Chapter 5

The Grandview Farm
1917 – 1940

Introduction

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The Grandview Farm, 1917-1940
Part 1, Chapter 5

Introduction

After Harry S Truman left the farm in 1917 to serve in the First World War, Mary Jane and her mother, Martha Truman, continued farming with the help of friends, neighbors, and a hired man. When Harry returned from France, he decided to leave the farm permanently. He divested himself of his interest in the farm. Farm animals and implements were sold at auction. Mary Jane intensified her involvement in both the Baptist Church and Eastern Star, as well as continuing to care for Martha. Harry opened a clothing store in Kansas City, and Vivian Truman, Harry and Mary Jane's brother, worked the acreage around the farmhouse. Later, Vivian's sons would take over the farm.

In 1940 the farm was seized in a mortgage foreclosure; Mary Jane and Martha moved to Grandview, and a renter moved into the farmhouse. Vivian and two of his sons continued to farm the land around the farmhouse.

The chapter focuses on the farm between 1917 and 1940, provides some insight regarding Mary Jane and Martha, and then follows the two women into Grandview after the foreclosure.

The Grandview Farm During World War I

When Harry went to war, Mary Jane stayed behind with their mother and ran the farm. Although neighbors helped when they could with the Truman farm, Mary Jane and Martha Truman were usually on their own. Vivian was running his own farm, and most of the young men were in the army, leaving older men and boys who were unable to provide much help.[178]

They did have one hired man and his wife living on the farm. And during unusually busy times, they would hire additional temporary help. They raised large crops of wheat, oats, and corn on a portion of the 600 acres they worked. Two hundred acres was in pasture. As later related by Mary Jane:

> When Harry went to the Army, I took over the farm. We raised wheat, corn, Hampshire hogs and cattle. I had to manage the place, hire the help, buy supplies and arrange for the sale of the products.[179]

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[178] Mary Jane Truman, interview by Jerald L. Hill and William D. Stilley, 2 January 1976, transcript of taped interview, Harry S. Truman Library.
[179] C. A. Johnson, "Truman Sister, Brother: One Politician in Family Enough," *Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, 12 October 1947.

Mary Jane recalled the years she spent with her mother on the farm as good years. They enjoyed each other's company. According to Mary Jane, Martha (who was generally referred to as Mamma or Mamma Truman) never seemed like an old lady. She remained clear-minded right up to the time of her death. "Sensible is the word for Mamma," Mary Jane concluded.[180] Mary Jane reported that her mother described herself as a "light-foot Baptist," meaning that she was a Baptist who enjoyed dancing. Mary Jane also recalled that one of her mother's favorite sayings when describing to a person how best to live life, was, "Just belong to the key of B-natural." And, her favorite Bible text was Matthew 7:1 and 2: "Judge not, that ye be not judged.[181]

Holidays were times for guests around the table. Mamma Truman always sat at the west end of the one-leaf, square, dining room table that normally had a plain, white, oil cloth tacked to the top. On special occasions, Mary Jane would use the linen table cloth. Mamma Truman always used her old bone-handled knife and kept an aluminum coffeepot next to her table setting.

"Never drink more than one cup," she claimed. But, the frequent "warm-ups" were hard to miss. Milk or cream for the coffee came from the cellar where it was stored in large crocks that sat on the cellar's stone floor along with jars of vegetables. Across the dining room, against the north wall sat a roll-top desk. Mary Jane used it, and before her, her older brother, Harry Truman, had used it to keep farm records and write letters to Bess Wallace, his future wife. A bird dog picture hung on the south wall of the dining room. A small, oval, wood stove stood in front of a little closet under the stairway. There was no door connecting the dining room to the sitting room. Mary Jane and her mother accessed both rooms from the hall.[182]

The kitchen was immediately east of the dining room.[183] As one entered the kitchen, there was a cabinet immediately to the left with three drawers on one side and a large tilt-out flour drawer on the other side, with a flat preparation surface on top. Immediately to the right of the door was a wood stove with a warming oven on top. In the summer, Mary Jane and Mamma

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[180] Ibid., 3.
[181] Doris Faber, Typescript notes of interview of Mary Jane Truman, July 1967. Family Correspondence File: Mary Jane Truman, Harry S. Truman Library.
[182] Years later, in the late 1940s Vivian Truman's son, Harry Arnold Truman would live in the house with his wife. He would construct a doorway connecting the dining room with the sitting room.
[183] It should be noted, that what is today (2000) being used as the dining room was the kitchen, and what is now the sitting room served as the dining room on formal occasions. However, today's arrangement is as it was when Mary Jane and Martha lived there in the 1920s. In the 1930s, the room on the east end of the house, presently serving as the kitchen, was added. See Niel M. Johnson, Memo for the File, Re Esther Grube telephone interview, August 1, 1983, Harry S. Truman Library.

Truman would bring a coal oil cooking stove into the kitchen. It would be too hot to cook on the wood cook stove. (See Appendix C for the floor plan of the farmhouse during this period that is based upon a description by Harry S Truman in 1950.)

In the winter, Mary Jane and Mamma Truman used a small, round coal oil heater that stood about three feet high, which they carried upstairs into Mary Jane's bedroom on the north side of the house at night to "take the chill off." Mary Jane's bedroom was immediately above the sitting room. There was a register in the floor of her bedroom that allowed heat from the sitting room to rise into her bedroom. Mary Jane had a small oak wash stand in her bedroom, as well as a walnut dresser, a small dressing table with triple mirrors, and a vanity seat. A small picture of a hunting scene hung on the wall. It had horses, dogs, and riders in red coats.

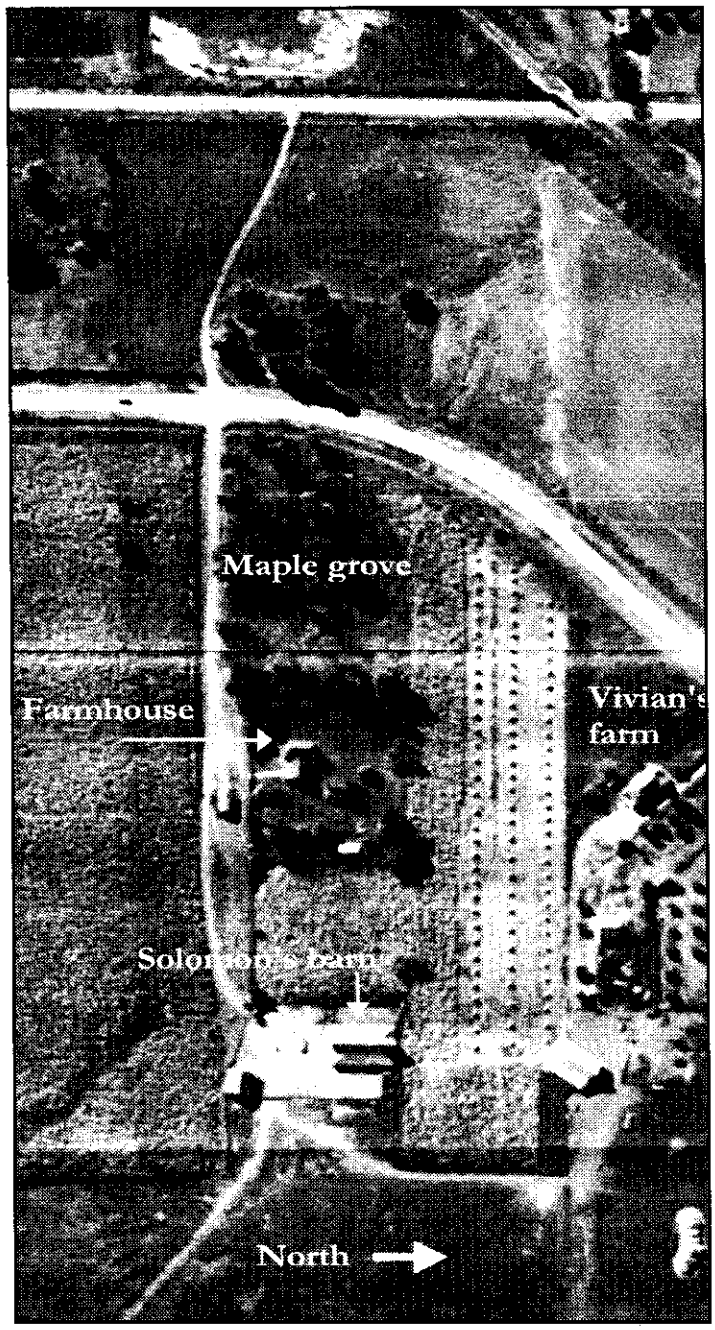
The upstairs hall separating Mary Jane and Margaret Truman's bedrooms contained a blanket chest along the wall near the west window, and a sewing machine positioned next to the stairway rail. Mamma Truman's south-side bedroom remained unheated. The head of her feather bed was against the south wall. On the west side of the bed was a thirty-inch-square end table with spindle legs and a lower shelf. A coal oil lamp rested on the end table. Occasionally, to entertain visiting children, Mamma Truman would use the lighted lamp to cast animal-figure shadows against the east wall of her bedroom. Her dresser of solid walnut with burl inlay, was against the north wall.

Downstairs, the hall separating the sitting room from the parlor was furnished with an oak chest of drawers in the corner under the stair landing. A black, heavy metal clock rested on it. A marble-topped hall tree was also in the hall. It had a large mirror and brass coat hooks on the frame around the mirror.

In the sitting room were two rocking chairs, an oak library table, and a wicker sofa. Mamma Truman would sit in the larger rocking chair and read. Both rocking chairs had wicker seats and backs that were covered with cushions. The library table, positioned against the east wall, was a long table with a central drawer in the middle and a shelf beneath. At one time there was a leather sofa in the sitting room. One day, Mamma Truman decided to take it upstairs. It became stuck while she was trying to navigate the back stairs. She sawed off the legs and nailed them back on once she had it upstairs.

The piano was across the hall from the sitting room in the parlor, where the glass-fronted bookcase was kept as well. Unless they had company, the parlor was not heated. [184]

[184] Martha Ann Swoyer, interview by Niel M. Johnson, 28 October 1983, transcript of taped interview, Harry S. Truman Library.



Young-Truman Farm c. 1944. United States Soil Conservation Service

Outside, Mary Jane kept the trellises that covered both the south side and front (west) gates covered with roses in season. Mamma Truman planted nasturtiums and cocks comb around the edge of the foundation. Northeast of the house was a wooden gate leading into the chicken yard. Near the gate Mamma Truman kept a large asparagus bed.[185]

After Harry returned from serving in France during World War I, he had no interest in farming. Harry had marriage plans and wanted to open a clothing store in Kansas City. Mary Jane was reluctant to continue running the farm without Harry's assistance. The decision was made to discontinue the farming operation. Although Martha Ellen Truman's interest in the farm would seem to have been great since she owned more than 62 percent of the land (375 acres; her three children owned seventy-five acres each), her position on Harry's decision to discontinue farming is unclear. On one hand, she may have been reluctant to stop an activity that had supported her family for decades. On the other hand, she never seemed personally enamored with farm life. She stayed away from the fields and the barns, and even during the busy threshing season she left the cooking for the farm help to Harry and Mary Jane. Furthermore, Martha may have believed that discontinuing the family farming operation would relieve some of her indebtedness and was a wise long-term financial decision. She may have been aware that the profitable years of farming were waning after World War I and that the income from farm production and the value of farm land was slowly declining. The money made from the sale of farm machinery and animals may have seemed especially attractive as well as the prospect of receiving regular income from tenant farmers. Finally, Martha had always supported Harry financially in his various business ventures; the income from a farm auction would allow her to do this again. And, Martha may have reasoned, there was no one else in the family to carry on with the farm operation. Her father, mother, and Uncle Harrison had all died, and Vivian's farming interests were elsewhere.[186]

With all these considerations in mind, the Trumans placed an advertisement in the September 18, 1919, *Belton Herald*, announcing that they were going to auction:

eighteen head of horses and mules
five mares
three work horses
two suckling colts

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[185] Martha Ann Swoyer, interview, 28 October 1983. Note: Most of the information in this chapter describing the house layout and contents were derived from a careful reading of the Swoyer interview.
[186] Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: His Life on the Family Farms*, 22, 95-103. McCullough, *Truman*, 100-101.

two nine-year-old horse mules
one saddle stallion, Kentucky bred
one blind horse
two yearling colts
one two-year-old gelding
one mare mule, 4 years old
231 hogs
230 stock hogs
one Hampshire boar
twenty-three head of cows and calves
four thoroughbred shorthorn cows
three milk cows, and
sixteen steers and heifers

The September 22, 1919 *Independence Examiner* ran the following story:

> Captain Harry Truman has decided to quit the farming game for the present. With his mother and sister he owns 600 acres of land one mile north of Grandview and they have leased the land in several tracts. Tomorrow they will hold an all day auction sale of the farm property, hogs, horses, cattle and farming implements.[187]

They auctioned off the farm equipment, and Mary Jane bought a Dodge coupe, which she drove for over ten years. Later, she drove a series of Nashes. The car, and the release from farm chores liberated her, and she immersed herself in social activities she had only been able to sample before.

Mary Jane was very active in the local Baptist church. She was an accomplished pianist, and played for the Grandview Baptist church for thirty years. She also taught Sunday School, first for young boys, then classes of young girls, and finally for young adults. She frequently had picnics for her Sunday School classes at the farm.

Mary Jane was also active in the Eastern Star.[188] She joined in 1913 and was installed as Matron of the Grandview lodge in 1917. In 1951 she was named Worthy Grand Matron of the State of Missouri. Following her installation, approximately 750 people attended a reception held in her honor at the Ruskin High School. Eastern Star took her out of Missouri as well. She was an honorary member of lodges in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Montana, Wyoming, Kentucky, and Nebraska, all of

[187] *Independence Examiner*, 22 September 1922.
[188] The Eastern Star is an organization of women which focuses on the moral and ethical development of the individual member through adherence to certain social and religious principles. The Eastern Star is closely associated with the Masons.

which she visited.[189] Years later, on March 14, 1996, Viola Zumault, a friend of Mary Jane's and a member of Eastern Star who attended meetings with Mary Jane, was interviewed. During the interview, Zumault recalled:

> It [Eastern Star] was her life. She lived it. That's what it meant to her. Mary Jane was never married. You know that. She devoted her life to Eastern Star and to her mother. But she loved everything about it. She loved the work and the thing that it represented. That's what it meant to Mary Jane. She was just a symbol to others of a loving person who did the right thing and lived a good life.[190]

Although Mary Jane never married, Roy Romine, a relative who visited her on the farm in the 1930s, recalled that she had several boyfriends:

> She had a fair share of suitors. Now don't ask me who they were because I don't remember, but one of them gave her a black chow. . . . And none of them cut the mustard. As we mentioned yesterday, everybody overlooks the part that Mary Jane played in Harry's success, in that she gave up everything and took care of Mamma [Mamma Truman]. Outside of her work in the Eastern Star, Mary Jane devoted her life to her mother.[191]

Vivian and Luella Truman Family

In the 1920s, Vivian Truman purchased a portion of the old Young farmstead adjacent to the land occupied by the farmhouse. In 1930, he built a house, a barn, and several outbuildings. He continued to farm the land until his sons Harry and Gilbert permanently took over the operation. Harry A. Truman was born on September 18, 1923. He graduated from Ruskin High School in 1941 and married Dorothy Barr on June 1, 1946. Gilbert, the younger brother, was born on June 27, 1926. He also graduated from Ruskin High School (In 1944). On November 30, 1946, he married Pauline Reynolds.[192]

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[189] Mary Jane Truman, interview by Stephen and Cathy Doyal and Fred and Audrey Truman, 1975, transcript of taped interview, 69, Harry S. Truman Library.
[190] Viola Zumault, interviewed by Jon E. Taylor, 14 March 1996, transcript of taped interview, 28, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.
[191] Roy and Carol Romine, interview by Jon Taylor, 11 September 1997, transcript of taped interview, 23, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.
[192] Tom Quickel, "The Truman Brothers of Grandview Lifelong Partners," *Jackson County Democrat*, 14 April 1950.

In 1931 another of Vivian's sons, John C. Truman, assumed management of the 600 acres Vivian had been working adjacent to the Young-Truman farmhouse. John had been attending Central Missouri State Teachers College in Warrensburg, Missouri; however, when Vivian's business started keeping him away from the farm, John came home. Although John continued his course work as much as possible, he committed himself primarily to the farm. In fact, he was unable to take any classes in 1933 and 1934. When John ran the farm, it consisted of approximately 300 acres in cultivation and 300 acres in pasture. Each year it produced 250 to 300 hogs, twenty to thirty beef cattle, and fifty to seventy dairy calves. They sold the dairy calves to local dairies when the calves came into milk production.

John completed all his undergraduate coursework and was graduated with a bachelor of science degree and a teacher's certificate in late 1936. He attended summer school at the University of Missouri from 1938 to 1941 and on April 20, 1944, enlisted in the navy. After attending Quartermaster School from July to October of 1944, he was assigned to the *U. S. S. Missouri* as a seaman second class in November of that year. John was aboard the *Missouri* when Japan surrendered. John was honorably discharged on October 23, 1945, with a rank of seaman first class.[193] John became the clerk of the United States district court for the Western District of Missouri.

Vivian's son, Harry, enlisted in the army in 1942. When he returned to Missouri after his enlistment in 1948, he, rented the farmhouse from Truman and Vivian, and moved in 1948 with his wife, Dorothy Barr. For the first year, there was no water piped into the house and they carried water in buckets. They used an outhouse that was near the gate east of the house. A year after they moved in, city water was piped into the house and a bathroom was installed off the hallway downstairs.[194]

In the late 1940s and first half of the 1950s, Vivian's sons, Harry and Gilbert Truman, farmed 640 acres that included the land immediately adjacent to the Grandview farmhouse. The brothers had 320 acres in cultivation and 320 acres in pasture for 140 head of calves, heifers and Holstein cows. Inside their milking barn, they had running water from the Grandview city system, a hot water heater, and a milk cooler. They used a vacuum milking system for their thirty-three-cow dairy herd. The machine could accommodate three cows at a time. They also

[193] Application for federal employment, John C. Truman, June 25, 1947, Harry S. Truman Library.
[194] Gilbert and Harry Truman, interview by Jon Taylor, 20 September, 1996, transcript of typed interview, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

maintained a herd of twenty-eight nurse-cows. Each nurse-cow would raise from four to twelve calves a year.

The brothers put up an average of over 200 tons of hay each year. They ground and mixed their own hay and small grain to be used as feed for both their dairy herd and their hogs. They had no hired help. Both were up by 4:30 a.m. and worked until dark six days each week.

Harry and Gilbert continued to farm the acreage until large portions were sold by the Trumans to be transformed into commercial use. In 1955 the brothers moved to Louisburg, Kansas, where they continued farming.[195]

John Vivian Truman died on July 8, 1965, at the age of 79. He was survived by his wife, Luella; four sons, Harry, Fred, J.C., and Gilbert; a daughter, Mrs. Martha Ann Swoyer; a sister, Mary Jane Truman; seven grandchildren; a great-granddaughter, and his brother, Harry S Truman.[196] He was a charter member of the Grandview lodge of the Masons, and was Grand Master of that lodge in 1920.[197] He was also active in the church. Prior to the construction of the shopping center known as Truman Corners, Vivian Truman's house was moved into Grandview.[198]

Mary Jane and Martha Truman, and the Family Farm 1940 - 1947

For Mary Jane and her mother, 1940 was a profoundly fateful year. They were forced to move off their farm where Mary Jane had spent most of her life, and where her eighty-seven-year-old mother had hoped to die in peace. A mortgage, which was then held by Jackson County, was foreclosed. The origins of the indebtedness that forced Mary Jane and her mother into a small house in Grandview arose from the family fight over Harriet Young's estate.

The initial mortgage had been made in 1909 to pay legal fees arising from litigation between the Trumans and Harrison Young on one side, and the rest of the Young children on the other. The descendants of Harriet Young were fighting about her will, which provided that all her assets were to go to her son, Harrison, and her daughter Martha Ellen, Harry Truman's mother. Grandmother Young gave the rest of her children $5 each. The other children sued to have the will declared invalid.

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[195] Maxine Williams, interviewed by Niel M. Johnson, 17 May 1983, transcript of typed interview, Harry S. Truman Library.
[196] *New York Telegram*, 8 July 1965.
[197] *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March 1978.
[198] Ibid., 55.

The case went to trial before a judge alone without a jury, and what must have been painful testimony of family members against family members was elicited. The other children alleged that Grandmother Young, who died at the age of ninety-one, was mentally incompetent at the time she made the will at age seventy-seven. The court ordered that the Trumans and Harrison would retain the farm; however, the final outcome resulted in each of the other children receiving $9,500. This liability, added to the $3,000 of attorney's fees paid to Fred J. Boxley of Kansas City, necessitated that Harrison and the Trumans borrow money and convey a mortgage as collateral for the loan. They borrowed $7,500.

When Harry Truman's uncle, Harrison Young, died, he left his half of the farm, about three hundred acres, to Harry's mother, Martha Ellen Truman, and her three children. In February of 1917, Martha Ellen Truman increased the home farm mortgage to $25,000.

The mortgage encumbrances against the farm were not well received by everyone in the family. According to Gaylon Babcok, who knew Truman, Vivian, and Mary Jane Truman well, on several occasions Vivian voiced the strong opinion that not all the money borrowed had been absolutely essential.[199]

Although legal costs necessitated by litigating the validity of Harriet's will certainly exacerbated the Truman's financial woes, farm indebtedness was becoming a common business practice in America. Large farms that would later become even more successful used debt to leverage increased production.

In the meantime, the Trumans had paid interest only on their note. In 1938 they consolidated their indebtedness into a new note of $35,000 that was secured by the farm mortgage. To add to the growing problem, the family had sold off more than half the land in the preceding years, and only 287 acres of the farm was left. The farm at that time was trying to sustain two separate families: Harry Truman's brother, Vivian, Vivian's wife, and their five children, and Mother Truman, and Harry Truman's sister, Mary Jane. Because farm income wasn't enough, they sold parcels. And Harry Truman couldn't help. He closed the haberdashery in 1922 with a loss of $30,000. His partner, Eddie Jacobson, was unable to help with the haberdashery debt, and filed for bankruptcy protection in 1925. Harry Truman finally paid off the haberdashery debt in 1935 by buying back the final note at a sheriff's sale at a substantial discount. Unfortunately, the year before, he had incurred new debt to finance his campaign for the Senate, and again in 1940 when he campaigned for reelection.

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[199] Gaylon Babcock, interview by James Ruchs, 12 February, 1964, transcript of taped interview Harry S. Truman Library.

In 1938, the holder of the note secured by the mortgage asked the Trumans to find other financing. They turned to the county school board, which was empowered to invest surplus funds in real estate loans. The school board granted the loan in April of 1938. The note was to be repaid by the end of the year at 6 percent interest. An unofficial appraisal of the farm that year calculated its value at $22,680. By December 31, 1938, the Trumans were in default. Negotiations were protracted, lasting one and one-half years. Finally, on July 16, 1940, the mortgage was foreclosed by the county court. Truman's sister and his eighty-seven-year-old mother moved to a house in Grandview. Between 1940 and 1945 the farmhouse was rented out. Receipts received by Jackson County during that period totaled $4,865.94

In 1940, Martha broke a hip, making her dependent upon the use of a cane. In 1944, she fell again and suffered fractures of both the left hip and the left shoulder. She fell again in February of 1947, at age ninety-four, again fracturing a hip. This time the injury confined her to her bedroom. At mid-day on July 26, 1947, at the age of ninety-four, Martha Young Truman died.[200]

On the day of her death, two deputy sheriffs, L. E. Babcock and Oscar L. Shartzer, together with Grandview Marshal, Vivian Goodwin, were positioned in front of Martha Truman's Grandview cottage. A Secret Service agent paced back and forth. A. E. Kerr, special agent of the Frisco railroad, made arrangement for trains to muffle their whistles at the crossing that was one-half block away. She was pronounced dead at 11:05 a.m. At 11:15 an ambulance arrived at the rear of the cottage; it departed at 11:45, and took Martha's body to the George Chapel in Belton. At 11:55 Vivian Truman, who, with George P. Wallace, Harry's brother-in-law, and Mary Jane, had remained at Martha's bedside, left the cottage looking grief stricken, and removed the barricade from the street.[201]

While flying in a C-54 at 5,000 feet above Cincinnati, heading home, President Harry Truman was handed the following radio message: "The President's mother died 11 a.m. Central Standard time. The Secret Service." The message was received by the Charles M. Mills, the C-54 pilot, at 11:26. [202].

During the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, Mary Jane Truman continued to live in Grandview. She remained active in the Baptist Church and Eastern Star. From 1956 until 1982, the Williams family rented and occupied the farmhouse. The Williamses replaced the old stone columns that supported the

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[200] Doris Faber, *The Mothers of American Presidents*, (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968), 61.
[201] *Kansas City Star*, 26 July 1947.
[202] *Kansas City Star*, 27 July 1947.

kitchen portion of the house with a cement foundation; they screened in the back porch, and installed a concrete-floored patio off the kitchen door. They also installed a concrete base for the front (west-facing) porch and shingled its roof.[203]

By 1973, Mary Jane had outlived her two siblings, Vivian and Harry S Truman. In late September of 1975, Malvina Stephenson, a writer with the North American Newspaper Alliance, was emboldened to walk up to the front door of Mary Jane's Grandview home and ring the bell. Mary Jane's telephone number was unlisted, and she had repeatedly refused other interviews. After three long rings of the doorbell, a squeaky screen door opened, revealing Mary Jane wearing a big, welcoming smile. Mary Jane invited Stephenson in, saying, "I look like a tramp." Stephenson saw nothing wrong with Mary Jane's green-and-white print housedress topped with a dark green sweater. "She was steadied by a cane in each hand, but manages to get around by herself. Her skin is surprisingly smooth for her age, and she is peppy and uncomplaining," Stephenson later reported. They sat on Mary Jane's glassed-in front porch and chatted. Her brothers Vivian and Harry had died: Vivian in 1965, Harry in 1972. Mary Jane was the only child left of John and Martha Truman. Stephenson reported that Mary Jane laughed frequently, and didn't seem to take herself too seriously. "Like her brother," Stephenson concluded, "she is one of a kind."[204]

On December 5, 1977, Mary Jane suffered a stroke. She was hospitalized at the Research Medical Center in Kansas City. In March of 1978, she moved to a nursing home, the Red Bridge Health Care Center, at 11515 Troost in Kansas City.[205] She died on November 3, 1978, at the age of 89.[206] In the year 2000, her house remains standing in Grandview, Missouri.

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[203] Maxine Williams interview, 17 May, 1983.
[204] Malvina Stephenson, "Plain Speaking from Miss Truman," *Kansas City Times*, 22 September 1975.
[205] *The Kansas City Star*, 13 March, 1978.
[206] *Grandview Tribune*, 8 November 1978.