

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

MAY WALLACE

DECEMBER 20, 1985

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY LISA BOSSO

ORAL HISTORY #1985-16

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #3107-3108

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR





May Wallace and Lisa Bosso
NPS Photos



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ABSTRACT

May Wallace, (July 9, 1894—May 18, 1993) wife of George Wallace and sister-in-law of Harry and Bess Truman, discusses the Wallace and Truman family members. Wallace discusses the family clock, the movement of the Gates family to Independence, Madge Gates Wallace's relationship with her family; domestic help and cooking; Christmas in Independence, New York, and Washington.

Persons mentioned: George Porterfield Wallace, George Porterfield Gates, Elizabeth E. Gates, Bess W. Truman, Ed Gates, Patty Gates, David Willock Wallace, Frank Gates Wallace, D. Frederick Wallace, Natalie Ott Wallace, Albert Ott, Natalie Ott, Julia Ott, Harry S Truman, Mike Westwood, Margaret Truman Daniel, E. Clifton Daniel, Clifton Truman Daniel, Vietta Garr, Edward Hobby, William Southern, Ronald Reagan, Nancy Reagan, and Pat Boone.

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
MAY WALLACE**

HSTR INTERVIEW #1985-16

STEVE HARRISON: This is an interview with May Wallace, or Mrs. George Wallace, at her home at 605 West Truman Road, in Independence, Missouri. It was recorded on December 20, 1985. Conducting the interview is Lisa Bosso and Steve Harrison.

LISA BOSSO: Now he's got you hooked up. Do we need to have her sign this now?

HARRISON: No.

BOSSO: Okay. What we've been doing is, we've been interviewing different people who have known the Trumans, just getting more information about them. So, I said, "I'll bet Mrs. Wallace would be a good one."

MAY WALLACE: [laughter] I'm the only one left.

BOSSO: That's right. You've got all those good stories. We just want to get your stories that you tell on tape, so someday if we do a movie or something . . .

WALLACE: Or I'm dead or something. [laughter]

BOSSO: So, you know, they would be on tape and it would be your voice. Okay? I've kind of gone through and thought through what stories I could remember, but I'm sure there's a lot more, right?

WALLACE: [chuckling] Well, maybe I can't remember them anymore.

BOSSO: Okay, well, I'll kind of help you out, okay? [laughter] So do we need to have her start out with her name and all that gizmo?

HARRISON: No.

BOSSO: Okay. I think the most famous one is, of course, when your husband fixed the clock, the hands on the clock.

WALLACE: [chuckling] Oh, made them out of the pie pans?

BOSSO: Yes.

WALLACE: Well, do you want me to tell you that?

BOSSO: Yes.

WALLACE: Well, my husband was always interested in . . . He was the family fixer. And as I told you, when Margaret fell down and skinned her knees, she got up and said, "Da fix!" [chuckling] She thought he could fix anything. But that old clock came out here in . . . must have come with the Gateses from the East. I don't know whether it ran for awhile or not, but some kids were having a party up there one time, and they got to fooling with it, and it never did run after that, and the hands got lost.

So George was home on an enforced vacation from the mill where he worked, and he was one of these people that had to be doing something all the time, which was real good when it was something useful. [chuckling] When it wasn't, why, it wasn't so good. So he took two of my very lightweight aluminum pie pans and went up to the house and made a pattern that he wanted to make, of the size and all where the hands would go out. Then he came home and laid that out and made a pattern and cut the hands out of the pie pans, painted them black, and put them back up there. Then he put that electric connection so that they'd run. Does it still work?

BOSSO: Uh huh, it sure does.

WALLACE: Well, wherever he is, he would be pleased, [chuckling] because he never wanted anything to be . . . If it was supposed to be doing something, he wanted it to be doing something. So that was the story of the clock. There's a date on that clock someplace.

BOSSO: Yes, inside the front cover there's a whole list of dates. I assume that's when it was serviced.

WALLACE: And it kept on after he electrocuted [sic] it, it kept on working. Now what else do you want to know?

HARRISON: When was the last time that it worked mechanically?

WALLACE: What?

HARRISON: When was the last time that it worked mechanically with works and so on?

WALLACE: Well, some of the works . . . Well, it just is run by electricity now anyway, isn't it? So it doesn't make too much difference. Doesn't the cord go clear down by the side there?

BOSSO: Yes, but you don't remember when it would work mechanically?

HARRISON: With the pendulum and all the original works that were inside the case?

WALLACE: No, I don't remember anything. That was before my time, I guess—I mean, before I was in the family. Because all I can remember of it is that it didn't work. But I suppose when the Gateses lived there, when Grandmother and Grandfather Gates, you see, lived in those . . . That side of the house was their part of the . . . and what was Mrs. Truman's bedroom was their bedroom, and then that great big room was their sitting room.

Grandfather Gates had a big chair that he sat in there and spilled pennies out of . . . I guess I told you that, didn't I, where he spilled pennies

out of his pockets and the boys would take [unintelligible], [chuckling] going in and reaching down in the chair to get . . . they were dimes, I expect. But Grandfather Gates was a man of very keen humor. He loved to joke with you.

Grandmother Gates was a little person—I mean, a short person—and a very dignified little person. She was English, and she had come over here during one of the plagues over in England. Her family had been practically wiped out, and so they sent her over to relatives in the East of the United States, so that she wouldn't get this plague. Evidently, that is why. Now, the Gateses came out here from the East, and evidently Mother Wallace was born in . . . Where was she born? One of the places there, one of those states in the East there.

BOSSO: In Illinois?

WALLACE: And I asked her how come one time, and she said, well, that was before the family came out. Then one of Grandfather Gates's brothers, Mr. Ed Gates, came out here, and he thought he saw a good place for a flour mill. That's when he wrote his . . . I guess, wrote. I guess they didn't call up over the telephone much in those days, for them to come out here. So Grandfather and Grandmother Gates came out, and they first lived out east of town here, out on one of the roads going down there. The old house was there for a long time. I have seen it, but I think it's been torn down.

The Ed Gateses lived up here on Spring Street, right next to the Minors, and she was Aunt Patty and Uncle Ed. I don't know where they first lived when they came out here. It must have been out in one of those

places, because . . . When was this house built?

BOSSO: Well, the second addition was built in 1867. The kitchen is the oldest part.

WALLACE: Yes, I know it is.

BOSSO: Maybe they lived in another place and then decided to move in there and added on?

WALLACE: Well, part of it was burned off at one time, wasn't it?

BOSSO: Well, that's what we're not real sure about. There are charred boards throughout the house. And then how the house is now was built in 1885.

WALLACE: It was after Mr. Wallace died that Mrs. Wallace and her family moved up there, because they didn't have any money and no way of getting any, really. She had Bess and Frank and George, and Fred was a baby, and so they moved in up here and lived with them. Then afterwards Mother Wallace, of course, took over the management of the house—I mean, technically—and that saved them.

But Grandfather Gates was quite a joker and liked to . . . and the boys took days about fishing down in the back of his chair to get the dimes out, because he'd sit down and spill the dimes out in the chair. [chuckling]
Oh, shoot!

HARRISON: You mentioned about the Gateses using the living room as kind of a sitting room. Would they have that area closed off with drapes or the sliding doors or . . .

WALLACE: Well, is there a place for sliding doors up there? Well, they probably had sliding doors, because, of course, it was . . . The house never was warm until they got the real big heating elements in the basement. I know I've

been cold up there even in . . . See, I was married in 1916, and Grandfather Gates died in what, in . . . ?

BOSSO: I don't know.

WALLACE: Well, anyway, it was after we were married. I believe he died in 1918, because Bess and Harry were going to be married that year, and Harry had to go to war, and then Grandfather Gates died and they put it off. They weren't married, what, 1919?

BOSSO: Yes.

WALLACE: And Grandmother Gates, after he died, she lived there technically, but she visited some of the other . . . She had an unmarried son out in the West, and she always loved Colorado, and she'd go out there some.

HARRISON: When you talk about Mother Wallace managing the house, what . . . ?

WALLACE: Well, I guess she took it over then.

BOSSO: Didn't you say she spoiled the children?

WALLACE: What?

BOSSO: Didn't you say that she used to spoil her children?

WALLACE: Mother Wallace? Oh, yes, she spoiled them. [chuckling] I had to take it out of one of them. [laughter] Yes, she got up at five o'clock in the morning to make their oatmeal because they liked old-fashioned oatmeal, you know. I told her . . . She said something to me about it, and I said, "Well, I don't do [that]. I just cook it in a double boiler and reheat it the next morning, because I don't like to get up at five o'clock." And she said, oh, she just loved to wait on them. And she really did. I think that was her life after her husband died tragically, and she was a recluse, really, but then she just

lived for her children. In some ways, it was a beautiful idea, but it was kind of hard on some of the in-laws because she kept pretty much of a watch on us. [chuckling] Now, I don't mean she did it in any . . . but she just had that feeling that she wanted to know that we were all in here and all safe.

I told you about Mrs. Frank Wallace coming over here one day and telling me she was going to Kansas City, "But," she said, "I'm not going through the yard up here to get the car down there. I'm going to Pleasant Street. I'm not going to do anything I shouldn't, but I don't want Mother Wallace to ask me where I'm going or what I'm going to do." [chuckling] Oh, dear! She was a spunky little soul. There's a good picture of her. I was going to show it to you.

HARRISON: Of Mother Wallace, or Natalie?

WALLACE: Hmm?

BOSSO: Of Natalie, Mrs. Franks Wallace?

WALLACE: Yes, Natalie. She was Natalie, and she was an Ott. The Otts still live out on Marriott and . . . Well, she had a half-brother Albert that lived out there. Her father was married twice. His first marriage was to their mother, Natalie and Julia, and then he married a Bryant—the Bryant family was a very prominent family here—and she had half-sisters.

BOSSO: So Mother Wallace was pretty strong then? She wanted to know where people were?

WALLACE: You mean healthy, that kind of strong? Strong-minded? Yes, she was strong-minded. [chuckling] And she used to wait until they all got in. My George had a good man friend who used to come to town, and they liked to

go downtown and go to see a gaiety picture or something like that. I didn't care, but it kind of worried her, and she'd stay up and wait till he got home because she didn't trust me to get him home. [chuckling] But I won't even say that about her. She was a sweet, good woman, and I think she would have stood on her head for her kids if it would have done any good. But she really was too cloying a person after she didn't have anything else to do, and, of course, Fred was spoiled rotten.

BOSSO: Did she say he could plant trees in the living room if he wanted to?

WALLACE: Oh, yes, and she wouldn't have said anything. [chuckling] He was quite an architect and designer at one time, and that's when a lot of the old . . . when those things were taken out of the living room, which I don't think should have ever been taken—the little do-dabbers like there are in the parlor that go up on each side.

BOSSO: Right, over the fireplace?

WALLACE: Yes, because they belonged to the house. But he wanted to modernize things, so . . .

HARRISON: And Mother Wallace would let him do that?

WALLACE: [chuckling] Oh, if he'd wanted to cut a hole in the front hall and put in a cistern, she would have let him do it. Well, he was the baby, and he was only a couple of years old, I think, when the father died, and so she just . . . And he was a frail, young . . . I remember when he had whooping cough, and that was before they had the serum for whooping cough. She used to have to open the window up there and stick his head out so he could breathe. I mean, whooping cough before the serum was . . . you all don't

remember it, but I had it. Really, the only serious childish disease I ever had was whooping cough, and I had a lulu! But we got raised in spite of it.

Now what?

HARRISON: Did Mother Wallace treat the boys differently than she did Bess?

WALLACE: Oh, no, she depended on Bess. Of course, Bess really took over the housekeeping after her mother . . . Well, Mother Wallace had a severe illness one summer, and that was after Bess was married. She and Harry intended to spend their summer out on the farm that summer, but she became quite ill. It was some back trouble and some kind of a thing that she needed help, so Bess came home that summer and then she never did leave. They came home there to live and, of course, lived in her bedroom upstairs.

BOSSO: Now, is that the blue bedroom right at the top of the steps? It's not the great big one, right?

WALLACE: It's the one on the south as you go up the little steps. And the big front room was . . . I guess that was Mother Wallace's room, and afterwards when she moved downstairs it was a spare bedroom. Bess and Harry had that big room, and then the little room over on the north where a lot of his clothes were, he used for a dressing room, because he got up at five o'clock in the morning and Bess didn't like to get up that early. She liked to have breakfast about eight o'clock. So he would get up and dress, and then he'd walk around and pick up . . . He had a cane with a nail in it, and he'd go around picking up papers in the yard. [chuckling] I told you the story about the little girl over by the church when they were walking there?

BOSSO: Oh, yes, that's a good one. Do you want to tell that?

WALLACE: Yes. He spoke to this little girl over there, and she didn't speak to him. And Mike Westwood, who was the Independence policeman that was allocated to walk with him, and he said to this little girl, he said, "That was Mr., President Truman that you didn't speak to." And she said, "My mama and papa told me not to speak to strange men." [chuckling] And he said, "You'd be just as safe as in the arms of Jesus." [laughter]

Anyway, they walked nearly every morning, walked around. He walked around. He'd talk to people. A woman came to see me—oh, I guess it's been a couple weeks ago—who used to live over here, and her husband was quite a friend of his. She said he used to walk around and her husband would talk to him when he was walking around. I can't remember what her name was, but they lived over on Maple Avenue.

HARRISON: You mentioned Mother Wallace moving downstairs. Did she use that downstairs bedroom then?

WALLACE: Yes, she did. After the Gateses left, then she used it, and then when she was . . . She had a sick spell. What did she have . . . one summer when it was so hot? Oh, I know. She had a lump on her back that they had had an operation on it, and she recuperated from that. But that's before we had any air conditioning. Frank Wallace at that time was working down at the ice plant and in charge of a lot of it, so they brought a big container up and put ice blocks in it to cool off that room. It seems queer to us now, but then it was all they could do.

BOSSO: So Mr. and Mrs. Truman then lived in that one bedroom upstairs then,

right?

WALLACE: Yes, and he had the little room over at the north for a dressing room.

BOSSO: Do you remember, were there always twin beds in there? Was there a double bed, do you remember, anything?

WALLACE: Well, there was a double bed in there when Bess used it as her own room, but I don't know whether there was . . . I can't get a mental picture of whether they were . . . Of course, when Margaret was little they had that opening where they could go around into her bedroom.

HARRISON: When you say Bess used it as her own room, what time would that have been?

BOSSO: Before she was married? Is that what you're saying, when Bess lived there, before she was married?

WALLACE: Oh, yes.

BOSSO: She had a double bed in there?

WALLACE: Yes, because my husband made it. [chuckling] He was quite a carpenter, too. They had manual training at high school and he made her a set of furniture for that room, very, very plain. What do we call that kind of furniture? Anyway, it was just very straight. He made the bed, and it seems to me like there was something else. She used that until . . . I guess, until they were married. Time just sort of meshes together and you can't remember it. But she . . .

BOSSO: Then when Mr. Truman got ill, he moved downstairs to the downstairs bedroom, to the Gateses' bedroom?

WALLACE: Yes, but they both lived upstairs. I mean, he was there when she still lived

upstairs.

BOSSO: Right.

WALLACE: No, they never moved downstairs. Mother Wallace moved into that back bedroom after she was . . . Her last years were spent in that back bedroom. Then they made a bedroom out of that big north room upstairs, where the clock is that I want. If you ever get a chance to steal that clock, why, bring it down to me. [chuckling] It's an old Seth Thomas, real old. Margaret used that room one time for a while.

BOSSO: The big bedroom?

WALLACE: The big bedroom on the . . .

BOSSO: With the fireplace?

WALLACE: Yes. She had a dresser set. Oh, the things I have made for that infant! [chuckling] She wanted a pad for her dressing table, and there was a long bench that you sat on. Well, she wanted it with some kind of blue . . . it wasn't silk, but she wanted it stitched across in a pattern. So Aunt Beufie had to make the pad for this. [chuckling] She used that room quite awhile, when she'd come back. Of course, that was when she was away from here. In fact, she and Clifton really never lived in the house up there.

BOSSO: Right.

WALLACE: Of course, Harry had the den over on this side of the dining room. The parlor never was used, really. They had a television in there at one time. Is there still a television up there?

BOSSO: Yes.

WALLACE: And the picture is still on the piano?

BOSSO: Yes.

WALLACE: [chuckling] Oh!

BOSSO: Do you ever remember going over there and hearing Mr. Truman play the piano?

WALLACE: I have heard him play the piano. [chuckling] Margaret was so disappointed the year they got the piano. He bought the piano because that's what *he* thought [she] would want, and she wanted an electric train. [chuckling]

HARRISON: Do you remember anything about them getting the piano, or it being delivered, or . . . ?

WALLACE: No, but I know they got it for Christmas. I guess they had it . . . No, I don't remember. I know that Harry just loved the piano. Margaret could have been a very good musician if she'd have practiced, but she never would work at it very hard. [chuckling]

I had a letter from her this last . . . well, I guess it's been a week or two ago. She sent me the picture of the girl [to whom] her oldest son Clifton is engaged to be married. She thinks it will be probably next spring, something like that, but she sent me a picture of the . . . real pretty girl, and the announcement the girl's parents had made. Well, he's old. Clifton must be twenty-eight or twenty-nine. He'd have to be, wouldn't he? He was a good-looking kid. Well, he looked like his father. He's more like Clifton Daniel. The second boy is big and blonde, more like the blonde . . . that side of the family. Margaret is illiterate. She can't write. At least she can't write letters. [chuckling] She writes plays and things like that, but she just calls you up, she don't . . . But we all spoiled her, so we have nothing to

say about it.

BOSSO: You were telling me a story—gosh, I don't even remember, this was probably last summer—that you were in Washington, D.C., with Mrs. Truman, and you had gone to the circus?

WALLACE: When what?

BOSSO: You had gone to a circus, you and Mrs. Truman, and there was a clown there? Do you remember that?

WALLACE: Oh, yes, that was in Washington. Yes, the bridge club went to Washington, if you remember. That was one way she entertained for the bridge club was to take us all to the circus. The seats were considered very good, and so they put us down pretty close to the thing. That's when the clown thought he'd be a little bit familiar with Mrs. Truman. [chuckling] He got glared at, and I don't remember whether . . . The Secret Service must have been around handy, so . . . But she put him right back in his place. She could do that, too.

BOSSO: Just with a look, right?

WALLACE: Yes. She was a very sweet, nice person, but she was a very . . . And I've always thought—and this is not for publication, of course—but I've always thought that she was good for Mr. Truman because he was inclined to be . . . well, lenient, I guess, is the word. I think she was a big help to him, really, in all of his . . . I don't think she wanted him to go into politics, but when he did, why, she was there. [chuckling] Is the table still set in the dining room?

BOSSO: Yes, it sure is.

WALLACE: Why don't you have a luncheon someday? [chuckling]

BOSSO: And you can come up and cook it. [laughter]

WALLACE: And I'll come up. I'll come up and make some bran rolls.

BOSSO: Right. Steve needs to change the tape here.

[End #3107; Begin #3108]

WALLACE: . . . because I sometimes forget to put it on, but I do. [chuckling]

BOSSO: Now what was this about the bran muffins?

WALLACE: Well, they were still in the White House and they wrote to her and wanted a recipe. So she wrote to me and asked me if I would write out the recipe for these. One of her favorite recipes was my bran rolls. So I did. Well, they wrote her back and asked her how many it would make. Well, of course, she had no idea. [chuckling] So she wrote them back and told them it depended on what size the pan was. [laughter] I thought that was pretty quick. She never heard any more from them, so I guess they made them.

HARRISON: Was she pretty quick like that?

WALLACE: Oh, yes, she was hair-triggered. But she made scalloped oysters. That was one of her things that she liked to make, and made, and there was something else. Well, there were two things that she . . . She never liked to cook. She did it when she had to, but they nearly always had help. Let's see, there were oysters and something else that she liked that she specialized in. And Mother Wallace never did . . . She was raised in an era when they had . . . well, mostly black help.

And Vietta, you know, was the one that Margaret called "Pete."
We never knew why. [chuckling] Her name was Vietta Garr, and Margaret

was a little thing and she called her Pete. I guess she couldn't say Vietta, very probably. And [she] died very tragically. Did you ever hear the tale about what happened to Vietta? She got up back of the gas stove to do something on the wall, and there was a burner lit on the stove and her clothes caught fire, and she ran out in the yard instead of rolling up in a . . . What do you do, in a carpet or something?

BOSSO: In a blanket, yes.

WALLACE: And she burned so badly that she died in a hospital. But she worked for them for a long time.

HARRISON: Did Mother Wallace have help to cook?

WALLACE: Oh, yes.

HARRISON: What kind of people, how many, or . . . ?

WALLACE: Well, they always had help, as far as if she could get anybody. In those days, there was quite a Negro development over here a little bit north and east of here, and you could nearly always . . . They could come up the alley here. Vietta, I think, lived over in there. No, Mother Wallace didn't cook unless it was . . . She got breakfast. She made the oatmeal that she got up at five o'clock and made. But Bess didn't like to cook.

BOSSO: So they would have servants then come for lunch and dinner?

WALLACE: Well, as I remember it, the lunch proposition didn't amount to too much. Mother Wallace got up early in the morning and made breakfast. Then, I guess, the help came about ten or eleven o'clock.

BOSSO: But no one ever stayed at the house?

WALLACE: No, they didn't have any place for colored help. They did have . . . it seems

to me like there was a place down in the basement. A Negro man that worked, the Reverend . . .

BOSSO: Reverend Hobby?

WALLACE: Reverend Hobby. [chuckling] I know they put in some of these washing things down there and a toilet so that they could go in and out of that . . . where we ate breakfast on my birthday. [chuckling] But she nearly always had . . . Well, they all did. My mother did, they all had . . . And my grandmother was just . . . she was just sunk if the help didn't come, because they just weren't raised to do that. See, I was raised in a house that didn't have any conveniences, you might call them. The Chic Sale¹ was out in the backyard, and we didn't have water. Finally, they got a sink and some water in the kitchen. But just imagine! Just imagine that, and my poor mother with two baby girls having to . . .

BOSSO: At your birthday party, I guess a couple of years ago, you were talking about the church and how the Wallaces were Presbyterian and . . .

WALLACE: Mother Wallace got mad at the preacher.

BOSSO: So they were Presbyterian then, right?

WALLACE: Yes, they were. They never did change from being . . . Grandmother and Grandfather Gates never did. But Mother Wallace . . . The church, as they often do in Protestant churches, this old man got . . . well, he just got past his prime, and they let him go. Well, Mother Wallace took it upon herself to be mad because she was crazy about him, and she didn't think . . . So then she quit going to church. Then Frank, the one in the pictures, got

¹ Chic Sale – see definition from RH dictionary

interested in a young minister over at the Episcopal church and got to going over there, and then my husband, so then eventually they all got over to the Episcopal church. But they were originally . . . The family tradition was Presbyterian, and I think there's still some mementoes and things of the Gateses over in the parlor over there at the Presbyterian church.

BOSSO: So they were very involved in the Presbyterian church then, right?

WALLACE: In the Presbyterian church, yes. Mother Wallace was a sweet, good woman, and I was very fond of her, but she was very positive—I guess is the word—when she wanted, when she thought something was . . . Well, see, old Dr. Madiera, well, now, he was the old man that she thought . . . And he had just lived his usefulness out, you know, and they let him go. Then they got over to the Episcopal church, and, of course, that's all Margaret knew.

BOSSO: And that's where the Trumans were married, right?

WALLACE: Yes, they were married over there, with the hollyhocks in the back, in the jars, the umbrella jars that we put the hollyhocks in.

HARRISON: You referred to Mother Wallace as a recluse?

WALLACE: Well, she got to be, yes. You see, Mr. Wallace's death . . . a suicide in those days was kind of . . . well, it was just a little bit on the disgraceful side, you know. I think she just kind of went in a hole and pulled the hole in after her, because she was . . . and then their children were young, and Fred was a baby. But Mr. Wallace my father knew very well, and he always thought that my husband George was more like his father than he was more like the Gateses. Frank was a Gates, there's no doubt about that.

Pop was very fond of Mr. Wallace, but Mrs. Wallace, Mother Wallace, had been raised in a very wealthy family. She had always had everything she wanted, and, of course, when she married, Mr. Wallace was just a clerk in the courthouse up here. But he wanted to give her everything that she wanted, as husbands, nice husbands do, and he over . . . I don't mean he took anything, but he just got so deeply in debt that he couldn't get out of it. So he shot himself. You know, I think, and maybe I'm crazy, but I've got a right to think what I want to, I think that affected my husband's nervous condition, because he went in and found . . . He heard the shot and went in and found his father there. That must have been quite . . . He was only nine, ten, eleven years old, and, you know, that would be pretty grim. That was before all the wars that everybody got to hauling dead people around, and they just . . .

BOSSO: Especially he being so young.

WALLACE: Yes. My father always thought George was more like his father than he was like the Gateses, that he thought he was more social. The Gateses were very . . . well, they were what you would say "exclusive." [chuckling] Frank Wallace was a . . . I was very fond of him, but I never felt close to him because he was a . . . he was a Gates.

HARRISON: How do you think Mrs. Truman fit in? Was she a Gates or a Wallace?

WALLACE: She was a kind of a mixture. [laughter] Yes, she could be, she could be just as . . . I think I told Lisa about the time we were in Washington. Well, that was at the thing.

BOSSO: The circus.

WALLACE: It was at a period of time when seersucker, the material, was quite in style, and she had a nice seersucker suit. We were downtown in Washington doing something, and we were in an elevator. I heard a woman behind me say, "That's Mrs. Truman." And the other woman said, "Seersucker!" [chuckling] So disgusted that the first lady would have on seersucker. She thought she ought to have point lace and diamonds, I guess. But Bess got a big kick out of it. Bess had a keen sense of humor, and especially when anything was like that. But we had some mighty good . . . We spent some Christmases in the White House, too. That's quite a . . .

BOSSO: I'll bet that was something fancy!

WALLACE: That big tree down on the . . . oh, what is it? I can't get my direct . . . Speaking of something different, did you watch the Christmas television that they had?

BOSSO: No.

WALLACE: Oh, that was a beautiful program! The Reagans at the White House, they showed at the White House, and they entertained these children and Pat Boone, and it was just a beautiful program.

BOSSO: Was that just recently?

WALLACE: Just this last . . .

BOSSO: Last night?

WALLACE: It was around Thanksgiving, I guess. No, it was after Thanksgiving because I wasn't here. It hasn't been too long. But she entertained a whole lot of foreign children and schoolchildren. Then, right at the end, she took them in to give them something to eat. But she's a sweet, nice person. I

think Mrs. Reagan is just a darling. But that took me back to the White House.

BOSSO: Thinking when you were there, right? [chuckling]

WALLACE: Yes. Well, there's a picture someplace, a picture of us all at the table in the dining room there at the White House eating.

BOSSO: Would you take gifts up there and then exchange gifts up at the White House in Washington?

WALLACE: Lady, if you had seen that living room on Christmas morning, you'd have thought a hurricane had taken care of it. [chuckling] Yes, we each had a chair. We all had to come up there at a certain time in the morning. We had taken our presents up, and we each had a chair, and then we would open them in sequence, you know. The room got full of tissue paper. Vietta had to pretty near bring a broom to get through there. [chuckling] Yes, they had several Christmases, and then we had several Christmases in the White House, and that's quite a deal, too. We had to go on the train in those days, and then they would meet us over wherever the train used to go into Washington. We were changing in Saint Louis. We had to go down on the C & A to Saint Louis, and then get onto the B & O or whatever it is that goes to Washington. We heard a man behind us say, "That's some of the Truman kinfolks. They're going to Washington." [laughter]

HARRISON: The story about the Christmas gifts and everybody passing them around in a circle, that was here at the Truman home or that was in Washington? The story you just told us about the room filling up with Christmas stuff?

WALLACE: Oh, that was here.

BOSSO: So that was right up at the house?

WALLACE: Right here up in the big living room.

HARRISON: Who was usually at the Christmases here at the Truman home?

WALLACE: Well, just family. But you see, there was Frank and Natalie, and George and me, and Fred, and Harry and Bess and Margaret, and Vietta. [chuckling] There was quite a roomful of us.

HARRISON: Can you recall any of the decorations or anything they had in the house, or any of the other . . .

WALLACE: Oh, yes, they had a Christmas tree. It was over on that end where the big . . . oh, that thing that goes . . .

BOSSO: The grate?

HARRISON: The register?

WALLACE: The cold air shaft I'm trying to say. There's a big, metal, cold air shaft over there. Well, that's what they fastened the Christmas tree to. Margaret had to have one that touched the ceiling, and that's a nine-foot ceiling, I guess, isn't it? It must be something like that. So there may be out here someplace a big spread thing that he made to put the Christmas tree on. Then Frank and Natalie, and I guess there must have been some more people around, anyway, they sat and bossed while George and Bess and I trimmed the Christmas tree. [chuckling] And then it would show. Then they'd open the front draperies and let the . . . People would go by, and they could see it from the street.

HARRISON: Would you decorate the tree at the same time each year?

WALLACE: Oh, yes. Well, yes, I don't remember the . . . but not too far before

Christmas, and then we'd go and take all our packages and put them . . .

On Christmas morning the paper was just like that. [chuckling]

HARRISON: Did you ever decorate on Christmas Eve or . . . ?

WALLACE: I guess we did our decorating on Christmas Eve, because we all had to be up there early because Margaret was young enough so that she'd get up and have . . . She knew Santa Claus hadn't been there, but she had to go get up and see what was going on, have her presents. She was sick. Margaret was a frail child until she was, oh, nineteen or twenty. She was a spindly-legged little thing, and she got up . . . The year she wanted an electric train and got that piano, [chuckling] that was almost a tragedy, too. But we all took our presents up the night before, and then we opened them the next day. "Oh, isn't this pretty! Open it! What did you get?" [chuckling] Oh, shoot!

HARRISON: And then, after that, how would the rest of Christmas Day be spent?

WALLACE: The rest of Christmas Day? Well, we had Christmas dinner up there. I know I had to trade some way. My family had Christmas dinner, too, and they thought I ought to be there, too. I don't know what we did, whether we had it . . . whether I alternated and if I had Thanksgiving dinner with one and Christmas with the other or something, but they had the big dining room, and they had a big old table in those days. I don't remember Grandfather and Grandmother Gates in the Christmas melee, but they must have been there because they lived several years after I . . . Let's see, I was married in 1916 and they didn't . . . he didn't die till . . . Well, he died in 1918. It wasn't too long.

BOSSO: When the Trumans came back from Washington after they had retired,

would you still have Christmas up there?

WALLACE: Oh, yes.

BOSSO: Would they decorate? Would they get the tree touching the ceiling?

WALLACE: Yes. Oh, Margaret always had a tree.

BOSSO: Even when she was married and away from home?

WALLACE: Well, I don't remember them being . . . I don't associate Clifton with the Christmases. Well, we all went to New York when . . . Well, it was when one of her babies was a baby—well, maybe the first one. My husband died in 1963, didn't he, in the spring, and that Christmas Bess and Harry took me to New York with them on the special train. I got to ride on the special train! We had Christmas with Margaret that year, and she didn't have room for all of us, so we stayed in a . . . well, you'd probably know the name of the place, but it was a real nice place right near them. Then I helped Margaret and I helped Clifton decorate the tree, and we had dinner at Margaret's.

I don't know how long we stayed there, several days, because Bess and I went over to New York. I had never been in New York at that time, and she wanted me to see some of the sights. Bess Truman was a very, very thoughtful person. She was just as kind as she could be, and as I said before, she wasn't sloppy kind, she could be just the other way. [chuckling] But we had a good time that winter.

Let's see, I'm trying to think of somebody that I wanted to meet, some celebrity. I was kind of a celebrity hound, and she took me . . . It was some man that was staying at the Waldorf-Astoria, and she said, "Well,

I'm going over . . ." I guess it was somebody who had been in the White House or something, and I can't think who it was. Anyway, she took me over, and I got to shake hands with him.

BOSSO: And you've never washed your hands since.

WALLACE: No, I haven't washed them since. [chuckling] Then we went to some of the galleries and all in New York. That's the only time I was ever . . . I've been through New York many times, but not . . . Then one year, when I went through there going on some trip and we had to change in New York, Margaret and her family were out, they used to go out in the summertime they went out to one of those resorts up there when the boys were wanting to swim and do things like that, so I called her up and talked to her over the telephone. But what a time! So I've had a pretty interesting life myself.

BOSSO: I'd say so. Didn't you all used to have a dog?

WALLACE: [chuckling] Spot! Spot's the one that got the hairs on Harry's good suit. [chuckling] And sitting right over there. There was a chair that Spot always sat in. Harry came down one night with his good dark blue suit on. Before we could stop him, he sat down in Spot's chair. Well, I didn't say anything more then. There wasn't anything I could do about it. But when he got up and left, it just looked like he'd just been pasted with this . . . The dog was a black and white, mostly white dog. So I always figured that the air was pretty blue up there when he got home and took off his suit. [chuckling] Harry was a very meticulous dresser. He liked good clothes, and he . . . Of course, in Washington he had a valet.

One time when we were there at Christmas time and we were going

to have . . . I guess just with Margaret and this Jane . . . Jane, what was Jane's other . . . her best friend there in Washington at that time. They were going to have a big dance at the White House in the big room, and they came down. It was so pretty. They came down the steps. There was a long stairway that came down and emptied into the lobby there of the White House. Jane . . . Lingo, that was her name. Lingo? That's not right. Jane . . . Well, anyway, she was real dark, and she had on a red dress. And Margaret, of course, was a blonde, and I've forgotten what her dress was, but they came down the steps, these long steps together to come down in there and it was so pretty.

Then they had the dance. So my husband was alive at that time, and I said, "Now, George . . ." He didn't like to dance, and I did, and I said, "We're going in there and take a few steps so I can say I've danced in the White House, whether you want to or not." [chuckling] So we did. We danced around a little. But that was a nice Christmas.

BOSSO: Did you get to dance with Mr. Truman?

WALLACE: No, he never would dance.

BOSSO: He didn't like to dance?

WALLACE: No. [chuckling] He liked to play poker. No, I guess he really was raised . . . Of course, Harry was raised on the farm, and Harry had worked all of his life, and I don't think he had ever . . . Bess was a nice dancer, she had taken dancing lessons, but I never saw Harry dance. Maybe Margaret could have dragged him out on the floor, but nobody else could have. But that was a nice Christmas that we spent.

HARRISON: Did you ever see President Truman playing poker?

WALLACE: [chuckling] No. He wouldn't even play cards with us. We used to play. Bess and my husband and . . . Bess and Natalie and May and George, [chuckling]we used to play cards up on the back porch there at night. Frank Wallace didn't care anything about it, but my husband was a real good bridge player, so we used to play bridge up there.

HARRISON: Would President Truman be sitting out there reading or anything, or would he be inside?

WALLACE: Yes, he had him a good light out there. If he could have a book . . . He's just like my sister. If he could have a book and a good light, he didn't care what went on. [chuckling] But he always had something to read. Of course, they fixed a telephone . . . They had a telephone so they could move it out there. Is there still a . . . out there?

BOSSO: There's a little connection, yes.

WALLACE: But, see, that was all built on. The original house, they just had that funny little porch that went all the way around. They didn't have that big porch that's built on the back. I can't remember, when was that porch built?

BOSSO: In the early fifties, wasn't it? I think it was like . . .

WALLACE: After the Trumans . . . ?

BOSSO: It was around the same time when all the . . . Well, they got the idea from putting the porches on the White House.

WALLACE: Yes.

BOSSO: Because he liked the porches. I think it was shortly thereafter is when it was added.

WALLACE: Well, they used to have . . . It was just a funny little narrow porch across the front, and they did have chairs out there sometimes, but when you've got a chair out there, there wasn't much room for anybody else. [chuckling] But that big living porch has just been a . . . I can see Harry now. He had a good light out there, and he'd sit out there and read. They'd sit out there and read. Both were avid readers, which was a good thing, because you might wanted to fuss if your husband was reading and you wanted him to do something else. [chuckling]

BOSSO: Well, we've got a tape change . . .

END OF INTERVIEW