

Bess Truman's warmth, love for f

By Robin Mackey

staff writer *Bess Truman*

They were her surrogate family, the conclave of private nurses and Secret Service agents who played Benny Goodman albums and watched old movies with Bess Truman the last few months of her life. OCT 22 1982 PM

They were with her during long hospital stays, when she needed a loving hand to hold, on holidays, and when she wanted to look at photo albums of days and lives gone by.

They grew to know intimately the reserved, cautious and caring Independence woman who quietly returned to her birthplace after serving as the nation's first lady.

On Thursday, as the procession of family, friends and dignitaries filed into the courtyard of the Truman Library for graveside services, four of her private nurses huddled behind police barricades, their coats drawn against the early autumn chill.

Marcia Armstrong, one of Mrs. Truman's private nurses since June 1981, said they considered themselves part of Mrs. Truman's family.

"She was ready to go," Mrs. Armstrong said. "She's better off. I know she's happier and we're happier for her." The other nurses nodded in agreement. They said they were thankful the end came without suffering and pain.

Eager to reminisce, the women remembered a Bess Truman they grew to love and respect, an undemanding woman whose care became far more than just a job.

There was the night when Rhonda Welch, one of the handful of full-time private nurses, lugged her record player to the two-story Victorian house on



Rhonda Welch, who was a full-time private nurse for Bess Truman, holds a music box, shaped like a cable car, that she brought back from San Francisco as a gift for Mrs. Truman. (staff photo by Talls Bergmanis)

North Delaware Street and played Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller albums all night.

Mrs. Truman joined in the fun with the impromptu gathering of nurses and Secret Service agents, refusing to go to bed.

"We wheeled her out into the kitchen and popped corn," re-

membered Mrs. Welch, who for the last 16 months had spent most week nights with Mrs. Truman. "We teased her that she had to get involved," she added fondly.

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Truman's warmth, love for fun recalled

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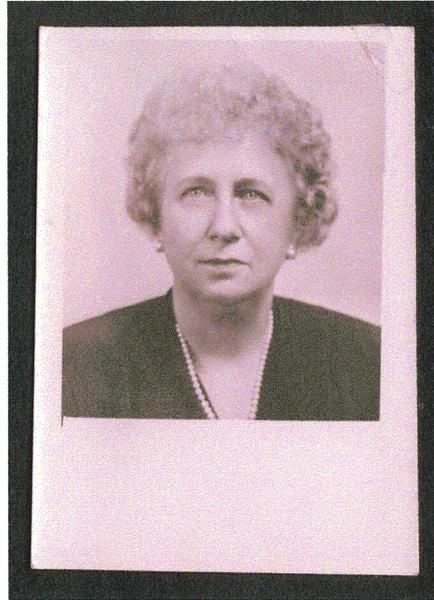
Rhonda Welch, who was a full-time private nurse for Bess Truman, holds a music box, shaped like a cable car, that she brought back from San Francisco as a gift for Mrs. Truman. (staff photo by Talls Bergmanis)

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membered Mrs. Welch, who for the last 16 months had spent most week nights with Mrs. Truman. "We teased her that she had to get involved," she added fondly. Always the practical one, the former first lady offered to do the dishes.

Then there was Thanksgiving dinner, 1961, with all the trimmings. Seated at the head of the table, Mrs. Truman looked around at her family of nurses and security personnel and her beautiful eyes glistened, Mrs. Welch recalled Thursday night. "These are the things that kept her alive as long as she did," said Mrs. Welch of the activities that so pleased the woman who cherished her privacy and refused special treatment. "It wasn't the idea of who she was," said Mrs. Welch of the staff's desire to please Mrs. Truman. "It was just that she was such a wonderful person." There were quiet, private times shared with Mrs. Truman, said Mrs. Welch, who often spent hours looking at photo albums with her. They would sit, the aging gray-haired woman and the 32-year-old nurse, and talk, often holding hands. "We talked about a lot of things, about death," said Mrs. Welch, who feels it was the Lord's will that she was off duty when Mrs. Truman died in the early morning. They also shared old movies, often sitting up all night like school girls watching Henry Fonda and Gary Cooper re-runs, mysteries and monster thrillers. One of the fondest memories was of a 97th birthday celebration, her last, in February. The bearers of a singing telegram sang a birthday message complete with lyrics about Bess and her blue eyes. Balloons surrounded the beaming Mrs. Truman as Dr. Wallace Graham, the family physician, marched through the door with a candle-laden cake. "She was just in seventh heaven, smiling and laughing," remembered Mrs. Welch. "To bear that laugh made every thing worthwhile."

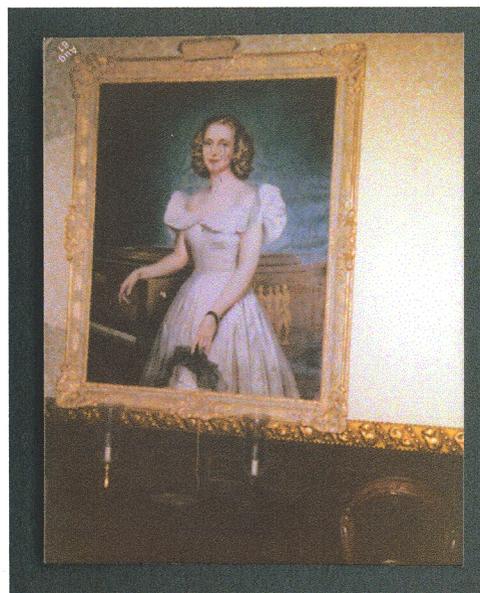
Bess W. Truman Publicity Photos
from the collection of Marcia Armstrong



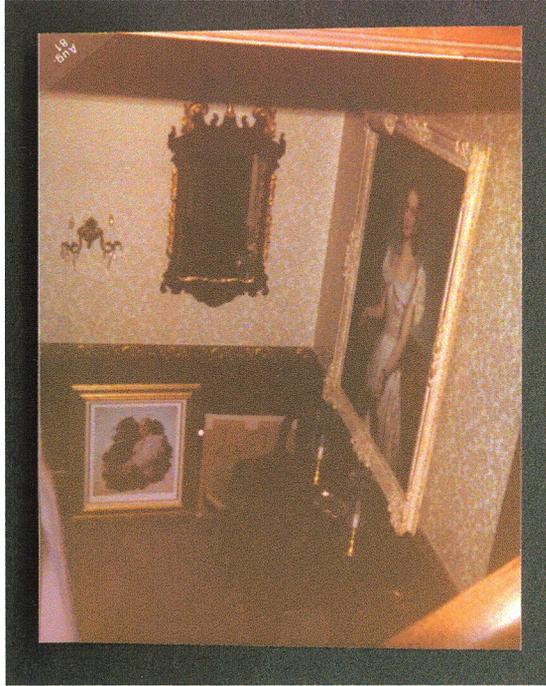
**Photographs of the Truman Home,
circa August 1981
taken by and courtesy of Marcia Armstrong**



Entryway and central hall



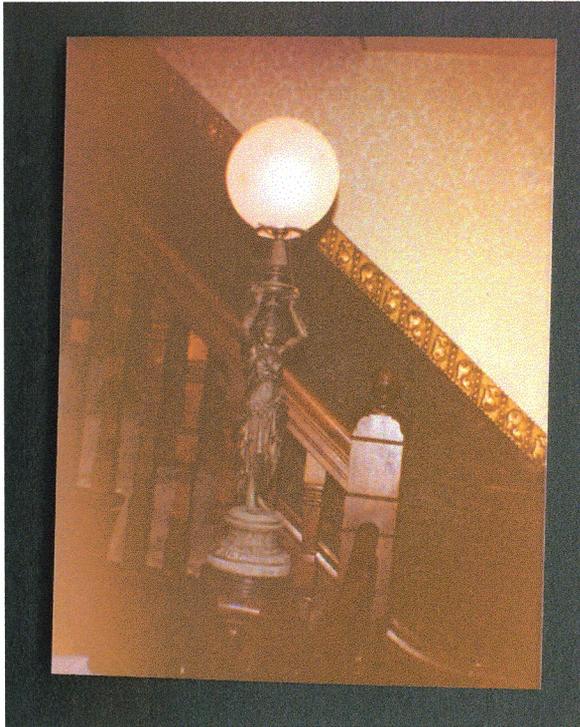
Portrait of Margaret Truman in the central hall



View from the staircase down into the central hall



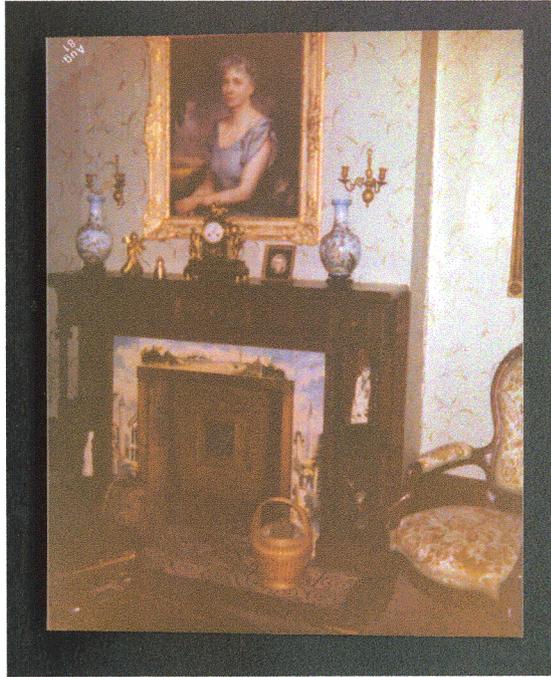
Front staircase from the central hall



Newell post lamp in the central hall



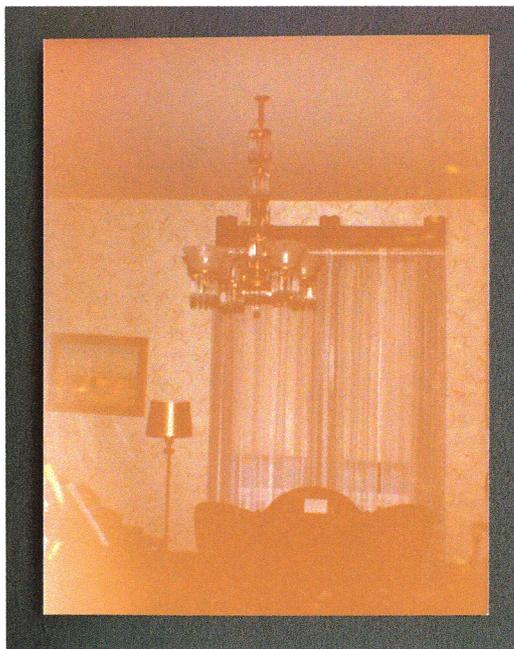
View of the music room from the northeast corner



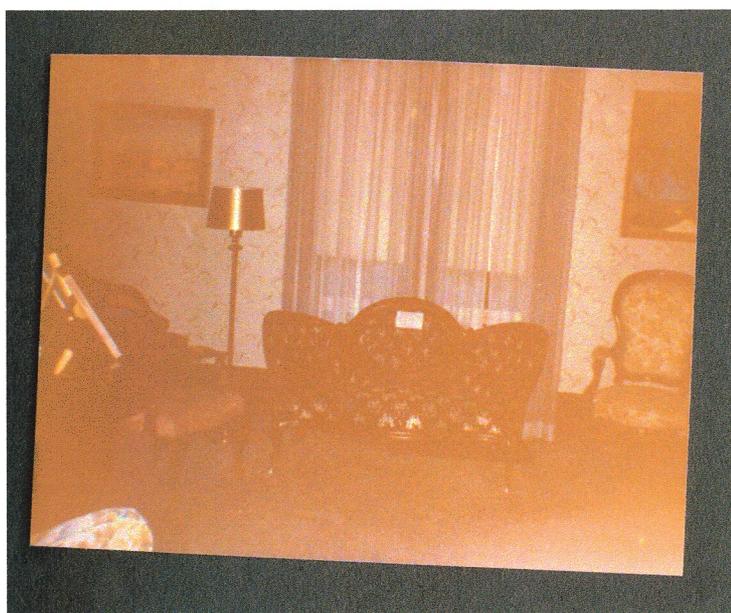
The music room



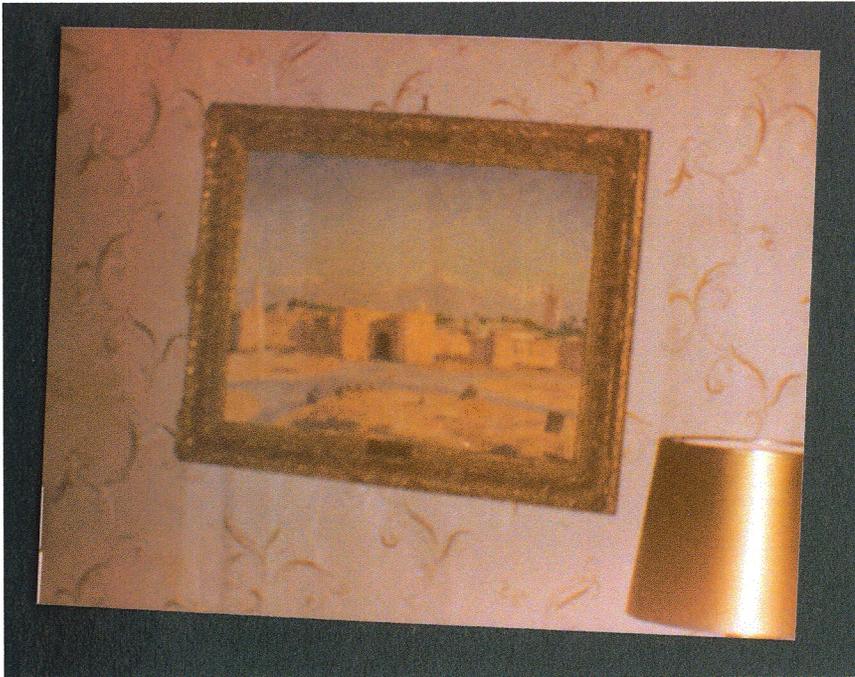
**View of the music room from the central hall
(Sheets in the doorway to the study were used
by the Secret Service to keep cool or warm air in the study)**



The music room



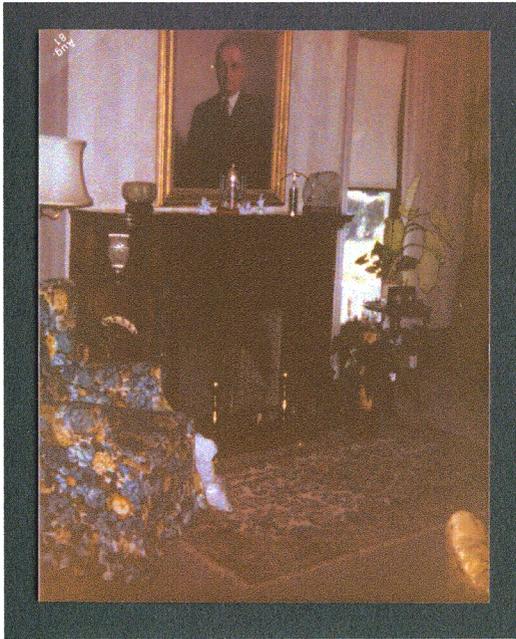
**The music room
(A “do not sit” sign is visible on the settee)**



**“Marrakeck” painting by Winston S. Churchill
hanging in the music room**



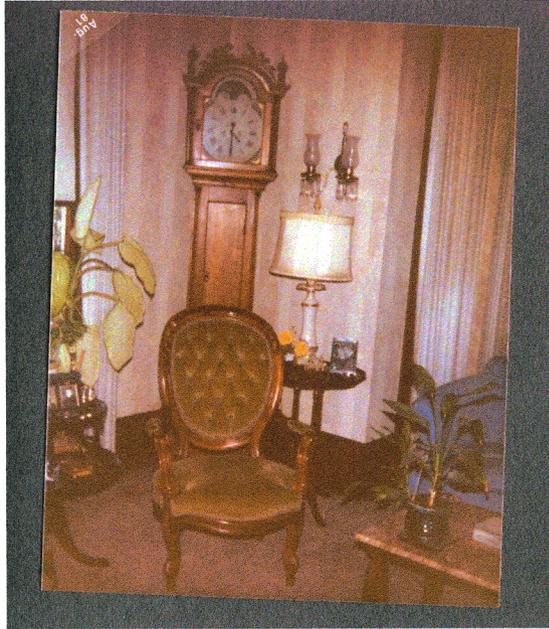
View of the living room from the central hall



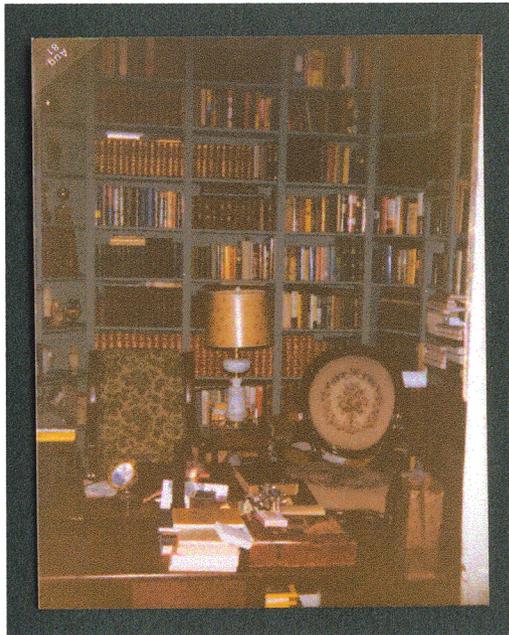
Fireplace area in the living room



**Portraits of Clifton Daniel, Margaret Truman, and William Daniel
on the north wall of the living room**



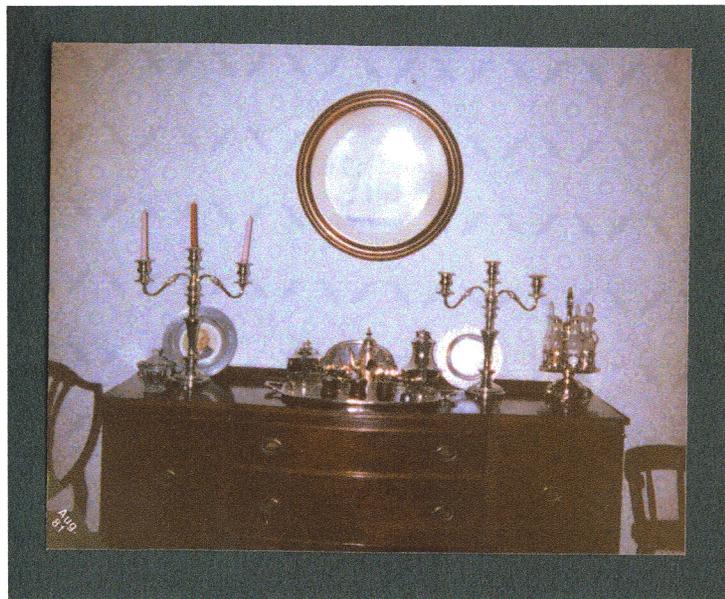
Southwest corner of the living room



View of the study from the music room



View of the dining room from the central hall



Sideboard in the dining room

[NOTE: Due to the provisions of Bess W. Truman's will, the National Park Service is unable to include here the nine Armstrong photographs taken on the second floor.]