also. The fireplaces I thought were *so* beautiful with all the mosaic work around them.

WILLIAMS: What's this over the study, the doorway between the music room and the study?

ARMSTRONG: The Secret Service would hang a sheet or a blanket there to help protect them, you know, to keep the warmth. It was so cold in that library and in this room, and to keep the heat into the library they would indeed hang these sheets or blankets over the arched doorways that go into those just

to—

WILLIAMS: On both doorways?

ARMSTRONG: On both doorways, to keep the heat into the room.

WILLIAMS: Would they have a space heater in their room?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Would you do anything like that in the living room or Mrs. Truman's room?

ARMSTRONG: No. No, we certainly did not.

WILLIAMS: So you wouldn't shut the bedroom door to keep the heat in, or anything like that?

ARMSTRONG: No, we did not, because we stayed in the living room when she was sleeping, so that we would leave that door open so we could watch her.

WILLIAMS: Was she a pretty sound sleeper?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, she certainly was.

WILLIAMS: You didn't have to worry about every little noise waking her?

ARMSTRONG: No. No, definitely not. She was definitely a sound sleeper. We had no problems with that.

WILLIAMS: Well, the TV's not there. Where was the TV at this time? It's sitting . . .

ARMSTRONG: Right. We had moved this chair and put the TV in here, and I don't know at what point we did that because it was not originally there.

WILLIAMS: Where was the TV before this?

ARMSTRONG: I don't know. I do not remember where it was before that. I just had not even thought about it not being there till we looked at this picture.

WILLIAMS: And a picture of the parlor/music room light fixture.

ARMSTRONG: That was not electrified. And the old Victorian furniture.

WILLIAMS: What's this white piece of paper?

ARMSTRONG: It's a little sign that Valeria had put on there cautioning people please not

to sit on it.

WILLIAMS: Well, that was nice of her. That's the silk settee.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: On the north side of the music room.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And the Winston Churchill painting.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And the living room.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, and the gold chair here is what we would sit in, for the most part. We were not restricted where we sat, by any means. We were not told we couldn't sit anywhere but on the settee. It's just from this chair you could see into Mrs. Truman's bedroom, so that's where most of us would choose to sit. And then the flowered chair.

WILLIAMS: The fireplace with the knickknacks.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Who got to clean all that stuff?

ARMSTRONG: Doris's daughter Mary would come in and clean the house on a weekly basis. She would come in once a week and do all the housecleaning, upstairs and down. She would do all the dusting and the carpeting.

WILLIAMS: And here's Margaret's portrait and her two oldest sons.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: You never met the grandsons?

ARMSTRONG: No, never once.

WILLIAMS: They didn't call either?

ARMSTRONG: No, they did not call either. And the grandfather clock that did not work.

WILLIAMS: Here's a few of the plants that they . . . Is that called elephant ear?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm. And the library.

WILLIAMS: Were there books stacked up around the walls?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And behind the chairs?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: I guess those are the ones that were cleared out after she died, or even, I guess, before she died.

ARMSTRONG: It was before she died that all this . . . She was not allowed to know, and we had to keep her out of those sections of the house, and the library staff that was doing the inventory had to be very quiet because she was not to know they were there doing that. It was something that Margaret had asked them to do, and she was not to know and we were not to let her know that they were there doing this.

WILLIAMS: Why do you suppose Margaret asked them to do that?

ARMSTRONG: I think Margaret felt like her mother probably did not have too many years left, and I think she very much wanted to see that everything was inventoried before Mrs. Truman passed away so that it would make for easier transitions.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any idea what would happen to the house after Mrs. Truman died?

ARMSTRONG: No, did not. However, we were told by Valeria that . . . I guess in that sense, yes, we did, in the sense Valeria had told us that repairs weren't being made to the house, because she was going to leave it to the country and was going to let the country take care of the repairs. And we were specifically told that.

WILLIAMS: Yes, we had some.

ARMSTRONG: I can imagine. The wiring was quite unique.

WILLIAMS: That's in the dining room, I guess.



ARMSTRONG: Yes, that's in the dining room.

WILLIAMS: The buffet.

ARMSTRONG: The buffet, mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Well, Mr. Truman's plate is out.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, Mr. Truman's plate resided there.

WILLIAMS: It's one with a blue . . . I guess, a blue border. I'm not sure where that one is now.

ARMSTRONG: I don't remember if it's blue or if it was silver or pewter. There was a lot of silver and/or pewter, also.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever use any of these things, the candelabras and . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: We did use the candelabra, yes.

WILLIAMS: There are candles in one of them.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, they didn't match.

WILLIAMS: What would you use them for?

ARMSTRONG: They were there when . . . When we had Thanksgiving dinner, we would use the candelabra, yes.

WILLIAMS: On the dining room table?

ARMSTRONG: On the dining room table, yes.

WILLIAMS: And what about the cruet set? It still has salt and pepper and . . .

ARMSTRONG: Yes, those were used, definitely.

WILLIAMS: So you tried to have a nice, normal Thanksgiving, with turkey and . . .

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, we did. We did. We had a turkey and she came to the dining room in her wheelchair and did have dinner with us.

WILLIAMS: And here's upstairs, all the books.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, this is the corner cabinet that had the books, and then there were boxes of books back in the little alcove here. And then this would be the northwest bedroom.

WILLIAMS: You said that's where Clifton Daniel stayed.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, that's where he stayed. And then this is Margaret's bedroom upstairs, and the snowman.

WILLIAMS: It's pretty when the sun comes in in the afternoon.

ARMSTRONG: It's beautiful when the sun comes in. And then this is a close up of the fireplace in Margaret's bedroom.

WILLIAMS: That's a good picture.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: I suppose you wondered where these things came from.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Just like we do.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, some of them we were told came from this dignitary or that, but not many. Most of them we didn't . . .

WILLIAMS: Do you remember anything in particular?

ARMSTRONG: The ones in the living room, the jade pieces, those came from when they were in the White House. Those were gifts that were given to them by one of the dignitaries in one of the Indonesian countries, I forget which, but those came from there somewhere.

WILLIAMS: And Valeria was the one who told you this?

ARMSTRONG: Secret Service. Most of what we learned came from Secret Service.

WILLIAMS: So they must have found these things out through the years from the Trumans.

ARMSTRONG: I'm sure. But this is the spare bedroom upstairs, and we never did know exactly whether when the boys were there that's what they used or what. I have no idea. They were not there at all during the time we were with Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: So when you speak of Mrs. Truman's bedroom, is that the northwest

bedroom?

ARMSTRONG: No, that's this bedroom here. This was Mrs. Truman's bedroom.

WILLIAMS: The little . . . what we call Margaret's childhood room.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, this was Mrs. Truman's bedroom. And the closets that were along the wall here, the big floor-to-ceiling closets. But this is what we were told was Mrs. Truman's bedroom. The mirror that I referred to with the Secret Service was kept right back there in that little alcove.

WILLIAMS: Were all of her clothes still up in this bedroom?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, but the closets were locked, and they were kept locked.

WILLIAMS: So the clothing that she wore, you kept downstairs?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: In the chest of drawers and the closet?

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, mm-hmm. There was a closet in the bathroom there downstairs where we kept her hanging clothes. We were told that all her ball gowns and things were kept in these closets upstairs. I have no idea, because they were kept locked and we were not allowed to see—not that we really had need to either. It would have been nice, but not that we had need to either, but . . . You know, her purse was sitting there and . . .

WILLIAMS: So there was a sense of some security with people in and out.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm. But that's the only place where there were locked doors, was in her bedroom in those closets. There wasn't anything else that was locked or that we didn't have access to, or that we weren't shown. That was the only thing we were not shown.

Of course this is Mr. Truman's room, and it's quite humble. His tie and shirt, everything that he was going to wear that day was left there. And the dresser in his bedroom, again quite plain, so simple. And his little bed.

WILLIAMS: No stand. It's just a mattress on the floor.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah. Yeah, it just . . . And let's see, this is a picture from the outside that I had taken, and just another picture of the bedroom. And then these are pictures of the birthday party, the ninety-seventh birthday party, and that is the cake that I had made for Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: It looks like white cake?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: And vanilla ice cream, chocolate chip or something?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm. One of the other girls brought the ice cream. I don't remember what flavor, but . . .

WILLIAMS: Did she like white cake over chocolate or . . .

ARMSTRONG: Yes, definitely.

WILLIAMS: Wasn't a big chocolate eater?

ARMSTRONG: No, she was not a big chocolate eater. And that's just three of the nurses, myself and two of the others.

WILLIAMS: And this is . . . Is that Rhonda Welch?

ARMSTRONG: That's Rhonda.

WILLIAMS: And . . .?

ARMSTRONG: Sue, and I don't remember Sue's last name, Susan . . .

WILLIAMS: And you're dishing up ice cream in the dining room.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm, and this was one of the Secret Service agents. His name was Tim.

WILLIAMS: He's having cake and ice cream.

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: I saw in your scrapbook a copy of this newspaper article that I have, too.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Where you're quoted four days after Mrs. Truman died, I guess, in the

*Star* [see appendix, item 1].

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: This part about . . . Would you comment on your comment in the paper?

ARMSTRONG: I commented in the paper that I knew she was happier. I don't believe she was happy the last few months of her life because she had deteriorated so much and she was left nothing of her dignity. I mean, she could no longer eat or do anything for herself. And I think, when we get to that point, all of us are probably happier. And I know that, you know, Christmas was around the corner and it was such a sad time of year for her, and I know that she was happier knowing that she was going to be reunited, wouldn't have this Christmas alone.

WILLIAMS: Well, is there some way I could get copies of these photographs?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, there is.

WILLIAMS: Do you have the negatives or . . . ?

ARMSTRONG: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, I can make copies for you, or . . .

WILLIAMS: Could you loan me those or . . .

ARMSTRONG: Yeah, whichever. Some of them I have duplicates on, but not on all of them.

WILLIAMS: Well, that would be great. We'll take great care of them for you.

ARMSTRONG: Okay, I appreciate that.

WILLIAMS: We're real good at—I hope we are—preservation. That's what Leslie does mostly.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: She found some photographs of way back when, turn of the century?

HAGENSEN: Between 1895 and 1906, photographs of Mrs. Truman's family when she

was young.

ARMSTRONG: Ah, how wonderful.

WILLIAMS: They're little, aren't they?

HAGENSEN: Some of them are probably postage stamp size, and then there's some that are . . . they're on really thin blue paper. And I don't know what kind of a print that is, but there's a name for it. And you can tell they're of good times when she was younger with her friends and things.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. We had good friends that lived in the house where she lived in as a child, where her father committed suicide, so that, you know, we felt like we got to see that house, too, because we'd had good friends that had lived there and made it even more meaningful having worked for her.

WILLIAMS: Were you invited to the funeral or anything like that?

ARMSTRONG: No.

WILLIAMS: It was a very small affair.

ARMSTRONG: Very small, very limited. We were not invited at all. We did come to the library for the graveside services. Rhonda and I and one of the other nurse—I think it was Susan—we did come to the library for the graveside services, but we were not invited to the funeral.

WILLIAMS: So once you found out that she had died, you knew that your employment was over?

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And what did you decide to do then?

ARMSTRONG: I did not work for a little while after that, and then I continued doing private duty.

WILLIAMS: And that's what you've done ever since?

ARMSTRONG: I switched in '85, '84, and started doing home health nursing. I think I had the best here.

WILLIAMS: Well, thank you.

ARMSTRONG: Thank you.

WILLIAMS: It's been great talking to you.

ARMSTRONG: It's been a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW

## APPENDIX

1. "Bess Truman's warmth, love for fun recalled," *The Kansas City Star*, 22 October 1982.