

Harry S Truman National Historic Site

Harry S Truman National Historic Site was established shortly after the death of former First Lady Bess Wallace Truman in October 1982. The museum collection includes the contents of the Truman Home in Independence, Missouri. Almost 48,000 items remained in the house at the time of Bess' death, most situated as they had been since the Trumans left the White House in 1953. In addition to the president's personal effects, the house contained the belongings of several generations of Bess Truman's family, including an array of household items dating from the 1830s to 1982.

Exhibits

Visitors to the Truman Home often remark on the sense of "homeyness" they experience. This



The Trumans' 1932 Silver-Marshall radio on display at the Harry S Truman Library and Museum. Photo by Scott Stone, NPS.

atmosphere results from the thickly-populated interior spaces of the home—tables covered with knickknacks, shelves full of books, and cupboards stacked with dishes—which itself is the result of a rapid transition from private residence to historic house museum. The timeliness of NPS stewardship allowed an opportunity to maintain the home just as the Trumans left it, as though Harry and Bess had stepped out to visit neighbors and might return any minute. Eleven years after commencing public tours, the exhibit areas remain almost exactly as they were found.

Visitors tour only the first floor of the home. The upstairs remains off-limits to the public, according to the terms of Bess Truman's will. Paired with the static nature of exhibits on the

first floor, this arrangement leaves the bulk of the collection inaccessible to visitors. That hasn't kept the staff from finding inventive ways to put the collection to use.

The park celebrated its 10th anniversary in May 1994, with an open house at the George Wallace home, next door to the Truman Home. Temporary exhibits allowed visitors a taste of objects not normally on display. One interpreted the importance of games in the Truman's family and social life, using board games, playing cards and poker chips found in the attic. One board game in particular, "Lawmakers," seems to have been well-used in the home of a career politician.

Another display gave visitors a more literal "taste," when park staff baked cookies, breads, and brownies from some of Bess Truman's own recipes. The original recipes, scribbled on index cards or note paper, were placed under plexiglass behind their sweet and chewy manifestations. Visitors received copies of the recipes to try in their own kitchens. More than interactive, this exhibit was edible!

June 1995 marked the 50th anniversary of Truman's first homecoming as president. We used the family's own scrapbooks to produce a poster-size display of newspaper clippings from June 1945. Called "No Pretense in this Man," it showed the nation getting to know its new chief with the help of newspaper editors and columnists.

During the last several years, the NPS staff has developed a cooperative relationship with the Harry S Truman Library and Museum, also in Independence. With increasing frequency, the Library has borrowed items from our collection for use in their own exhibits.

Research

Recently the people of Deming, New Mexico, contacted us while organizing an effort to preserve their old train depot. Truman's famous 1948 "Whistle-stop" campaign stopped in Deming. The town fathers presented him with several gifts, including a hand-tooled leather belt and a jeweled silver buckle with gold longhorn steer having fiery red eyes. In exchange for photos and catalog data of the belt and buckle, we received copies of local newspaper accounts of the visit and presentation ceremony.

A California artist contacted us, curious about the disposition of works he had done for the president in 1951. The two pencil sketches of Bess

and Margaret were located in the attic of the Truman Home. Through the artist we learned that Truman's Secretary of the Air Force had commissioned the work as a birthday present for the president. Again, in exchange for photos of the sketches, we received a copy of Truman's thank-you letter.

Last year the A. Sulka Company of New York began preparing for their company's 100th anniversary. A maker of fine men's apparel, they have made presents to several U.S. presidents, including Truman. To assist their research, we tallied up the number of Sulka items in our collection (39 neckties and bow ties, 2 shirts, 8 collars and a dressing gown) and sent along photos of a sample of them.

Interpretation

Park interpreters guide more than 50,000 people a year through the Truman Home, describing the Trumans' life, and often answering questions about specific objects along the tour route. Curatorial staff help rangers answer frequently-asked questions by sharing catalog data and research findings. Occasionally, rangers are provided with statistical abstracts which detail individual objects or illustrate the diversity of the collection. With these tools, rangers can respond accurately to questions such as "How many hats did Truman have?" or "What kind of toys did the children play with?"

Much of the history we deal with is less than 50 years old, so oral history interviews can provide a lot of grist for the interpretive mill. The collection has been used to spark the memories of several oral history subjects. Margaret Truman was the first, interviewed in the familiar setting of the house where she was born.

Truman sister-in-law and next-door neighbor, May Wallace, walked through the house telling her stories for the tape recorder in 1983. Sister-in-law Christine Wallace, who married Bess' brother Fred in 1933, and lived in the house shortly before Truman became president, did the same in 1991.

Kansas City tailor Sol Stolowy made many of Truman's suits during and after his presidency. Stolowy re-examined his work in 1991 while telling us of the times he brought fabric samples to the Home for Mrs. Truman's selection.

The president's eldest grandson, Clifton Truman Daniel, was the subject of a 1994 interview in the house. On entering the kitchen he said it even smelled exactly as he remembered. He told of exploring the attic, and playing "cops and robbers" with his brothers in the yard. He was amazed to find the toy machine gun he'd last seen almost 30 years before: Grandpa Truman took it

away when he caught young Clifton taking target practice in the living room!

Un-tapped Potential

The park recently acquired the Noland House across Delaware Street from the Truman Home, formerly the home of Harry's Aunt Ella and cousins Nellie and Ethel. When the house is restored for adaptive use there will be space for rotating thematic exhibits. Until then, the Truman Library and temporary exhibits will continue to be the primary outlets for "hidden treasures" of the Truman collection. The next eight years will bring a series of 50th anniversary events commemorating the Truman presidency, and sharing unseen parts of the collection with the public will be an integral part of these occasions.

And the collection is not even fully cataloged yet. The completed database will enable us to quickly gather related exhibit materials for ourselves or other institutions, to create finding aids for researchers, and to provide rangers with the most complete and precise information about the site they interpret.

Best of all, on occasion the house still reveals previously undiscovered artifacts. Just last summer, while cleaning Bess Wallace Truman's desk upstairs, the space behind a drawer yielded an 1892 letter to young Bessie Wallace from her grandfather George P. Gates. In it, Grandpa Gates (who built the house now called the Truman Home) tells seven-year-old Bessie about his vacation in New Mexico.

We have only scratched the surface of this collection's usefulness. The potential for thematic exhibits is virtually unlimited, and research opportunities abound for scholars of the Truman era. As a source of interpretive material on the home life of an American president, the collection is unmatched. There will undoubtedly be much more to come.

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