

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

ROBERT R. SHEMWELL

AUGUST 3, 1991

EXCELSIOR SPRINGS, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY JIM WILLIAMS

ORAL HISTORY #1991-16

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HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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ABSTRACT

Robert R. Shemwell, podiatrist, served the Trumans from 1954 until Harry S Truman's death in 1972 and Bess W. Truman's death in 1982. He describes the procedure used to alleviate foot problems in general and those experienced by the Trumans in particular. He also discusses the Secret Service's security procedures both in his office and later at the Truman home.

Persons mentioned: Harry S Truman, Bess W. Truman, Edmund S. Muskie, Sue Hesse, Denise Cates, Wallace H. Graham, and Lyndon B. Johnson.

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JIM WILLIAMS: This is an oral history interview with Dr. Robert Shemwell. We're at his house in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, on the morning of August 3, 1991. The interviewer is Jim Williams from the National Park Service.

Well, before we get to your association with the Trumans, I'd like to find out a little bit more about you. How long have you practiced in Independence?

ROBERT SHEMWELL: I started practice in 1958, and I've been in the Independence area in the last twenty-five years.

WILLIAMS: Are you a native of this area?

SHEMWELL: I grew up in Kansas City.

WILLIAMS: Is your only practice in Independence?

SHEMWELL: No, I have eight practices. We go from the city practices into the outlying areas. We go into Warrensburg, Maryville, Cameron, Richmond, and we fly to these locations.

WILLIAMS: You fly?

SHEMWELL: Mm-hmm.

WILLIAMS: So you're a busy . . .

SHEMWELL: Pilot, yeah.

WILLIAMS: How often are you in Independence?

SHEMWELL: We're in Independence three days a week.

WILLIAMS: When did you first become acquainted with the Trumans?

SHEMWELL: I became acquainted with the Trumans in 1958. After I graduated, I was an associate with Dr. Rowe, who was a podiatrist in Independence who had been treating them shortly before I came into the practice. And between the two of us, we treated them over the period of time up till 1970, and then Dr. Rowe died at that time. Then I was the sole practitioner who took care of their foot problems.

WILLIAMS: How do you spell Dr. Rowe's name?

SHEMWELL: R-O-W-E, Rowe.

WILLIAMS: Some people may not know what podiatry is. Could you explain everything involved in that?

SHEMWELL: A podiatrist is a physician who primarily treats the foot, surgically and medically.

WILLIAMS: What is your first memory of the Trumans?

SHEMWELL: Well, the first memory I had was the involvement it took to bring them into the office. It was quite an ordeal. The Trumans would call and make an appointment, and then about two hours before they came, the Secret Service would come in and check out the building. They'd bring us an alarm device to put in the treatment room, in such a way that the Trumans wouldn't know that it was in the room. So, in the event there was any problems, we were to sound the alarm; and then in that event, we would be

flooded with Secret Service people into the office. But over the years we never had any problems with having to press the black box to notify them.

But they came in three cars. They had Secret Service in front of them and behind them, and a driver for their old Chrysler. One car would stay in the back of the building, one would stay in the front, and they'd let the Trumans out in the front. There would be a Secret Service man in the hall, one in the reception room, and we made it a point to have the Trumans come during the lunch hour without having a reception room full of people. So we'd see them about 12:30 and try to be through with them by 1:00, but sometimes they were late or we were running late. Consequently, Mr. Truman would like to go out in the waiting room and visit with the patients as they were coming into the office, and that was very exciting for the patients. And that was pretty much the routine every time they came to the office; and more times than not, they would come together.

WILLIAMS: How long had Dr. Rowe been treating them before you came in, do you know?

SHEMWELL: Approximately four years.

WILLIAMS: Was this procedure with the security the same all through the years? Did it ever change?

SHEMWELL: It gradually decreased after President Truman passed away. We did not have the Secret Service, other than the driver that brought Mrs. Truman.

WILLIAMS: How often would the Trumans come in?

SHEMWELL: They would come in at least once a month to have their feet treated.

WILLIAMS: What kind of treatment was it?

SHEMWELL: Most of it was palliative. They had nail conditions that they weren't able to take care of, and callous lesions as well on the sole of their foot, that the president couldn't get to. He said he'd created it by years of walking and not taking time to take care of his foot properly as a young person.

WILLIAMS: Were their problems fairly typical of people that age?

SHEMWELL: Pretty much, as I recall.

WILLIAMS: Because I know that my grandmother used to have her nails trimmed and things like that.

SHEMWELL: It's difficult for the old folks to get to their feet. It seems like the older you get the further away your feet get.

WILLIAMS: So would they have a regular appointment each month, or would they have to call up?

SHEMWELL: I can't recall. I don't remember how that was handled.

WILLIAMS: And were you the one treating them when Dr. Rowe was there?

SHEMWELL: Pretty much of the time I treated them, yes.

WILLIAMS: Did they seem anything special to you as patients?

SHEMWELL: Well, I think early on they did. You know, I had not had any contact with them prior to that, and having the past President of the United States come to your office, it was quite thrilling. And then after a while you realized

they were just like you and I, and you could get down to basic things to talk about each time they'd come in. You'd see a news article in the paper you'd like to relate to the president: "I saw such and such in the paper, where you did such and such." And then he would more or less relate back to me what the incident was. One time I asked the president, I said, "I see where Ed Muskie was in the primary race, and now he has dropped out." And the president came back with this. He said, "The damn fool was ill-advised. He should have never been there to begin with." Another time I said, "I was reading in the paper where you were the only president to ever go down in a captured submarine in Norfolk, Virginia." He said, "Yes sir, and they wouldn't let me run it." [chuckling] So we had a lot of humorous things as well as serious things in the office to discuss.

WILLIAMS: So you would try to have something to talk about with him?

SHEMWELL: Pretty much. And Mrs. Truman was more or less always inquiring about my children and what grade they were in and how they were doing in school. She always remembered their names and really took a personal interest in the family, and she was a very gracious lady all the years that I took care of her.

WILLIAMS: Would they be examined together?

SHEMWELL: No, they'd be examined separately and treated separately.

WILLIAMS: They didn't mind splitting up?

SHEMWELL: No, one would go in one treatment room and one in the other. And Mrs.

Truman was a great reader, and she'd bring her book and she'd be patiently reading as I'd come into the treatment room. Then she'd lay the book down and then want to converse the whole time I was treating her.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember any particular books that she had with her?

SHEMWELL: Mrs. Truman always had mystery books. And when you went to her house, they were stacked all over her bed or in the library, and you'd have to work your way through to get to where Mrs. Truman was.

WILLIAMS: Besides you and Dr. Rowe, were there other doctors in the practice?

SHEMWELL: No, that was it, the two of us.

WILLIAMS: And you had nurses, I assume?

SHEMWELL: Yes, the nurses were there.

WILLIAMS: Do you know any of their names?

SHEMWELL: Sue Hesse was one of them, Denise Cates was another, and . . . I'm losing my memory. This goes back quite a ways.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever go to the home to treat the Trumans?

SHEMWELL: Many a times. Many a times.

WILLIAMS: Why would you do that, instead of having them come in?

SHEMWELL: Well, as the president's health started failing, they asked me to come to the house, and periodically I'd go to the house and I'd treat the president. And then he was in Research Hospital at one time, and they called from Research and asked if I'd come over and treat his feet at that particular time when he was ill. And I did that up to the time he passed away. And

then Mrs. Truman continued to come into the office. And then when her health started failing, then I started going to the home.

WILLIAMS: Did you have any contact with their physician, Dr. [Wallace H.] Graham?

SHEMWELL: Only by written contact, by letters of what was going on and what they were being treated for.

WILLIAMS: So he would keep up with what you were doing?

SHEMWELL: Yes, he was very aware that I was taking care of their lower extremity.

WILLIAMS: Do you know approximately what year it was when you started treating him at home instead of him coming in?

SHEMWELL: I think it was in the late seventies, as I recall, that I started going to the home, but I'm not sure.

WILLIAMS: So a few years before he died?

SHEMWELL: Yes, the last couple of years, I think that's when I started going to the home.

WILLIAMS: Where would you treat him in the house?

SHEMWELL: Well, they had moved downstairs to the back bedroom off of the parlor, and they had set up twin beds in there. And I would usually treat him in a chair, and there at the last I treated him in bed. But he pretty much stayed in that area, as I was told, during the latter part of his life.

WILLIAMS: Who would call you and ask you to come over?

SHEMWELL: The call came in from their home by a nurse that was staying with them. And they had several nurses that I remember over the period of time that

would rotate twenty-four hours a day.

WILLIAMS: Were these the medical technicians from the navy, or were they regular nurses?

SHEMWELL: I think they were just regular nurses that were employed by the Truman family.

WILLIAMS: Do you remember any particular visits to the home when you were treating Mr. Truman?

SHEMWELL: Yes, several times. I remember some very, very exciting times going to their home. I would come down the alley and make the turn between two garages. There was an eye on the side of the garage that would set off an alarm. Well, the FBI/Secret Service would be living across the street, and they'd keep their blinds slightly open so they could see who comes and goes. So this one particular day, the nurse or Mrs. Truman failed to tell them I was coming. And I went back through the garage area and parked my car and got out. I always came up to the back porch and opened the door and just go in, never knock or anything. That was the instructions. And this particular day, I put my hand on the doorknob, and the next thing I know, I was doing a couple of 360s on my heels by somebody grabbing me by the shoulder. And then straightened me up and apologetically saying, "Dr. Shemwell, I am so sorry. I wish they would let me know you were coming."

And then another time I was all the way into the main part of the

house, and in comes through the double doors was the Secret Service running wide-open, wanting to know who came into the house. Once again they were not notified. And other than that, those are the two times I will always remember being manhandled by the Secret Service. But other than that, it was always an enjoyment to go in to see Mrs. Truman and Mr. Truman.

There were times, at certain times of the year, Mrs. Truman would like to sit out on her screened-in back porch. It was very picturesque, and she had the antebellum fan going in the ceiling, and the grapevines growing up the side of the screened-in porch, and the breeze coming through, and we'd sit and visit after a treatment for some period of time, or have iced tea with her. And one time when she was getting pretty frail, the nurse said, "Would you like to see the whole house from top to bottom?" So I did get to see the upstairs, and I understand now that that will never be shown.

WILLIAMS: At least as long as Margaret is alive.

SHEMWELL: I understand. And I was amazed at the prestige of the president and the . . . You go into the kitchen and see the wainscot wood slats on the wall around the side, and the typical old-fashioned sink with the drain board, and it made you really appreciate the Trumans because they never made a point to flaunt who they were. They were very down-to-earth people, very sincere people, and gracious people.

WILLIAMS: So you would pull around in the driveway and park there in the back, and then go up to the kitchen door?

SHEMWELL: Just go up the back way and come in the kitchen door, and walk through the dining room and walk on into the main part of the house. You looked towards their library area, and there would be books stacked there. And then after he passed away, his bed seemed to be a catchall for all the new novels that she would receive from authors throughout the United States who would write a mystery would always send her a new book. And there was books piled everywhere in her bedroom, even in her latter years.

WILLIAMS: On the other bed?

SHEMWELL: On the other bed as well.

WILLIAMS: So there were always twin beds in there, as you remember?

SHEMWELL: That's correct.

WILLIAMS: Were the Trumans ever difficult as patients?

SHEMWELL: I never would think so. Even Mrs. Truman, who always seems to be the one that gets the finger pointed that she was a little on that side of the rim where she could be short, I never found her to be. I always found her to be just the opposite. Always have read that she could, but never had encountered it.

WILLIAMS: Did she appear to be kind of in charge of things?

SHEMWELL: Definitely. Definitely. Right up to the last she even would call and make her own doctor appointments and make her own hair appointments, and

pretty much wanted to run her home without any more help than she actually needed.

WILLIAMS: Would she always offer refreshments or anything like that when you would be there?

SHEMWELL: Sometimes. You know, it was how she felt. That was the main thing. If she wasn't feeling herself, she would thank you for coming and said she would notify me when I would be needed again.

WILLIAMS: How long would you stay, typically?

SHEMWELL: I would be in the home thirty-five minutes to an hour.

WILLIAMS: And not to get too personal into their finances, but did they have insurance, things like that?

SHEMWELL: Well, see, they were the first couple in the United States to have Medicare. President Johnson came here and presented them with the first Medicare cards in the United States, and President Truman got number one and Mrs. Truman got number two. So things that were covered under Medicare, they naturally got reimbursed for it—or we did—through Medicare. And before that, we used to get their checks. And I was looking back through their file, and some of their first visits were \$4.

WILLIAMS: And that was in the '50s?

SHEMWELL: Yeah. You go back today and look at that and you kind of chuckle and say, "Guy, how did we make it at \$4 office calls?" [chuckling] One year Mrs. Truman sent me a check for \$100 as a gift for Christmas. And to this

day I still have her check, and it's framed. And some of her letters she would write to us, we have them framed, and we have a . . . My wife put together the file in the office into a scrapbook. So I keep that in my library along with pictures of the Trumans in their home. You know, it brings back good memories, and they were just very gracious people, and it was an honor to serve them.

WILLIAMS: So typically you would send them a bill, and then they'd send a check, just like anyone else.

SHEMWELL: And then some of the checks we just kept.

WILLIAMS: You didn't cash them.

SHEMWELL: Didn't cash them.

WILLIAMS: They're probably more valuable today.

SHEMWELL: Yes. I would say yes to that question, yes.

WILLIAMS: I wonder how many people did that to them.

SHEMWELL: Oh, I understand throughout Kansas City there's a lot of people. Where he used to go eat chili they'd keep his check, and other places, barbecue places he would like to go eat, they say they kept their checks, and so . . .

WILLIAMS: I suppose that makes it difficult to balance your checkbook. [chuckling]

SHEMWELL: I'm sure the accountant figured a way to do it.

WILLIAMS: Although, I guess in essence you get whatever it is for free.

SHEMWELL: The president did well. [chuckling]

WILLIAMS: Do you recall the last time you visited Mrs. Truman?

SHEMWELL: Yes, I do. It was at her home, and at that time she was no longer able to sit in a chair, and she was laying in the bed. And her hair was done very nicely. Just before I got out to see her, the beautician had been there. She looked very, very peaceful, but you could see that she was failing. And I knew this would probably be my last visit to visit the Truman home, or to have the opportunity to treat Mrs. Truman. And shortly thereafter, she passed away.

WILLIAMS: Was she able to communicate with you?

SHEMWELL: Yes, but it was . . . you know, it was not Mrs. Truman herself. She was polite and spoke when you talked to her, but she wasn't overly enthusiastic because she just didn't have the strength or the energy to exert herself.

WILLIAMS: Would these conditions in their feet be painful?

SHEMWELL: They would be painful if they were neglected. I mean, they would start having infections or things of that nature, where they'd have to limp to walk if it wasn't treated. And as you know, our geriatric patients need good foot care or else they're not going to be active, and consequently they start developing other serious problems with not being able to function in a manner that requires the whole body to move with ease.

WILLIAMS: I was just curious how someone would know when it was time to call you in.

SHEMWELL: In general, or the Trumans per se?

WILLIAMS: In general.

SHEMWELL: Well, most people start developing pain and discomfort in their feet. They start to notice redness around the toes or discoloration such as darkness, which concerns the lack of circulation, lesions that are starting to appear on the foot that cause them to walk with a limp. Those are all warning signals to the old folks, and that should be heeded, and consequently they should contact a podiatrist, who is well-trained with the lower extremity.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever treat them for arch problems or things like that?

SHEMWELL: Not so much for arch problems. We treated Mr. Truman for metatarsal problems. The metatarsals had a tendency not to be level, and so when he came down on his foot he'd have one location that would bear the majority of the weight momentarily. It created a lesion, and then it worked a core up in the foot, you might say, and it was just like stepping on a tack. And once it was removed, he'd walk out of the office. He was one of the people that I can recall more than anybody who would be overly polite and just thank you many, many times for how well he could stand and walk when he walked out, like you did a miracle. You know, that was his impression he would leave you with.

WILLIAMS: Well, walking, as you mentioned earlier, was very important to him.

SHEMWELL: It was very important to him. And when he could not really bear his weight on his foot, he was really at odds with himself. But once he came in and was able to put that foot down and stomp on it three times and say, "That's wonderful. Thank you, thank you," then you knew that you did a

job that he was going to be pleased with, and he was going to be able to walk for a period of time until he starts having a reoccurrence.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever give them advice on the types of shoes that were good?

SHEMWELL: At their age, no.

WILLIAMS: It was too late by then?

SHEMWELL: Too late by then, and I'm not going to change their habits. We'll just work around them.

WILLIAMS: Some of my family, they have the insoles?

SHEMWELL: The orthotics, yes.

WILLIAMS: Orthotics. Did the Trumans ever have anything like that?

SHEMWELL: I think I made a pair for Mrs. Truman for a high heel at one time, as I recall.

WILLIAMS: But all in all, they just had the routine problems?

SHEMWELL: Pretty much came in just to get their feet gone over and be assured that their comfort will last till their next visit. So you might put that in the category of palliative, preventative care.

WILLIAMS: Well, would you like to look through your scrapbook and maybe just talk about some things that are in here? Is this the one you said has their records?

SHEMWELL: Going back to the records, they were in, I guess the first time, in '54, and we treated them over the period of time to . . . back clear up into the '70s. It looks like '73, as I can see at this point. And then it goes on over . . . we

treated them clear up into '77. That was Mrs. Truman. And our last visit with Mrs. Truman in her home was on 6/14/77. So, over the years we saw quite a bit of the Trumans in the office. My scrapbook consists of envelopes that was addressed to us. And what's kind of unusual about a president or his wife after they've retired from the White House is that they can sit down and write as many letters as they want to daily and sign their name up in the right-hand corner and never use a stamp. So we have a lot of those, and we've got pictures of the Trumans, and we've got literature from them as well. And there's a lot of articles that have been written about them and printed in the Independence *Examiner* as well as the *Kansas City Star*. We have pictures of their home, the interior as well as the exterior, and even a picture of their back porch where I'd treated Mrs. Truman. And these are things that go clear back to the time that Margaret got married. It's all in here about the family. And even the wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Truman, with a picture of them.

WILLIAMS: Would they send you Christmas cards, things like that?

SHEMWELL: We'd get Christmas cards from them, yes. Yes, we would. So all this in the scrapbook was compiled from their files in the office, articles that came out that office employees would cut out of the paper and slip in their file and just . . . The file grew very thick and now it's in a scrapbook. We even have a picture here of where the family was walking out through the gates to get in the limo to go to Carson's Funeral Home to bury the

president. I guess we've got a pretty good scrapbook, considering my girls did this just on their own, and I wasn't even aware of it until . . . for a number of years they accumulated this about the president. But like I can say to you, it was really enjoyable to go to their home and be a part of their life and offer a service at the same time.

WILLIAMS: And you have a few things up there on the wall.

SHEMWELL: Yes, there's a letter up there on the wall from Mrs. Truman. When the president was in the hospital we contacted Mrs. Truman, inquired about how he was getting along. We got a letter in regards to his care. We've got some announcements up there, and there's the check for \$100 that she sent me one year as a gift for Christmas. We got a plate of his, a picture on a plate up there in the library shelf here. And a picture of his home. And I cherish those very, very much.

WILLIAMS: The letter from July 27, 1972, is addressed to you, Sue, and Vicky. Is that your family?

SHEMWELL: At the time, those were some of the receptionists that worked for me in the office. Sue's still with us and Vicky has long been gone from our office. She even knew every girl that worked in the office by their first and last name. She was very aware of who was in our office and who she came in contact with.

WILLIAMS: Well, apparently you sent her a birthday card or something, because she . . .

SHEMWELL: We do. Every year we'd send both of them a birthday card.

WILLIAMS: And the check was in 1979.

SHEMWELL: Yes.

WILLIAMS: And she's written on there: "Gift."

SHEMWELL: Uh-huh. It was a gift.

WILLIAMS: And the plate . . .

SHEMWELL: That's a plate of President Truman up there on the top shelf of the library.

WILLIAMS: I'm trying to think if I've missed anything. I don't think so. Can you think of anything else that I should have asked?

SHEMWELL: I can't think of anything.

WILLIAMS: Well, I'd like to thank you then.

SHEMWELL: Okay.

WILLIAMS: It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

END OF INTERVIEW

