

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

ROGER T. SERMON, JR.

AUGUST 30, 1991

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-28

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #4405-4406

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



## **EDITORIAL NOTICE**

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Harry S Truman National Historic Site. After a draft of this transcript was made, the park provided a copy to the interviewee and requested that he or she return the transcript with any corrections or modifications that he or she wished to be included in the final transcript. The interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff member, also reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. The corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewee and interviewer have been incorporated into this final transcript. The transcript follows as closely as possible the recorded interview, including the usual starts, stops, and other rough spots in typical conversation. The reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

Roger T. Sermon, Jr., 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.

## **RESTRICTION**

Researchers may read, quote from, cite, and photocopy this transcript without permission for purposes of research only. Publication is prohibited, however, without permission from the Superintendent, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.



IN REPLY REFER TO:

# United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE  
223 NORTH MAIN STREET  
INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI 64050-2804



## GIFT AND RELEASE AGREEMENT

I Roger T. Sermon do hereby give and grant to the  
Name (Print)  
United States of America all literary and property rights, title and  
interest which I may possess to the tape recording(s) and transcript(s)  
of the interview(s) conducted at Independence, Missouri,  
Location  
on the date(s) of August 30, 1991, for the oral history  
program of Harry S Truman National Historic Site, which gift I will  
never revoke or recall.

Roger T. Sermon  
Signature

August 30, 1991  
Date

701 Proctor Place  
Independence, MO  
Address

(816) 252-9192  
Telephone

James H. Williams  
Interviewer's Signature

8/30/91  
Date

223 N. Main Street  
Independence, Mo 64050  
Address

(816) 254-2720  
Telephone



## ABSTRACT

In the first half of this hour-long interview, Roger T. Sermon, Jr., walks through the Truman home first and second floors while discussing curtains, draperies, and shades. Through the decades of operating Sermon-Anderson, Inc., Sermon and his partner had provided window treatments for the Truman home. In one case he responded to a request from Margaret Truman Daniel in the early 1980s, and in another instance his firm won the bid to replace the window shades in the home before the National Park Service opened it for public tours. He also shares insights into decorating fads and typical household cleaning routines in the area. In the second half of the interview, Sermon remembers his father, the long-time mayor of Independence and a local grocer, as well as growing up in Independence, his schooling, and the evolution of his fabric business. He mentions the aborted effort in which he was involved to put curtains in the windows of the Truman Library entranceway to protect Thomas Hart Benton's mural.

Persons mentioned: Margaret Truman Daniel, Bess Wallace Truman, Harry S Truman, Mitchell Anderson, Madge Gates Wallace, Christine Wallace, Mary Shaw Branton, Tieman Crow, Roger T. Sermon, Sr., Blevins Davis, Bill Sermon, Thomas Hart Benton, Barbara Potts, Spencer Salisbury, Kenneth Bostian, Lucy Peters, Helena Crow, and Linda King.

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

ROGER T. SERMON, JR.

HSTR INTERVIEW #1991-28

JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Roger T. Sermon, Jr., on the morning of August 30, 1991. We're in the Truman home. The interviewer is Jim Williams from the National Park Service. Carol Dage from the National Park Service and Leslie Hagensen from the National Park Service are helping with the recording equipment. This is going to be something out of order, because we have to be in the home before the visitors arrive, but I'd like to ask first how much you were in the home through the years?

ROGER T. SERMON, JR.: Well, of course I'm older than Margaret, and when we were growing up, real youngsters, why, we saw each other a lot more frequently then. She went to high school, of course, away from here, but there used to be a whole mess of girls around, the Delaware gang and all. And sometimes the boys got to play with the girls, but not too often. They had their own little group. So early on, why, there were opportunities or times to be in the house, but then when we got to be, you know, high school age, things like that, why, I didn't see her so much.

WILLIAMS: Were you ever here in the Trumans' retirement years?

SERMON: Oh, yes.

WILLIAMS: Why would you be in the home?

SERMON: Well, I think one time Margaret called and said that she felt that we should replace some of the draperies and curtains upstairs, and just to go on and pick out something and put it up.

WILLIAMS: Do you know when that was, about?

SERMON: Well, I could look in my files, you know, at my shop and tell you, but it was . . . Mrs. Truman was, you know, incapacitated and was in her wheelchair.

WILLIAMS: So it would have been '80, '81, '82?

SERMON: I expect, early eighties. But I can give you a date if you want.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Did you ever work on the first floor of the house?

SERMON: No. Turn this machine off. [chuckling] I don't think there was too much done for quite a period of time.

WILLIAMS: That's no secret, so . . . [chuckling].

SERMON: Well . . . [chuckling].

WILLIAMS: So you did work upstairs, but not on the first floor.

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever sell the Trumans like window shades, or anything that you know of, that went on the first floor?

SERMON: I don't . . . No, Mrs. Truman did her own shopping. You know, I mean, she'd come and make a purchase or . . . We did have a little dress shop down here on Truman Road, and my partner and I fixed it up for a friend and a relative to run as a dress shop, and Mrs. Truman used to come down there and buy clothes from us. Margaret came in the shop quite a few times, but that would be way back as early as maybe the fifties that she would stop in and look around and maybe make a purchase or two, talk a while.

WILLIAMS: What was the name of your business? What is it?

SERMON: Sermon-Anderson, Incorporated [see appendix, item 1].

WILLIAMS: And it's here in Independence?

SERMON: Mm-hmm, in Englewood. You haven't been there?

WILLIAMS: No.

SERMON: Shame. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Sorry. I've never had to decorate a house here. Well, let's walk through the house and see what you notice that's different or the same.

SERMON: All right.

WILLIAMS: You go first and I'll trail along here. When you were growing up and would, I guess, visit with Margaret, would you be inside the house?

SERMON: Sometimes. Kids were usually put out to pasture, you know, in the yard or the porch.

WILLIAMS: Where would you play in the house or visit in the house?

SERMON: Outdoors. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Not in the home?

SERMON: I think the girls maybe had time to.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember Madge Wallace?

SERMON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Margaret's grandmother.

SERMON: Just barely, Mrs. Wallace. My dad had a grocery store, too, and the Trumans were customers at the grocery store. And in those days they used to have delivery service and they would deliver, and Mrs. Wallace would call. She ordered steak to scrape a lot of times. I don't know, I think that was an old-

timer that you chopped and fixed a steak so that it was easily chewed or easily . . . you know, tenderizing it, I think that's what I'm saying. And then you used to take the top of the steak and scrape it a little bit and then that made it a little bit better meat dish.

WILLIAMS: Is there anything else you remember about her?

SERMON: No. [chuckling] If you turn the machine off . . .

WILLIAMS: We could do that.

SERMON: Okay. No, I do have an incident I would like to tell you about, but . . .

WILLIAMS: Not on tape?

SERMON: No.

WILLIAMS: Okay, shut it off. [tape turned off] When you look at the wallpaper and carpetings and drapes, what decade comes to mind, really, to you? [chuckling]

SERMON: Well, it's really kind of a conglomerate of different periods. I don't think . . . You know, in those days you didn't do the whole house. You redid the wallpaper if you had a leak upstairs, or if the draperies got too bad, why, you put up new curtains or new draperies. So I don't think you really did design. I don't think interior decorating or anything like that was real prevalent in the forties and maybe even early fifties, so I think most of this is probably replaced as, you know, as it was needed. And then again when you're a youngster, you don't remember what the wallpaper looked like or what the carpets were. You just remember whether they gave you ice cream or cookies or something.

WILLIAMS: Did they?

SERMON: [chuckling] I don't remember the kinds of cookies.

WILLIAMS: But you got refreshments?



SERMON: Well, usually they were very . . . They were very helpful about keeping the kids quiet and occupied.

WILLIAMS: Do you notice anything about the den or the study?

SERMON: Well, again, you just . . . you know, my age, I remember the den and remember the dining room, remember the living room, the piano, and lots of things, but . . .

WILLIAMS: Okay.

SERMON: I couldn't tell you that these were here.

WILLIAMS: In 1984, I think it was, we purchased some shades from you. Why were you selected? Do you know?

SERMON: Well, it was put out to bid, I think. The carpet runners and the shades were put out to bid.

WILLIAMS: So it wasn't a suggestion by Margaret or somebody that you should do them?

SERMON: Well, I think . . . I don't know who else bid, frankly, and I don't think Margaret, you know, influenced it.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever hear the stories about Mrs. Truman keeping her shades at a certain length, or do you remember them being at a certain length?

SERMON: No. That's woman talk. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: You didn't care, huh? Does the front of the house look basically as you remember it?

SERMON: [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Off again?

SERMON: I think the house looks very attractive now, and looks much like it did then.

WILLIAMS: Well, I'm not asking you to downgrade it.

SERMON: Well, again, you know, when you're that age you know that there was something there, and it looks . . .

WILLIAMS: Like the leak over here in the music room. It would have been customary to re-paper if something like that had happened?

SERMON: If it got bad enough, yes.

WILLIAMS: That's typically what people did, you think?

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Okay, well, let's go upstairs and look at the draperies you did. [sound of footsteps as they ascend the stairs] Why did you work only on the second floor when Margaret—

SERMON: [chuckling] That's all she wanted us to do.

WILLIAMS: Do you know why?

SERMON: No, I think this was her room, and she thought maybe that it might be more presentable. I think she knew at that time that the second floor wouldn't be open, you know, and that probably it was requested that most of the first floor remain as much as it was like, you know, when she, her mother and dad lived here.

WILLIAMS: Okay. So did she give you any guidelines as to what you were supposed to do?

SERMON: Well, actually, no. She just said, you know, do something. We've been in business forty years, so that we had a, you know, fairly decent reputation, and she didn't think we were going to do anything bad.

WILLIAMS: Or wild or anything.

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Are these the ones?

SERMON: Yeah. Now, I don't think these are, you know, identical to what was up here.  
She just said, "Pick out something that you like and put it up."

WILLIAMS: Did you try to match it with other . . . like the first floor?

SERMON: Just to keep the house in a continuity from the outside, you know. A lot of times, if it's a white house, you try to keep something light or something white, so it doesn't look like you have pink curtains and . . .

WILLIAMS: Right, showing through the windows.

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Did you replace the shades at that time?

SERMON: No, this was later when we did the shades.

WILLIAMS: And that was for the whole house.

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Do you recall what was here before?

SERMON: Well, a representative from the park service department, I think, came from New Jersey, and we did some work with her. She asked us to show her samples, and we did, and . . . [whispering] You'd better turn that off again.  
[tape turned off]

WILLIAMS: So, on the curtains, what was the condition of the ones that were in here before you put these in?

SERMON: I don't remember. I think they did need replacing. Mrs. Truman was, you know, ill, and Mr. Truman was ill, and I think when they came home they hadn't lived in the house for seven or eight years, except on rare occasion, so that it does deteriorate with time and I don't think it looked maybe quite as nice as it did when they left it. And then with their illness and things like that,

nothing was done.

WILLIAMS: Could you have guessed about how old the curtains were that you replaced?

SERMON: No, I don't think I can do that without, you know, feeling or having them back in the hand.

WILLIAMS: What did you do with the old ones?

SERMON: We just discarded them. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: That's okay. I just wondered.

SERMON: Well, in those days, you know, you didn't save everything. You pack-ratted a lot, but you didn't . . . You just didn't keep everything. Actually, when we did the shades, we suggested that we could use the rollers. That's what frequently happens when people replace window shades. It's a small saving, very small, but just . . . they fit, you know. But we did replace the rollers, too, I think, this time.

WILLIAMS: And we have the old shades, I think, in storage.

SERMON: I think so.

CAROL DAGE: Yes, we do.

WILLIAMS: So the curtains, the ones that were here before were pretty much the same?

SERMON: A casement, you know, a semi-sheer.

WILLIAMS: And do these have rods that open up?

SERMON: No, these have sheering at the top. They're not traverse. These you have to do by hand, but I think all of them are like that. Maybe the draperies are traverse, but I don't think any of the curtains are.

DAGE: Could you tell us the fabric type of the draperies?

SERMON: Well, I suspicion that in the original house most everything is cotton, because

people used to want to wash their curtains every year or twice a year. But nowadays it's very hard to get a full cotton. You get a composition of poly and dacron, or dacron and cotton, or things like that. Which, you know, they're still washable, but they're not . . . They don't rot as easily and they have a little bit longer life span, and there's more selection in something like that. Cotton, full cotton, you can't find anymore in a wide selection of things. And this, you know, the cotton carpet was a kind of a fad at the time. It came in lots of colors, and people thought, "Get cotton carpet and put it down." It's the kind you have to sweep your way out of, you know. Otherwise you have tracks.

WILLIAMS: So it was a fad in the fifties?

SERMON: In the forties and fifties, I think. I suspicion Margaret's room . . . I don't know, but I suspicion that it was done, you know, before they went to Washington.

WILLIAMS: So this is the room that you know as Margaret's room?

SERMON: Uh-huh.

WILLIAMS: The northwest bedroom? Okay. Let's look in—

SERMON: I could be wrong since I never . . . [chuckling] [sound of footsteps]

WILLIAMS: There aren't any curtains in the alcove. Did you put up, do you remember . . . ?

SERMON: No.

WILLIAMS: Just the shades?

SERMON: That wasn't, you know, that was kind of customary, too. Maybe there was one area where you just kept the shades down and you didn't worry about curtains.

WILLIAMS: These have had some damage in here, as you can see.

SERMON: I don't think the ones we replaced were, you know, that bad.

WILLIAMS: Well, this has happened since we were here.

SERMON: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: From the wind.

SERMON: These are chiffonesses and voiles, and it's either dirty or got a little nylon in it. [chuckling] No, these were very common. When you had large windows, why, you put sheers up and hid everything. I think draperies came along a little later.

WILLIAMS: And it would have been the same, probably cotton before this, but now it's a blend?

SERMON: On the curtains?

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

SERMON: I'm pretty sure it would have been. I don't think, you know, anyone coming in would think that maybe that was the latest fashion. Something would maybe have been of more interest than trying to put the newest kind of curtains up. And there are a lot of windows in the house, so that replacing them would have been an expense and a job.

WILLIAMS: Besides cotton, back before the popularity of synthetics, were there other natural fibers used?

SERMON: I don't think that wool is a very usual fabric. Maybe in upholstery or something like that, but you never put too much wool in the window, unless it was Victoriana.

WILLIAMS: Silk or velvet or things like that?

SERMON: Well, velvet's so heavy-hanging. You do that in the drapery, and even silks; but silks rot easily in the sun, so it wasn't a good choice to put a silk up.

WILLIAMS: Since the Trumans seemed to be interested in durability, cotton would have been—

SERMON: Well, I think everybody was then. You painted the bathroom and you painted the kitchen once a year, and that was decorating. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Christine Wallace was here earlier this week, the Trumans' sister-in-law, and she was telling us about painting the bathroom black one time and those . . . [chuckling]

SERMON: Well, that was very common, to paint once a year whether it needed it or not. I expect you found many layers in the kitchen—of paint—didn't you?

WILLIAMS: There were several different shades of green and styles of wallpaper. [sound of footsteps] Each room is a little bit different.

SERMON: Yes, it is. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: That used to be different or . . . ?

SERMON: Well, I don't know. Now, see, I'm even too young for that, but I know the house was added onto, and I think each time there was an addition, of course, they put it up in the current way instead of as it was.

WILLIAMS: Did you make a point to use different kind of materials in each room, or was it just determined by what was already in the room?

SERMON: Just something that appealed, you know, to a client, maybe is what they wanted to select. And if they had something they wanted yellow, why, you found everything yellow that might appeal.

WILLIAMS: Did Mrs. Truman's companion have anything to do with selection of the curtains?

SERMON: No, not really. We talked to her, you know, once or twice when we came in. And my partner and I used to bring Mrs. Truman a rose, a yellow rose when we came, but I don't think she recognized us at that time.

WILLIAMS: Do you think she was aware of the work you were doing?

SERMON: I don't think so.

WILLIAMS: These are a little bit different than the ones we've seen, I think.

SERMON: Mm-hmm. Well, you know, they might have been replaced at a different time. This is south and has a west window, and that's hard on fabric, southwest sunlight, so I doubt if they were all replaced at the same time. But they all have a heading and casing, and that's very common. You didn't traverse too much in those days.

WILLIAMS: Okay. I guess there's a few more rooms through here. [sound of footsteps]

SERMON: I'll twist around.

WILLIAMS: It's a little bit crowded. We're in Mrs. Truman's dressing room, we call it, or Margaret's childhood bedroom. Again, we've had some storm damage, I think, up in these . . .

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: These look like the ones in the big bedroom, very sheer.

SERMON: Uh-huh, they're kind of a chiffonese. That's the sheerest of sheer.

WILLIAMS: Is that nylon?

SERMON: No, I don't know. It feels like it's got another thread in it besides cotton, but they don't have a sheen like nylon. There used to be a fabric called ninon that was some cotton and some nylon, and that is a ninon kind of a thing.

WILLIAMS: Ninon? N-I-N-O-N?

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: This is all new to me, so . . . [chuckling]

SERMON: Well, you'll have to come to my shop and see it, and I'll show you fabrics and



different kinds of . . .

WILLIAMS: [speaking to Dage] Do you want to mention our project?

DAGE: We do have a drapery restoration and conservation project that will be coming up this year, so we may be calling on you. We have a conservator that's going to be coming in and doing conservation and . . .

SERMON: Well, I'd love to help, just, you know, because of sentiment or something. I don't think I'll be doing this too much longer, and . . . [chuckling]

DAGE: Well, I think your insights would be very helpful to this person when they come on board.

WILLIAMS: That's why we're interested in the fabrics and all of that.

SERMON: Mm-hmm. Well, we've been in business forty years, and I don't know if I have a card with me or not, but we started with a workroom on fabric, and we were very interested in fabric. And I chaired the Vaile Mansion restoration and was president the first six, seven years, and then I was on the . . . I chaired the Truman Centennial Commission, so that I have some interest in, you know, the local . . . But our card has scissors and needle and thread, because we like fabric and we usually start with a fabric in a room and then work from that.

DAGE: Thank you.

WILLIAMS: Okay, let's squeeze through here into Mr. Truman's—

SERMON: I don't know whether to go ahead of her or whether she's going to shock me or what. [sound of footsteps]

WILLIAMS: And again, the curtains in Mr. Truman's dressing room are different from—

SERMON: More mannish. I mean, beige and brown are usually the color they pick for a man.

WILLIAMS: Was it like this when you were here, this room?

SERMON: Pretty much.

WILLIAMS: All his clothing?

SERMON: Now, I don't remember. [chuckling] Hmm, we'll wait a while. I think you all have maybe tidied up a little bit. You know, most of us don't live like that. We leave the wet towel on the floor or something, but I'm sure that it's very much . . . or it's very similar to the way it was.

WILLIAMS: Did you do work back here in the storage room?

SERMON: Mm-hmm. Just those were the hardest window shades to get up. I don't know why, but they were.

WILLIAMS: Well, there's stuff piled up in the windows, for one thing. But the curtains, you didn't mess with them?

SERMON: No, I think they just wanted to replace what really needed doing, you know.

DAGE: How would you describe this fabric?

SERMON: In here?

DAGE: Mm-hmm.

SERMON: Well, this is a slub weave. Now that feels like nylon. They're too dirty. You can't tell the fabric. But it's a slub weave. It's kind of like an . . . It's not an antique satin, but it's a similar weave to an antique satin. But these are still what we would call a casement cloth.

WILLIAMS: That gives it the textured look?

SERMON: Mm-hmm. A lot of times, antique satin, they line this to make a drapery out of it with another . . . but this is not as heavy as the usual antique satin. They used antique satin for bedspreads a lot. I think maybe Margaret's bedspread is an

antique satin bedspread.

WILLIAMS: These are the only traverse ones. Well, I guess on the center in the other ones they're not. Is that . . . ?

SERMON: Stationary. They have a cord?

WILLIAMS: These have cords.

SERMON: Yeah, they have a cord. They're one-way traverse.

WILLIAMS: You're right. They haven't been cleaned in a while. What's the typical cleaning pattern?

SERMON: Well, cotton, of course, people wash. If you send them to the dry cleaners, why, they will clean, but they'll fall apart easier, I think, than if you soft-wash things. Now, I think these have probably been up long enough that they're not going to wash whatsoever. They'll just disintegrate.

WILLIAMS: So that the typical . . . It would have been about every year people washed them?

SERMON: Depends on how clean you are. [chuckling] We have ladies now they want . . . you know, they still want a fabric they can wash. If it's kitchen or bathrooms, say, and they want it to wash every year, or every two months, or whatever their cleaning habits are.

WILLIAMS: But the fabrics could withstand washing every year?

SERMON: Depending on their content. If you mix a fabric too much, you put too many different kinds together, they don't wash well. The threads shrink different ways, you know, and they don't . . . they're not a smooth fabric anymore.

WILLIAMS: Okay.

SERMON: Most of the time now they recommend heavier fabrics be dry-cleaned.

WILLIAMS: Are there curtains in the bathroom?

DAGE: Just shades.

WILLIAMS: Just shades?

SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Pretty blue, isn't it?

SERMON: Yes, it's rather intense. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: All different shades.

SERMON: Well, you know, there are people who like to read and people who like to draw, and people like different things, so . . .

WILLIAMS: But it looks like there were curtains in here at one time.

SERMON: There's a rod up.

WILLIAMS: Okay. [speaking to Dage] Do you have any other questions about curtains and draperies?

DAGE: Not right now, but I'm sure when we start the project we'll have a lot more.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Well, let's go—

DAGE: One thing I just thought of. Was it typical to weight all of the curtains? Because I noticed as we were downstairs, and then some in the upstairs bedroom, a lot of those are weighted in the corners.

SERMON: No, it wasn't really typical. A lot of times, if you used a window, if you had it open for air or something like that, why, they'd say, "It blows." You know, "Is there some way to confine the drapery?" And there's shot-weight tape, which is like just by the yard, and then there are corner weights that are triangular or rectangular weights that you just sew in the corners of the . . .

DAGE: Those are mostly what we have.

SERMON: Corners?

DAGE: Mm-hmm.

SERMON: Well, there's a shot-weight, too. It really is better for a thin fabric than corner weights. [sound of footsteps going down stairs] That's a cool spot.

WILLIAMS: Let's go downstairs and backtrack a little bit and talk about your family.

SERMON: Okay.

WILLIAMS: And your father. We don't have to worry about visitors anymore.

[End #4405; Begin #4406]

WILLIAMS: Well, let's go back a little bit and talk about your family association with the Trumans. You said earlier you were a little bit . . . you're older than Margaret?

SERMON: Yes, I don't want to admit to it though on tape. I'll just say that . . . slightly.

WILLIAMS: But you're about the same age?

SERMON: Yeah. Well, I think maybe one association that we have, I lived next door to Shawsie, Mary Shaw.

WILLIAMS: Was that on Proctor Place?

SERMON: Yes, on Proctor. But I lived down on . . . we called it Van Horn Road instead of Truman Road, just about two blocks down here when I was growing up, and moved down to Proctor in the late thirties, I think, or middle thirties. And there was a young man next door, Tieman Crow, and Tieman and Shawsie and I were about the same vintage, and of course Shawsie and Margaret were very good friends. And there were a couple of times when we went out together, the four of us. And I don't remember what we did or where we went, but we did see each other occasionally. But my association, I think, mainly comes from my dad.

WILLIAMS: You said Tieman Crow? How do you spell that?

SERMON: I think it's T-I-E-M-A-N. He just passed away not very long ago.

WILLIAMS: Was he related to the Crows who played bridge with Mrs. Truman?

SERMON: Well, Mrs. Crow was one of the bridge club.

WILLIAMS: That was E. K. Crow?

SERMON: Helena Crow, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Tell us about your father.

SERMON: Well, he was a good man, a nice man. He started in political life as a council person from this area, and I think he was councilman for two years, and then he ran for mayor. And he continued from 1920s and he passed away in 1950—he died while he was still in office—and during that time I think he had very frequent contacts with Mr. Truman. And then they had some correspondence that was maybe political in nature, but they were, you know, done more as a personal letter.

And then we had the grocery store which was called Cook and Sermon Grocery, and I think my dad and his partner came back from World War [I] and started their, you know, partnership and their association. As far as I know, the Wallaces and the Trumans were regular customers there. My dad operated in a funny way, in that he had his secretary come to the grocery store. They used to have delivery service, and they delivered in the morning and then they had one delivery in the afternoon, and he used to think that he had to be at the grocery store in the morning. And he had his secretary there, and he had a telephone extension from the mayor's office so he could answer the mayor's phone, you know, there.

And I think in those days everybody walked around the square, and they had coffee clubs or [klatches] or something at the dime store, and the postmaster and the councilmen, and I know Mr. Truman walked that circuit, too. And he used to have . . . He'd have to go to the grocery store on Sunday, and all they did was just meet up there and talk, you know, and rehash the week or the month. And then—

WILLIAMS: Did you work in the grocery store?

SERMON: Yes. I went to school down in Columbia, Missouri, and my dad wanted me to be a lawyer, and I went to law school and finished law and practiced for four years, but I didn't like it too well so I had to change. But every time I came home, even when I was in law school, I had to go work in the grocery store. And if you went out on Friday night and you had, you know, kind of a nice time, or exciting, you certainly didn't want to get up on Sunday, or Saturday, and go to work in the grocery store, but I had to do that.

WILLIAMS: Where was the store located?

SERMON: It was on the square, on the north side of the square, and then they moved down and built a building a block west. It's in the 200 block on Maple.

WILLIAMS: Okay. Where the . . . Well, anyway, there's some—

SERMON: Well, I still own part of the building. That was where Dowels' [?] Frame Shop was, and I think now somebody just bought the building and they have sort of a craft store in it. It's 210 and 212 Maple.

WILLIAMS: What is your first memory of Mr. Truman?

SERMON: Well, I told you about Blevins Davis, and when we first started in business Blevins was a very good customer and helped us, you know, quite a bit. To

buy ninety yards of silk damask, that was quite unusual. But that house took ninety yards for a room, so that kind of put us on the map, as far as our business was concerned. And we started in business in '49, and I think the first recollection is when the Trumans came home for Christmas. And Blevins used to entertain for them at Christmas time. And he would call and tell us that, you know, the party was going to be here and he was going to have so and so and such and such and he wanted to get everything redone. We had to do the dining room, had to do the living room. He had a house on Long Island, Big Tree—I think it had forty-some-odd rooms—and he and his wife had a house in Colorado Springs, the Petite Trianon, and they also had a home in California. And he moved all of the things from Big Tree back here and to Colorado. And he'd have a great big truck come and we'd have to take the furniture off the truck and decide whether we were going to use it in the house or not, you know, for the party. And there were two large barns, and he had one barn tin-lined so that it would be for storage, without having any problem with rodents or furniture being damaged. And we'd work and work and work and work to get this ready for the parties, and then at the last minute Blevins would decide that it was going to be too crowded and we'd have to move all the furniture out to the barn. And we thought maybe after that happened two or three times we wouldn't have to meet these deadlines, you know, to get ready for the party, but we always had to get ready for that party. So that was very impressive.

WILLIAMS: It was every year at Christmas time?

SERMON: During their term in office, when they used to come home for Christmas.

WILLIAMS: And the Trumans would go to those parties?



SERMON: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: Who was there besides the Trumans and Blevins Davis?

SERMON: Well, I think Blevins usually had about, oh, 180, 200 people. And they didn't kill to get an invitation, but they almost . . . [chuckling] You know, it was very nice to have an invitation to go to the party.

WILLIAMS: This is the house that he had out on Lee's Summit Road?

SERMON: On Lee's Summit Road.

WILLIAMS: Your father was mayor of Independence, right? And Mr. Truman was a judge and state senator.

SERMON: A county judge.

WILLIAMS: How much cooperation or contact would they have had as politicians?

SERMON: I think quite a bit. I'm not politically informed. In fact, I didn't like politics, and not until they decided to name the light plant for my dad did I ever want to get involved in committee or civic work or anything like that. But when he was mayor, he started being mayor in the twenties, and I think Mr. Truman first had public office in the late thirties, and my dad was mayor until 1950, so that their association was for several, several, several years. And I think Mr. Truman relied on a lot of local people, and talked just to have information, local things, events. I do know, you know, of Mr. Truman's association with Mr. Pendergast, and my dad wasn't associated with Pendergast. Independence is two . . . is one of the two county seats, you know. Kansas City is county, but Independence was the first county seat, and I think eastern Jackson County people were always very jealous of that being the first county seat. They don't recognize Kansas City as being involved and all. And I think eastern Jackson

County was maybe not too Pendergast-oriented. I think they had rabbits and goats in their factions, and if you were a rabbit you weren't a goat, and so I think they did have quite a few contacts during those years.

WILLIAMS: I assume your father was a Democrat.

SERMON: Yes.

WILLIAMS: No doubt about that.

SERMON: No.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned to me, I think, on the phone that Mr. Truman would . . . the Harpie Club would meet at your house on occasion.

SERMON: Occasionally. I don't think they met there all the time, you know, but on occasion. My dad and mother built this home in the thirties, and I told you it had a recreation room, and I think part of that was done for me. It has an outside entrance, and to get rid of the kids and the noise and the music, and then we had a floor that you could dance, you know, there, so you could go and come without disturbing the rest of them in the house. And I think that was true of the poker clubs or the meetings that they had. You just, you didn't hear anything and you could do whatever you wanted to.

WILLIAMS: Was your family ever invited to Washington when the Trumans—

SERMON: Yes, Dad was an elector one time and they went to visit. They went to visit Blevins at Big Tree, I think, the first time, before they went to Washington. But there were quite a few people . . . I have some pictures of when they went to Washington, the Childers and the Burruses and I had Uncle Bill Sermon and his wife. I think there were about six or seven couples that went as a group to the inaugural.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever go with them?

SERMON: No.

WILLIAMS: You weren't interested?

SERMON: A lot more interesting things to do. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: How much did you see the Trumans after they retired here?

SERMON: I think illness set in too much before they ever really . . . There were still a lot of outside contacts. I don't think that most of us ever thought that they were available too much.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any involvement in the Truman Library, any projects like that?

SERMON: Well, we were asked when Benton painted the mural on the entranceway, his temperament got in the way one time and he thought that it should have curtains, and we . . . That was when fiberglass first came in, and we went over and proposed that they use fiberglass curtains, and that would protect the painting a little bit. And he was, "No, sir, no way would that be done. No way." So we lost that battle. We didn't . . .

WILLIAMS: So he wanted curtains to cover the mural?

SERMON: No, the front windows, you know, in the entrance lobby.

WILLIAMS: So the light—

SERMON: And then the painting is back thirty or forty feet. But the sun, when it goes south in the winter, did reflect on the wall in there.

WILLIAMS: I see. Do you recall being in the house any time during the retirement, other than the times you did the curtains?

SERMON: I think only by invitation, when we were asked to, you know, do something or something like that. I really recall most of all the time that Mrs. Truman was

ill. I mean, that seemed the longest period of time to me, after they came home. It didn't seem like Mr. Truman was here too many years before he was in bad health.

WILLIAMS: From what you know of the Trumans, how would you describe them as people?

SERMON: Very delightful. I think Mr. Truman had a wonderful sense of humor, the little bit I knew about him, and I'm not sure Mrs. Truman had that same sense of humor. [chuckling] But I understand she was . . . See, I didn't play cards. I wasn't in the bridge club, or I didn't think anything about it until it came out in *Life* magazine one time. And I had a college friend—I don't think he was my roommate—but he wrote me a letter and he said, "Where in the world do you get these funny names of all these people?" And we didn't think anything about it. And they had this picture of all the ladies of the Truman bridge club, and they had Mrs. Oscar King, and Miss Helena Crow, and Miss Lucy Peters. And locally you'd never think anything about the names, you know, you lived with them all your life, but if you saw them lined up in *Life* magazine, you'd think, "My goodness, we do have some strange characters here in town."

WILLIAMS: Do you think that's true of Independence?

SERMON: Turn the machine off. [chuckling] [tape turned off] [Williams talking in low voice with Dage]

WILLIAMS: Do you have photographs of the inaugural?

SERMON: I have the inaugural invitation and photographs, and then I have a picture . . . I know I have a picture of all of them, you know, getting ready, and then . . . I didn't give them to Connie [Odom-Soper] when she was uptown at the

archives. I was going to, but I didn't. I have their dresses.

WILLIAMS: Carol's the one who's in charge of collections.

SERMON: Of fabrics and things and stuff?

WILLIAMS: And deciding what to accept and all, so I'll let you discuss with her what . . . I think you told me you were interested in donating some of these things to someone.

SERMON: Well, as I said, my dad's secretary kept these scrapbooks of each year he was in office, so I have quite a few of those. And I don't know what year this is, I just picked them up as I'm trying to clean up, but this is apparently—Well, here's an inaugural deal in this.

WILLIAMS: Have you already given what you want to give to Barbara Potts?

SERMON: No, not yet.

WILLIAMS: Okay. And you had some World War I-era material?

SERMON: I have some army photographs and I have two footlockers of my dad's. And I hate to open them, because I don't know what . . . [chuckling] I know that it's going to be a sad thing, you know, because they haven't been put for restoration.

WILLIAMS: Could you explain how he was associated with Mr. Truman in the war?

SERMON: Well, they all . . . There were four captains and one major from Independence out of the 129th Field Artillery. Now, I might even have some of that wrong, but one was Spencer Salisbury, and I don't know what battery he had. I don't think there was an A Battery. It didn't go A, B, C, and D; it went A and C and F, or something like that. And Spencer Salisbury and Bostian, Kenneth Bostian, and my dad, and Mr. Truman were the four captains in artillery, and I

think Major Miles was their senior officer in the 129th Field Artillery. And I think I have pictures of those, and I know I have one long one like this of my dad's, and I'm sure you have one long one like that of Mr. Truman's battery.

DAGE: With the encampment then?

SERMON: And then I have a lot of stuff that my dad brought to my mother when he came home from France, you know, spoons and jewelry and that kind of stuff. But I have framed my stuff, and, you know, have tried to kind of put it away or keep it. I got interested in the Vaile after they started the Sermon Center. Because I think Dad was gone about thirty years—1950 to 1980—and I got uptight because, you know, they hadn't named an alley or they hadn't named a street or a bridge or anything for him. And I thought if a man gave twenty-six years of his life to, you know, being a mayor . . .

And my recollections of his days of mayor, because I was just a real youngster, is you used to take rides in the afternoon on Sunday. You'd get in the car and take a ride. We always ended up at the light plant and the newest culvert and bridge, and my mother and I would just give him hell. You know, we'd say, "Is this all we do is just go sit in front of the light plant?" So when they picked out the light plant to name for him, you know, as a community center, I thought, "Well, now that's great." He would have much rather had that than he would an alley or a street or something. And I know how much he loved it because he was down there every day. He wanted the turbines to move and . . . I can even remember the names of the people that worked down there, [chuckling] we were there so frequently.

WILLIAMS: That was your amusement as a child?

SERMON: Well, Sunday afternoon anyhow. So I got interested in civic and stuff and things, and chaired the Vaile. I chaired the historical society jail museum, I think, for about four or five years first, and then I got interested in the Vaile, and my partner and I were very active in it. And if you'll turn off the machine, I'll tell you, you know, I got . . . No, I'm kidding you. The city just will not do anything. You know, we waited years and years and years. We'd say, "Are you going to put the lightning rods up?" or "Can we have some lights on the stairway? The volunteers are saying the guests are going to fall." And you just couldn't get anything done. And I had more things to do, and I was still in business, and I just decided I didn't want to do it anymore. But I think we made great headway and did a lot of good stuff getting it started.

WILLIAMS: The Vaile is wonderful now.

SERMON: Well, it's slipped a lot since I left. No, I would love for you to come see my shop. I've been told that we have one of the most unique shops in about a seven- or eight-state area. And of course it's grown like a Topsy through the years. I just visited a shop in San Antonio that they told me was very comparable to what we had. And I just lost my partner a year or so ago, and I've been wondering, you know, what I'm going to do. I'm still continuing the shop, but I do have this building uptown that was the old grocery store building. It's much smaller and it's not in the Kansas City School District, which if you're a property owner out there, it really kills you. And the way we were set up, we also pay a merchants' tax on inventory, and that's not a helpful thing. So I've been thinking, and my partner and I had talked about it before he passed away, that we might move uptown and do it on a smaller scale. Because

we have twenty-six rooms and five furnaces, and it's a lot to take care of. But I do know fabric very well, and I really do think that you should . . . You're leaving today?

WILLIAMS: This is my last day, yes. Carol will be here.

SERMON: A reassignment?

WILLIAMS: No, I'm just here in the summer.

SERMON: I see.

WILLIAMS: I have to go back to school.

SERMON: I see. Well, I wasn't going to put out the red carpet for you, but I just thought maybe you could . . .

WILLIAMS: I live in Kansas City, so . . .

SERMON: Do you?

WILLIAMS: I will be back on occasion. It sounds like an interesting place.

DAGE: I think so.

WILLIAMS: Twenty-six rooms?

SERMON: Mm-hmm, we bought an old house, and then we built a building in front, a two-story building, and then we have a little house in the back that's sort of a carriage house, and then we have another little house in the back that has a . . . It's kind of a courtyard. I, frankly, have let it go down this year. It's just too much. And I do have a nice house and home and I have a big garden, and it's just too much to keep all of it together.

DAGE: You're looking at me. I think we'd certainly be interested. This is the end for the interview.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Thank you for coming by today.

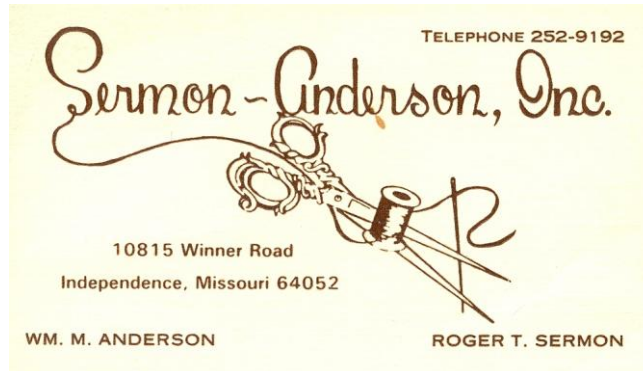


SERMON: You're very welcome. I hope I haven't revealed too many secrets of the past.

END OF INTERVIEW

## APPENDIX

1. Sermon's business card at the time of the interview. (Interview file)



2. Sermon's obituary from the *Kansas City Star*, March 29, 1998.

### ROGER T. SERMON

Roger T. Sermon, 79, Independence, MO, passed away Saturday, March 28, 1998, at Rosewood Health Center, Independence. Funeral service will be 1 p.m. Tuesday, March 31, at D.W. Newcomer's Sons Noland Road Chapel; burial in Woodlawn Cemetery. Visitation will be 12 noon-1 p.m. Tuesday at the chapel.

Mr. Sermon was born October 8, 1918, in Independence, MO, to Roger T. Sermon Sr. and Mary Estell (Campbell) Sermon. Mr. Sermon attended local schools and graduated from the University of Missouri in 1940. He completed his law degree at the University of Kansas City in 1942. While attending MU, he was twice president of Kappa Sigma Fraternity. He was a U.S. Army veteran and had attended Officers Training School. In 1949, he established an interior design business with Mitchell Anderson called Sermon-Anderson in the Englewood business district of Independence. He served as chairman of the 1859 Jail Committee and was the first president of the Vail Victorian Society. He was a member of the Independence Civic Cultural Committee, Quality of Life Commission, and Friends of Art, and was treasurer of the Independence Cultural Arts Coalition. He is survived by several cousins. (Arrangements: D.W. Newcomer's Sons Noland Road Chapel)