

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

DR. WALLACE H. GRAHAM

DECEMBER 9, 1985

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY PAM SMOOT

ORAL HISTORY #1985-9

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #3088-3090

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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Dr. Wallace H. Graham and Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. Their corrections were incorporated into this final transcript by Perky Beisel in summer 2001. A grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association funded the transcription and final editing of this interview.

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ABSTRACT

Wallace H. Graham, M.D. (October 9, 1910—January 4, 1996) was a colonel in the United States Army when President Truman chose him to be his personal physician and medical advisor. From that point in September 1945 until the death of Bess Truman, Graham was the Truman family physician. In this interview, Graham describes his first meeting with Truman at Potsdam, some experiences from the Truman White House, and his relationship with the Trumans that developed during their retirement years.

Persons mentioned: Harry S Truman, Bess W. Truman, James W. Graham, Harry H. Vaughn, King Ibn Saud, King Faisal I of Saudi Arabia, James F. Byrnes, Margaret Truman Daniel, Adlai Stevenson, Madge Gates Wallace, Albert K. Chow, Li Zongren (also spelled Li Tsung-jen), Song Meiling (also spelled Soong Mei-Ling; aka Madame Chiang Kai-shek), Chiang Kai-shek, Eurico Gaspar Dutra, and Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, first earl of Halifax.

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
DR. WALLACE H. GRAHAM**

HSTR INTERVIEW #1985-9

STEVE HARRISON: This is an interview with Dr. Wallace Graham, the Trumans' family physician. It's being conducted by Pam Smoot, historian with the National Park Service at the Midwest Regional Office in Omaha. Today's date is December 9, 1985. We're conducting the interview in the living room of the Truman home at 219 North Delaware in Independence. My name is Steve Harrison. I'll be operating the tape recorder.

DR. WALLACE H. GRAHAM: . . . for?

PAM SMOOT: For the National Park Service.

GRAHAM: National Park . . . [chuckling]

SMOOT: Yes, the National Park Service.

GRAHAM: Alright, that's fine.

SMOOT: To better understand Harry and Bess Truman. The information that you'll provide us will help with the interpretation of Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

GRAHAM: [reading the interview gift form] This is quite a document. What's all this for? I mean, I'm giving away my rights or my life. [laughter] Which is it? Interesting. I've written quite a bit on both Mrs. T. and then the president, that they have gone over themselves and okayed, but I haven't done

anything about it. Well . . . [reading]

SMOOT: Steve, you will be our witness, won't you? You're going to charge us.

GRAHAM: [pause as Dr. Graham reads] Okay.

SMOOT: Dr. Graham, would you please tell us your name, address, and your birth date?

GRAHAM: Wallace Harry Graham. My address is 5157 Ward Parkway. I'm a medical doctor, physician and surgeon, and my address is 5157 Ward Parkway, Kansas City, Missouri, 64112.

SMOOT: Okay, and your birth date?

GRAHAM: My birth date is October 9, 1910.

SMOOT: Dr. Graham, where is your hometown?

GRAHAM: My hometown? Kansas City, Missouri.

SMOOT: Did you ever live in Independence at any time?

GRAHAM: No, never did.

SMOOT: Where did you attend medical school?

GRAHAM: Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska; and Harvard University.

SMOOT: Did you specialize in any particular area of medicine?

GRAHAM: Not in the undergraduate work and not in the graduate work—I mean, from the standpoint of medical school. But following that, then, I had my internship and then a residency, and I specialized in general surgery then. I had a five-year residency in Walter Reed Army Hospital, and stayed on there later as chief of section in surgery. [interview is interrupted by Lisa Bosso who gives Dr. Graham a phone message from Research Hospital;

and tape is turned off]

. . . two or three weeks. It must be a full moon or something.

[laughter] Really, this man's wife, he says, "She's gurgling down the hall, doctor!" [laughter] Yes, she has Alzheimer's disease, which is a disease of the brain. But my gosh, being in the practice as long as I have though, and it comes usually in elderly people, I'm coming to that phase of my practice where a lot of them are getting it.

HARRISON: You've had the same patients for a long period of time?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes. This one girl, she's been a teacher, she's been a mathematician, and brilliant, and now she's just . . . oh, she's way out. Just all of a sudden. Her husband thought he saw something peculiar about her and put her in the hospital, and then I listened and she is out. I've got about five of them.

SMOOT: You'd better watch yourself. [chuckling]

GRAHAM: Yes, barely got it [?] maybe catch it, and boom! [chuckling] What's your name, you say?

SMOOT: My name is Pamela Smoot.

GRAHAM: Pamela Smoot, yes.

SMOOT: I'm working on a Ph.D. at Michigan State University in American history.

GRAHAM: Great! It's a marvelous school.

SMOOT: I think so.

GRAHAM: I have a son up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at Blodgett Memorial Hospital. He's in the sixth year of a residency in surgery up there. He says it's too

cold for anybody.

SMOOT: I know. It's very chilly there.

GRAHAM: It's bad enough here. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Dr. Graham, when did you first meet the Trumans?

GRAHAM: Well, I first met them at a reserve officers' meeting through my father. Now, that is very vague. This may be yea or nay, but I never made anything of it. The fact is, I was reluctant to meet him. He was a senator at that time. I hadn't really known him at all, but my father knew him and he wanted me to meet the senator. So I met the senator, and that's it. Now, when did I see him again? Well, I didn't ever actually meet him where we knew each other at all, except I asked him why he chose me as his surgeon. He said, "Well," he said, "I looked over all the doctors from Missouri," and then he said, "I settled down to Kansas City." He said, "Jim Graham was a whale of a fine doctor." He said, "I figured some of it could have rubbed off on you." [chuckling] He said, "I figured I'd find out."

I was over in Germany at the time, and I had put in for Japan. I was in Stuttgart at the time, and he came over there for the Potsdam conference. Matter of fact, I turned it down because the officer came through with a group of officers and said, "Colonel Graham?" I said, "Yes?" "You're wanted at Potsdam immediately." "Am I being transferred?" "No, the President of the United States wants to see you." I said, "No, he doesn't. He doesn't know me and I don't know him. He doesn't want to see me. You've got the wrong man." They looked at me and they said, "Well, we think

we've got the wrong man, too." [chuckling] So they fiddled around another day or so and then came back and said, "Yes, you're the right man." So I put things together and I flew up from Stuttgart, but I'd put in for Japan at the time.

Now, they got me back in Stederdorf, Germany. I was up on the Elbe River, right across from the Russians, then down to Stuttgart and then on up to Potsdam, and then to, let's see, Babelsberg and then Potsdam. Then I met him there, actually. That's the first time I really met him.

SMOOT: Why were you reluctant about meeting him when he was a U.S. Senator?

GRAHAM: I just felt like I was like Little Iodine, you know, Little Stinky? Here's my fine son Little Stinky, you know. [chuckling] I just felt that he couldn't care less whether I'm Joe Blow or what. But my father knew him as a senator and he'd known him for some time, that's all. But I wasn't really reluctant, it's just that I felt a little backward, you know how it is.

SMOOT: So when you arrived at Mr. Truman's home, what did he want? Why did he summon you?

GRAHAM: Well, I didn't arrive at his home. It was by command of. You know, I was in the army and it's, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." [chuckling] I was to report to Potsdam, so they had a plane for me and I put things together and went up there. I didn't have the slightest idea what it was about. I thought maybe they was a conclave of Missouri doctors. I didn't know. So then I went on into Babelsberg or Potsdam, and the Secret Service met me there. Of course, they didn't know what it was all about either.

There were some other doctors from Missouri there, real fine gentlemen, and some of them, I had known them before. One was chief of medicine at Saint Louis University and one was chief of medicine at Barnes Hospital and Washington University, both very knowledgeable and splendid doctors. I think there were a couple more there, also, and that was about it.

Then they told me to come up then to the White House, where he was staying there. I did so and presented myself to General [Harry H.] Vaughn, told him who I was, and was acting by command of order number so and so, so and so, and he said, "I know," and saluted, about-faced, and he said, "Sit down." So that was it. So then I waited about fifteen minutes and he said, "The President of the United States is coming down." So he came down the stairs and I saluted him and presented myself. He said, "Why, you're Colonel Graham. You're Dr. Graham." "Yes! Yes, sir, Mr. President." Well, that was after I had the interview with General Vaughn. The interview, General Vaughn looked up just all of a sudden and he said, "How would you like to be the personal physician and the medical advisor to the President of the United States?" I said, "Well, I don't think I'd like it." So I saluted, he said, "Well, that will be perfectly damn fine." [chuckling] And I saluted, about-faced, and walked out, and the Secret Service, one of them out there said, "Doctor, you didn't stick one foot in your mouth, you stuck both feet in your mouth." So I didn't pay any attention to it, and I went on back to my digs and went up to Berlin because

I had always wanted to . . . Well, I had lived in Berlin prior to the war, and I had some of my schooling in Deutschland, in Germany, and I just wanted to see it again. It was pretty well smashed-up. So I went on back, and then they called me the next day, they found me . . .

Up in the city of Berlin . . . I was explaining the Ober den Lindenstraße, the big, victorious gate, you know, the heroes all march under and all that business. I was explaining that to some of the fellows in my outfit, what they did to the horsemen [?] up there, brought them back from Paris when Napoleon took them down and all that malarkey. Then the military police came up and said to me, “You’re wanted back at the White House immediately.” “All right, fine.” So I got in the car and came on back. And General Vaughn was there, and I saluted again, and he said, “Why the hell wouldn’t you like it?” [chuckling] Well, I said, “It isn’t a matter that I wouldn’t like it, really. That was a poor thing to have said. The only thing is, I felt personally that he should have . . . It isn’t my judgment, but I felt that he should have an older man, a man more adept and more in the training of geriatrics and one who not only was older than I am but of professorial status.” I won’t say exactly what he said then, but he said, “My God, you’ve been to every university in the world! You went to the University of Budapest and Edinburgh and . . .,” and he went on and on and on. I said, “Well, that doesn’t mean that you know everything because you’ve had scholarships to these places, and it doesn’t mean that you’ll be the most adept doctor for a very important man like the President of the

United States.” And he said, “Well, we’ll decide that.” [chuckling] So that was about it.

SMOOT: So, in other words, are you saying that you changed your mind?

GRAHAM: Well, it wasn’t a matter of changing my mind. It was a matter that I didn’t know . . . I mean, I personally felt that he didn’t know who he was getting, and that’s the first thing I said to him. I said, “Well, Mr. President, I hope you know who you’ve asked for for your personal physician.” And he said, “Well, I’ve gone over all of them. You’re the one I want. You’re fine with me.” [chuckling] And so that was it.

SMOOT: How would you describe Mr. Truman?

GRAHAM: Oh, my. Gentle, kind, generally soft-spoken, thought before he said things, of course, and always very considerate, considerate of everybody, very considerate, and just a real fine gentleman, that’s all.

SMOOT: Would you say that he left a lasting impression upon you?

GRAHAM: Oh, sure, I should say. I’ve met, he has sent me to take care of many, many heads of state. Well, like His Majesty King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, and King Faisal, and many . . . They were all fine or they wouldn’t have been there in the first place, but he was the most sincere and knowledgeable man, really. You could tell he was genuine. There was no affectation about him. He didn’t have this superfluous affectation that many have or high-vaunted reaction. He was just, he was just himself, President Harry Truman. He had a very distinctive air about him. Maybe this was in my own aura, or in my own thoughts, but he carried himself well. He carried himself like a

president. I know he was considerate of everybody and circumstances.

SMOOT: What circumstances?

GRAHAM: Hmm?

SMOOT: What circumstances?

GRAHAM: Well, circumstances change according to the minute. I mean, if he's to be thinking of one subject, then he has one attitude, another attitude toward something else, and that's to meet the exigencies, should I say, and the vicissitudes of life and human nature? [chuckling]

SMOOT: During Mr. Truman's later years, as his physician, would you say that your impression of him changed?

GRAHAM: Just deeper, deeper ingrained, from the standpoint of absolute respect knowing him, basically, and what a completely moral man he was all the way. All the way through his youth and all the way, I studied his background and I studied him, knowing his mother and his sister, and he was an absolutely very . . . well, interesting. He was a completely moral man from all respects, a true gentleman.

SMOOT: While Mr. Truman was president, did you make any house calls to the White House?

GRAHAM: I lived there for a while until I got tired of it, then had me a house, they had me a house out on the post at Walter Reed. See, I was chief of section in surgery at Walter Reed Army Hospital. I don't know if you know Washington or not, but that's on Sixteenth Street and it's straight down the line with Silver Springs, Maryland. I lived there at the post of Walter Reed,

and I would either come down to the White House early in the morning, some mornings when it was necessary. Otherwise, I was on duty at Walter Reed Army Hospital throughout my whole stay in Washington, doing surgery at Walter Reed Army Hospital, also giving lectures, and giving clinics and lectures at Gallinger Hospital in Washington, D. C.

Then I'd be in the hospital all day long treating . . . well, it was the GIs, the soldiers, and then I'd get in my car and go down Sixteenth Street to the White House. I was there by five o'clock, and if I had to see anybody that he had requested me to see, why, I would see them accordingly. And I'd take care of the mail that had to do with medicine that came to the president, or anything that he thought that I might answer adequately. My office was there, and he'd come down every evening, and that's it.

SMOOT: So are you saying that Mr. Truman was not the only person in the White House that you saw?

GRAHAM: Oh, primarily, absolutely. But he said, "You see anybody you wish to see." No, he had Jimmy Byrnes over there at times to see . . . I think it was Lord Halifax once, and, oh, some who would have little maladies, and he would send them down to see me or me up to see them in the house.

SMOOT: Did you examine Harry and Bess or Margaret all within the same visit?

GRAHAM: No, no, no, I didn't make myself a boor and I wasn't ostentatious from that standpoint. [chuckling] No.

SMOOT: Well, approximately how often did Mr. Truman receive a checkup?

GRAHAM: Well, he was always being checked-up every night that I saw him, as far as

that's concerned, but, you know, you don't do a rectal on him, you don't do a prostatic on him, you don't do, you don't do every . . . That would be very boresome and tiresome, and wouldn't be worthy anyway. Sometimes it would be this; I'd see the eye grounds [?]. The main thing is I would learn his attitude, whether he was tired, whether he was worn, whether he was worried, his psychological reaction to various problems, what he thought of certain problems or decisions, and how his physiological response was to these, well, to the various problems that arose. Is that a satisfactory answer for you? [laughter]

SMOOT: Yes, that's just fine. You're doing great. [chuckling]

GRAHAM: All right.

SMOOT: This may be a personal question, but when you first became the Trumans' physician, or Mr. Truman's physician, what was your fee?

GRAHAM: Fee? Why, \$1,000 a minute, naturally. [chuckling] No, I had no fee. I was in the service. By command of. You paid for me. Thank you, and I appreciate it, all those little tidbits and all. [chuckling] I hope you don't mind my digressing, foolishness, but, anyway, no, I'm in the service of the United States Army.

SMOOT: I just didn't want to take anything for granted.

GRAHAM: I later transferred to the Air Force because I had to fly so much. No, I was paid by the government. That is, paid by the government, I was in the service of the United States Air Force.

SMOOT: Dr. Graham, were you ever a guest in the Truman home?

GRAHAM: Sure.

SMOOT: On any special occasions, or were you just invited?

GRAHAM: Nothing special, just . . . Then, at the White House, I was always invited to diplomatic things, but I didn't go unless he really felt it was necessary. Why would it be necessary? Oh, to show a little brass around or . . . [chuckling] I mean, you know . . . Well, he would always say, "You're perfectly welcome, as far as that's concerned." But I said, "Well, I don't care to attend these diplomatic functions, and I'm sure my wife doesn't either, and unless you feel that it is for your welfare, for your well-being, or for any reason whatsoever, I will choose my own." He said, "Let's leave it at that. That's great. Sure." In certain things, he'd want me to be there to meet certain people or something like that. But I didn't, I won't say I completely shunned them, but I didn't care about these diplomatic . . . and my wife certainly didn't either.

SMOOT: So, on the times that you visited the home, did you have dinner? Did you have any meals at all?

GRAHAM: Sure. [chuckling] We never made an issue of it. Let's see, well, now, I had a luncheon when he had Adlai Stevenson there at the White House. Well, that was just it. We never thought anything of it. He just said, "Will you come for luncheon today or dinner this evening?" or something like that. "What are you doing this evening?" "Oh, not much." So he'd say, "Well, I'm all alone," he said. "I'm a darned bachelor." I'd say, "Well, why don't you come out to my house then?" "Well, they've got everything all fuzzy-

duded around here, so . . .” So that’s it, so I’d go down to the White House and eat with him.

SMOOT: So what about here in Independence, at 219 North Delaware?

GRAHAM: Yes. I never made an issue of it, and I don’t think he did either, if I happened . . . See, I’d come out here to see him or Mrs. Truman. I tried to miss the dinner evening, unless he asked me to come out for a certain time. Oh, I’ve eaten in the kitchen; I’ve eaten in the dining room. [laughter] I mean, nothing . . . we never made an issue of things. It’s just . . . oh, I think you understand.

SMOOT: Yes, I understand.

GRAHAM: See, I am not an important visitor. [chuckling] It’s just like if you come over to my house at dinnertime, “Sit down, let’s have a bite to eat.” You know, it’s the same thing.

SMOOT: So would you say that over the years you developed a personal relationship with the Trumans?

GRAHAM: [chuckling] Well, certainly, from the day I met them, sure. They accepted me. They . . . we got along beautifully. I was able to get many a laugh out of Mrs. Truman, which was something. [chuckling] She did have a fine sense of humor. She always appeared to be a little cold and austere, but she actually wasn’t. She was very sentimental.

SMOOT: Since you are talking about Bess Truman right now, would you care to describe her for us?

GRAHAM: I’ve got a few pages on it. [chuckling] Well, she was deeply sentimental,

but appeared to be a bit austere and gave the impression as being very direct, not one who would ponder over questions and answers. Nothing like that. She was very straightforward, said exactly what she thought, and you knew how she stood, just like the president, just straight off. I hardly know how to answer that.

SMOOT: So was this sort of like your first impression of her, like during the period that you were in the White House, or is this sort of like a later perspective of Mrs. Truman?

GRAHAM: I think a doctor looks at people a little differently, really, or I do. My father was a doctor also, and you look at individuals for their depth, for their real worth, for their psychological reactions and their true reactions, affectations, things of that type, you know. And they were just homey people, I mean normally, they were just very homey people.

SMOOT: Did you have very much contact with Margaret Truman?

GRAHAM: Yes.

SMOOT: Can you tell me a little bit about Margaret?

GRAHAM: Well, she's a lovely person, actually. She just . . . well, naturally she fit right in with the family, as far as that's concerned, naturally . . . I don't have any adverse comments one way or the other. I like Margaret, and she has the depth of character that both her father and mother had, and like them, she's certainly straightforward. You don't have to stand around and wonder exactly what she's thinking, but she was just a grand person. I like Margaret. I liked all of them very, very much. Of course, a doctor I think

sees beyond certain things like—I mean, from all aspects, yeah.

SMOOT: Okay. Dr. Graham, there were two air conditioning units installed here at 219 North Delaware, one in 1954 and the other in 1970.

GRAHAM: [chuckling] Great.

SMOOT: And I'd like to know if any of those, either of the air conditioning units were installed upon your advice.

GRAHAM: Nope, not at all. [chuckling] But I'd say it wasn't body temperature and pleasantries [?]. No, no, no, not at all.

SMOOT: Were either Harry or Bess on any sort of diets that you had prescribed for either of them?

GRAHAM: I never addressed them as Harry or Bess under any circumstances. I always kept strict protocol at all times. Now, your question was were they . . . ?

SMOOT: Did you ever prescribe any sorts of diets for them while they were under your care?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes, sure, sure. But they ate the right things, really. I would suggest certain things. He ate well, he ate what he should eat, the salads, the greens. He liked buttermilk and various things, toast in the morning, and he liked to have an egg. [chuckling]

SMOOT: So would you say that they were cooperative in following the doctor's orders?

GRAHAM: But they didn't need to follow the doctor's orders because they had . . . They did, yes, absolutely, or they'd take my suggestions, but they were just a regular American family and they ate accordingly. Nothing extraordinary.

I mean, if you expect pate de fois gras every evening and such as that, no. Caviar, should I say we chose the black caviar instead of the red? No, not at all. [chuckling] No, they ate the same as I eat at home, as you eat at home, anyone, just . . . that's it.

[End #3088; Begin #3089]

SMOOT: Dr. Graham, when Mrs. Truman's health took a sudden turn for the worse, were any provisions made for her in the home?

GRAHAM: Yes.

SMOOT: Could you elaborate?

GRAHAM: Well, I don't know exactly what you're getting at. I mean, I felt that she'd be better taken care of by the facilities we had at the hospital rather than here, and she could have more professional observation and care here. Of course, we had a nurse on duty there for quite some time. And when I felt that a problem was just a bit on edge or a little more than we could handle in the home by having the greater facilities there, then I put her in the hospital accordingly. But I didn't want to cause any disruption whatsoever with her mentally or physically or the hospital either.

SMOOT: Was there ever a hospital bed in this house, to your knowledge?

GRAHAM: No, never. Wait just a minute now. Wait just a minute. [pause] Yes, I think there was. Yes, there was. Because . . . Yes, she was in that side bedroom and there was a reason . . . Well, she could sit up or lie down, had her own push-button thing. Yes, there was a hospital bed here.

SMOOT: Was it brought here upon your advice?

GRAHAM: Yes, yes, yes, it was, because, to could get in and out of the bed . . . I don't know why right now.

SMOOT: Okay, you said "in the side bedroom." Which floor of the house?

GRAHAM: This floor. She was in that side bedroom there most of the time. Isn't it awful? I'm trying to think. I'm sure there was a hospital bed here, but right now I don't remember me ordering it, but I do know there was. I'm a little foggy.

SMOOT: So did you ever treat Mrs. Truman here in the home?

GRAHAM: Sure, the whole family!

SMOOT: Okay, and in what bedroom was she in the first time you treated her?

GRAHAM: It was the end, the one right next to the toilet in here.

HARRISON: [unintelligible].

GRAHAM: Oh, that's all right. Yes, the one right next to the wall there.

HARRISON: The bed on the east side of the room there?

GRAHAM: Yes, right next to the bathroom. You know, I haven't been out here since the end.

SMOOT: When you treated Mr. Truman in the home, which room of the house was he in?

GRAHAM: Well, he wasn't in bed when I first treated him. He would just sit back in that little cubicle like, and he'd sit there and read for hours. She would oftentimes sit in the rocking chair just to the left of the bed. Do you know where I'm referring to? You know the little cubicle there, and he'd sit back in that . . . See, the window is around, the little bay window is around there.

She'd oftentimes come in, or I'd invite her in, or she'd come in her own self and sit alongside. I'd say, "You might as well come on in and hear all of our secrets." [chuckling] So she'd laugh and come on in and sit down. I'd examine her at times, too. Sure.

SMOOT: When Mr. Truman's first series of illnesses started, did you treat him here in the home?

GRAHAM: Well, I don't know what to say here. Are you referring to Mrs. Truman?

SMOOT: Mr. Truman.

GRAHAM: Oh, the president.

SMOOT: Yes.

GRAHAM: Oh, well, he'd come into my office occasionally, when he felt like it, just like any other patient I had downtown. [chuckling] And I would come out here and see him here. I don't think he was ever actually in bed here until he fell once. But he'd see me back in the . . . No, he was never in bed. I had him in bed at the White House for a few times. But he'd sit back there in the little alcove and we'd go over our problems then.

SMOOT: Did you know Madge Wallace?

GRAHAM: Sure. Yes, indeed.

SMOOT: Could you sort of give me a description of what she was like?

GRAHAM: Well, she wasn't around here. She was next door [referring to May Wallace]. Just a very fine, straightforward lady; I mean, just like anybody else under the same circumstances. I don't know what you're really referring to or wanting to get at. She was never here when I was taking care

of them, however, but she lived right next door, and a very fine lady and very cooperative, got along with everybody.

SMOOT: I mean, I'm referring to Madge Wallace, Mrs. Truman's mother.

GRAHAM: Oh, her mother.

SMOOT: Yes.

GRAHAM: Oh, well, that's something else. What do you want to know?

SMOOT: Whatever you can tell us. We don't know very much about her.

GRAHAM: Well, she was a little . . . This is my own make-up. I would say she was just a little bit of the Southern aristocracy, and ruled the world accordingly—I mean, her little world. I liked her; she was fine. There was no question as to how she felt about anybody, and she was very straightforward. There are some very interesting little things that occurred, but she and I got along beautifully. I told her if she didn't I'd get a bigger needle for her. [laughter] No, we got along well, really.

SMOOT: Did she have a sense of humor like Bess, like her daughter?

GRAHAM: It was contained, should I say? [chuckling] Yes, we used to joke together; I mean, in trying to find her depth of this, that, and the other thing, you know? But she was a little more sedate, a little more composed. Well, I won't say that either. I don't mean exactly that, but she was . . . [sigh] she held her own counsel.

SMOOT: Did you ever give her any medical treatment while in Washington, D. C.?

GRAHAM: Sure. Yes, many times.

SMOOT: Did you ever treat her here at the Truman home?

GRAHAM: Yes, sure.

SMOOT: What room did you treat her in, or did you?

GRAHAM: Well, it was usually . . . She wasn't in bed here that I can recall. It was just more like, you know, "How do you feel?" and give her something for this, that, and the other thing, momentary spot therapy. I treated her, though, in Washington, in bed and out of bed.

SMOOT: What was your impression of Mrs. Truman's nursing staff during her later years?

GRAHAM: My impression of the staff?

SMOOT: The nursing staff.

GRAHAM: Well, they were very attentive. One of them wasn't exactly a nurse, but she was a little too indulgent and took advantage of certain situations, but they were all very fine. The nurses themselves, the RN's, were very professional, always very proper, and they were fine nurses. In fact, they were specially chosen. They were excellent nurses—that's both here and in the hospital.

SMOOT: Since they were specially chosen, did you choose them?

GRAHAM: Yes! I went over their backgrounds. You know, they weren't yippety-yap to . . . Well, nurses generally, as far as I'm concerned, are in a special category of their own, but they're like anybody else. There are certain ones that you can rely on. They will keep confidences. They keep their professional bearing at all times. Naturally I'm a little prejudiced to them because my daughter is a nurse, my wife is a nurse, and they don't bear ill

tidings to anybody, should I say? I mean, they don't talk about their patients. There are confidences and that's it.

SMOOT: Did any of your professional visits to the Truman home require that you spend the night?

GRAHAM: I have.

SMOOT: Dr. Graham, I have noticed that there are several Oriental items here in the Truman home. Are you familiar with any of these items?

GRAHAM: I haven't paid a whole lot of attention to them at any time. No, looking around here, I don't know. [chuckling] I think the mayor of Chinatown gave him that. He gave one to me, too, and it kind of broke my heart because of the fact that we had a great big, big-bottomed gal, and I said, "Now, Annabelle, be sure and be careful of the TV," because that sits upon the TV set. "What's that?" and she turned around and hit her rear end on that and smashed it in 40,000 pieces. [laughter] Well, it shouldn't have been there in the first place, I guess. "What's that?" "Oh, that's all right. We'll put that together." [laughter] Well, it was like putting powder together, so that was it, but it was a very expensive piece given to me by the same man who gave him his.

HARRISON: That's the boat?

GRAHAM: Yes.

HARRISON: It's on the corner of the cabinet, on the corner shelf. [see appendix, item 1]

GRAHAM: Yes. The mayor of San Francisco Chinatown gave him that. Charlie . . . I kept calling him Charlie Chan, but I don't know, I think it was [Albert]

Chow really was his name. [chuckling]

SMOOT: I was going to ask you which Chinatown.

GRAHAM: In San Francisco.

SMOOT: It could have been Chinatown, New York, and we used to have one in Pittsburgh, but we don't anymore.

GRAHAM: Oh, yes.

SMOOT: Steve, do you have anything you'd like to ask Dr. Graham?

HARRISON: Just the reason Pam was asking you about the Oriental objects is that there just does seem to be quite a few of them here in the house, and I'm just kind of curious if they were gifts or if they're things that they liked that they bought.

GRAHAM: No, they were all gifts, yes. I mean, all that I know of, and I recognize most of them. They're all gifts, yes. They didn't actually buy any of them themselves.

HARRISON: Do you recall any other one, any other specific ones that they might have gotten from particular people, like the mayor of Chinatown?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes. Dr. Li [Zongren, also spelled Li Tsung-jen], who was the vice president of China, gave them . . . Oh, I don't know what it was right now. And so did Mrs. . . . Who was Mrs. Sun's husband? Chiang Kai-shek. Mrs. Song [Meiling, also spelled Soong Mei-Ling] got along a little better with the Roosevelts, I think. She was quite an aristocrat. But everybody . . . I don't know, there were no adverse problems that arose.

SMOOT: Do you remember, did Mr. or Mrs. Truman ever tell you any stories?

GRAHAM: Many, many, many stories. What about? [chuckling]

SMOOT: Whatever you care to share with us would be fine.

HARRISON: Particularly things, anything about the house or their life here in the house.

GRAHAM: We would talk about various things here, like the architecture and things of that type. See, this used to be the Gates house. That was her mother's family. Oh, we'd talk about those things. We were just like family to family. I didn't mark anything down. I didn't keep anything. I didn't care to.

HARRISON: Why don't we walk around a little bit around the first floor.

SMOOT: See if we can refresh your memory.

GRAHAM: Well, I don't know. I don't think I'll know any more when I walk around. The piano room is in there. I haven't been here since they . . . since they left. How about the grandson up there? I'll be darned. Well, there's a bedroom here, bathroom. That's about the same as it was. There's a couple more pictures there that weren't there at the time. Oh, over here you've got this thing here, huh?

HARRISON: Do you recall any of the circumstances about Mrs. Truman moving down to this bedroom from the upstairs bedroom?

GRAHAM: No, other than she thought it would be handier for me rather than to walk upstairs, and I thought it would eliminate the process of her probably falling. [chuckling] That's about it. I don't know, we were very common. I mean, just . . . well, I'd be more proper if I went over to your house, I guess.

SMOOT: I'm sure.

GRAHAM: But it was just more or less like family. I mean, we'd known each other so long and so intimately. But I was always, though, with very correct protocol, you know. Like many people think we were so close that it was Harry this and Bess this. Never, under no circumstances. Never. It was always Mr. President or Mr. Senator. My army training probably, thirty-five years in the army, has done something to that, too, and my father also. No, we gave them every respect that their office commanded, actually. Mrs. Truman, also. No, many think that I was so close to them, and they'd say many personal things about me or about things that they thought, well, it was Harry and Bess. Never. I mean, I wouldn't even consider that in any circumstances.

HARRISON: Since we're here in the foyer, did you usually come in the front door or the back door?

GRAHAM: Back. This is a nuisance here. They've got a gate out there. I wouldn't come in that way. [chuckling] No, I'd drive in the back and that's it. That isn't the same piano, is it?

SMOOT: I don't know, Dr. Graham, I wasn't here. [laughter]

GRAHAM: Oh, all right! [laughter]

HARRISON: It's supposed to be.

GRAHAM: Yes, I guess it is, all right. I thought it was a little larger.

HARRISON: Did anybody ever play music on that while you were here?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes. I fiddled with it a couple times myself. [chuckling] Oh, the president would kind of dingle around a little bit. He was never any

Paderewski [chuckling], but that's about it. Gosh, you've got a lot more pictures up here than he had then, I'll guarantee you.

HARRISON: What room would you usually visit with them in?

GRAHAM: Back here.

HARRISON: In the study?

GRAHAM: Does this thing go along . . .

HARRISON: It won't reach, so I'm going to have to move the recorder.

GRAHAM: It won't reach. All right, okay.

HARRISON: So if you guys can just stay here a few minutes.

SMOOT: Okay.

GRAHAM: There's the king and queen, isn't it? Is that of Holland or is that England?

HARRISON: I think it was Holland.

GRAHAM: Yes, I think it is, yes. They were wonderful people. That's her. Nice people, anyway.

HARRISON: Why don't you just wait . . .

GRAHAM: Okay. [tape is turned off]

SMOOT: It sure is.

GRAHAM: Oh, really nice, yes. Really, you know, I think I see people a little differently than a lot of them do. But they were a real fine family. And if I didn't like what a certain one would say, I would say so. Margaret would get kind of sharp with her mother at times. "Stop that!" I'd say. [laughter] "You little devil!" You know? "The devil's in you again." [laughter]

HARRISON: You mentioned that you'd eaten meals in here. Do you remember, did

people have particular seats that they would sit in in here?

GRAHAM: No, the president always sat up there and Mrs. here.

HARRISON: Mrs. Truman sat here at what would be the north end of the table and Mr. Truman at the south end of the table.

GRAHAM: Yes.

SMOOT: And where did you sit?

GRAHAM: Oh, I'd sit there. I was here a couple of times. [chuckling] Just anyplace they put me was about it. I'd be out in the kitchen, too. [chuckling] Yes, that's about it.

HARRISON: Would they have certain meals of the day in here and certain ones in there? Was it pretty routine or did that vary, if you know?

GRAHAM: Fairly so. He'd eat in the kitchen when he was here, occasionally, but he'd eat here mostly.

HARRISON: You're doing fine here with that.

GRAHAM: Okay, all right. [in the study] This is where he'd usually sit, but not in that . . . Let's see, more over toward the middle. Or let me see now, yes, it was more towards the middle, and this would be over a little bit. He always had a pile of books, always had a pile of books. You know, he'd always say, "Any books you want, Doctor?" "Nope. Nope." I had plenty to read that I didn't read myself. [chuckling]

SMOOT: You said he always had a pile of books. Where were the books?

GRAHAM: Here, here, and here. Yes, he'd sit back there and read his paper.

SMOOT: On the table?

GRAHAM: Yes, and then read . . . But he had books lined in there, rather than those things there. I don't know where they came from. Oh, yet, his whole place was lined with books. He'd offer any of them for me to read. Mrs. T. would . . . You know, I don't remember two chairs being here like this all the time. Still, I would sit down occasionally, but maybe they were. She'd sit over there. That would go in the middle. But, oh, yes, very definitely . . . Well, let's see . . .

HARRISON: Would you get any phone calls or anything while you were here visiting?

GRAHAM: Sure, yes. My office would call me and tell me . . . By the way, I think I have to call now. Well, I've already made the call maybe. 3702. Yes, I already made that call. Yes, I'd get calls here. I generally didn't want them here, because instead of usually coming to the office I'd say hold any that you can, or write the numbers down, whatever it was, you know, or through my home, but that's about it. If it was an emergency or anything that they should know, that it was imperative or demanding at the time, why, that would be it.

You know, it's funny, I observe more things now—I mean, better than I did when I was out here—because I just didn't pay attention to things. I had my mind on their belly or whatever it was, you know. [laughter] And that's what we'd get to, and that was it.

HARRISON: Did you make regular visits here as their physician, or was it kind of on-call?

GRAHAM: No, it wasn't on-call. If it was on-call he'd tell me, but I just would come

out. I'd call him and tell him, "I'm coming out there. Are you going to have anything doing?" "No, fine. Come on out, Doctor." You know, I'd let him know ahead of time in case they were going out, or I didn't want to break into a big party someplace, you know. But that was about it. He always told me I was perfectly welcome anytime, naturally, when I thought I should come or that he needed me.

SMOOT: Were you ever summoned by any of the nurses to come here to the home to see Mrs. Truman?

GRAHAM: No, I don't think so. I may have been, but I don't recall it. I just knew when I should be here anyway; and when it was necessary, that was it. They were never demanding, never, you know, get out here, dash out here, do this. But I policed myself.

HARRISON: They probably appreciated that, too.

GRAHAM: Oh, yes, sure they did. You know, they didn't feel like they were imposing on me, which they couldn't do at all. But no, I was out here. I don't remember they ever had this many here. You must be going to have a feast!
[laughter]

HARRISON: That's what Margaret . . . Margaret wanted us to have six place settings out, so we set it up.

GRAHAM: Yes, okay. Well, Margaret was never here when I was here. [chuckling]
She was, but it wasn't very often. Yes, that's all right.

SMOOT: Dr. Wallace, I did want to know how old you were when you first moved into the White House, or when you first moved to the White House and

became Mr. Truman's physician.

GRAHAM: Well, I don't know. Let me see, that was in September, either the fifth or the fifteenth, I'm not sure now, and I came directly over from Germany here. It was September . . . I don't know when it was.

SMOOT: If you could just remember the year, that'll be okay. I don't expect you to remember the exact date.

GRAHAM: In September 1945. Yes, the war was over and I had put in for Japan, and then I got the call to Potsdam. I was up on the Russian border in Stederdorf. No, I don't know where I was now. Then that was about it. From Stederdorf to Stuttgart, Stuttgart to Potsdam, back to Stuttgart, and then on over here.

I was out in the [English] Channel on D-Day, and I went in D Plus 2, Easy Red, Omaha Beach. I got hit on D Plus 12, I think that was it, and I got hit again. I got hit on D Plus 5, got hit on D Plus 12, and then I got hit up on Nijmegen, Holland, when I was attached to the 101st Airborne up there. But that's about it. A German officer didn't like me either once. I ran the wrong pillbox and I connected with his handgun. It went off and shot me in the hand here. That's about it.

HARRISON: Let's see how I'm doing on tape here, because we're pretty much at the end of this one. Let's see, a couple things that Pam already kind of asked about. One thing was Madge Wallace, Mrs. Truman's mother. Do you know what bedroom she used here in the home? Do you recall?

GRAHAM: [pause] Isn't that odd? I really don't.

HARRISON: Well, it was more than thirty years ago. [chuckling]

GRAHAM: I treated her most in the White House, though.

HARRISON: Also, there are stories, and part of the reason that Pam asked about the air conditioners and picked those out in particular is that there were a lot of stories that President Truman didn't like air conditioners and so on, and that the only reason that they were put in was because the doctor ordered them or so on after one of his illnesses.

GRAHAM: No.

HARRISON: Did he ever express any feelings to you about air conditioners one way or the other?

GRAHAM: No, not that I can recall. No, not that I can recall. It always seemed to be pleasant in here. No, I figured if he wanted them he'd get them. [chuckling]
But that's about it.

HARRISON: Do you ever remember them having any fires in the fireplaces?

GRAHAM: Yes, they did have a fire a few times. Yes, they did. In the winter, yes.

SMOOT: In which rooms in the house were the fireplaces lit?

GRAHAM: This one here.

SMOOT: In the living room.

GRAHAM: Yes. Not all the time, but I do remember having seen a fire there. The president would poke around in it a little bit. [chuckling]

He was such a good man. He really was. He was just a real sincere . . . To me, he looked like a president, he acted and he walked like a president. I mean, like he really [chuckling] . . . and I've treated a lot of them.

SMOOT: A lot of presidents?

GRAHAM: Yes, presidents. His Majesty King Ibn Saud was a very picturesque . . .

[End #3089; Begin #3090]

SMOOT: Okay, so you were saying that you had treated other presidents?

GRAHAM: Yes, I treated the president of Honduras, the president of Brazil (that was President [Eurico] Dutra), the president of Peru. I don't know, either some word from the president or something like that, or their embassy, and they wanted a doctor to be sent down there for consultation, whichever it was, and so I'd go down. I don't think it was advertised at that point. [chuckling] On consultations or to treat them. Let's see, who else did I treat? Brazil, Spain, Germany . . . I don't recall any others right now.

SMOOT: Well, Dr. Graham, it's obvious that you thought an awful lot of Mr. and Mrs. Truman.

GRAHAM: Oh, yes.

SMOOT: Did their deaths in any way, did they affect you in any way, or did you just sort of treat it like any other patient's death? Was theirs different?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes. Well, I was very proper, you know, "Yes, Mr. President," and "No, Mr. President." Sure, but that comes naturally with me, actually, having been in the army as long as I had been, why, we disciplined ourselves. I never took advantage of anything, under no circumstances.

People were always asking me to do this or talk to the president about that. Well, that wasn't my policy. It wasn't my duty to ever initiate anything of that type, any personal matters of anybody else, although I was

certainly approached enough. I've been offered money and everything else to talk about certain things. Well, that was more or less an insult, frankly. But, you know, you handle it though without any problem.

SMOOT: I don't think you understood me. [chuckling] I was asking about their deaths, D-E-A-T-H-S.

GRAHAM: Their deaths?

SMOOT: Yes.

GRAHAM: What about their deaths?

SMOOT: I was asking if they had affected you in any way. I mean, how did you feel?

GRAHAM: You're always sad to lose them, yes. Yes, but it's inevitable, it's life. My father went and my mother went and my grandparents went. I'm not going to stay forever, and I'm ready for it anytime. As long as you're a believer in Christianity, et cetera, and there are certain precepts which I'm very happy to believe in, why, you're ready for it whenever it comes. You don't want to rush it any. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Enjoy it.

GRAHAM: Yes, that's right. [laughter] No, I thought I was going to be dead several times. Well, this time when I was hit in the hand. That son of a gun, well, if I don't knock that out I'm a dead pigeon. [chuckling] So I clobbered him. That was it. But there's things [that] come up in all your life where you could have been eliminated, and all of us have got that, but if you're in war, why, you're a little more exposed.

I was shot several times . . . the arm. A beautiful girl hit me once. A

little French gal, she was a sniper, and she was . . . That was along about D Plus 12, something like that. I got up out of my . . . Well, I saw it “psst!” pop up out of the . . . I was lying in this little trench and Captain Hogan, “Hey, some so and so is shooting at us.” I said, “No, they’re shooting squirrels out there.” [chuckling] So then I saw it was small arms when I heard it. Psst! It’s either psst! or a crack, you know, like a snap, and you can tell immediately. I jumped up like a nut and started running for the tent. But what I was going to do was tell them that there was a sniper out there and we’d better get the MP’s out there and knock them out. Well, they knocked them out. It was a girl, a little French girl, and she’d been in love with a German officer. She was a pretty good shot. But, oh well . . .

HARRISON: What was your father’s name?

GRAHAM: James Walter, James W. Graham. He was a doctor, M.D., a whale of a good one, too, compassionate. He came from a little town in Kansas. He was a horse and buggy doctor. I’ve gone out in the buggy with him many times. He’d talk to me about cases—not names, but cases. And so much was consumption in those days, but that was a wastebasket of tuberculosis, pneumonia, and God knows what else. [chuckling]

Poor Johnny Frump . . . and Dad would pray, pray, pray. I learned the names of all of his patients through his prayers every morning and every night. Oh, God, he really lived with them. Yes, everybody was in his heart. He was a good doctor. With limited resources, too. I mean, we didn’t have the medicines we have today by any means then.

SMOOT: Did your father ever tell you any stories about Mr. Truman and himself?

GRAHAM: He never knew them. I mean, just, “How do you do, Mr. President?” Dad was a reserve officer, and so was the president, and they had meetings there. He was a senator at that time. No, no, no, he never knew anything about him one way or the other. If he did, he wouldn’t have told me. [chuckling] I mean, he may have been talking about people. He talked about people, he talked about cases, but never names, never. And the same thing in my family, to my son, I don’t ever talk about people’s names.

SMOOT: Well, Dr. Graham, I think this will conclude our interview. We’re certainly glad that despite the bad weather that you were able to be here with us today.

GRAHAM: Well, you told me to be here, and to me it was a command performance. [laughter] Sure!

SMOOT: We really appreciate the information that you have shared with us, which will, like I said earlier, help us with the future interpretation of Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

GRAHAM: Well, I’m glad to have made your acquaintance, too. Everybody you meet, you know . . . Well, Mark Twain had it. He never met anybody he didn’t like. That’s what he said, really.

SMOOT: Steve is going to take your picture, too.

END OF INTERVIEW

APPENDIX

1. Photograph of Chinese boat (HSTR catalog #115-116).
2. "Doctors say Bess Truman 'doing well,'" *The Examiner*, May 8, 1981, p. 8.
3. "Mrs. Truman to mark 97th year with party," *Kansas City Star*, Feb. 12, 1982, p. 4A.
4. "Former first lady observes birthday," *Kansas City Star*, Feb. 14, 1982, p. 28A.
5. "Bearing sad news," *The Examiner*, Oct. 18, 1982, p. 5.
6. Obituary, *Kansas City Star*, January 7, 1996, p. B-4.
7. Obituary, *Whistlestop*, January 1996.