Chapter 3

Harry S Truman: The Farm Years

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Introduction

This chapter examines Harry Truman's years on the farm as an adult from 1905-06 until 1917. It discusses the relationships of those living on the farm during that time, and the relationship of each of them to the farm and to farming. The chapter briefly examines the emotional and financial repercussions resulting from the unfortunate litigation over Harriet Young's estate. The newer, scientific farming methods being used in Missouri generally, and at the Young-Truman farm in particular, are outlined, as well as a glimpse of what life was like on a farm at that time.

Harry Truman's social life is presented, including his membership in the Masons, the church, and the National Guard.

Harry Truman Returns to the Grandview Farm

The farm that Harry Truman returned to in 1907 as a young man was not the farm he knew as a five-year-old child. The big house Solomon Young built in 1867-68 had burned in 1893 and been replaced by a smaller home built by his uncle, Harrison Young. His uncle had built it on the location occupied by the larger house that had burned. He built it in at least two stages. Apparently the rear, or eastern, portion was constructed first. It consisted of a small kitchen, a dining room, and an upstairs bedroom, built directly over the original house's cellar. The western portion, or what is the front of the house today, was built next. It included two rooms downstairs bisected by a hallway with stairs leading up to two bedrooms.[76]

Six people lived in this three-bedroom house in 1907. Harriet Young, John Anderson and Martha Truman, Harry Truman, and Vivian and Mary Jane Truman all lived in the house. Each person played an important role in the operation of the farm. Harry Truman's father, John Anderson Truman, oversaw the total farm operation until his death in November of 1914, when Harry Truman took over his role as farm manager. When Harry Truman returned to the farm, Harrison Young then lived in an apartment in Kansas City, but he stopped by to spend several days at a time. Harry and his brother Vivian shared the bedroom over the dining room until Vivian married in 1911; and after that Harry frequently shared his bedroom with hired

[76] Telephone Conversation with Miss Mary Jane Truman, 29 July 1974, Vertical File: "Grandview Farm," Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

hands[77] when they had to spend the night. Family members, including the Noldnas and Colgans, were frequent visitors to the farm.[78]

The front drive was marked by two stone posts and a white gate. The stone posts were thirty inches wide on each side, were about five feet high, and were capped with Portland cement. These massive square posts of cemented stones were used throughout the farm as both corner posts or, paired to support gates.

The Trumans would build additional outbuildings. Behind the house (twenty feet behind the old seventeen-by-seventeen-foot dwelling) they would build a small twelve-by-twenty-foot utility barn on a brick foundation. They would build a newer, additional barn. The crowning glory of the Truman transformation of the Young farm was a modest utilitarian building at the extreme eastern end of the rear yard — a new outhouse. They installed the door on the east side, modestly facing away from the house, and they embellished the structure with a brick floor.[79] The pump, which was located on the south side of the house, and was painted white:

> I gave the pump a good coat. I did that because it stands immediately in front of the back door and in one of those horribly dark nights I was telling you of when the Nolands were here I was endeavoring to get out of Ethel's way in a hurry and collided with the pump. I dislocated my specs and gave myself a black eye.[80]

On the east side of the barn was a cistern with a capacity of more than two hundred gallons. There was also a coal shed for stoves in the house, and the parlor stove was cantankerous.[81]

Truman found some things had not changed. They continued to use the massive barn Solomon built of lumber from Hickman's mill. It had four rows of stalls. You could drive a wagon through the central portion, and there were cribs at both

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[77] In 1911 the farm had two hired hands plus Vivian when John Truman broke his leg (see text below); in 1912 Booney McBroom (AKA "Boon") was the hired hand. Another hired hand, Brownie Huber; worked on the farm from 1912 to 1917 and boarded with the family. Bill Renshaw, "President Truman: His Missouri Neighbors Tell of His Farm Years," *The Prairie Farmer*, 12 May 1945. Henry Paustian was another hired hand. The dates of his employment are unknown. Esther M. Grube (nee Hall), interview by Niel Johnson, 4 February 1981, transcript of taped interview, 4 February 1981, Harry S. Truman Library.
[78] Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 67, 116.
[79] Robert T. Bray, *Archaeological Survey and Testing at the Truman Farm Home and Grounds*, 1983, typescript, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.
[80] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 39.
[81] Ibid., 46.

ends on the side of the drive-through.[82] There was still no running water to the house. He bathed in a metal tub near the well in water that had sat warming in the sun during the day. Farm animals and human muscle still got the work done. Mornings started at four or five with dressing in the dark cold. Corncobs were gathered to start a fire in the kitchen stove, eggs were collected, cows were milked. Only then was time taken for breakfast. The farm and farmer remained so intimately connected that one didn't exist without the other.

Farm Work and Its Seasons

Harry Truman could not have chosen worse weather for his return to the farm than that of the spring of 1906. March brought cold and very wet weather. A local newspaper reported that, "everything is mud, travel is suspended, the rural mails are delayed, stock cannot go about in the field, and farming is at a standstill."[83] However, the bright economic climate of 1906 agriculture both nationally and in Missouri compensated for the heavy local rains. American farmers were prospering. Although agriculture was no longer expanding as rapidly as it had during much of the nineteenth century, industries and cities were, producing a national economy in which prices for the scarcer agriculture commodities were increasing as prices for more plentiful industrial goods were decreasing. In a very practical sense, it took fewer bushels of wheat to buy a plow. Rural population decreased in Missouri, and city populations grew (Kansas City doubled in size between 1900 and 1920, reaching over 320,000). The price of agricultural products continued upward. By 1916, prices for corn and wheat were double what they were in 1905, and the index of Missouri farm prices in 1916 was 15 percent above 1910 levels.[84]

As the value of agricultural products increased and rail transport of those products was enhanced, the value of Jackson County farmland rose. In 1900 the average (mean) value of an acre of farmland was $71, in 1910 it was $152, and in 1910 it reached $229. In 1920, Jackson County farmland was the most valuable in Missouri.[85] And, the Young farm could not have been more strategically located. It was less than twenty miles from

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[82] Harry and Gilbert Truman, interview by Jon Taylor, September 20, 1996, transcript of taped interview, Harry S Truman National Historic Site. Note: This majestic barn would burn to the ground on November 6, 1966.
[83] *Jackson Examiner*, 21 December 1906.
[84] Richard S. Kirkendall, "Harry S. Truman: A Missouri Farmer in the Golden Age," *Agricultural History* 48: 4 (1974), 467-83.
[85] Ibid., 472.

Kansas City, Grandview was connected to the city by a rock road and both the Kansas City Southern and the St. Louis & San Francisco railroads provided rail transport. In fact, trains ran through the farm, stopping a mile south in Grandview as well as in Hickman's Mill, a few miles north of the farm.[86] The Trumans hauled their wheat to the Hickman Mills' general store, where it would be weighed, and then shoveled into rail cars.[87]

Although the Trumans used machinery, including a gang plow, a corn planter, a grain drill and a binder, most motive power was provided by horses and mules during Harry Truman's tenure. The first gasoline-powered tractors were behemoth, lumbering monsters. Light tractors did not debut until around 1913 and were not commonly available until after World War I. And the Trumans were not alone. In 1919 Missouri farms had more than one million horses and mules, but only 7,200 tractors.[88]

The Truman farmhouse c. 1906. From left to right: Martha Truman, Harriet Young, and Harry S. Truman.
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library

[86] The proximity of the tracks was both blessing and curse. Sparks created by the wheels of passing trains would sometimes ignite fires. One such a fire burned thirty acres of corn and severely burned a horse. *Jackson Examiner*, 2 November 1906.
[87] B. F. Ervin, Sr., "He Was a Good Man With a Pitchfork, Too," *Kansas City Times*, 10 July 1963.
[88] Kirkendall, "Harry S. Truman: A Missouri Farmer," 467-83.

Harry Truman's farm life was dictated by the seasons. His year started behind an Emerson plow mounted on a three-wheeled frame pulled by four horses or mules digging a two-foot furrow. If he got an early start, he could plow five to six acres in a ten- or twelve-hour day. After plowing and harrowing, he planted wheat, oats, and corn. He used a twelve-disc drill that covered eight feet for the wheat and oats. Corn was planted in checkrows.[89]

After the planting came the incessant cultivating. Thistles, cockleburs, morning-glories, nettles, sand burs, plantain, pigweed, mules tail, buck brush, ironweed — all had to be hoed and removed from fields and pastures alike. Livestock had to be fed, watered, and treated for injury and illness. Farm tools had to be repaired, maintained, sharpened. Fences needed building or repairing. The house, the barn, and outbuildings needed constant attention after the winter snows and spring rains and wind. Time was read by the sun, and if light remained, work continued.

In a letter to his future wife in July 1912, Harry Truman described repairing a binder: "I have been working over an old binder. My hands and face and my clothes are as black as the ace of spades — blacker, because the ace has a white background. I hate the job I have before me. If the machine goes well, it is well; if not, it is a word rhyming with well (?) literally."[90] Harry Truman described other farm tasks as well:

> It was my job to help my father and brother feed the livestock, sometimes milk a couple of cows, then help my mother get breakfast. After breakfast we'd go to the fields. In spring and fall there'd be plowing to do. We had gang plows made by the Emerson Plow Company — two twelve-inch plows on a three-wheeled frame. It required four horses or mules to pull it and if an early start was had, about five acres could be broken up in a day — not an eight-hour one but in, say, ten or twelve hours. In the spring when the weather was cool and the teams could be kept moving the time was shorter. That sort of a plow is the best demonstration of horsepower, pounds, feet, minutes. Sometimes the horses gave out and then the power was off until a rest was had.[91]

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[89] Checkrows were based upon a checkerboard-square pattern that enabled the farmer to cultivate in two difference directions (e.g., north-south as well as east-west). The pattern was created by establishing equal-distant parallel lines in the field, then running equal-distant parallel lines perpendicular to the first set of lines. Wherever lines crossed, corn was planted.
[90] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 88.
[91] Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Autobiography of Harry S Truman* (Boulder, Colo.: Associated University Press, 1980), 31.

As spring turned into summer, the sun became hot and the dry winds dust-filled. The farmer's typical day was spent alone in the fields or barn. Problems that arose were either solved on the spot, or they were worked around. There were no committee meetings, no task forces, no brainstorm sessions. And if the garden didn't grow, there was a scarcity of vegetables for the table:

> We are living on bread and bacon with some canned goods thrown in. I can sympathize with those westerners now who can never raise a garden. Ours is a total failure. We had one measly little mess of peas and there was more soup than peas then. One of our neighbors who has a big orchard says that all the apples are falling off green. I am doing the usual farmer act now. They are always starving to death.[92]

Threshing Crew. From left to right: water wagon, steam engine, and thresher. The long belt provides sufficient distance between the steam engine and the hay to minimize fire danger. Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library

The children of farmers started young. By age eight, they were gathering and disposing of brush, by age ten they were in the cornfield with a hoe in search of weeds, by age twelve they had graduated to a scythe or were running a team of four horses in front of a plow or harrow.

Harvest-time meant a respite from solitude in the wheat fields. Neighbors gathered and moved from farm to farm, helping each other harvest the grain. The wheat would be cut, bound, set

[92] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 65.

in shocks, and left to dry for ten days to two weeks. The cutting and the binding were done using a machine called a binder. Assembling the bundles in shocks was done by hand.[93]

After the wheat that had been assembled in shocks had dried, the farmer would hire a thresher. The threshing machine was expensive and would only be used a few days a year by a farmer. Consequently, the common practice was to simply pay for the use of a thresher when needed. The Leslie C. Hall family was in the threshing-for-hire business in the Grandview area in the early 1900s. The thresher was paid by the bushel run through the machine.[94]

Years later, Mary Jane Truman would describe what threshing time meant for those running the house:

> [W]e always had a big bunch of men at threshing time. We had as many maybe as twenty-five or thirty for dinner. . . . You always had to have plenty of meat and plenty of potatoes and plenty of vegetables. . . . Then there were the machine men; there would be five with a machine and they stayed overnight. So you had breakfast, dinner, and supper for them. Then at the noon meal the neighbors would come in; they traded work. We would have anywhere from twenty-five to thirty, and we always had company besides. We always had a house-full.
>
> And, Harry, when he was home, would get up lots o times and get breakfast for the men. Cause maybe Mamma and I would be washing dishes 'til ten or eleven o'clock at night."[95]

Leslie Hall used his machine to thresh wheat at about eight farms near Hickman Mills. News of the arrival of Hall's steam engine, water wagon, and thresher traveled quickly through the farming community. Three blasts of his steam whistle, a pause, then three more blasts was the signal for the neighboring farmers to gather. The neighbors who formed the threshing crew usually started on a farm owned by C. W. Babock, nicknamed Witt. A boy would arrive in a buggy with a burlap-covered ten-gallon water can for the workers. Four farm wagons with spring seats arrived to transport the grain for weighing and shipment in Hickman Mills. And seven or more bundle wagons

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[93] Erwin, "He Was a Good Man With a Pitchfork, Too."
[94] Ibid.
[95] Mary Jane Truman, interview by Stephen and Cathy Doyal and Fred and Audrey Truman, 1975 transcript of taped interview, Harry S. Truman Library, 50.

were used to gather wheat bundles scattered in shocks throughout the field and deliver them to the thresher.[96]

Members of the thresher gang took pride in the assembly of the highest, most symmetrical load of wheat bundles on the bundle wagons. Losing a load on the way across the field to the thresher, or separator, was a fall from grace. Two loaded bundle wagons would pull up on either side of Hall's separator or thresher allowing workers to feed bundles of wheat into the machine with pitchforks.[97]

The threshing machine was run by a long belt, which was looped around the steam engine's flywheel. The steam engine was positioned as far away as possible from the thresher to minimize the risk of fire jumping to the wheat. The steam engine required water and wood or coal, which had to be continually supplied to the field operation. The logistics were almost as complex and labor-intensive as was the actual threshing. There were innumerable potential problems. Someone could walk into or drive a horse into the belt stretched from the thresher to the steam engine. Someone could throw too many wheat bundles into the thresher, causing it to stall. The water wagon could break down. It was not uncommon for individual farmers helping on these threshing crews to be unable to finish a full day due to illness, injury, or simple exhaustion from the heat and incessant wheat dust. When they finished that harvest, the entire group of neighbors would trundle after Hall's machines to the next farm. And then the next. Until all the wheat was harvested and the farmers would return to their solitary labors.[98]

Scientific Farming and Lessons Learned

During Harry Truman's tenure on the farm, the farm developed a reputation for being well-run. George Arington, a neighbor on an adjoining farm recalled that Harry Truman spent every spare moment either "readin'" or "figurin'". He built the first derrick and swing in the area for stacking hay. Ed Young (no relation), the local veterinarian who was the Truman's veterinarian from 1912 to 1917 said,

> Harry was always bustling around getting things done. I remember once when the Trumans were putting out a big

[96] Erwin, "He Was a Good Man With a Pitchfork, Too."
[97] Ibid.
[98] J. Sanford Rikoon, *Threshing in the Midwest, 1820-1940* (Bloomington, Il: Indiana University Press, 1979). See also Marvin McKinley, *Wheels of Farm Progress* (American Society of Agricultural Engineers, n.d.).

> corn crop, of seeing three corn planters running. A few days later I went by and was surprised to see the same three teams cultivating the corn before it was up. That was something new to me but it worked, as it gave Harry a head start on the weeds.[99]

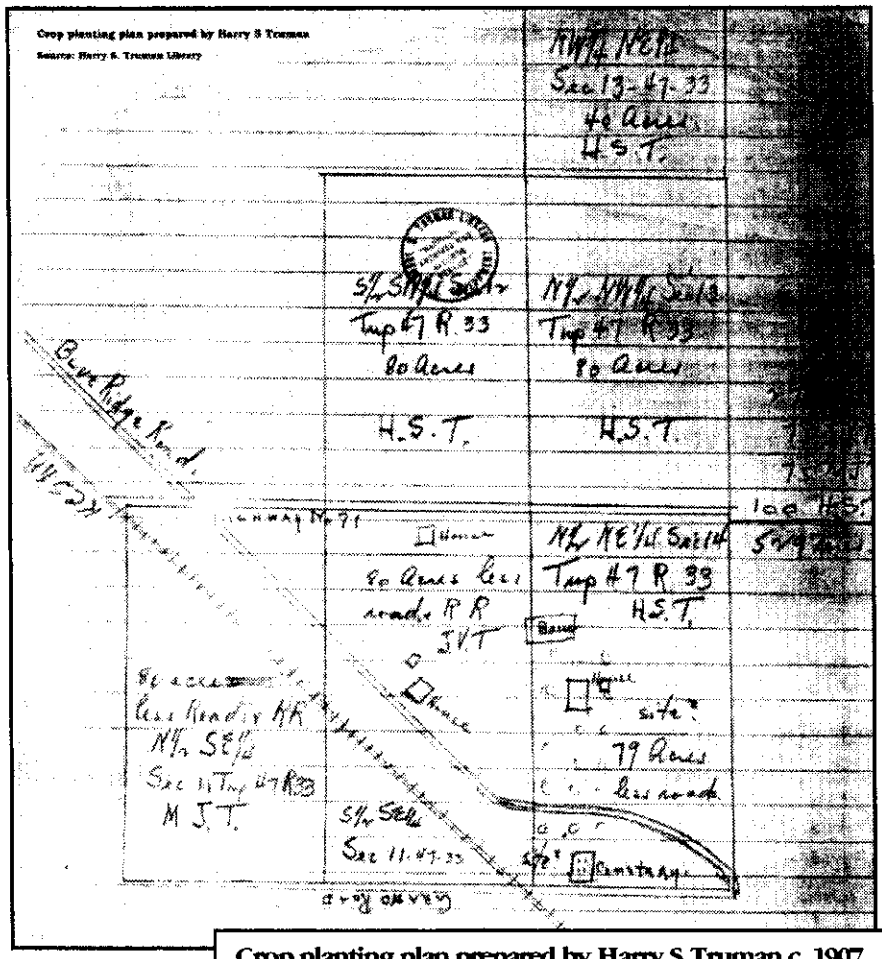
Truman farmed approximately 300 acres and used the rest as pasture for his livestock and neighbor's livestock. The 1910 census shows that the Trumans received $478.70 rent for livestock grazing in their pastures. In the same year they valued their farm at $59,500.[100] In 1911 he and his father built a new hay barn with internal dimensions of fifty by seventy-two feet.

Truman also practiced crop rotation. He sowed wheat in a field in September, and planted clover in the same field the following spring. He cut the wheat in July, and in the fall he would harvest a crop of stubble and clover from the field. The following year he would be able to harvest a crop of hay and clover seed. Then he broke up the clover field in the fall and planted corn in the spring. After harvesting the corn, he used the corn stalk field as pasture for the livestock through the winter then cut the stalks and sowed oats. In March of 1911, Harry Truman planted eighty acres of oats. It took him five days to sow seventy acres. They also put 160 acres of wheat in on September 8, 1911. The same field would be sown with wheat again the following fall. It would take five years to complete the rotation cycle of wheat, clover, corn, oats, and then wheat. The result of the rotation was increased crop yield. Wheat increased from thirteen to nineteen bushels per acre, oats from eight to fifty, and corn from thirty-five to seventy bushels per year.[101] In 1913, the Trumans harvested 150 tons of hay.[102] In Harry Truman's words:

> We used a rotation system in our farm program. We'd plant corn after clover. Starting with wheat we'd sow clover on the wheat field in the spring and usually get a crop of clover hay that fall. The next year we'd spread all the manure from the farm and the little town adjoining it on the clover field. Nearly every family in the little town of 300 people had a cow or two and a horse. My father and I bought a manure spreader and kept it busy all the time when we were not doing other necessary things. We'd break the clover field up in the fall and plant corn the next spring, sow oats in the corn stubble the next spring and

[99] Bill Renshaw, "President Truman: His Missouri Neighbors Tell of His Farm Years," *Prairie Farmer*, May 12, 1945.
[100] Vertical File: "Grandview Farm, Misc. Records, 1890-1918," Harry S. Truman Library.
[101] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 121.
[102] Ibid., 124.

wheat after oats. It would take five years to make the complete rotation but it worked most successfully. We increased the wheat yield from thirteen to nineteen bushels -- the oats from eight to fifty bushels and the corn from thirty-five to seventy bushels to the acre. Besides these increased yields in the grain crops we always had two excellent hay crops and at least one seed crop from the clover, so my practical education in farm management took place in those ten years.[103]



Crop planting plan prepared by Harry S Truman c. 1907
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library.

[103] Ferrell, ed., *Autobiography of Harry S. Truman*, 30-32.

The oat sowing and the wheat hauling were all done behind four horses, William, Samuel, Jane, and X. X was a bronc and interested in speed, William (AKA "Bill") was a former buggy horse and lazy, Samuel was a very large ex-dray horse whose top speed was measured in nanometers per hour. Jane was just right, according to Harry.

There can be little doubt that the future president learned much of his ingenuity and thoughtful approach to farming from his father. The manure spreader is just one example: Shortly after moving to the farm, he and his father bought a manure spreader. The Trumans picked up manure from neighbors' barns and stables and spread it on their clover fields.

Harry also learned a great deal about livestock from his father, who had spent most of his adult life working with animals in one capacity or another. The farm had horses, mules, chickens, and Shorthorns. At the time of John Truman's death in 1914, they had begun to raise Black Angus. According to letters Harry wrote to Bess, cows were not his favorite farm animal. One broke his leg in the spring of 1913. Harry's version of the incident was that he had grabbed the tail of this 300-pound cow and was reaching for her ear when it stuck her head between his legs, backed him into a corner, and with a heave of her head flipped him over her back. The resulting fall broke his leg. No record of the cows version of the incident could be found; however, it was later determined that it was not a cow, but a calf.

The Trumans also raised Hampshire hogs in a concrete-floored shelter with an attached fenced area east of the house. Harry didn't seem to like pigs either:

> I have been to the lot and put about a hundred rings in half as many hogs' noses. You really haven't any idea what a soul-stirring job it is, especially on a day when the mud is knee deep and about the consistency of cake dough. Every hog's voice is pitched in a different key and about time you get used to a squeal pitched in G minor that hog has to be loosed and the next one is in A-flat. This makes a violent discord and is very hard on the nerves of a high-strung person. It is very much harder on the hogs' nerves. We have a patent chute which takes Mr. Hog right behind the ears and he has to stand and let his nose be bejeweled to any extent the ringer sees fit. I don't like to do it, but when a nice bluegrass pasture is at stake I'd carve the whole hog tribe to small bits rather than see it ruined. Besides it only hurts them for about an hour and about one in every three loses his rings inside of a week and has to endure the agony over again.[104]

[104] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 80.

Raising hogs then also brought with it the risk of cholera decimating the entire stock. In 1913 10 percent of all American hogs died from cholera. An epidemic struck Truman's hogs in 1912. He started with ninety hogs; he was able to send only thirteen to market, and save twelve others. The rest died. In accordance with the law, he dumped the carcasses in a hole and buried them en masse.

About the same time, hogs on the neighboring farm owned by the Slaughters were also struck with cholera. Stephen Slaughter remembered years later his mother calling the Truman farm and asking for help vaccinating the Slaughters' hogs. At four-thirty the next morning, Harry S Truman arrived on horseback and spent the day helping the Slaughters wrestle 200-pound hogs to the ground long enough to vaccinate each one.[105] The incident wasn't forgotten by Harry either:

> It was necessary to sneak up and grab a hind leg, then hold on until someone else got another hold wherever he could, and then proceed to throw Mr. Hog and sit on him while he got what the Mo [Missouri] University says is good for him. A two-hundred-pound hog can almost jerk the rigs loose from your backbone when you get him by the hind leg. It is far and away the best exercise in the list. It beats Jack Johnson's whole training camp as a muscle toughener.[106]

Truman was to report in one of his letters to his future wife that the farm netted about $7,000 per year.[107] However, the Trumans seemed to have very little discretionary income. Stephen Slaughter, who was the son of one of the neighbors, wrote, "You know, they didn't have much spare money. The Trumans were always strapped."[108] What the neighbors didn't know was that income from the farm not only had to support the extended family living there, but John and Harry Truman were still struggling to pay off approximately $12,500 in debts John still owed from his 1900-01 financial collapse.[109]

A few of the farm receipts still exist. Obviously, receipts that have been lost over the past ninety years would number in the hundreds; however, the existing records provide a glimpse into the farm operation: On August 6, 1909, the Trumans sold 1,011 bushels of oats for $414.87 less $16.19 freight, $1.40 inspection and weighing and $5.06 commission. On August 11,

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[105] Stephen S. Slaughter, *History of a Missouri Farm Family* (Harrison, NY: Harbor Hill Books, 1978).
[106] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 96.
[107] Ibid, 42.
[108] Slaughter, *History of a Missouri Farm Family*, 71.
[109] Margaret Truman, *Bess W. Truman* (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 34.

1909, the Trumans sold 849 bushels of wheat for $912.85 less $40.71 for freight, inspection, and commission. On August 8, 1910, the Trumans sold 779 bushels of red wheat for $779.33, less $37.44 for freight, inspection, and commission. And, on August 15, 1910, the Trumans sold 1,286 bushels of oats for $468.16 less $28.42 for freight, inspection, and commission.[110]

Additional insight into the farm operation during Harry Truman's tenure can be gleaned from a close examination of the 1910 census questionnaire Harry filled out: He reported that they had 600 acres in pasture or under cultivation, and the farm value was $58,000, which included the farmhouse and all outbuildings worth about $8,000. Farm machinery and implements were reported to be worth $1,500. They also reported twenty-one cows, six heifers, seventeen calves, and five steers. Fifty-four hogs, eight horses, six colts, and sixty-five chickens were included. In responding to the census questions about the preceding year (1909), the Trumans said they had harvested 3,000 bushels of wheat from a hundred-acre planting that they sold for $1,500; they harvested 1,200 bushels of oats from a forty-acre planting that they sold for $480.53; and they sold 849 bushels of winter wheat for $872.60 that came from a sixty-acre planting. They also produced thirty tons of clover from forty acres they sold for $150, as well as twelve tons of alfalfa from three acres that sold for $153.00. The year 1909 was also a year rich in gestation and birthing. The Trumans were blessed by the arrival of ten calves, three colts, and sixty little piglets.

Existing records enable one to flip forward seven years in the Truman history, and look at the farm operation for 1916 and 1917. In the property valuation forms completed by Harry in 1916 and again in 1917 for state, county, and school district taxes, Harry reported:[111]

in 1916	in 1917
eight horses valued at $800	ten horses valued at $750
two yearling mules worth $100	two yearling mules worth $100
two older mules worth $200	two older mules worth $150
three pure breed cows, $120	five pure breed cows $200
two grade cows worth $60	three milch cows worth $150
two milch cows worth $80	forty hogs valued at $200
sixty hogs worth $240	one piano valued at $50
one piano worth $50	clocks, jewelry & furniture, $320
household furniture, $200	one car worth $100

[110] Mary Jane Truman Estate, Vertical File: "Grandview Farm, Misc.," Harry S. Truman Library.
[111] Ibid.

farm machinery worth $250[112]
one used car worth $100

It helps in developing a broader perspective of the Truman farm economics to step back and take a look at Missouri farming in general during the 1917-18 farming year: The state had 14,870,400 acres under tillage with the average value of crops on each farm being approximately $1,685.00. Statewide, there were 6.6 million acres in corn, 3 million acres in wheat, 1.5 million acres in oats, 2.9 million acres in hay, and 300,000 acres in potatoes, cotton, and rye. In 1919, Missouri farmers had 919,000 milk cows, 1,599,000 sheep, and 4,943,000 hogs.[113]

Extrapolating from information gleaned from receipts, census information and school tax information from the Young-Truman Farm, it becomes obvious that the farm was a very typical Missouri farm of the time. It produced milk, grains and hogs with hogs and grains being the principal income-producers.

A Family Divided

Harriet Young died on December 19, 1909. Harrison Young and John Truman were appointed executors of her estate. J. H. Conrad and W. B. Garrison were appointed by the probate court to assist them in making an inventory of the real and personal property Harriet owned at the time of her death. They reported to the court on February 4, 1910, that Harriet owned 444.75 acres when she died.

Harriet's will purported to leave all of her estate to Harrison Young and Martha Ellen Truman. The will directed that her other children received five dollars each. The other children filed suit, arguing that the will was invalid because Harriet was mentally incompetent when she made the will and because Harrison and/or Martha Ellen had exerted inappropriate influence on Harriet resulting in her not being able to exercise her own judgement in deciding how and to whom she wanted to convey her property. All parties to the lawsuit elected to not have a jury, and testimony was heard by Judge O. A. Lucas.[114] On

[112] Farm machinery was not listed on the 1917 form. Either the reporting rules changed or Harry forgot.
[113] F. B. Mumford, "A Century of Missouri Agriculture," 296.
[114] A search was made of both the state archives in Jefferson City, Missouri, as well as the court files in Jackson County. Although the probate file was found, the court file containing the litigation record, including testimony, was not located. The litigation file was assigned a different court number, and was archived separately. A litigant may appeal a trial court's judgment only during a specific period of time. After that time has passed, appeal is usually not possible.

May 14, 1914, the judge concluded that Harriet had been mentally competent and that the will accurately reflected Harriet's independent wishes.[115]

Two months after being appointed executors of Harriet's estate, John Truman and Harrison Young leased 480 acres to Harry Truman.[116] The lease was for a term of three years, running from March 1, 1910, to March 1, 1913. The lease required Harry to cultivate all the tillable land. The lease also required Harry to pay one-third of all grain in the crib, one-half of all hay in the stack (or one-third of the sale of the hay), and one-half of all pasture rents.[117]

The Truman Family Back on the Young Farm

Harry Truman did not live alone on the farm. His mother, Martha Ellen, his sister, Mary Jane, and until 1911, his brother Vivian all lived there. And, there were his cousins, Ruth, Nellie and Ethel Noland who were frequent visitors as was his Uncle Harrison.

Although they all played a role in running the farm, after Vivian's marriage and departure in 1911, Harry's younger sister, Mary Jane, was probably the most significant, particularly after Harry went to war.

Mary Jane grew up being lovingly cared for by her older brothers. Years later she would recall during an interview with Merle Miller:

> When I was a baby, Harry used to sit on a rocking chair and sing me to sleep, and he braided my hair, and when I was outdoors, he wouldn't let me out of his sight. He was so afraid I'd hurt myself.
>
> I sometimes think that's why I never did get married. I just never met anybody who was as nice to me as Harry
>
> We played almost all of the games that children played in those days, and we all three had a horse to ride and did

Consequently, the file upon which the appeal would be based would no longer be needed, and in many jurisdictions is destroyed except for the final judgment.

[115] Jackson County Probate File, Docket No. I3060.

[116] The inventory of Harriet's estate included only 444 acres of land, whereas this lease conveyed 480 acres. The land conveyed by the lease that was not in Harriet's estate was a forty-acre parcel immediately west of the acreage containing the farmhouse.

[117] Mary Jane Truman Estate, Vertical File: "Grandview Farm, Misc.," Harry S. Truman Library.

quite a bit of horseback riding. I remember one horse in particular — we called him Old Bill — and he wouldn't let the boys catch him. But I could go out and catch him in the pasture or anywhere else because I usually carried a biscuit or a piece of cake or something for him.

He was the old buggy horse, and we drove him for years. We still had him when my brother Harry went to the First World War, and I drove him all during that time and then bought a car in the spring of 1919, shortly after my brother came home. But Old Bill was still there. We kept him as long as he lived. [118]

Family and friends on the Truman farm. From left to right: Mary Jane Truman, Harry S Truman, Laura Everhart, Mary Colgan Hornbuckle, Vivian Truman, and Nellie Noland.
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library.

When the Truman family returned to the farm in 1906, Mary Jane was seventeen. She had been born there on August 12, 1889. According to Harry's letters to Bess, Mary Jane was actively involved in running the house. According to photographs dating from that period, Mary Jane was also actively involved in farming.

Mary Jane's abilities as a farmer are clearly demonstrated by her single-handedly managing the farm when Harry Truman

[118] Miller *Plain Speaking*, 50.

was absent pursuing business interests in late 1915 and much of 1916, first in Texas and later in Oklahoma. Mary again ran the farm while Truman was serving as an artillery officer in France during most of 1918 and the first five months of 1919. Vivian was running a farm of a couple hundred acres in Hickman Mills at the time. So, in Harry's absence, it was Mary Jane as farmer, and her mother as homemaker.[119]

The Young-Truman farm and farms throughout the country in the early twentieth century were not simple idyllic sanctuaries from the clatter of streetcar wheels, crime, and the street pollution of horse manure. The absence of telephones, the tediousness of transportation, and the vagaries of medical care all

Mary Jane after the morning milking. The Solomon Young barn is in the immediate background, Vivian Truman's hay barn is to the viewer's right.
Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library.

combined to paint a picture of a quiet determination, and a need to accept life on its own terms. In March of 1914, Truman's mother underwent hernia surgery at home. Truman held the lamp for the surgeon. Truman described the operation in a letter to Bess written on March 20, 1914:

> Dear Bess: I have a few minutes so I'm going to write you a short note. Mamma has had an operation called hernia. It is somewhat akin to appendicitis. At least there was a

[119] Fred L. Truman, interview by James H. Williams, June 18, 1991, transcript of typed interview, Harry S. Truman Library.

> long incision made in her right side and some parts removed. She is getting along as well as we can expect.
>
> I have to stay with her all the time, Mary has so much else to do. The doctor is with her now. We were very much surprised when the doctor said he wanted expert advice on the case. We just supposed at first that she had a slight rupture. The specialist came at five o'clock Thursday, and at six they decided to have the operation. I had to stand and hold a lamp while it was going on. I hope never to witness another one.[120]

In April of 1914, Truman borrowed $650 from his mother and bought a car: a Stafford. Contrary to popular reports, it wasn't used primarily for pleasure. He put five thousand miles on the car in the first three months of ownership, much of it transporting his father, who had developed medical problems, to and from a Kansas City doctor.[121]

In November 1914, Harry's father John Truman died. In September he had become ill. Reports vary regarding the source of his illness. Some indicate that he suffered a strangulated hernia resulting from a job injury; however, the local newspaper reported that he had cancer.[122] In a letter to Bess dated August 31, 1914, Truman reported that his father's condition was grave and they were not hopeful that his 63-year-old father would survive. According to Truman's letter, an X-ray showed that the lower entrance to his father's stomach was almost closed.[123] In October he underwent surgery at the Swedish Hospital in Kansas City. On the morning of November 3, 1914, Harry and Brownie Huber, the hired man, rose early and quietly went downstairs, not wanting to wake Mamma Truman and Mary Jane. Harry and Brownie made biscuits, oatmeal, and fried some eggs. Harry stepped into the parlor where his father had been sleeping on a couch since becoming ill. According to Brownie, Harry came back into the kitchen a moment later and said, "Dad just passed away."[124] John Anderson Truman was sixty-four. Local schools

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[120] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 115.
[121] Ibid., 175.
[122] See Truman, *Bess W. Truman*, 52. Margaret Truman reports that John Truman strained himself trying to move a huge boulder while working as road overseer. The strain, she reports, aggravated a pre-existing hernia, closing his stomach.
[123] Ibid., 173.
[124] Renshaw, "President Truman: His Missouri Neighbors."

were closed in memoriam on the day of his funeral.[125] He was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery in Kansas City.[126]

His father's death cast Harry Truman in the role of farm manager:

> I have quite a job on my hands now trying to make things run as smoothly as they formerly did. You know, I've been in the habit of running the farm for some time, but Papa always made it go. He could make the men [hired farm help] step lively even after he was sick a great deal better than I can or even will. It surely makes me feel a loss that is quite irreparable . . . .[127]

John Truman's illness had resulted in heavy medical bills, and Harry was forced to sell the Black Angus herd he and his father had started to pay them.[128]

Socializing in Town

The farm years of Truman were not years of isolation. In fact, some historians argue that Truman's farm years molded him into the more gregarious, more social, more self-confident person he became. It was during his years on the farm, argue these historians, that Harry Truman underwent important personality changes that prepared him for politics.[129] Whether the man made the farm, as the genetic-determinists would argue, or the farm made the man, as Jeffersonian agriculturists would argue, or whether, as is more probable, some of both are true, Truman would leave the farm a different man.

Each day he was confronted by problems he alone had to solve. Others working the farm were way up in the hog house vaccinating for cholera, or wrestling a sick calf away from a protective cow, or reattaching the right rear wagon wheel knocked loose on the macadam road into Kansas City. Wherever the others were, they were not with Harry when the team encountered the wasps in the north cornfield, developed a sudden longing to be somewhere in Kansas, and wanted to get there at light's speed. It was his problem. There was no one else. He had to solve it. And, like any other farmer, he solved it. Each

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[125] Doris Faber, Typescript of notes from interview of Mary Jane Truman, July 1967. Family Correspondence File: "Mary Jane Truman," Harry S. Truman Library.
[126] *Jackson Examiner*, 9 October 1914.
[127] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 132.
[128] Renshaw, "President Truman: His Missouri Neighbors."
[129] Kirkendall, "Harry S. Truman: A Missouri Farmer in the Golden Age," 467-83.

problem confronted and solved enhanced self-confidence. This environmentally induced self-confidence that was a natural by-product of early twentieth-century farming takes on profound significance when one remembers who is being discussed: Harry S Truman, aged twenty-two years, a young man who as a boy had been pampered and protected because of sight problems, a young man who as a boy had spent more time at domestic chores than at physical outdoor challenges, a young man who as a boy had stayed home with mother to watch his younger brother ride off with his father on another livestock trade. The person upon whom this magical self-reliance was being bestowed had been student, musician, and banker. There can be no doubt that just as he watched the metamorphosis of his body from banker to laborer, so he also sensed a new self-confidence, born of confronting and solving the innumerable problems that are the very definition of farming. It was a newer, more self-possessed Harry S Truman who ventured into town seeking solace from the solitude of farming.

Grandview, Missouri, 1910s Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library.

In town, Harry attended the Baptist church, became active in the Masons, joined camp 4311 of the Woodmen of America, participated as a member of a National Guard unit, and became politically active. In fact, Harry's father expressed the opinion on several occasions that Harry was so busy doing things off the farm that he couldn't be too interested in farming.

In 1903, while still living and working in Kansas City, Harry had been baptized in the Little Blue River and joined a Kansas City Baptist congregation. He continued his association with the Baptist tradition when he returned to the Young farm and became a member of the Grandview Baptist Church, which

had its origins on land deeded by Peter Thompson, a Jackson County pioneer, for the construction of a church and cemetery. The land was adjacent to the main entryway to the Young farm. He remained a member of that congregation for the rest of his life. In 1891 the congregation moved into Grandview, taking the building with it.

On June 14, 1905, Harry Truman, aged twenty-one, joined a battery of field artillery of the Missouri National Guard. He remained with the group for six years, or two enlistments. He attended drills every two weeks in and around Kansas City. It is reported that he was so proud of his dress blue uniform with red stripes down the trouser legs, red piping on the cuffs, and a red *fourragere* over the shoulder that he wore it to the farm one weekend to show his Grandmother Young. Truman later recalled that his grandmother's reaction wasn't what he had hoped for. "She looked me over, and I knew I was going to catch it." Truman recounted later. "She said, 'Harry, this is the first time since 1863 that a blue uniform has been in this house. Don't bring it here again.'"[130] While with the National Guard Harry Truman received promotions to the rank of corporal.

In December of 1908, Harry Truman filed his Petition for Initiation with the Westport lodge of the Masons, and joined the lodge in Belton, Missouri, nine miles north of Grandview. In 1911 he established a lodge in Grandview. Truman remained active in the Masons for the remainder of his life.[131] Both his Grandfather Young and Grandfather Truman had been members. By 1909 he had created a lodge in Grandview and was elected its first master. In 1913 he became the first patron of the Grandview chapter of the Eastern Star. Much later, in 1945, he would be given the thirty-third degree in the Masons.

In 1913 he joined the Farm Bureau and served as president of the township group. He also became president of the Grandview Commercial Club. Otherwise his political activities were limited to smaller posts. He succeeded his father to the post of road overseer for the southern half of Washington Township. He was appointed in December of 1914 to the position of postmaster of Grandview, a position, which he held from February 1915, until he resigned that April. In July 1916 he took the place of U.R. Holmes on the board of the Hickman Mills Consolidated School District, and served for almost a year. In August of 1916 he ran for committeeman in Washington Township but he lost in the primary.[132]

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[130] Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 68.
[131] Jill York O'Bright, "Cultivating the Land, Cultivating the Man: The Young-Truman Farm," *Jackson County Historical Society* 26: 2 (Fall 1984).
[132] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 86.

So, although it was farming that gave Harry Truman that confidence to rely upon himself, it was his life in town that gave him the social skills to apply that new-found confidence in the political arena.

Truman Leaves the Farm

In 1918 Truman left the farm to enlist in the U.S. Army. He was commissioned a first lieutenant and was stationed in France, leaving Mary Jane to manage the farm. Years later Mary Jane would recall:

> I did have a man and his wife that lived in a house on the farm. They were there all the time and then we had to hire other help to help them. Of course, we had quite a large crop of wheat and oats and corn; and then we had over two hundred acres in pasture, in pasture cattle.[133]

When Truman enlisted in the army he was thirty-three years old. Truman reported later that it was patriotism that compelled him to join the army. But, according to government officials, commencing in early 1917, plowing was as essential as shooting to victory in Europe. Farmers "will be as much a part of the great patriotic forces of the Nation as the men under fire. The boys in the furrows may win the war before the boys in the trenches may ever get a shot," proclaimed an USDA official. "No work," said the official, "that is being done in the country today is of more patriotic or of greater strategic military importance than the work of food production. Enlist in the national service; grow a war crop."[134] Truman would later recall that "it was quite a blow to my mother and sister for me to leave the farm."[135] Years later, when asked about her recollection of the time Harry went to France, Mary Jane said:

> When my brother Harry went off to enter the service during the First World War, he said I'd have to look after Mamma and the farm, and so I did. My brother Vivian was on another farm east of here.
> I ran the farm, but I did have one good man. He had a house down on the other part of the farm where he and his family lived. Our trouble was getting good help to help

[133] Mary Jane Truman, interview by Jerald L. Hill and William D. Stilley, 2 January 1976, transcript of taped interview, 8-9, Harry S. Truman Library.
[134] *Jackson Examiner*, 6, 20, 27 April and 4, 11 May 1917.
[135] William Hillman, *Mr President: The First Publication from the Personal Diaries, Private Letters, Papers, and Revealing Interviews of Harry S Truman* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), 73.

> him. But we got through, and we raised wheat and oats and corn and came out very well with it.[136]

Truman returned to the United States as a captain. He married Elizabeth Wallace in May of 1919, moved to Independence, opened a men's clothing store in Kansas City, and never returned to work the Young farm. Mary Jane, reluctant to continue running the farm without Harry's assistance, concluded that she would discontinue the farming operation.

[136] Miller, *Plain Speaking*, 123.