CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM THE GATES HOUSE TO MADGE WALLACE'S HOUSE

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Elizabeth Emery Gates Dies, 1924

Elizabeth E. Gates lived to see the birth of her great-granddaughter, when four generations lived under her roof. Mrs. Gates lived for six years after the death of her husband in 1918. She spent nearly every summer in Colorado Springs, Colorado, caring for her unmarried, invalid son, Frank E. Gates. When she was not in Colorado, she was at her home in Independence. Mrs. Gates was in Colorado for only a short time when she died there on June 19, 1924, at the age of 83. Three daughters, Madge, Myra, and Maud, and her son, Frank, survived her.[1] The will of Elizabeth Gates named Frank E. Gates as her principal beneficiary inheriting the bulk of her estate. (See Appendix for will). He was empowered to use "so much of the principal fund as may be required for his maintenance and comfort. The remainder after his death to go to my other children...."[2]

Assets of the estate were appraised at $56,013.09, and of that figure, Frank E. Gates received almost $30,000, while each daughter received less than $5,000.[3] The appraiser's report detailed some of the contents of the house. The following household goods were listed:

> Book case $50; 1 desk $15; 1 table $10; 4 chairs $25.
> Books $50--

parlor suite: 1 davenport $15; 3 chairs $15.

Dining Room: 1 table $10; 1 side board $15 and 6 chairs $20.

3 bed room suites with beds and dressers and 1 hall coat rack $15.

2 carpets $20.[4]

Because of his frail health, Frank E. Gates could not move to Missouri and live in the family home which he had inherited. Madge Wallace, however, was very much interested in having the old house for herself and her family. She used her share of her mother's estate,[5] plus some additional funds to buy the property.

Madge Wallace Acquires the Gates Mansion, 1924

On October 4, 1924, Madge Wallace purchased Lots 2 and 3 and the west 14.18 feet of Lot 1 from the trustees of the Estate of George P. Gates (Frank E. Gates and T.B. Wallace). She bought the property for $10,000.[6]

The three Gates daughters did not have long to wait to inherit the remainder of their mother's estate because Frank E. Gates, 54, passed away in 1925.[7] On September 4, 1926, Madge Wallace limited her property to include only Lots 2 and 3. She

deeded the west fourteen and eighteen one-hundredths feet of Lot 1 to her son and daughter-in-law, George Porterfield and Mary (May) Southern Wallace, for "one dollar and other valuable considerations."[8]

Life in the Wallace House, 1924-1934

Five people occupied the Wallace house in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Madge Wallace's quarters were in the second floor master bedroom, while her youngest son, Fred, had the northwest corner bedroom. Margaret Truman had her own bedroom between the second floor bathroom and her parents' room, connected by a passageway (circa 1926).

Margaret Truman remembered the cold winter nights in her room and a childish conviction which became a humorous family tale:

> ...before the gas furnace was put in, we had no blower. I had no heat in my room. I'm tough. I'm a survivor. I had no heat. The only register is that register that is in the dining room. It was very cold.
>
> Anyway, I thought there was a little man dressed in black who lived in the attic...
> When the house would cool off at night, the steps would one by one creak coming down and stop right in front of my door. And I said to my mother, "I want a lock on my door." I said, "There's a little

> man up there and he comes down every night and he stops in front of my door." And she said, "Oh, don't be ridiculous!" I remember my father saying, "It doesn't cost anything. Put a bolt on the door." So they put a bolt on the door.[9]

The Trumans' bedroom had always been the bedroom of Bess Wallace since she first came to the house in 1904. The furniture presently in the room belongs to Margaret Truman, while her parents' furniture, which was purchased in Washington, D.C., was moved in the mid-1970s to the first floor bedroom for Mrs. Truman's use.[10] It was during the early decades of the 20th century that a plain white, marble wash basin was installed in the bedroom where shaving or simple washing could be done without tying up the popular second floor bathroom.[11] Harry Truman slept in the bed nearest the sink.[12] During the sultry summer nights in Missouri, the Trumans were not unknown to take advantage of the screened porch outside their bedroom.[13]

David "Fred" Wallace, unmarried and in his early thirties, was a close companion to young Margaret Truman. Both were continuously getting into "trouble and mischief about the house" and being called down by Mrs. Wallace.[14] An architect, he accomplished several improvements to the Wallace house. In the late 1920s, a number of decorative crystal lamps were installed by Fred Wallace in the living room and parlor/music room. The chandelier in the living room was removed. Because

they came to be viewed as "ugly," he removed the decorative wood shelving and mirrors of the fireplace surrounds, although the second floor fireplace was left intact.[15] He also helped transform the "dark" library into a bright, cheery room. The woodwork, walls, and bookcases were painted white, while red was used on the trim areas.[16]

Margaret had nine little girls on the same block with which to play in the attic and basement of the house as well as in the yard which featured swings and a sliding board. A favorite sport was riding tricycles or playing with wheel toys on the gravel driveway, creating "roads and highways out of the loose gravel." The children stirred up so much dust during the dry summer months that Bess Truman and her mother usually had to dust the house as much as three times a day.[17]

Margaret Truman recalled her backyard, the neighborhood playground:

> ...I had everything in my backyard that anyone would want to play with. I had a swing. I had a trapeze. I had a teeter-totter. I had a slide, and plenty of trees to climb. We had lots more trees out there than we do now. And we used to climb trees. All nine girls used to come over and play in my yard, and that way my mother never had to worry where I was. I had a fire engine. I had a three-wheeled bike; two three-wheeled bikes. I had a big two-wheeled bike. I had a small two-wheeled bike. You name it, I had it.... I don't know how my Grandmother stood it, but on bad

> days, I was allowed to ride my tricycle in the house. My mother said she always gave her mother credit for that, that she never complained about that, because she was a very strict woman.[18]

Another summer pastime was digging channels through the backyard to sail the half-shells of English walnuts, stuck with a pin and a paper sail. Margaret Truman recalled in 1956:

> It was a kind of canal, beginning at the drip-faucet at the side of the house and running muddily through the mint bed, tumbling with waterfalls downward through Grandmother Wallace's lilies of the valley (which were ruthlessly uprooted), and on into the rose garden where further depredations took place. It looked, indeed, as if a bunch of moles had got on top of the ground and continued their architecture. It was quite a problem to raise flowers in that weather and at this vantage I have a better understanding of the wan looks of my grandmother when she regarded the fallen petals of her treasured Talismans.[19]

A photograph showing the Truman family in the backyard in May 1928, shows the gravel drive lined by bricks, a stone bench beside the flower garden, and a white picket fence parallel to Van Horn (now Truman) Road (See Figure 9). The fence was short and only went a few yards from the driveway entrance.[20] Another fence, made of wire "with a board top and a board bottom," ran parallel to the alley from the barn to the sidewalk on North Delaware.[21]

FIGURE 9

Truman Library Photo Archives, 82-318

1928 View Toward Van Horn (now Truman) Road

May 1928

Harry, Bess, and Margaret Truman in the backyard of the Wallace house. This photograph appeared in Margaret Truman's 1956 book, Souvenir. Note the diamond-shaped wood fence parallel to Van Horn Road, the stone bench, and placement of bricks to line the driveway.

Not shown in any pre-presidential photographs is the rose arbor, or pergola. This structure did not date to the Gates occupancy, but to sometime after 1924 when Madge Wallace owned the house. Mrs. Wallace, a woman who loved her flower gardens and roses, had the rose arbor constructed.[22]

Madge Wallace's upright piano was replaced in 1932 when the baby grand piano was purchased for Margaret Truman by her proud father. The Christmas present was not then appreciated by the eight-year-old girl who was crestfallen that she had not received the electric train she desired. This is the same piano which is presently in the parlor/music room and which, while in the White House, nearly fell through the floor.[23]

Spring was a busy time in the Wallace house during the 1920s and 1930s. Margaret Truman recalled "that season of domestic chaos when the ladies of my immediate ancestry tore the house limb from limb, scrubbed, waxed, painted, varnished, and enameled it and called it spring housecleaning."[24] The window coverings were also frequently cleaned and changed. Madge Wallace busied herself making most of the curtains for her home by hand.[25] Awnings and shutters were used on the front, west facade in the summer to block the intense sun and keep down the interior temperatures (See Figures 10 and 11).

FIGURE 10

Truman Library Photo Archives, 82-474

Wallace House with Awnings and Shutters

Circa late 1920s

Note the vertical striped awnings across the front (west) facade of 219 North Delaware, and the presence of shutters on the second floor windows.

Source: Negative taken from Truman home, 1982.

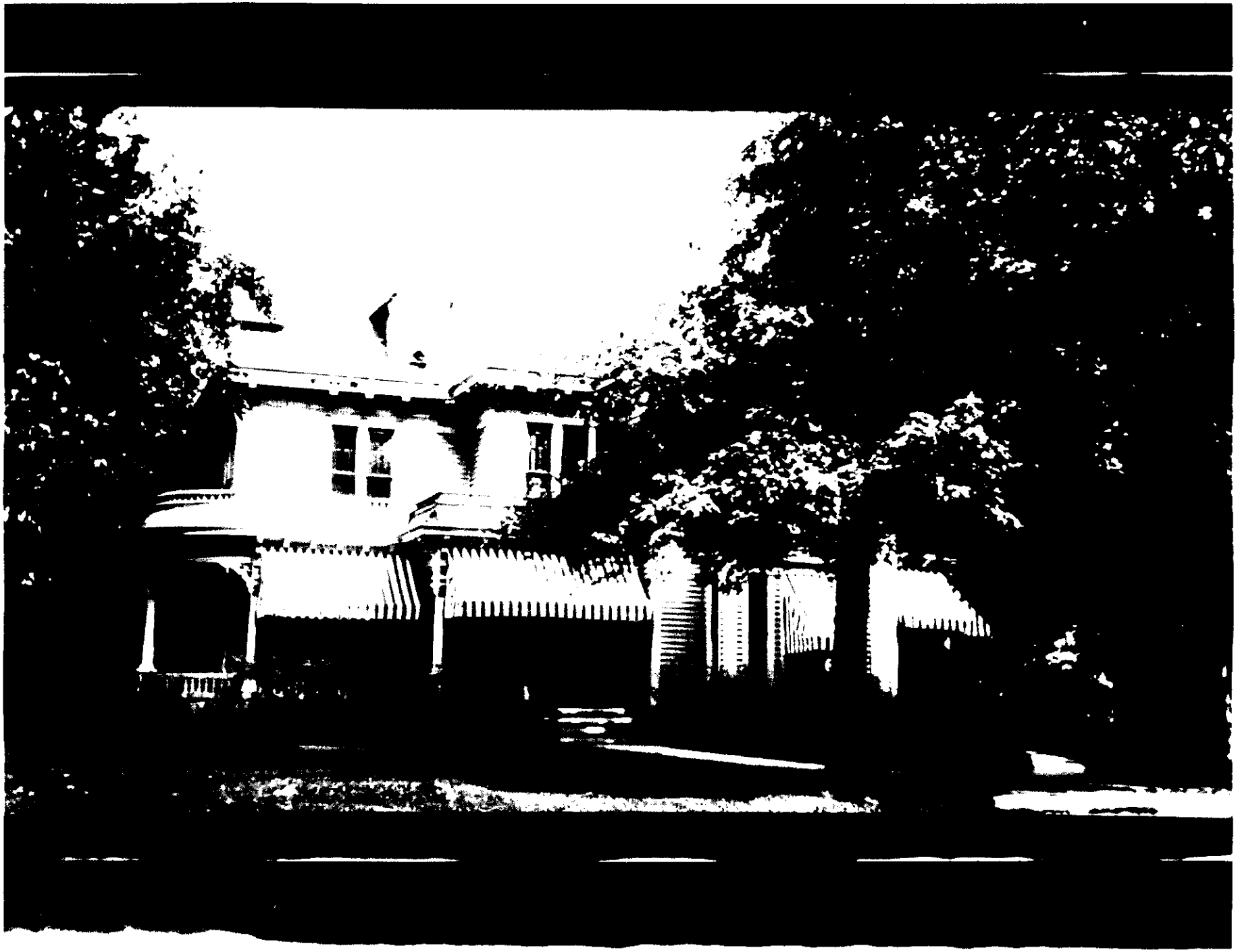

FIGURE 11

Truman Library Photo Archives, 66-2964

1934 Wallace House with Awnings

August 1934

Note that the vertical striped pattern of the awnings is much wider than those seen in the earlier (late 1920s) photograph in Figure 10. Also, the decorative railing above the first floor porch overhang is gone.

Source: Kansas City Star, August 12, 1934

Madge Wallace no longer had a sewing/sitting room on the second floor. By the 1920s, the room had become a storage area known as "the back room" where "everything was just shoved in there that we didn't want to use."[26] The back stairs remained a popular, quick avenue to go to and from the kitchen and second floor.

The small, north bedroom (which later became Mr. Truman's dressing room) featured a bed, but the room was not used. In the wintertime, to reduce drafts on the unheated second floor, the door to the north bedroom was kept closed.[27]

Heating the house was always a problem (See "The Heating System" in Chapter 13). In the wintertime, the kitchen was the warmest and, therefore, the most popular room in the house.[28] During one exceptionally cold winter, the music room and library were closed off to conserve heat.[29]

The theme of the interior furnishings was Victorian, which conformed to the personal tastes of Madge Wallace who delighted in her antiques as well as the Gates family heirlooms. Her granddaughter remembered:

> When I was a little girl the floors were dark and polished, so that I could see my face in them,

> and covered with oriental rugs. Grandmother Wallace loved antiques and there were many family heirlooms in the house. Her pride and joy was the fine old secretary in the living room which Great-grandfather Gates had brought out from Vermont in a wagon train.[30]

In the second floor bedrooms, the floors were not carpeted as they appear today. The floors were painted dark brown to resemble an oak floor. Rugs were scattered about. The small second floor alcove which is immediately above the front entrance vestibule, was used as a resting nook. Decorated with curtains, chair and table, it provided a quiet place to think or read.[31]

Margaret Truman's childhood in Independence was marked by persistent colds and other infections. She went through an "early and bitter tonsillectomy" after which one tonsil grew back. During the winter of 1932-33, a case of influenza turned into pneumonia and then rheumatic fever. In order for his daughter to regain her health, Harry Truman sent his wife and child to stay with friends in Biloxi, Mississippi, during the early spring of 1933.[32] It was their hope that the warm Gulf weather and a change in diet would restore her to good health.

During his family's seasonal exile from Independence, Judge Truman did not spend all his time at 219 North Delaware. He spent his weekends staying with his mother in Grandview.[33]

In late April 1933, Truman stayed as an unregistered guest in Kansas City's Pickwick Hotel "so no job holder who wants to stay on can see or phone me." Because of Depression-era cutbacks, he had been forced to discharge 200 county workers.[34] In late May he joined Bess and Margaret Truman in Biloxi. Margaret's health had dramatically improved and the family was able to return to Independence by mid-June.[35]

Truman In County Politics, 1924-1935

In 1924, Harry Truman's political career suffered a setback when he sought re-election as eastern judge. He was defeated as a result of a split in the local Democratic Party, and in the two years he was out of political office, he sold memberships for the Kansas City Automobile Club. With the backing of the Pendergast machine, Truman returned to office, winning the 1926 election. This time he was elected Jackson County Presiding Judge, serving two consecutive terms, 1927-1931 and 1931-1935. He established a remarkable record as the county's chief administrator. Through the passage of a multi-million dollar bond issue, Truman began an ambitious road building program which promised that no one would be more than two miles from a paved road. The Independence Courthouse was renovated to resemble Colonial Williamsburg (Georgian Revival).

Kansas City's 1870 courthouse was replaced by a modern art-deco skyscraper. Truman's success in Jackson County brought him wide attention throughout the state. Leaders in the Missouri Democratic Party and the Pendergast machine began mentioning his name as a possible candidate for the United States Senate.[36]

Elizabeth Emery Gates Dies, 1924

[1]"Mrs. George P. Gates Dead," undated newspaper clipping, folder-A172 unknown compiler 2F25 Woodson,-McCoy Scrapbook, Circa 1875-1925 newspaper clippings, Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, Mo.

Another son, G. Walter Gates, died in Coronado Beach, California, on February 8, 1923. The 55-year-old Gates was in California being treated for pneumonia. He was a successful Portland, Oregon, lumberman, having moved there in 1905. His funeral took place at 219 North Delaware on February 14, 1923. His nephews were pall bearers: John Wallace, Kansas City; Gates Wells, Platte City; Frank, George and Fred Wallace, and Harry Truman, Independence. See "G. Walter Gates Dead" and "Funeral of G.W. Gates," Examiner (Febraury 9 and 15, 1923), p. 1, folder-Truman, Harry S 1923, Research Room Vertical File, HSTL.

[2]Last Will and Testament of Elizabeth Gates, October 31, 1917, Office of the Probate Court, Jackson County Courthouse, Independence, Mo.

[3]Final Settlement of the Estate of Elizabeth Emery Gates, Independence Probate Court, No. 4941. The financial settlement was as follows: Frank E. Gates, $29,832.69; Madge Wallace, Maud Wells, and Myra Wallace, each received $4,987.05; Maud Louise Drake (Granddaughter) $2,493.53; and G. Walter Gates, Jr., (Grandson), $2,493.52. The last two heirs were the two children of the deceased son, G. Walter Gates.

In an affidavit filed before the court on August 12, 1924, administrator T.B. Wallace swore that Frank E. Gates, 53,

was an invalid and "is now and has been for some years physcially incapacitated from performing labor and thereby unable to earn a living. His said disability is permanent."

[4]In the Matter of the Appraisal of the Estate of Elizabeth Gates, Report of Appraiser, July 14, 1924, Independence Probate Court, No. 4941, Office of the Probate Court of Jackson County, Independence, Mo.

[5]Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interview, Independence, Mo., June 14, 1983.

Madge Wallace Acquires the Gates Mansion, 1924

[6]General Warranty Deed, Frank E. Gates and T.B. Wallace, as Trustees under the will of George P. Gates, and Madge Gates Wallace, October 4, 1924, Land Book 459, Page 342, No. 193526, Office of Deeds, Jackson County Courthouse, Independence, Mo.

[7]Genealogy chart, family group of George Porterfield Gates and Elizabeth Emery, by Annette W. Curtis, Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, Mo.

[8]Missouri Warranty Deed, Madge Gates Wallace to George P. and Mary S. Wallace, September 4, 1926, Land Book 492, Page 422, No. 219645, Office of Deeds, Jackson County Courthouse, Independence.

[9]Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret Truman," p. 20.

[10]Ibid., pp. 22; 59.

[11]Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interviews, Independence, Mo., June 14 and July 20, 1983. The present blue sink was probably installed in the 1950s when the bedroom was rewallpapered.

[12]Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret Truman," p. 59.

[13]In a letter from Harry Truman to his wife on July 11, 1939, he wrote: "Hope you didn't catch cold on that porch sleep on the first cool night." See Robert Ferrell, Dear Bess, p. 414.

[14]Margaret Truman, Souvenir: Margaret Truman's Own Story (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956), p. 17.

[15]Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret Truman," pp. 39; 43. The old fireplace surrounds were found in the barn, and National Park Service personnel have moved them to the basement to provide improved security.

[16]Ibid., p. 39.

[17]Margaret Truman, Souvenir, p. 29.

[18]Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret Truman," p. 14.

[19]Margaret Truman, Souvenir, p. 30.

[20]Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret Truman," p. 26.

[21]Ibid., p. 27.

[22]Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interview, Independence, Mo., June 14, 1983.

[23]Margaret Truman, Souvenir, pp. 27-8. Harry Truman was probably in error when, in a June 28, 1957, letter to his wife, he indicated that the piano was purchased in 1928. See Dear Bess, p. 568.

[24]Souvenir, p. 11.

[25]Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interview at 219 North Delaware, Independence, Mo., July 20, 1983.

[26]Cockrell, "Oral History Interview with Margaret Truman," p. 12.

[27]Ibid., p. 29.

[28]Ibid., p. 48.

[29]Ibid., p. 44.

[30]Margaret Truman, Souvenir, p. 21. The secretary is now located in the second floor front, west bedroom.

[31]Mrs. George P. (May) Wallace, Interview at 219 North Delaware, Independence, Mo., July 20, 1983.

[32]Margaret Truman, Souvenir, pp. 26-7.

[33]Ferrell, Dear Bess, p. 347. In a letter from

Grandview, Truman wrote his wife and daughter on April 14, 1933, that he had visited with her family and "had dinner with Mrs. Wallace."

[34]Ibid., p. 351. The letter from the Pickwick Hotel was dated April 28, 1933.

[35]"County Court Session Short," Examiner (May 16 and May 25, 1933), p. 1, folder-Truman, Harry S 1933, Research Room Vertical File, HSTL.

Truman In County Politics, 1924-1935

[36]Ferrell, Dear Bess, pp. 304-05.