

PRESIDENT HARRY S TRUMAN

(PART 1)

The thirty-third President of the United States, the son of a mule trader, was born in a small house in Lamar, Missouri on May 8, 1884. His formal first name is Harrison, but he became known and adopted the name Harry. Because his family could not agree on a middle name for him, his middle initial "S" does not stand for a name, so when writing his full name, it is proper to not put a period after the "S".

Mule trading was not a particularly prosperous business, so the Trumans moved to various Missouri towns until settling down in Independence when Harry was six. Before he started school at eight, Harry had been fitted with glasses because of an eye condition called hyperopia. Because of his glasses, the boy was excluded from much of the rough-and-tumble of his friends and spent a good deal of his time reading the Bible, biographies, and history. He also took piano lessons.

At sixteen he had his first experience with politics when he obtained a job as a page at the Democratic National Convention held in Kansas City in 1900. At the convention he was particularly impressed at hearing William Jennings Bryan speak.

Because Harry's father had had business reverses, he had to go to work to help support his younger brother and sister. He worked for about a year as a timekeeper with a railroad work gang, then obtained a seven-dollar-a-week job in the mailroom of the "Kansas City Star." Next he became a bank clerk, then a bookkeeper. For a time he roomed in a boardinghouse with a fellow bank clerk named Arthur Eisenhower who had a younger brother named Dwight.

In 1906, when Truman was twenty-two, his father asked him to come to Grandview, Missouri, and run his grandmother's 600-acre farm. For the next eleven years he lived the life of a dirt farmer, raising corn, hogs, and cattle, which he did with success.

His father died in 1914, and Harry was named to succeed him in a minor political job, that of a road overseer in Jackson County. The next year he was appointed postmaster of Grandview and began going into Kansas City regularly to attend meetings of a Democratic political club that was part of the party machine of the city's boss T. J. Pendergast.

Shortly after the United States entered World War I in 1917, Truman joined a National Guard artillery company as a lieutenant. In August it was taken into the Regular Army as the 129th Field Artillery of the 35th Division. Harry was not accepted into the Regular Army because he had failed the vision test. However, he secretly memorized the eye chart and passed the induction test on his second try! While the troops trained at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Truman

acted as Canteen Officer. Under his management, the post store earned a profit of \$15,000 in six months.

Truman landed in France in April, 1918. A few weeks later he was promoted to Captain, and in July he was given command of Battery D of the Second Battalion of the 129th. He first saw action in September when his battery laid down a barrage of gas shells in the German lines in the Voges Mountains. Later in the same month he and his men took part in the heavy fighting in the Argonne Forest. In October Truman and his artillery battery advanced with the 35th Division on Verdun. He was firing on the German-held city of Metz when the war ended in November. Truman arrived back in the United States in the spring of 1919, and after being promoted to the rank of Major was mustered out of the Army in May.

The 35-year-old Truman gave up bachelorhood on June 28, 1919, when he married Elizabeth "Bess" Wallace, an Independence, Missouri, girl who had gone through school with him from fifth grade and to whom he had become engaged shortly before joining the Army. He and his wife lived at his mother-in-law's home in Independence while he and an army friend opened a men's clothing store in Kansas City. At first the store prospered, but as farm prices fell during the Harding administration, business slacked off. He and his partner finally had to close the store in 1922, Truman losing about \$30,000. It took him more than fifteen years to pay off his debts, but he refused to declare himself bankrupt.

Truman decided in 1922 to make politics his career. With the help of his wartime buddies and the Pendergast political machine, he was elected one of the three "judges" of Jackson County, the county that includes Kansas City and Independence. Despite the title, the position was nonjudicial and was largely concerned with road and bridge building and maintenance. During the two years he was in this office, Truman decided to improve his education and attended night classes at the Kansas City Law School but did not attain a law degree.

Two major events took place in 1924: His only child, a daughter named Mary Margaret, was born, and he was defeated for re-election largely because of the opposition of the Ku Klux Klan, which mistakenly believed he was part Jewish because his grandfather was named Solomon Young. For the next two years he earned a living in a variety of jobs, from selling auto-club memberships to being a partner in a small bank that failed.

In 1926 Truman was elected presiding judge of Jackson County, a position that controlled hundreds of patronage jobs important to the Pendergast machine. He held this office for eight years, and during this time controlled public works projects totaling more than fifty million dollars, which involved a sizable amount of concrete bought from Tom Pendergast's Ready Mixed Concrete Company. But despite the well-merited reputation of the Pendergast machine, no suspicion of

dishonesty ever fell on Truman.

In 1934 Pendergast was having trouble with his own machine as well as with rival factions in the Missouri Democratic Party. Desperate for a candidate for the U. S. Senate, he finally hit on the obscure Truman, who surprisingly won a three-cornered race for the Democratic nomination in August, and went on to capture the Senate seat in November with a plurality of more than 260,000 votes. With astounding suddenness 50-year-old Harry Truman was launched in big-time politics. In 1940 he was re-elected to a second term in the United States Senate.

He became nationally prominent as chairman of a committee that investigated war profiteering. By the end of the war, Truman estimated that the work of this committee had saved the government about 15 billion dollars. In the spring of 1944 a survey of Washington newspapermen showed that they regarded Truman second only to President Franklin Roosevelt as the man in government who had contributed most to the successful prosecution of the war.

As the Democratic National Convention of 1944 approached, Truman's name was repeatedly mentioned as a possible running mate for Roosevelt in place of Henry Wallace who had alienated party leaders by his too-exuberant liberalism. Democratic National Committee Chairman Robert Hannegan persuaded Roosevelt to designate Truman as his choice. Truman, heading the Missouri delegation to the convention, believed that Senator James F. Byrnes of South Carolina was the President's choice and had even agreed to make the nomination speech for Byrnes. Hannegan persuaded Byrnes to withdraw and convinced Truman that Roosevelt really wanted him. When the convention began to vote for its vice-presidential choice, Henry Wallace led Truman on the first ballot by more than a hundred votes. On the second ballot Truman was nominated.

After Roosevelt's fourth-term victory over Thomas E. Dewey, the 60-year-old Truman was sworn in as Vice President on January 20, 1945. During the subsequent 82 days that Truman was Vice President, he met with the Cabinet a few times and had a half-dozen conversations with the President, but he was not filled in on many details of Roosevelt's problems largely because the President was not in Washington most of the period.

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