

The View from Independence

In April of 1945, the world was at war. Allied tanks were closing on the suburbs of Berlin, Hitler's Nazi Germany was nearing the end. In the Pacific, B-29s were pounding Tokyo, but the invasion of Japan, with its accompanying loss of life, still loomed ahead. World War II had inflicted a terrible cost. Nearly 200,000 American lives had been lost and casualties were steadily rising to nearly 900 per day. Suddenly, on April 12, 1945, a little-known figure was thrust into the spot light. The sudden death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt led to a man from Independence, Missouri occupying the nation's highest office. It was up to Harry Truman to lead the country through the war's last act and into the dangerous future that followed.

This is a replica of the oval office, but it's located right here in the Harry S Truman Library & Museum in Independence, Missouri. It's decorated just as it would have been in the early 1950's when Harry S Truman served as president of the United States.

Truman was thrust into the job at one of the most difficult times in our nation's history. War was still raging and delicate, post war negotiations had reached a pivotal stage. As Truman took the oath of office, many wondered if he was up to the task of leading the nation through this difficult time. Truman had a strength and depth of character historians are just now beginning to appreciate. It's a story that unfolds in a very personal way in Harry's letters to a special person.

Dear Bessie: speaking of diamonds, would you wear a solitaire on your left hand should I get it? Now that is a rather personal or pointed question, provided you take it for all it means. You know, were I an Italian or a poet, I would commence and use all the luscious language of two continents. I'm not either, but only a kind of good-for-nothing American farmer. I've always had a sneaking notion that someday maybe I might amount to something.

Sounds like young Harry Truman was in love. Here at the Truman library there are thousands of photographs, documents and artifacts relating to Truman's life. Among them, are hundreds of letters he wrote to his childhood sweetheart, and later wife, Bess.

These letters are more than simple notes of affection between two people. They are historical documents of great importance. They reflect not only the events of the times, but also the emotions. When he was writing to Bess, Harry was writing what he felt and the couple lived through and wrote about, some of our nation's most important events.

But before his years in Washington, Truman learned some important lessons in rural Missouri.

My dear Bessie: it's hard to acquire the habit of early rising of your own free will and the chord on these chilly mornings. And now, I have to get up myself, start fires, milk cows and do other odd jobs around while it's still dark. I don't think I'll ever make much of a mark as a farmer, anywhere else, but sometimes I have to come across. This is one of them.

Harry Truman began his life on a small farm near Lamar, Missouri. The family later moved to the small town of Independence, where Harry first met Bess. At that time, the Independence Library had about 2,000 books. Truman vowed to read them all and later claimed to have succeeded. After high school, Harry found work in Kansas City beginning a promising career in banking. In 1905, Truman's life changed. His father took on the management of his Grandma Young's farm and Harry's help was desperately needed. Truman's mother later stated that it was his years on this farm near Grandview, Missouri, that gave Harry his common sense and honesty. Days were a blur of dawn to dusk toil on the farm; evenings were devoted to reading history and literature, and writing to his beloved Bess. Life on the farm taught Harry Truman more than the intricacies of agriculture. Honesty is the best policy. If at first you don't succeed, try, try

again. Don't get too big for your britches. Keep your word; never forget a friend. Truman learned and believed in these simple mid-western values and they served him well in the troubled times to come.

In 1917, Truman left the farms for the fields of France, as an artillery commander in World War I, his letters to Bess reflect the excitement and terror of a young officer's first taste of combat.

Dear Bess: The great drive has taken place and I had a part in it. A very small part, but nevertheless, a part. The experience has been one that I can never forget. One that I don't want to go through again, less the Lord wills, but, one I'd never have missed for anything. I brought my battery forward under fire and never lost a horse nor a man. Had shells fall on all sides, and I'm as sure as I'm sitting here, that the Lord was and is with me. I'm not yet dizzy, although one or two men in the regiment are.

When Harry returned from the war, he and Bess were married, and they moved in with Bess' mother in this large Victorian home. It was supposed to be a temporary residence, but aside from their years in Washington, it's the only home they ever had. Today the home is owned by the National Parks Service, it's decorated just as it had been when Harry and Bess lived here. Check it out!

Harry Truman lived here through the 1920's and 1930's, as his political career began, and what a career. From county judge to Senator and finally to Vice President of the United States.

People say he didn't have all that much charisma, but he, he was effective because I think people got to feeling he was sincere, he was truthful, he was honest, he was straight forward, he was plain speaking, in fact he said in the, before his '48 campaign, this will be a common-sense and intellectually honest campaign. It will be novel, and it will work. And I think he kind of lived up to that.

On April 12, 1945, Vice President Harry Truman was summoned to the White House. Eleanor Roosevelt told him that the President, Franklin Roosevelt, had died. After a long pause, he asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?" And Mrs. Roosevelt replied, "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one that's in trouble now."

It is a very hard position to fall into, as I did, if there was ever a man who was forced to be President, I'm that man. But I must face the music and try the best of my ability. You just keep praying and hoping for the best.

The day after he wrote that letter, Truman was visited by the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, to discuss the progress of the War. Eden was struck by what he described as Truman's air of quiet confidence in himself. Truman told him:

I am here to make decisions. And whether they prove right or wrong, I am going to make them.

Many of his decisions proved momentous. He guided American actions that helped to end the war in Europe and he approved the use of the atomic bomb, which ended the war with Japan. He then turned his attention to rebuilding war-torn Europe. Creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, now known as NATO. He issued an executive order ending racial discrimination in the Armed Forces and the Federal Government. He signed a foreign assistance act, known as the Marshall Plan. He recognized the newly formed state of Israel. He championed the founding of the United Nations and oversaw the conduct of the war in Korea that threatened to re-ignite global conflict. His decisions were not always popular. In 1948 he won reelection by a very narrow margin. But his views were always characterized by the common sense and honesty he had learned growing up in Missouri.

Through it all, his devotion to Bess and to their simple life in Independence never wavered.

Dear Bess: Twenty-nine years! Seems like 29 days. Detroit, Port Heron, farm sale, the Black Stone Hotel, a shirt store, County Judge, defeat, Margie, automobile club membership drive, presiding judge, Senator, VP, now...you, you're still on the pedestal where I placed you that day in 1890. What an old fool I am!

After his years in the White House, Truman returned to Independence, to the simple life with Bess at their home on Delaware Street. He'd take his morning walks through the streets of Independence, truly a most uncommon, common man. The story of one of Missouri's—and the world's—greatest men unfolds here in Independence. It's a part of your Missouri heritage.