

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MAXINE LAROE

AUGUST 2, 1991

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-15

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HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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ABSTRACT

Maxine LaRoe, librarian at the Independence branch of Mid-Continent Public Library, often assisted Bess W. Truman during her frequent visits to the library. LaRoe discusses the books chosen by Mrs. Truman, and she remembers Mike Westwood's presence in the library. LaRoe also describes the funeral of Harry S Truman, local patrons' reactions to seeing Bess W. Truman in the library, and her sons' experience with Bess W. Truman as a driver.

Persons mentioned: Bess W. Truman, Ross LaRoe, Harry S Truman, Mike Westwood, Robert LaRoe, Lyndon B. Johnson, Sue Gentry, Ethel Mae Tiffy, Margaret McMillan, Mildred Gable, Jeanne Fann, James Leathers, Mike Manners, Margaret Truman Daniel, John F. Kennedy, May Wallace, Bill Carnes, Carolyn Southern Carnes, Vietta Garr, Judy Lembcke, Erle Stanley Gardner, Valeria LaMere, Edward R. Murrow, Jack Benny, and Maurice Chevalier.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

MAXINE LaROE

HSTR INTERVIEW #1991-15

JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Maxine LaRoe. We are at the Truman Library on the afternoon of August 2, 1991. The interviewer is Jim Williams from the National Park Service, and Scott Stone from the National Park Service is running the recording equipment.

Well, Mrs. LaRoe, thank you for coming by today. Could you tell me first a little bit about where you grew up, when you were born, and that sort of thing, how you made it to Independence?

MAXINE LaROE: I've lived here in Kansas City area always. I was born in northeast, Kansas City, graduated Northeast High School, and I've always lived in Independence, except for two years in Massachusetts. I worked for the Mid-Continent Public Library and was there from 1965 until 1979.

WILLIAMS: Were you trained as a librarian?

LaROE: No. Now, I've had some library courses, but I do not have a master's degree in library science, no. I was what they call a clerk, just a clerk there. But we work on the front desk, check the books in and out, and do all the clerk-type duties, the filing and the card catalogue and that sort of thing.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any contact with the Trumans before you went to work at the library?

LaROE: No, never did. Except we voted for him. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: You hadn't seen them around town?

LaROE: Oh, well, yes, we had seen them around town. I'd seen Mr. Truman in the Halloween parades, and he would ride sometimes in an open car in the parades, and we've seen him on his walks and that sort of thing. But to know him and to approach him, we never had.

WILLIAMS: I didn't know they had Halloween parades.

LaROE: Sure, every Halloween. Well, I guess they still do. When my children were going to William Chrisman and played in the band, they had to march with the band. They had the high school bands, the Truman High School band and the Chrisman band, and all the politicians that were home at the time would ride in the cars that the car dealers had, the fancy new convertibles. [chuckling] Oh, it was quite, quite festive.

WILLIAMS: What was the route of the parade?

LaROE: Well, they went . . . oh, I can't remember exactly all the streets. They did go around the square to the Truman home, and I think in later years maybe up here by the library or up over on 24 Highway some way, but I don't know the exact route of it now. That's been a lot of years ago.

WILLIAMS: But that was a big event in Independence?

LaROE: It was a big event. What they were trying to do was to have something for the kids to do so that they weren't getting in trouble doing bad things on Halloween.

WILLIAMS: Tricks.

LaROE: Tricks. [chuckling] Yeah, *real* tricks.

WILLIAMS: How long have you been married?

LaROE: Forty-six years, to Robert.

WILLIAMS: Robert LaRoe.

LaROE: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: And you have children?

LaROE: Two sons. I have a son who is a professor of economics at Denison University in Ohio, and another son who is working on his master's at UMKC now.

WILLIAMS: I think when I talked to you on the phone you mentioned one of your sons had a run-in with Mrs. Truman.

LaROE: [chuckling] Well, yeah, and my husband and I were trying to figure out just about when that would have been. Now my son was born in '48, and he was probably just . . . oh, sixteen, seventeen. His driver's license wasn't too new, and both the boys were in the car. The older boy Ross, of course, was the one driving. And this lady backed out of a parking space on the square and she dented the fender of our car. [chuckling] Well, the boys were more concerned with the dent than with anything. They thought that they were going to get in trouble when they got home. So they called me at work and told me what had happened. They found out when she got out of her car and came over to inspect the damage that it was Mrs. Truman who had backed out and hit them. I was talking to my son last night—he's in Massachusetts right now—and he reminded me that it was the Bethel Body

Shop on Truman Road that Mrs. Truman told him to take the care. She said to him at the time, “That’s where I send all of my repairs.” [laughter] And when he took the car in, they weren’t surprised to see him at all when he said that Mrs. Truman had backed into him. So, bless her heart, I guess she had a little problem with that Chrysler at that time.

The only thing he had to write on was his pink learner’s permit, and it was pretty ragged from having been folded and in his wallet for a long time. But she wrote her name “Bess Truman” on that, and her home telephone number, her silent telephone number. He was to go over and talk with them at Bethel and call her. And he did, and she was just lovely to him on the phone, and told him to go and get the car fixed. It cost \$7, so it wasn’t a very large dent. And like my sister-in-law said, “anybody else would have painted a red circle around it and said, ‘Mrs. Truman did this.’” [chuckling] But we chose to get the car fixed anyway. But he’s always remembered that. And in his album of his memoirs he has that pink slip. She was really nice to him about it. There are many stories about her and how nice she was to people.

WILLIAMS: And you said that was the Bethel Body Shop?

LaROE: Bethel Body Shop. Yes, I’m sure that’s right. Bethel Body Shop on Truman Road. I don’t even know if it’s still in existence.

WILLIAMS: So the Trumans were regular customers there?

LaROE: [chuckling] Well, I think they were. I think she drove a lot longer than he

did maybe, because Mike [Westwood] used to drive him every place. Mike came with Mr. Truman, when he came home from Washington. But she still continued to drive. However, when she came to the library, Mike always brought her in later years.

WILLIAMS: And you started to work at the library in 1965?

LaROE: Sixty-five, yes.

WILLIAMS: Where was the library located then?

LaROE: It was on Osage, 211 North Osage.

WILLIAMS: So, not far from the square then.

LaROE: Not far from the square. Well, let's see, how can I tell you? There are some offices in there now, I believe some county offices in that building now. It was a big old building, and Mrs. Truman loved to come in there. You know she liked her mysteries. There were little stickers on the mystery books, like a skull. And at the time when I started working there and began to know Mrs. Truman, the mysteries were all in one section. Well, then someone decided that all the books should be arranged together . . . the fiction should be arranged alphabetically by author. So you could still distinguish the mysteries by the skulls on them, and like science fiction had a crazy zigzag thing on it, and the westerns had the *W*, and you could still pick them out. But she didn't like that at all. She liked all of her mysteries in one place so she could find her favorite authors. I think, though, that it stayed that way for a little while, but I think they finally changed it back.

Not maybe because of her, but they changed things around frequently.

WILLIAMS: They changed it back then?

LaROE: I don't think they did on a permanent basis. No, I think they left the mysteries in with the fiction. Well, now, I want to change that a little bit. They have changed it and re-changed it, and I don't know how it is right at this moment.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever work at the library where it is now, the present location, right across the street?

LaROE: Yes, I helped them move. And the day of Mr. Truman's funeral, it was real slow, of course, at our library. No one was in the public library, so all of us that could, just walked across 24 Highway and stood on the hill over here and watched all the cars come in to the Truman Library. And we happened to have a very good vantage point where some of us from the Mid-Continent Library were standing. The Johnsons' car, then-President Johnson went by with his family, and we got some real close looks at some of the dignitaries. That was quite a day.

WILLIAMS: What was Mrs. Truman like as a library patron?

LaROE: Oh, we all just loved her. She really was a nice lady. Had probably the bluest eyes, like I told you, that I ever saw, and she was just . . . she was a real smiley lady, in spite of the fact you never see her smiling in a photograph. I mean, if she had a chance to duck behind somebody she would. She didn't like to be photographed at all. But she would come in,

and she always had a big smile. She was always just real pleasant and real nice.

She one day—well, maybe more than once, but once I remember in particular—where she stood in line. We had groups come from the school—that would come in the school buses. And of course, you'd get a bus load of those kids in line waiting to check out their books, and here's poor Mrs. Truman way back at the end of the line. So somebody rescued her and brought her up front and said, "Is there anything we can do to help you?" And she said, "Well, I just want to pay my 2-cent fine on my overdue book." Now, can you believe that? And most people it would make their day if they thought they could slip a book in that was late. In fact, many of the schoolchildren brought their parents' overdue books and just stacked them all up with their things. But not Mrs. Truman. She stood there and she wanted to pay her fine.

She did like her mysteries. She never wanted any special treatment. She wanted to go look for her own books, as long as she was able, but her arthritis got the best of her there toward the end and she had to have a little bit of help. And then at the very last of it there, when she could no longer even come in the library, she would trust us to pick out books. And we'd stack them up, and good old Mike Westwood, would come and pick them up and he'd return them.

But another thing she would do . . . Like I say, she never wanted

any special treatment, she just wanted to be like everybody else. This one day she didn't have her library card, and she had all these books she'd chosen and she didn't have her card. I said, "Well, Mrs. Truman, I'll check them out for you on my card." And once she let me do that before for just one or two books or something special, but this time she said, "No, I'll just go home, and I'll find my card, and Mike will come back and get the books, if you'll just set them back for me." [chuckling] So I said to her as she was leaving, "Look in your coat pocket." And she just turned around . . . and smiled, [patting her side] kind of like that. So when Mike . . . Because of that coat that hangs in the Truman home over there I got in trouble! For touching it. That's where she kept her library card. We'd seen her just reach in her pocket and get it so many times. So when Mike came back in just a few minutes, he said, "That's where it was, in her coat pocket." [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: That's the herringbone overcoat.

LaROE: Yes. And I just . . . well, I was with this group, and we'd been through the Truman home, so many times, and I guess I just . . . well, I wasn't bored with the tour, not at all, but we had company and we were taking them through, and just as I went by, I just kind of patted the coat, and I said, "My old friend," you know, or something that way. And boy, they got me back on that plastic runner in a hurry. [chuckling] And I realize, you can't touch it. I told Sue that story. She sits right in front of me in church. She goes to

our church, too.

WILLIAMS: Sue?

LaROE: Sue Gentry, I told her that story, and she laughed, knowing Mrs. Truman and knowing me as well as she does, you know, and she just laughed and laughed and laughed. She put it in her column one time about how I got the whistles blown at me. I don't think they were really whistles, but it was just, "Let's stay on the plastic."

WILLIAMS: We try to be nice about it.

LaROE: Oh, they were. They didn't try to embarrass me. We liked her because she was as she is. I mean, she was just one of us.

WILLIAMS: How often did you say she would come into the library?

LaROE: Oh, about once a week. Just about once a week. It'd be kind of fun at night to drive down Truman Road past the home, and you could see the light on there, and the lamp and the chair, and you knew right where she sat, and you knew she was sitting there reading her books, because that light would be on.

And the poor dear, one day she came in, and I said something to her. I said, "Did you see the article in the paper this morning?" It was something that I thought she'd be interested in, and she said, "I haven't been able to get out in my yard and get my paper yet." She said, "The street's just full of people." They were all standing over there, waiting for a glimpse of someone, I guess, and she couldn't even get out to get her paper.

[chuckling] And that wasn't her thing. I mean, she didn't want to be noticed.

WILLIAMS: Did she have a certain day when she would come? Would you always know that . . .

LaROE: No, I don't think she did. I think she'd just come when she needed new books to read.

WILLIAMS: So it wasn't like, "Well, it's Tuesday, Mrs. Truman will be in"?

LaROE: Mrs. Truman will be . . . No.

WILLIAMS: How many books would she check out usually?

LaROE: Probably ten. That was what the limit was at that time on the card, and she'd . . . Well, those little mysteries, you know . . . Of course, now, she did read some other things, too. I think one time she sort of resented people saying that she just read mysteries. And that really isn't true. I mean, she did read other things too, but she did enjoy the mysteries.

WILLIAMS: What were some of the other things?

LaROE: Oh, she liked to read some of the biographies about some of the people, the important people at the time, the prominent people. And she liked current things. She was a sharp lady. She was a real sharp lady.

As much as we all saw her, if you saw her outside the library, you still didn't approach her, because Mike was just right there. And even though he'd know you too, you still didn't feel that you should go up to her. I mean, we were all a little in awe, you know? I remember one day on my

noon hour I'd gone down to what used to be Milgram's on 24, down there—it's Food Land or something now—and all of a sudden, this little lady came up and took hold of my arm, and she says, "Have you looked in the meat counter?" And she was telling me something she had seen that she thought looked really good—they had something at that time—it was Mrs. Truman, and Mike was standing there just grinning. But had I walked up to her, that would have been a different thing. Well, that's what his job was, was to protect her.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever get the feeling she was checking out things for Mr. Truman?

LaROE: No, not really, because, see, by this time . . . I mean, he didn't . . . he wasn't really . . . When did he die?

WILLIAMS: Seventy-two.

LaROE: Oh, was it '72? Well, I don't remember her checking out things for him. Now, Mike has probably come in and checked out things for him, or maybe . . . I don't know anything about his library habits, but he has come to the library with her, and we've seen him, waiting in the car. And if we'd happen to walk by, you could just wave or something, and he would just . . . he didn't know who, but he'd wave, you know, at anyone.

WILLIAMS: Did he ever come into the library?

LaROE: On occasion, he would come in.

WILLIAMS: Would he browse?

LaROE: Yes, just kind of browse around. Our librarian at this time was Miss Tiffy,

Ethel Mae Tiffy, and she was a little lady, a quite elderly lady, and she'd take care of him, when he'd come in. And another lady that used to come in our library a lot, her husband was the curator here for a while, and I can't think what her name was.

WILLIAMS: Perry?

LaROE: No, I don't believe that was it.

WILLIAMS: That's the only one I . . .

LaROE: Mrs. Brooks—she came in quite a lot. Miss Tiffy always helped her.

WILLIAMS: Did Mr. Truman have a library card?

LaROE: I don't know. I don't know.

WILLIAMS: You never saw one?

LaROE: If he didn't, he could have had the whole library, as far as we were concerned. [chuckling] But I never saw his card. But Mrs. Truman did, you know, and she . . . Well, like you know it's in the Truman Library. When we went from one sort of a check-out system to another and everyone had to re-register, she just does what everybody else is supposed to. I mean, she doesn't say, "Well, get it from my records." Never took advantage of her position.

WILLIAMS: So I can't even dig up a little dirt on her and say that she was—

LaROE: You can't. Not from me you can't. [chuckling] I thought she was really . . . It's just too bad we don't have more souls like her. She was really a nice lady.

WILLIAMS: But she would keep books out overdue on occasion?

LaROE: Once in a while she would. She'd forget, you know, or they'd get mixed in with some others or something. She had quite a sense of humor. One time in Independence they got real busy tearing up every street, and it seemed like they tore them all up at the same time. They didn't bother to finish one and then go on to another; everything was torn up. And she'd walk over that debris to get into the library. We were still on Osage at that time before we came out here to Spring Street, and she'd walk over that to get in the library. And then this one day she came and, by golly, they'd torn up the sidewalk, too, in front of the library. She came in and . . . she plopped her books down, and she said, "Now, why do you suppose they're tearing up the sidewalks?" [chuckling] And I just said to her, "Well, I think they just ran out of streets to tear up." That just seemed to hit her just right, and every time she'd come in, for the next two or three times, she couldn't even look at me. I mean, she'd look at me and then she'd get tickled, and I'd get tickled, and we'd both have to do something else. I mean, she was a really . . . she was a fun person, you know, and a nice, nice lady. Well, she would have had to have been, and had a sense of humor to go through what she's been through.

WILLIAMS: You were talking about Mike Westwood protecting her. Would he come in with her?

LaROE: You bet.

WILLIAMS: And follow her around?

LaROE: Well, he wouldn't always follow her around, but he would stand . . . like maybe he would stand at the end of the aisle. He didn't crowd her at all. And he felt she was on pretty home ground in the library.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever see him head anyone off that was heading in her direction?

LaROE: Well, many times I've seen . . . yes, I've seen him go closer to her, just in case . . . However, no one in the library really ever bothered her, but I've seen him on the street, and he was very protective of her.

WILLIAMS: What would he do? Would he just step in the way?

LaROE: He would just kind of step in between them, and take hold of her, so that they knew that they weren't going to get any closer. But I don't think anyone had anything against her. I think maybe they just wanted maybe an autograph, maybe something. I don't really know.

But she was a part of everything. I mean, if anything was going on, she wanted to be a part of everything. She just was a really nice person to have around, that you could enjoy.

And like I was telling you on the phone, this one day I was just so excited because my son was coming home. He was working on his doctorate at that time, and he was going to be coming home. The next time, the next week when she was in, or whenever it was, she asked me, "Did your boy get home all right?" I mean, she remembered little things.

WILLIAMS: So you would visit with her when she'd come in?

LaROE: Oh, yes, she would stand, and she would visit with you and talk with you about things. If you had something she liked especially, she'd say, "My that's pretty," or "You look nice," or "Your hair looks nice that way." I mean, she was just . . . she was at home in the library. Well, we'd all been there a long time, you know, most of us. At that time, we didn't change jobs like people do now so much, and I guess she felt pretty much at home.

WILLIAMS: About how many people worked in the library at that time?

LaROE: Now? Oh, at that . . . Well, let's see, I don't know about now, but at that time I think probably on the circulation desk there were probably maybe seven of us was all. I think they have more than that now. They have a larger library and more circulation, but there were probably only about seven of us then, but not at the same time. Our schedule varied. And then we had two reference librarians: Miss Margaret McMillan and Miss Lear at that time was reference librarian there, and then Miss Tiffy, who was branch librarian. That was in the upstairs, the adult, and then the juvenile section was downstairs, and Mrs. Truman never went down there. She always, you know, was upstairs. But really, no one paid too much attention to her. I mean, everybody was always glad to see her and spoke with her, but they always wanted her to be comfortable.

WILLIAMS: You never saw her check out books for her grandsons or anything like that?

LaROE: No, I don't remember her ever doing that. And I don't remember Margaret ever coming to the library.

WILLIAMS: Would you say that you knew her any more or less than any of the other circulation librarians?

LaROE: Oh, no, I don't think I knew her any better. I think we all knew her about the same. Like the lady's name I gave you. She would visit with her, too, and talk with her. Another one of our ladies, when Mrs. Truman could no longer come in, would check in some of the new books and things, and she'd say, "Oh, I think Mrs. Truman would like this," and she'd help put back some of the books.

WILLIAMS: Who was that?

LaROE: Her name was Mildred Gable, and she now lives in Florida. I thought about it. You know, I would have liked to have had her talk with you because she was real good, too.

WILLIAMS: And the lady's name you mentioned, just so I have it on tape, is Jeanne Fann.

LaROE: Jeanne Fann. Jeanne was *very* good. But there were others there that she spoke with, too, that . . . helped her when they could, did little things. We all did.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember where Mr. Truman sat out in the car?

LaROE: Right in front of the door. Mike always would park just right in front of the door to the library.

WILLIAMS: Would Mr. and Mrs. Truman ride in the back seat together?

LaROE: Well, no, generally he'd ride up front and she'd ride in the back. He'd ride

up with Mike, you know, and she would most generally be in the back. But now, I can remember him sitting in the back, too, sometimes when he'd be up there. And I don't know why that was; whether it was easier for him getting in and out, I don't know.

WILLIAMS: Did things change any after Mr. Truman died, as far as how often she would visit the library?

LaROE: No, not as long as she could. You know, when the library first moved to its present location on 24 and Spring here, it was an old A&P store, and it has just been completely renovated this last year. But as an old A&P store, it had a revolving door. This was when we first had moved in there, before we really even had everything all settled. And poor Mrs. Truman, she just got bumped a little. She was moving slowly, and she was very dependent on her cane at this time, and she just . . . She just got bumped just a little, you know? But it was enough so that we all told Mr. James Leathers, who was the head administrator of all Mid-Continent branches, and that revolving door was out of there in no time at all. But she didn't get to come much after that because she was pretty disabled with her knee. But she did come a few times, and she was glad to see that that door was gone.
[chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Mike Westwood would come in sometimes by himself and pick things up?

LaROE: For her, yes, and return them. Now, Mike would stand there and wait to pay a fine if there were overdue books. He'd stand there, and he'd say,

“You better check those.” And, you know, we’d check the date, and he wanted to make sure that she didn’t owe anything.

WILLIAMS: And his stepson worked at the library?

LaROE: Uh-huh, Mike Manners. And Mike, like I was saying, was a debater. Of course, he’s a lawyer now, so that kind of figures, right? But he was a debater. We had a periodical room, just a small room, and with a big, meeting-type table. And this one time I happened to be doing something in there, I was looking up something for someone, and Mike Manners was sitting in there at the table and he was studying with some of his fellow debaters. He had this stack of magazines, *Time* magazine, and they were looking for whatever their topic was. And someone of the librarians came in and was looking for a special issue of *Time*, and she said, “Mike, are those the library copies?” And he said, “No, these were loaned to me by a friend.” And it just dropped at that. Then, the next afternoon when we found his magazines still sitting there—he was going to use them again—they all said “Harry S Truman” on them. [chuckling] And Mr. Truman had given them to him . . . But he never elaborated. Well, he was over at their house with Mike Westwood all the time, you know, from the time he was small, so he was great friends with Mr. Truman, enough so that he could take those books and this, and get them autographed for me.

WILLIAMS: Do you know if he still lives around here?

LaROE: I don’t know where Mike lives. I only know that he’s a lawyer now.

WILLIAMS: He might be a good person to talk to.

LaROE: Oh, he would be wonderful! Because he would know about both of them from being in their home so much.

WILLIAMS: I didn't realize he would tag along with Mike.

LaROE: Oh, yes, he was in the home, and very good friends with Mr. Truman, too. But I have just no idea where Mike is. Now, he would have graduated from high school the same year as my boy, like in '66 probably, so he'd be forty-three or four.

WILLIAMS: He'd be in his forties.

LaROE: Yeah, it doesn't seem possible to me, but that's what he'd be.

WILLIAMS: Okay, let's see, Mrs. Truman, would she . . . You were talking about a friend of yours who has letters. Did you ever receive anything like that, or . . .?

LaROE: Yes, I received a . . . oh, a couple little things. But like I said, they're in my boy's book with his pink learner's permit with her name on it. [chuckling] I don't know if he still had the bill from Bethel or not; but I just gave those books to him when he was home this June, or I could have brought those to show you. I had a thank you for the condolences, when Mr. Truman died, and maybe a thank you for sending her a birthday card or when she was ill or something. And most of the time . . . Now, the condolence cards were all the edged-in-black type things that were sent out by the hundreds, I'm sure, but the other little personal things, like the little card there, you know, she'd

do those, take care of those things personally. Mike Westwood told us that when we were so thrilled with the flower, we said, “You be sure and tell Mrs. Truman that we love our flower. We take real good care of it.” And he said, “Do you know she went in and picked that out herself?” She wasn’t going to trust anybody else to do that. And she sent many of them.

WILLIAMS: Did she know you all on a first-name basis?

LaROE: She did at the time, but I’m sure . . . Well, not all of us, but those that she worked with, that she would see the most often. Part of those seven people that I was telling you about were part-time, and they would come in at night and things, so she would know us. And we never wore name tags, so it would be just . . . you know, she would just hear us talking to each other or something. But she did at the time. She’d know enough to say, “Well, Cleo did that or told me about this.” Or Mrs. Gable, she did know her by her last name. She’d say, “Mrs. Gable has some books put back for me,” or something.

WILLIAMS: I think we need to change, and we’ll have a few more questions.

LaROE: I don’t think I know much more. I wrote some things down I wanted to tell you, too, and I think I’ve about hit on all of them.

[End #4351; Begin #4352]

WILLIAMS: You brought a floral card with you. Could you tell us about where that came from [see appendix, item 1]?

LaROE: Well, every Christmas Mrs. Truman would send, as she would put it on the

envelope, "To the girls at the front desk," because that was the checkout desk, and they were the ones that checked her books in and out, and, really, her contact with the library, and she would send us a beautiful floral plant. I mean, if it was a plant, it was always a huge one. It was always just very attractive and very pretty. And Mike Westwood told us that she always went in and chose them herself, and she'd say, "Now, I want this one to go here and . . ." And so she had sent with it a handwritten note that said, "Merry Christmas, and thank you," or something like that. This one, the one that I brought you the card for, was a cyclamen plant, and it just . . . Well, it had so many of us taking care of it, and plants, I think, sort of thrive on oxygen, and there were certainly a lot of people talking in the library, and the lights all the time, because the lights were on night and day. It was like that plant lived in a greenhouse, really. And they always lasted, you know, a real long time. And whenever she would come in, she'd sort of look it over to make sure that it was still looking okay. She was very, very observant of everything in the library, all the changes, and she liked to see progress.

WILLIAMS: Would she ever suggest books that you might want to purchase for the library, or anything like that?

LaROE: Now if she did, I doubt it, because she was not presuming at all, you know. But if she did, she would have spoken to Miss Tiffy, our librarian, probably, because we didn't have any kind of authority there at the desk. I mean, we

could take suggestions and things, but if it was anything that was going to get anywhere, they'd have had to go to Miss Tiffy.

WILLIAMS: As far as you know, did Miss Tiffy buy more mysteries than she might have because she knew Mrs. Truman was there?

LaROE: No, I don't really think so. Miss Tiffy went to the same church as the Trumans, and she knew Mrs. Truman through the church, and she . . . No, I don't think she did. They always had a big budget for fiction, for the mystery books. But if there was something special or new . . . Miss Tiffy would always check in all the nonfiction books, and if there was something special or something new, she'd stack it up there, and she'd say, "The next time Mike or Mrs. Truman come in, why . . ."

And it's kind of funny, you know, in the book pocket of each book is a book card that they put your checkout number, and if anyone was very observant . . . Well, I don't know that there would still be any of those books still around maybe even now, but it used to be kind of funny to look at those cards and it would just say "Mrs. T" on there. Because for some reason, either she wasn't able to get there with her card, or Mike didn't have it . . . Now, Mike would let us check them out once in a while without it, you know, but . . . We'd never put "Mrs. Truman," but we'd just put "Mrs. T." But I've come across that so many times. My job there was sending the overdue notices. And I never had to send her any, but I had a lot to do with the cards of the books that were still out, and I'd see her name

on it somewhere up the line somewhere: “Mrs. T.” [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: And she would send a plant then every year at Christmas?

LaROE: Every year. She did that for a number of years.

WILLIAMS: Do you ever remember her coming in and commenting about a particular book, that this one was just wonderful, or would she ever do that?

LaROE: Sometimes there would be some she didn’t like, and she would think . . . maybe it was a little racy or something, you know, and she wouldn’t . . . She might call that to Miss Tiffany’s attention or something. She might make some remark, but she never fussed about anything, really. She just might make an observation. And she’d stay in the longest time. I mean, she’d really look those books over before she took them home, [chuckling] make sure it was something she wanted to read.

WILLIAMS: How long?

LaROE: Oh, she’d stay maybe sometimes twenty, twenty-five minutes, in there. She wouldn’t just come in and just grab them off the shelf. She would be very selective in what she chose. And here would be little kids crawling around on the floor, around her, and other people standing around, and people just standing and looking at her and wondering, “Is that really her, or isn’t it?” You know, “Is it, or isn’t it?” It never bothered her. She’d just still keep standing there looking at our books, you know. [chuckling] She was not impressed with his position at all.

WILLIAMS: Did she seem to have a favorite author?

LaROE: Gosh, I can't remember. I really can't remember who her . . . Now Millie Gable, the one who's in Florida, might, but I can't remember her having a . . . There were so many mystery authors, and so many of them written by the same author under different names, pseudonyms, and I don't remember that she had a favorite one. But I can see her so plainly in that coat and in those black kid gloves coming up to the library.

WILLIAMS: When Margaret started writing books, did that subject ever come up?

LaROE: No. Wouldn't that have been after she was . . . She probably didn't come in the library very often . . . well, I don't think she came in at all the last two or three years I was there. You know, she just wasn't able.

WILLIAMS: Margaret's book . . .

LaROE: The first one?

WILLIAMS: The *Harry S. Truman* book came out soon after he died, and then she started writing the mysteries, but I just wondered if maybe Mrs. Truman had ever commented about it: "Do you have any of Margaret's books?" or "Have any of you read them?" or anything like that?

LaROE: No, she never did. I would have loved to have had her autograph in here. But even seeing her as much as I did, I didn't feel that that I should ask. I thought that was overstepping, to ask her to sign it. And we all, like I say, we were in awe and we respected her privacy a lot. But I don't know, Margaret . . . she never discussed Margaret or said anything about Margaret—to me anyway.

WILLIAMS: Did she ever mention anything going on at the house, if a celebrity had been there or anything like that?

LaROE: Oh, yes, we kidded her. You know, we'd say, "We saw your picture on the front page this morning," or something that way when someone was there. I think even Mr. Kennedy was there one time, and that didn't please her too much. [chuckling] Oh, and there had been a lot of people there at the White House—I mean, at the summer White House, as they call it there. But no, she would never comment. She'd just say, "Yes, isn't that just wonderful?" [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: She wouldn't complain.

LaROE: No, she didn't complain. She did complain because she couldn't get into her yard to get her paper. That sort of bothered her because she felt she didn't have any privacy. And of course Mrs. Wallace lived right back down behind her, and they were real good friends.

WILLIAMS: Do you know May Wallace very well?

LaROE: Yes.

WILLIAMS: You go to the same church.

LaROE: Yes. Of course she's not able anymore to go, but yes, I've known her . . . We've belonged to that church since 1947, so I've known May a long, long, long time, and her family, her sister and family.

WILLIAMS: How would you describe May Wallace? We are in the process of purchasing her house.

LaROE: Oh, are you really?

WILLIAMS: To add to the park, so we'd like to find out more about her.

LaROE: She's a real nice lady, too, and a real sharpie, up until the last few years. Well, I don't know that he's able anymore. Have you interviewed Bill Carnes?

WILLIAMS: I've thought about it. I haven't called him.

LaROE: Bill's been sick. He's had a nervous breakdown, I understand, and he's been real, real sick, so I don't know how . . . But May's sister is Carolyn Carnes, and their father used to be the editor of the *Independence Examiner*—I'm sure you know that. Okay. They have been up there forever. In fact, my husband was a pallbearer for Mr. Carnes when he died. Bill called and asked him if he would be. May came to the wedding reception of our youngest boy fourteen years ago. I mean, we've known them for a long, long time. Of course, Mrs. Carnes is gone too now, but Bill has been very solicitous of May, takes her back and forth to church and everywhere.

WILLIAMS: Is that the main contact you had with May was through church?

LaROE: Was through church, that was all. I've been in her home a few times, but then generally with church stuff.

WILLIAMS: She wasn't quite the reader that Mrs. Truman was.

LaROE: No. No, she didn't come in the library as much. But she was a real gracious lady, too. A real nice lady.

WILLIAMS: When the Secret Service kind of took over, I guess, or when Mike Westwood retired, did that change anything, as far as Mrs. Truman's trips to the library?

LaROE: No, but the Secret Service men would come and get books for her. No, she didn't come with them, that I recall, and I don't remember just when Mike retired. But they were in the house, you know, right across the street, upstairs? And they would come. Of course, you're not supposed to notice them. [chuckling] They're supposed to just blend into the woodwork. But we finally did recognize a couple of them because they would come with regularity to pick up books for her.

WILLIAMS: Did they look like Secret Service agents?

LaROE: I don't know what Secret Service agents look like, [chuckling] but they were just kind of nondescript. They weren't flashy in any way. But, boy, it was hot up there in that little garret-type place where they had to spend so much time, and such a dull routine because nothing was happening over there across the street, you know. But they would, they came for, oh, maybe a couple of years and got books for her, as I recall.

WILLIAMS: And how would those be checked out? Would they have her card?

LaROE: No, I think probably that's when we did the "Mrs. T" thing. I was just trying to think here, because she never would let us check them out without her card, and that may have been when we did that, because she wasn't able to keep track maybe of things. And her lady that lived at home with her

there—oh, she liked her so much. What was her name? Yetta?

WILLIAMS: Valeria?

LaROE: No, the lady that lived with Mrs. Truman. Their cook. She was their cook.

WILLIAMS: Oh, the cook, Vietta [Garr].

LaROE: Vietta. Oh, she liked her. She liked her so much, and she was about the only one she'd talk about at the house. She'd say something about, "Oh, Vietta said this about this or that or the other," or something.

WILLIAMS: Just kind of small talk?

LaROE: Yes, just pass the time of day about her. She was very dependent on her. She liked her. She was a lonely lady after he died, you know. She couldn't get out and really mingle with everybody. She wasn't able, and she was unapproachable so far as . . . I mean, just a few could go to see her. She was a very, very lonely lady.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever deliver books to their house or pick them up there?

LaROE: I never did, no, and I don't think anybody else did either because she always had either the Secret Service or Mike.

WILLIAMS: And did she ever mention Mr. Truman at all?

LaROE: Oh, sure, yes, she'd talk about him.

WILLIAMS: What would she talk about?

LaROE: Well, she'd just say, "Well, you know, Harry said this, and Harry said that," just like any of us would talk about our husbands. [chuckling] I don't think she ever thought he was anything real special. She just talked about him

just like you just would talk about someone, your mate, someone you lived with. Never anything derogatory. I never heard her say anything mean about anyone.

WILLIAMS: Just like how he was feeling or that kind of thing?

LaROE: Mm-hmm, or if there was something current going on, she'd say, "Well, you know what Harry said?" She'd say something like that, just some little small type of thing.

WILLIAMS: So he had opinions on things.

LaROE: Oh, sure he did. You bet he did. [chuckling] Yeah, and she did, too. She did, too.

WILLIAMS: And she wasn't real shy about then talking about it?

LaROE: Not when she'd get acquainted with you, but I would imagine that in a crowd she would be very shy. I would imagine she would. She wasn't the aggressor that Mr. Truman was, by nature. She was a timid little . . . well, not really timid either. I mean, I think she'd probably hold her own, but she . . . I don't think she'd be the one to open a conversation, let me say, in a group. And I imagine it was just . . . Washington was awfully hard on her. It just wasn't her thing at all.

WILLIAMS: And that's what really impressed you about her was that she just seemed to blend in with everyone else?

LaROE: Mm-hmm, she just was hometown people. That's what she was. She didn't want to be above the rest of the world. She just wanted to be what

she was.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever hear stories from people that had worked there before you about how long she'd been coming into the library, or . . . ?

LaROE: No, I don't know, and I don't even know . . . I know she'd come in for a lot of years before I started working there. And of course he would have been . . . let's see, '52, is that his last year? So, see, that would have been . . . She would have still been a celebrity in her own hometown even then. But I don't remember anybody talking about anything that she . . .

In fact, when I first went to work there, she came in this one day, and I wasn't aware that Mrs. Truman came in there. You know, I'd never seen Mrs. Truman before—I mean, up face-to-face—and here we were just standing like this. And I was really surprised, and I just kind of stared at her, and she just kind of stared back. And then I said, "Well, hello." And she said, "Well, hello." But I don't think she . . . Oh, I don't know, she would never be the aggressor in anything, I'm sure, in a society like Washington, D.C. She'd rather stay home and read her mysteries, I'm sure, than go to some of those things that she had to go to. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: How much can you tell from someone by what they read, as a librarian?

LaROE: Oh, I don't know. We could make up lots of stories about what we thought they were going to do with some of the material they checked out. But I think you can tell whether they are really wanting to improve their mind or . . . Of course, I knew now that she read mysteries, she wasn't going to go

out and shoot somebody and try to hide it or anything. But when you get into some of the nonfiction stuff, about how to assemble bombs, and all this and that sort of thing, you just think, I wonder where he lives? I'm going to stay away from there. [chuckling] And you can kind of guess. But generally at that time our circulation was really good, too, and we . . . you didn't really have time to look much at what they were reading. You know, you were just checking them out as fast as you could, and you just didn't really have a lot of time. And the phone rang constantly, and you just didn't really have that kind of time to analyze much, except some of your special people.

WILLIAMS: If she had about ten books a week, did you get the impression that she would read all of them, or . . . ?

LaROE: Oh, I think she did, unless she just maybe didn't like it. But I would be overwhelmed with ten books a week.

WILLIAMS: I would be, too.

LaROE: [chuckling] But she had help, Vietta was there and she did the housework and everything, and she had a little more leisure than she'd had for a long time, and I think she just enjoyed them. And I think she was a rapid reader, and she could enjoy them.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned earlier that she would make her way through the children sitting on the floor, and things like that.

LaROE: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Would she ever stop and visit with people in the library?

LaROE: Not often, no, unless it was someone she knew.

WILLIAMS: Or stoop down and say hello to a child, or anything like that?

LaROE: I don't remember that she did that. She could have, but I don't remember that she did that. But, see, they were active in their church, you know, and so they knew a lot of people. It's really too bad Father Lembcke's no longer here because he would have known . . . he could tell you a lot of really interesting stories, and he used to come in the library a lot. Now, if he and Mrs. Truman would meet in there, why, you know they'd have a big, long conversation or something, or anyone that she knew from the church. And she knew a lot of people—she had a lot of friends in it—but, gosh, they'd lived here forever, you know.

WILLIAMS: I hope to interview Judy Lembcke this coming Sunday.

LaROE: Oh, do you?

WILLIAMS: That's another question I can ask her about: going to the library.

LaROE: Mm-hmm. Now, I remember when he married her. Of course . . . well, I can just remember when they got married. [chuckling] She's quite a bit younger than he was.

WILLIAMS: That's kind of the impression I got. She's still working.

LaROE: And they had a baby, I remember, before he died, but the baby was quite tiny. He died so suddenly, you know—I mean, he just was gone in a hurry. But he was a great guy. It's just too bad you can't interview him.

WILLIAMS: Well, I'm looking here at my sheet, and I . . .

LaROE: Have we covered it?

WILLIAMS: I think so. There's probably something I've missed, something about checking out books, I'm sure. Scott, can you think of anything?

SCOTT STONE: No, I can't. I'm the silent partner.

WILLIAMS: Not even one question, huh?

LaROE: I've probably worn you both out. I haven't had a chance or anybody to talk about Mrs. Truman about for a long, long time, and I liked her, [chuckling] so I just really—

WILLIAMS: Well, I'm very interested in their reading habits. Because the last two summers I've worked here, part of the time I would do research on the books in the study in the home, and I think most of those were probably Mr. Truman's. He would get thousands or hundreds a year, and that may be one reason he didn't go to the library because people . . .

LaROE: Every edition he got a copy of, sure. That's probably the reason he never had to go. But I think he was . . . He was a brilliant man, he really was, and he was very well-read, and I think he kept up with things long after he retired.

WILLIAMS: That's the impression I got. And Erle Stanley Gardner, the Perry Mason mysteries, I think they got every book that Erle Stanley Gardner had ever written. And I was quite surprised to find that Mr. Truman seemed to like mysteries—maybe not so much, but he liked mysteries, too. You always

hear that he liked biography and history, but he seemed to have a lighter side to his interests, too.

LaROE: Oh, I'm sure he did. Nobody could just read all that heavy stuff all the time. But I know that he was up on current affairs, and that he kept up, and I think they subscribed to a lot of magazines. I know they subscribed to *Time*, [chuckling] and probably lots and lots of other things, too. I wonder, the books are still over there in their house, are they?

WILLIAMS: They're scattered all over. Most of them, of course, are in the little library there. But they go from the basement to the attic, here and there. They had so many, and most of them didn't even make it to the house. They're over here at the [Truman] Library. Of course, they'd always be sent here to his office, and then he would take things home, is the impression that I got. Of course, Mrs. Truman's nurses talk about reading books to her. Did any of them ever come in to the library for her?

LaROE: I don't remember any of them coming in, but . . . I can't remember who . . . Now, one of them did.

WILLIAMS: She had a companion, or a woman that would take care of the business.

LaROE: There was someone who came, because I know she told me one time, she was talking to me about Mrs. Truman and she said, "Do you have any idea how lonely that poor woman is?" And I said, "Well, I imagine she is just terribly lonely all day, day after day." And often she couldn't even . . . Well, she got so, I think, that she didn't even want to go out to the kitchen

to eat. And I can't think who this lady was that was telling me all about that. And she was telling me about how she kind of teased her and got her to get up. I think she just kind of gave up, you know? But she was telling how she got her to come out to the kitchen and eat with her, you know, instead of eating in her bedroom there, when they made the bedroom downstairs, you know? But I can't think who that was. It's way back . . . I can't remember yesterday, really, a lot of time. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Valeria La Mere was her companion.

LaROE: Was that the one?

WILLIAMS: She came on in '77, I think, and kind of ran the household. It may have been her, and it may have been a nurse or something.

LaROE: It may have been, I don't remember. I don't remember that name, but she . . . Oh, I can remember one funny thing when Edward R. Murrow came out, you know, to do an interview there at the Truman home. Do you remember how he used to do? Do you remember any of the Edward R. Murrow things?

WILLIAMS: No. I've seen the "Person to Person" show.

LaROE: Have you seen the one he did on the Trumans?

WILLIAMS: Uh-huh.

LaROE: Yeah? Well, when he was out there and they were setting up all those cameras and things, [chuckling] she was a nervous wreck. They were just making a mess out of her house, you know. [chuckling] And it was really

funny, and we could hardly wait to see it on television, to see what happened. And bless her heart, I think she kind of sits there like a ramrod through the whole thing, you know. [chuckling] She just wanted that over with, and in a hurry. But they even had Vietta on that, I think, as I recall.

WILLIAMS: Did she ever mention Jack Benny?

LaROE: No, I can't remember that she did. I can remember, anything she said about . . .

WILLIAMS: The Johnsons. President Johnson visited several times. Did she ever say anything about them?

LaROE: No, she never made any . . . not that I can't remember anything that she said.

WILLIAMS: How about Maurice Chevalier?

LaROE: She never talked about any of them, but I'm sure they knew a lot of them, you know. But she never did talk about them.

WILLIAMS: Well, I guess that's all. Thank you very much.

LaROE: Well, you're welcome. I enjoyed it immensely.

WILLIAMS: I enjoyed it, too. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

APPENDIX

1. Photocopy: floral card and envelope addressed to “The girls at the front desk, Mid-Continent Library, 24 Highway,” from Bess W. Truman, in Mrs. Truman’s handwriting, along with the care tag for the cyclamen plant. Courtesy of Maxine LaRoe