ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH

VALERIA LAMERE

NOVEMBER 18, 1985

INDEPENDENCE, MISSOURI

INTERVIEWED BY PAM SMOOT

ORAL HISTORY #1985-4

This transcript corresponds to audiotapes DAV-AR #3071-3074

HARRY S TRUMAN NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

National Park Service photographs of Valeria LaMere taken during her interview

Historian Pam Smoot and Valeria LaMere in the living room of the Truman home (HSTR slide #194)

Valeria LaMere in the living room of the Truman home
(HSTR slide #195)

Valeria LaMere in the living room of the Truman home
(HSTR slide # 890)

Valeria LaMere in the living room of the Truman home
(HSTR slide #892)

Valeria LaMere in the living room of the Truman home
(HSTR slide #891)

EDITORIAL NOTICE

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Jim Williams reviewed the draft of this transcript. His corrections were incorporated into this final transcript by Perky Beisel in summer 2001. A grant from Eastern National Park and Monument Association funded the transcription and final editing of this interview.

RESTRICTION

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ABSTRACT

Valeria LaMere worked for Bess W. Truman from October 1977 to Truman's death in 1982. She began as a nurse and companion then became the housekeeper and daily coordinator of Mrs. Truman's affairs. LaMere discusses Mrs. Truman's daily routine, including her favorite television programs, and reading habits, and special occasions, such as Jimmy Carter's visit in 1980 and birthday parties. She also relates experiences shopping with the Secret Service and visits by local friends of the Trumans. LaMere explains the changes made in the household as Bess W. Truman's health declined.

Persons mentioned: Bess W. Truman, Henry J. Talge, May Wallace, Jimmy Carter, Alma Carmichael, Doris Miller, Gary Plowman, Andrew Gray, Georgia Neese Clark Gray, Margaret Truman Daniel, Geraldine Peterson, Edward Hobby, Velma (James) Simmons, Robert E. Lockwood, Harry S Truman, Petey Childers, and Alice (Pikert) Gross.

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

VALERIA LAMERE

HSTR INTERVIEW #1985-4

STEVE HARRISON: This is a recording of an interview on November 18, 1985, at the Truman home, 219 North Delaware, Independence, Missouri. We're interviewing Valeria LaMere, who worked for Mrs. Truman as a companion and nurse, and the interview is being conducted by Pam Smoot, historian with the National Park Service at the Midwest Regional Office in Omaha, Nebraska.

Of course, it's different for us too, because we don't use the attic fan.

VALERIA LAMERE: Oh, you don't?

HARRISON: And the window air conditioning units, we did use, but of course, when we're opening and closing the doors every fifteen minutes . . .

LAMERE: Mm-hmm, that's right.

HARRISON: . . . all the hot air is coming in, too. There probably wasn't that much traffic.

LAMERE: I thought that attic fan was great, though.

HARRISON: Did it work pretty well?

LAMERE: I thought it did.

HARRISON: How did you . . .?

LAMERE: It sucked cool air right down in here. It really did. I thought it was great.

HARRISON: It probably would work, but then that kind of means keeping the house

closed up . . .

LAMERE: Yes.

HARRISON: . . . of course, we can't because of the tours.

LAMERE: Yes, that's right. You sure have a lot of tourists. I'd like to ask a personal question: Why do you not charge them? Look at the money you could have made to fix this place up with.

HARRISON: One of the things is that at national park areas, most of the monies that park takes in goes into the treasury, just the treasury, or the Land and Water Conservation Fund. That money then is spent on other parks and so on, so that the money we would make wouldn't necessarily stay here. We just depend on appropriations from Congress, so there's not a direct line of money there.

LAMERE: I see.

HARRISON: Plus then we would have to pay people to collect the money, and we wouldn't necessarily get that money to help pay those people's salaries, so it's not necessarily a benefit for us to charge. I'm gonna operate the recording equipment as discreetly as I can, so you can ignore me. Pam will conduct the interview.

LAMERE: I just hope you ask questions, because I just don't know—I didn't know what kind of pictures you wanted.

HARRISON: Shall we look at these?

LAMERE: Yes, sure. That's her ninety-sixth birthday party. That was the year before she died. [See appendix item 1.]

HARRISON: That was in the dining room?

LAMERE: That was in the dining room, and up against the wall of the study there.

PAM SMOOT: Was the cake home made?

LAMERE: No. The cake, Mr. Talge, I know you've heard of Mr. Talge, Henry Talge, he had her cake every year made. And it said on it, "Four more to go." For 100, you know? And that was her last birthday cake.

SMOOT: Who was at the birthday party?

LAMERE: The staff, and let me think—Mrs. Wallace, of course, just Secret Service and us and Mrs. Wallace.

SMOOT: Do you remember the names of any of those people who were there?

LAMERE: Yeah. I have a picture of them right there with President Carter. When he came, I didn't know if you had that or not. [See appendix item 2.]

HARRISON: No!

LAMERE: I didn't know if you had that, so I thought well, I'll bring it. I can't remember their names, though. This girl sort of served as a nurse's aid, and this is the nurse's aid. This girl was my cook. This lady, we had to fire her. She posed as a nurse, and we thought she was one, and she really wasn't one. And we didn't know it—Secret Service didn't even know it. And this is her hairdresser. You've met Doris Miller, I'm sure.

HARRISON: Okay, that's Doris Miller

LAMERE: Yes, this is the hairdresser, and . . .

HARRISON: Jimmy Carter, President Jimmy Carter standing there, too.

LAMERE: . . . and me and another nurse's aid, and this is the lady that did the

laundry, Alma Carmichael. Now there is an article I brought, a newspaper article that covers the story. I didn't know if you had that or not.

Gee, I thought you all would have all this. I could have brought more, but I just assumed you had all the newspaper articles and everything, you know? I said, "What would I take that you don't already have?" So now—

HARRISON: That's great. Let me just describe the picture so it'll be on tape. It's a picture of President Carter with the staff in the living room in front of the fireplace.

LAMERE: Yes.

SMOOT: How long was Mr. Carter here to visit? How long was he in the home?

LAMERE: Oh, well, let's see. I'd say probably everything, I'd say thirty minutes, because Mrs. Truman sat here, and he sat there, and I sat over there. And Mrs. Truman at that time of her life, wasn't able to speak very plainly, so I sat in with them and did the talking for her. And answered his questions and so forth. So, he was nice.

Of course, I called him "Mr. Truman"! I told her before he ever got here that that would happen. I said, "I've just got to be careful," and by George, I did it. He just laughed.

SMOOT: What were some of the things that they talked about?

LAMERE: Jeepers, you're asking me that now? [laughter] I don't remember. I honestly don't remember.

HARRISON: Was anybody else with him?

LAMERE: Just his staff. No, nobody else. This was taken in that chair there. [See appendix item 3.]

HARRISON: In the gold chair.

LAMERE: Uh-huh, right there. I had been here for about a year already, and I'm very happy to say that she had really learned to love me. And I was gonna go on a vacation to Virginia—that's where I'm from—and she said, "When you come back, I'm gonna give you a gift of having a photographer come in and have our pictures made together." She knew I would love that.

So that's what we did, and jeepers, I thought I brought that too, that article, but I didn't bring it. [See appendix item 4.]

HARRISON: She signed it here.

LAMERE: Gary Plowman, is it? Gary Plowman, I believe is the photographer that took that. Now I can call you and give you that. I have it. I thought I brought it, but I guess I didn't. That was the best picture. This is the way we were all the time, I mean all the time. Always laughing.

SMOOT: She looks like she's really happy in this picture.

LAMERE: She was. This is the way we were. After about six months, this is the way we were for five years. She was just as happy as she could be, and we did things that she hadn't done for five years, like—I didn't know anything about what all went on in here, you know, or anything, and so one day I said, "Let's go out on the porch, on the back porch." And no,

she didn't want to go out there. So, I didn't pursue it, you know.

So later on the, oh, it was such a beautiful day, and I put her in the wheelchair, and I said, "Come on, let's go set out on the porch." So she went. She said, "This is the first time I've been out here since Harry left me." And I didn't know that, see. So then, we started going out there every day, and I bought her a little birdhouse, a little wren house, you know, put that up for her to watch, and she enjoyed that.

And then it became necessary for me to be here quite often in the evenings, so one night at dinner time, I said, "Come on, let's go out on the back porch," and I set the table out there. And she went, and she looked kind of funny, but I didn't really pay much attention. And while we were eating, she had tears in her eyes, and she said, "You know, this is the first time I've sat at this table since Harry left. We used to eat here every night."

And I didn't even think of that, you know? I didn't mean to make her sad. But then we did it, and then every time I stayed at night, we'd eat dinner out there. And sometimes I'd bring my grill over and grill food outside for her, and she enjoyed that so much, you know?

And we'd go shopping. If I needed something, she'd call Secret Service and say, "I want to go shopping," and we'd go and get something for me, and they wouldn't know the difference.

SMOOT: So did you go clothing shopping?

LAMERE: Yes. Of course, I had gotten to be on terms with Mrs. Truman where I

could joke and kid with her, you know, and I would talk very freely with her, and she with me. So one day, she said, “Would you go out to Harzfelds and buy me a few dresses?” I said, “No, I won’t.” And she looked at me, and she said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, what do you want me to go for?” I said, “You can go get them yourself.” She said, “Well, how can I do that?” I said, “Well, you get in that wheelchair, and we’ll go.” She said, “Well, can you get in the store with a wheelchair?” I said, “Of course you can.” I said, “Get your dark clogs on. Let’s go.”

So, I called Secret Service and got her ready and off we went, and she went in the store and bought herself three dresses. And she enjoyed it. She met people in the store that she had known, you know, and friends, and spoke to them, and it was fun for her. You know, things that she hadn’t done.

SMOOT: What were the names of some of the stores? Was there a place in particular where she especially liked to shop?

LAMERE: Harzfelds was her specialty. Let’s see, what else? Oh. Every Wednesday we’d go get her hair fixed, and then we’d go eat someplace. And we’d always eat at a different place every week because the news people would catch up with us, and they did at Kross’s [Kross Lounge, Sugar Creek]. Of course, I didn’t know that they sold alcoholic beverages in there when—somebody said, “You ought to go to Kross’s. They have good spaghetti,” I believe it was.

So I said, “Oh, let’s go to Kross’s.” So, in we went, and there was all the news people. Now how they found out that she was gonna be in there, I have no idea. But they either knew it or else that’s where they were eating their dinner, I don’t know. But they got a picture on the front page of her. [See appendix item 5.]

I have that picture, but I didn’t bring it. I just assumed you people had this stuff. Do you?

SMOOT: No, we don’t have it all.

LAMERE: Well, I have that picture. It’s not very complimentary of her, because I’ll tell you, I was trying to get her out of there and away from those photographers, and here her dress was up to here, and they got a picture of her and put it on the front page. And she said, “I’ll never go in Kross’s again”—and she never did. Never went in again.

SMOOT: Would you be willing to share the other information that you have with us? The other photographs and things?

LAMERE: Oh, sure, I’d just assumed you had this, these newspaper articles and things, so I didn’t bring them. I discussed it with my husband. I said, “Surely they have this.” He said, “I’m sure they do. I wouldn’t take that up there.” So I didn’t. [laughter] So let’s see, what else would you like to know?

SMOOT: I’d like to know when you first began working for Bess Truman?

LAMERE: It was in 1977, October—I told you that once. Was it 19th? I think it was the 19th. And you want to know how it happened, I suppose. Well, the

phone rang, and I had been out of a job for about three weeks, because my last patient had passed away, and someone, a stranger to me from Independence here, called, and wanted to know if I wanted to go back to work.

And I said, “Well, not particularly, really, because I have arthritis so bad I really didn’t want to work in the winter time.” But I said, “It depends on who it is and what it is, you know, if it’s something real easy, I would do it.” Well, when she told me Bess Truman, I nearly fell out of my chair, because I’ll tell you, I had dreamed of this for—I’d been doing nurse/companion work for many, many years, and I often, many, many times thought, “Oh, I wonder how I could get in touch to see if she needed anybody,” but I didn’t know how to get in touch with her. I didn’t even know there was Secret Service over there or anything about it, you know?

I knew she’d have a private number. I couldn’t call her, so I just flubbed it off as something I’d never know about. So naturally when she said it was Bess Truman, I really couldn’t believe that one.

So I said, “Well, what does she need?” And she said, “Well, all she needs really is someone to cook her evening meal or meals for her and put her to bed.” And I said, “Cook for Bess Truman?” “Yes.” I said, “Not me!” I said, “I don’t cook for anybody.” “Oh,” she said, “we have references, good references for you.” I said, “Oh, no, not this woman, not for cooking, and I’m not about to start on Bess Truman.” I said I’d

only done nurse-companion work and opened up a can of soup for somebody, and that's as far as I've gone.

Well, she says, "I feel sure you could do it." But I said, "No, I won't do that," I said. "I'm not gonna start cooking for Bess Truman, my first person!"

So I hung up. The next morning about nine o'clock, another lady called me from Kansas City that I'd never heard of. Same thing, same conversation, you know—and again I said no. She said, "Well, she's just plain old down to earth like you and me. She just eats plain old bread and potatoes and gravy just like you and I do." She says, "If you cook for your husband, you can surely cook for Bess." I said, "Oh, no, you're not gonna pull me into that." So she hung up, and it wasn't fifteen minutes when Mrs. Truman called me. And that really floored me. Wanted to know if I'd come up and visit with her, and naturally, who could say no? So we set a time that afternoon, that same day. So I came up and came in. She was sitting in that gold chair there, bless her heart, and we talked for oh, probably thirty minutes, just passing, you know, wanting to know where I was from and all this thing, you know. And she said, "You want to go find the kitchen?" And I thought to myself, "What do I want to find that kitchen for? I'm not gonna be working in it." But I said, "Yeah, I'll go find it," you know, and I went through there looking for that kitchen, and I stood in the doorway. I never even went in because I thought, "What's the use," you know. "I'm not gonna be doing

this." So I just stood in the doorway and looked at that big kitchen. Turned around and came back.

"Did you find the kitchen?" I said, "Yeah, my, that's a big kitchen." She said, "Well, I think that you and I will just get along fine together. Could you start working for me tomorrow?" And she looked at me with those sweet little old eyes, and I couldn't say no.

I said, "Well, Ms. Truman, I'll tell you. I've never cooked for anybody outside of my own home, but if you'll tell me what you want cooked and how you want it prepared, I can do it." And I said, "I'll give you the best I got."

So I came that next day, and stayed with her until she died.

SMOOT: So what were your responsibilities?

LAMERE: Well, when I first came, all I did was fix her meals, and stay here until she went to bed. She wouldn't let me put her to bed. She fought every minute of the way to keep her strength. And I waited until she went to bed, and then I went home.

Then, after—well, after about a year, she started working me into taking care of her personal business: writing her checks and stuff for her bills, and helping her with her mail that she got from people. And then she got so that I needed help—well, I was her nurse, too. I acted as a nurse and companion, both, and cook—I did it all, did everything that had to be done. And then she got so I had to stay with her more, so I went to her, and I told her, I said, "Now, Mrs. Truman, I think the time

has come where we need to have a little more help here, because I can't be here day and night and do everything that has to be done, too." So she agreed to let me hire some help. And she turned that over to me. She turned everything over to me eventually. I did all the hiring and made all the decisions on everything. And then one day she called me in the room and had a banker here and asked me to take over her checkbook, and had her money, and so I took all that responsibility, too. So eventually, I ended up doing it all.

SMOOT: Did you fix all three of Mrs. Truman's meals?

LAMERE: When I first came, I fixed her lunch and dinner. She had another lady here that fixed breakfast, and then on Wednesdays, she wouldn't go home. She'd stay and do the laundry.

SMOOT: What was her name, do you remember?

LAMERE: Mrs. Peterson was her name.

SMOOT: Okay. When Mrs. Truman turned over her checkbook to you, was that in 1978? You said a year later.

LAMERE: Oh, no, no. That didn't happen a year later. Now what year was that? Oh, my, let's see. She died in '82, didn't she?

SMOOT: Yes.

LAMERE: You know, it must have been in '80, but I couldn't tell you for sure, but I believe it was in '80.

SMOOT: Approximately how many hours would you say you worked in a day when you first came?

LAMERE: When I first came? Well, six hours, probably, when I first came.

SMOOT: And then as time went on, approximately how many hours did you work?

LAMERE: It varied. Sometimes, I'd be here day and night, and never go home at all—just stay from morning until the next day, and sometimes, I'd stay here for a couple of days. Depends on the need that arose.

SMOOT: When you spent the night, where did you sleep?

LAMERE: Upstairs in the room where the two twin beds are, off the porch.

SMOOT: And where did Mrs. Truman sleep?

LAMERE: She slept down here. There were two twin beds in this room that she slept in, the one on that side.

SMOOT: You mean this downstairs bedroom here?

LAMERE: Uh-huh.

SMOOT: When you cooked Mrs. Truman's meals, what kind of food did you prepare for her in the mornings for breakfast?

LAMERE: Well, I didn't fix her breakfast, but she ate—she called it two breakfasts. Her first breakfast consisted of a cup of coffee, probably hot cereal and toast, no not—you know, it was hot cereal and coffee. And then she'd have some kind of fruit and toast and another cup of coffee, you know, after that.

SMOOT: Do you remember what some of her favorite foods were?

LAMERE: Favorite foods. She loved my homemade cheesecake. [laughter] She told me that was the best she had ever eaten. Margaret also gave me the same

compliment, which I appreciated. But she loved sweets. Anything you could make sweet for her, she really loved it. Now let me think . . . I don't know, she just ate anything. She was so easy to cook for. She'd tell me what she wanted. If I didn't know how to fix it, she'd tell me how to fix it, and I'd go fix it, and she'd always say, "Oh, that's delicious," you know, whether it was or not. [chuckling] She was very kind about that.

SMOOT: Do you know what time she ate her breakfast? Did she usually eat her meals at the same time of day?

LAMERE: Yes. She usually ate at seven o'clock when I first came here. She started eating at seven o'clock, and she'd eat at twelve o'clock, and she ate at six o'clock.

SMOOT: Did she ever have a bedtime snack?

LAMERE: When I stayed all night, she did, because I did. So I saw to it that she had something, too. But normally no, because she went to bed quite early, like seven o'clock at night. Right after she ate, she'd get ready for bed. But then when I'd stay all night, I couldn't get her to bed. She'd stay up until midnight because she liked to sit and—talk with me.

SMOOT: Did she ever watch television?

LAMERE: Oh, she loved to watch ballgames, baseball. And she enjoyed the Olympics. But that's all.

SMOOT: Did she have a favorite baseball team?

LAMERE: Royals! She wouldn't let anyone come in and turn that game off, either.

[laughter]

SMOOT: Was Mrs. Truman involved in any daily activities? Was there something that she did every day? What was her daily routine?

LAMERE: Read her newspaper after she ate her breakfast, and read her mail. And she had these whodunits that she read all the time. *All* the time.

SMOOT: What is a "whodunit"?

LAMERE: It's a mystery book. She loved the mystery books.

SMOOT: Is that the title of the book, or is that what she called them?

LAMERE: We called it whodunits because that's just a nickname for mystery books, you know, and she had them stacked up in the library, oh, my! I'd say twenty-five or thirty books high, and maybe ten stacks of them that she had read. So, I had a lot of reading to do, too.

SMOOT: Where did she have them stacked in the library?

LAMERE: They were stacked up along the wall there beside Mr. Truman's chair, on that wall.

SMOOT: Did she buy the books?

LAMERE: Well, no. People would send them to her. They'd read them, and they'd say, "We think you'd enjoy this book," so they'd mail them to her. And then, Margaret supplied her with books, too. After she'd read them, she'd send them to her mother, and she'd read them, too.

SMOOT: Do you remember the names of any of the people who may have sent Mrs. Truman some books?

LAMERE: No, I don't remember names very good.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman get a lot of telephone calls?

LAMERE: Oh, yes, yes.

SMOOT: Do you know the names of any of the people who probably called on a frequent basis?

LAMERE: Well, you know, she belonged to the Mary Paxton Club. That was a club that she belonged to. I think some of the ladies that belonged to that, you know, would call her. And, one of her very frequent visits was Mr. and Mrs. Gray. Now, Mrs. Gray was Mr. Truman's secretary-treasurer [treasurer of the United States]. They used to come quite often and visit. I remember something about him that struck me funny. He'd come to see Mrs. Truman, and every time he came, he'd say, "Oh, she just looks wonderful, wonderful. You've just done a wonderful job with her." And so, one Christmas, he sent me a Christmas card, and he couldn't think of my last name, and he sent me a beautiful, beautiful candle as a Christmas present, and on the card he addressed it, "Mrs. Valerie Wonderful." And I kept that because he said, "I couldn't think of your last name, but you've done such a wonderful job with Mrs. Truman, I thought that was appropriate." So that was how he addressed that, and I kept that. I thought that was cute. [See appendix item 6.]

SMOOT: How often would you say they visited?

LAMERE: Oh, they used to come real often. I'd say every two months they'd be here.

SMOOT: And how long would they usually stay?

LAMERE: Oh, about thirty minutes.

SMOOT: What did they do while they were here?

LAMERE: Just sit and talk. Just sit and talk. Sometimes I'd serve them a cup of coffee and a cookie or something, but you know, they weren't here very long.

SMOOT: Would you say that Mrs. Truman really enjoyed their company?

LAMERE: Oh, my, yes, she did love those people.

SMOOT: Do you know how they met Mrs. Truman?

LAMERE: Well, see, Mrs. Gray was his secretary-treasurer, so that's all I know.

SMOOT: Well, did Mrs. Truman ever call a lot of people on the telephone?

LAMERE: She called some, but I don't know who she called, naturally.

SMOOT: Did she talk on the telephone a lot?

LAMERE: Yes, at first she did. She'd call me if I had the flu or something and couldn't get to work. She'd call me up and talk to me. She couldn't stand it. We really had a beautiful rapport.

SMOOT: Other than the Grays, did Mrs. Truman have any other regular visitors, any other people who used to come by?

LAMERE: Yes, but I can't remember their names. They were some of their oldster friends, you know, and one lady, I can't remember her name for the life of me, but she was cute as a button. She'd drive over here, and how she ever drove over here, I don't know. And I'd go to the gate to help her in. She was that old. But she just loved to come, and she'd tell Mrs. Truman, "Oh, I feel so honored," she'd say, "to come through this gate

to visit you." I cannot remember that dear lady's name. She was a cutie.

SMOOT: When you first started to put Mrs. Truman in bed, did you decide what time she would go to bed, or did she decide.

LAMERE: She decided. I'd let her make all the decisions. All the time I was taking care of her, I'd ask her what she wanted. It was her decision for everything.

SMOOT: So what time did she usually go to bed?

LAMERE: Well, like I say, when I first came it was at seven o'clock. But after we got to be real friendly, then she'd stay up sometimes until midnight. I couldn't get her to bed; she just wanted to sit up and talk. She enjoyed having me stay with her, and I enjoyed it, too.

SMOOT: Once Mrs. Truman was in bed, did she read? When you first came, did she read or did she just go to sleep?

LAMERE: Not in bed, no. No, no. And then we fixed up a buzzer so that she could buzz me, and it rang upstairs in my bedroom, and it would ring in the kitchen, so that I'd know if I was in that part of the house, if she needed me, then she could let me know, you know, with that buzzer.

SMOOT: Once her health began to deteriorate, did you or anyone else read to her? Was she still able to read to herself?

LAMERE: Well, I had the nurses to read to her. And her favorite book was Margaret's book. Oh my, now that's gone. It was about Margaret's life. What was it? Oh, my, I can't remember.

SMOOT: Maybe it'll come to you later.

LAMERE: Okay.

SMOOT: When you first came to work for Mrs. Truman, were there any other employees on the premises?

LAMERE: Just a man that had been here for many, many years. He did the yard work, and he did the upstairs cleaning, and he polished the silver and things like that. Or no, he cleaned downstairs. Mrs. Peterson cleaned the upstairs, and Mrs. Peterson did the breakfast and the laundry, that was it. Just the two.

SMOOT: Okay, so when you say "downstairs," what area are you referring to?

LAMERE: Just the whole downstairs, he cleaned.

SMOOT: Downstairs on the first floor?

LAMERE: First floor, first floor.

SMOOT: And Mrs. Peterson cleaned?

LAMERE: Mrs. Peterson cleaned up in the bedroom area.

SMOOT: What was the gentleman's name?

LAMERE: Edward Hobby. He is a reverend. Hobby.

SMOOT: So there were only two other employees on the premises?

LAMERE: That's it, uh-huh.

SMOOT: Did you hire any additional employees?

LAMERE: Yes.

SMOOT: Who were some of the people that you employed, or that you hired? Excuse me.

LAMERE: Well, wait a minute. Doris Miller, now she took care of Mrs. Truman's

hair even before she went to the White House, I understand. You know. But I had—oh, my, didn't know you were gonna ask me names.

HARRISON: Think about it while I change tapes.

[End #3071; Begin #3072]

SMOOT: What were the names of the nurses, again?

LAMERE: Well, I can't remember their names, but I do remember Velma James. Now, she was the first one that I hired, and I trained her. She had never done this before, such as nurse's aid work. And she was great, she was really great. And then I turned her into my cook later on when things got kind of hefty around here, too much to do. And Velma turned into my cook, and boy, she has really gone far. She's working up at Rest Haven now and giving medicines and studying to be a registered nurse. She's gone far. Wonderful person.

SMOOT: Did you know Ms. James before you came here?

LAMERE: No, I didn't. And I don't remember who told me about her. Somebody told me about her. But Mrs. Truman liked her very much, and that meant a lot to me. If I hired somebody and Mrs. Truman didn't like them, they were gone the next day. [laughter] Because I was here to please her, and I meant to see to it that she was happy.

SMOOT: Who determined what the salaries would be for the employees?

LAMERE: At first, Mrs. Truman did, and then when she became more ill, I took over on it.

SMOOT: Have you ever fired any of the employees before?

LAMERE: Yes, I did.

SMOOT: Approximately how many?

LAMERE: Oh, my. If I could see that picture? Let's see, one, two, three. I believe I fired three of them while I was here.

SMOOT: Prior to terminating any of the employees, did you have to get permission from Mrs. Truman first?

LAMERE: I discussed the problems with her. And she agreed with me, wholeheartedly. So . . .

SMOOT: Did you ever fire anyone that she had hired?

LAMERE: No, she didn't hire anybody. I took care of all that.

SMOOT: Mrs. LaMere, did you ever do anything for any special occasions?

LAMERE: You mean like birthday parties? Yes. On her birthdays, I'd see to it that all the staff was here. Of course, the first year there wasn't any staff except Hobby and Peterson. And so we had cake and I'm quite a jokester, so I believe I baked that cake, and put fake candles on it for her. Margaret was here, and she sat in that chair there, and she didn't know anything was going on.

SMOOT: Which chair?

LAMERE: The yellow chair, the gold chair. She didn't know anything was going on. Everything was done quietly, so that night I wheeled the cake in with the candles on it, and oh, she was so surprised, and told her she had to blow out those candles. [laughter] And she started blowing them [laughter], and of course the candles would go out and then come back

on [laughter]—and she said, “What’s going on here?” Oh, I’ll never forget that, she enjoyed that so much.

So then after that, Margaret wasn’t here any more on her birthday that I can remember. But I had a birthday [with] a lot of people, so I had them in the dining room. So then at Christmas and Thanksgiving, we had it, and she always wanted my family—my husband and my son—to come and eat those two meals with her. She loved them very much, as they loved her.

And so, the three of us would sit there and have always have a party with the staff and we’d exchange gifts, and have a lot of refreshments and things. Secret Service would come over and join us, one by one, take turns. It was fun. She really enjoyed it.

SMOOT: How many candles were on this birthday cake?

LAMERE: Oh, I don’t remember—you mean the one that I fooled her on? I don’t remember, I really don’t.

SMOOT: Do you remember which birthday party that was, how old was she?

LAMERE: That was in 1977. No, ’78, it was in 1978. She was ninety, oh, my, three I believe—ninety-three.

SMOOT: And you gave her a birthday party from 1978 up until her last birthday?

LAMERE: Uh-huh.

SMOOT: That’s great.

LAMERE: In ’78, yeah. Then another thing I used to do, on Halloween the hairdresser, Doris Miller and myself, just the two of us, we’re both

jokesters alike and we'd put Mrs. Truman here in this window, in the chair, and we dressed up like clowns, you know, and got us a pot and put hot ice out here in it and had the smoke curling up from that, and I bought candy, and when the kids would go by, I'd put something in their bag and tell them to wave at Mrs. Truman every time I'd give them something, and she'd wave at them and they'd wave back at her. And boy, the kids enjoyed that, too, and Mrs. Truman would just sit there and laugh at us. We'd go through all kinds of crazy antics out there in the yard.

Sometimes it'd be raining, and we'd come in wetter than heck. But she really enjoyed watching us do that, too. She got as many laughs out of it as we did. But she enjoyed that. I can't remember anything else we did, particularly.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman acknowledge the birthdays of other employees?

LAMERE: Birthdays? No, I don't believe she did. Now unless she—no, I don't believe she did, not that I know of.

SMOOT: Did she ever give any of the employees Christmas presents?

LAMERE: Oh, yes, money. But she gave me a gift. But she asked me not to tell anybody else that she'd given it to me because she didn't give anybody else anything but money. But she gave me a beautiful broach that had twenty some diamonds and six cultured pearls in it, which I value very much. But that's the only Christmas gift that she ever gave.

SMOOT: Do you have any idea how much money some of the employees were

given for Christmas?

LAMERE: Oh, like twenty-five dollars usually.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever tell you any stories about being the first lady or any of her childhood stories?

LAMERE: You know, when I came here, I was told that she was a very private person, and I respected her for that, and I did not ask her questions. I didn't pry into her business. I didn't look into her things. And you know, I'm kind of sorry that I didn't. But I respected her privacy, and I really didn't.

Now she did tell me something, she told me some things once. One time she said that Mr. Truman was sitting there in that blue chair, and she was sitting in the gold chair, and he looked at her, and he said, "Well honey, I think it's time we better go home." And she looked at him and she said, "Well, honey, we are at home!" And she said she went out to the kitchen and wept—because she knew then that he was slipping at that time, you know, because he didn't realize where he was. And she hadn't realized it.

And she told me that when he went to the hospital the last time, that she had absolutely no idea he would not be coming back—absolutely. She just thought he was there for this pneumonia and that was it, you know, and that he'd be coming back home.

SMOOT: How much contact did you have with Margaret Truman?

LAMERE: Just when she came here to visit, you know, not very much.

SMOOT: How often did she visit?

LAMERE: Usually once or twice a year.

SMOOT: And how long did she usually stay?

LAMERE: A week.

SMOOT: Did her sons come along with her?

LAMERE: One—I believe twice Tommy came, the youngest one, came. And I believe her husband came twice. Excluding the funeral, I'm not thinking of that time of course. They all came.

SMOOT: Did Margaret call her mother on a regular basis?

LAMERE: Oh, yeah. They talked every Sunday. One would call the other, whichever way it ended up. And they'd talk. Always around eleven o'clock Sunday mornings they'd be talking. And of course, on her birthday they'd talk if she wasn't here. They'd talk at least once a week, and sometimes more often. And the boys wrote to their "Gammy." They called her "Gammy." So they'd write to her and they'd send pictures of things.

SMOOT: Did Margaret and her mother usually talk on the telephone for a long time?

LAMERE: Oh, yeah.

SMOOT: Approximately how long would they talk?

LAMERE: Oh, sometimes they'd talk fifteen to twenty minutes, thirty minutes maybe.

SMOOT: How would you describe Mrs. Truman as an employer?

LAMERE: Oh, she wasn't like an employer to me. She was more like a friend, *really*. She treated me royally. I have worked for all kinds of people—doctors, lawyers—but I've never been treated as well as I was treated by Mrs. Truman. She treated me like a daughter more than she treated me like somebody that worked for her. I couldn't say enough good about her, ever.

SMOOT: When you were paid, were you paid by check or in cash?

LAMERE: I was paid by check.

SMOOT: Did you ever receive a bonus?

LAMERE: She gave me more money at Christmas time than she gave the other people, and I got quite a bit more money than the rest of them got.

SMOOT: Mrs. LaMere, there was a newspaper article in the Independence *Examiner* with you pushing Mrs. Truman in a wheelchair. Do you remember this picture? And there was a gentleman who was standing there, and you were giving a very, very hard look as if you were going to choke him to death. And I was wondering if you recall that photograph in the Independence *Examiner*?

LAMERE: Was that the one that came out across the restaurant perhaps?

SMOOT: I couldn't really tell because of the background.

LAMERE: Was his back to the camera?

SMOOT: Yes, it was.

LAMERE: That's probably the one from Kross's restaurant. That's probably the one.

SMOOT: So did you guys have words?

LAMERE: Oh, no, we got along fine. That was Bob Lockwood. He was the head Secret Service man, and we just made it great. We were good friends. Oh, no, no. I was just mad because they caught us over there, and we couldn't get away quick enough without those cameras. That's all that was about.

SMOOT: I think at this point, maybe we can take a walk around and see some things that are familiar.

LAMERE: All right.

HARRISON: Yeah. Hang on for a minute while I turn this off. [tape turned off]

SMOOT: Mrs. LaMere, during the time that you were here, was Mrs. Truman jolly most of the time?

LAMERE: Yes. She just laughed all the time, but at Christmas time she was sad because naturally, that's when he passed away.

And I remember one Christmas, the only time I ever saw her cry—she had just come home from the hospital, and flowers and gifts and things were just flowing in of course, and one flower came in, and everything that came in I would take it to the bedside to her, and tell her who it was from. And I don't remember now, this was somebody that he, that Mr. Truman knew quite well, was a very good friend of his, and of course I had forgotten who it was, but when I told her who this was from, she just started crying.

Well, that broke my heart to see her cry, and I didn't know what to

do. I'd never seen her like this before, so Bob Lockwood was out in the kitchen, and I went out there, and I said, "Bob, she's crying. What do I do?" He said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "Well, I don't know, either, I've never seen her like this."

So I went back in and I put my arms around her, and I said, "Ms. Truman, I don't want to see you weep, honey. I want to see you happy." And I said, "I know that you don't have too much to be happy about right now at this time of the year, but try honey to be happy and not cry." And she put her arms around me, and she said, "Valerie," she says, "I love you," she says. "Don't you every leave me." And I said all right, but I said, "if you don't quit crying, I'm gonna sing!" And I used to, whenever I was trying to make her laugh, I'd act like I was singing off key, and I could do that real well without much effort.

And so she just started laughing. She said, "Oh no," and so she didn't cry any more after I said I was going to sing. So any time then that she looked like she's getting down in the dumps, I'd say, "Uh, oh, you want to hear me sing again, don't you?" [chuckling] And she'd get to laughing. I forgot about that.

SMOOT: Did she have a very good sense of humor?

LAMERE: Oh, yes, she really did, but you know, she never did ever, ever tell an off-color story. She told me one time, she said, "I've never ever repeated an off-color story that I have heard." She says, "I might have snickered at one or two, but I've never repeated one." And I remember one time I

hired a girl to work here, and by Joe, the first thing that girl did was come in that room and tell her an off-color story.

And I took her in the other room, and I said, "You don't do that here," I said. "We don't appreciate that." So, she never did that again.

SMOOT: Now what do you mean when you say an "off-color story"?

LAMERE: Well, it wasn't too clean, and it wasn't one that I'd want to tell anybody either. It shocked me that this girl did that, you know? And it shocked Ms. Truman even more, I'll tell you. Her eyes bugged. You know, but she never said anything. She made me do all the correcting and everything with anybody.

SMOOT: Mrs. LaMere, when the other nurses were here, where did they eat their meals?

LAMERE: In the kitchen.

SMOOT: When you did the grocery shopping, did the Secret Service accompany you to the grocery store?

LAMERE: When I was first here. For about a year, they did. She made them go with me. And to tell you the truth, I didn't like it. I'd see friends in the store, and they'd see me with a strange man, and it bothered me terribly to always have somebody staring at me because I wasn't with my husband. I was always with a different man. And a lot of people did not know that I worked for Mrs. Truman because I did not make it public. I didn't want people calling me and asking me a lot of questions that I wasn't going to answer. So I didn't tell it.

But yet on the other hand, they kept seeing me with these strange men. So I went to Mrs. Truman one day and I told her how I felt about it, and I said, “Honey, I don’t need these men to go with me to the grocery store,” and she said, “Well, I don’t like it, but,” she says, “you just take the keys to my car and you take it and go.” So from that day on, I took the car, her car, and went wherever I wanted to go, unaccompanied by the men.

SMOOT: Okay. Now when the men went with you, who drove the car?

LAMERE: They did.

SMOOT: Which car did they drive?

LAMERE: Her car.

SMOOT: Did more than one agent go with you?

LAMERE: No, it was usually just one.

SMOOT: Where did you sit in the car?

LAMERE: In the back seat.

SMOOT: On what side of the back seat?

LAMERE: On the right.

SMOOT: How do you feel about having worked for a former first lady?

LAMERE: I feel honored. I feel honored that I was ever allowed to do this job, and I don’t know. There’s no way to describe it.

SMOOT: Did the Trumans ever use any of the fireplaces?

LAMERE: Not while I was here. Now I understand they did in earlier years, but they never used it after I came.

SMOOT: When you first came, which room did Mrs. Truman spend most of her time in?

LAMERE: In this living room, right here, in that gold chair.

SMOOT: Up until what time did Mrs. Peterson work here? Do you recall?

LAMERE: No, I can't remember what year she quit.

SMOOT: When the nurses worked here, did they wear uniforms?

LAMERE: The Upjohn nurses did, but not the ones that I hired. I didn't make them wear uniforms. I felt like Mrs. Truman would be more comfortable with people with street clothes on, rather than to feel like she had nurses looking over her all the time. I felt that it was better not to wear uniforms. So I recommended that they not wear uniforms.

SMOOT: If there was one thing that you thought was extra special about Mrs. Truman, what would it be?

LAMERE: Mercy me, everything about her was special. I just could not tell you one—everything. She was just A Number One Special. She was so thoughtful of others, especially me. She just—"You go sit down. Don't you just keep working like that all the time, go sit down." She didn't want me to earn my money. I wanted to earn my money. She didn't want me to. She wanted me to sit down and talk to her, you know, and said I was up working all the time. Well, that's what I was here for, I felt like, you know? But she was just—to know her was to love her, period. There's just nothing else you could say.

SMOOT: Did you supervise Reverend Hobby or Mrs. Peterson?

LAMERE: No, no. They were here before I came, and they knew what their job was, and they did it, and there was no supervision for them at all. Now if there was something, after Mrs. Truman became quite ill, if there was something that he wanted to know if I wanted it done or something like that, you know, we discussed things. But usually they knew their job and they did it.

SMOOT: Who made up the grocery list?

LAMERE: I did. Mrs. Truman did at first, but then when she became more ill, I took that over, too. And nothing was ever bought, ever when she was able to talk and supervise things, *nothing* ever was bought without her approval. Groceries, drugs, anything that came through this house met with her approval, and I saw to it that it stayed that way, even after I started hiring help.

One of the women that I hired just went out and ordered something and bought it, and came in with it, and I told her never to do that again, because she must go through Mrs. Truman or me with it before she did that. You know, she couldn't do that with Mrs. Truman's money.

SMOOT: Well, Mrs. LaMere, I'd like to thank you for your time.

HARRISON: Well, I think you might like to ask a bit more about the Christmas decorations. That's one thing . . .

LAMERE: I didn't have any. Margaret didn't want me to bother with those. They were packed away upstairs, so I never got into it. When the Upjohn nurses came, they wanted to go up there and bring Mrs. Truman's things

down, and I wouldn't let them. I said, "No, Margaret said not to touch it." So I didn't let anybody touch it. We never had any.

I had a tree. Now, I had a ceramic Christmas tree at home that when you plugged it in it lit up. And I brought that, and it stood up about six or eight inches high. And I'd bring that and put it on her dresser, in her bedroom, and she just loved it. She looked forward to that because, you know, it was pretty. And she always said, "I hate for Christmas to be over because I'm gonna lose that tree." I'd take it back home. But she had that tree all through Christmas and New Year's. And she enjoyed that. But that was the only decoration that she had.

SMOOT: Why do you think Margaret didn't want to bring the Christmas decorations down?

LAMERE: I don't know. I have no idea. I never discussed it with her, you know? But she just didn't want us to get into it, so I refused to let anyone go up and bring it down. Now, Mrs. Truman would order a wreath for the door, you know, through the florist, and we'd have that every year, always and a florist wreath on the door. But that's all.

SMOOT: Do you know what the name of the florist was?

LAMERE: Yeah, I do, but I can't think of it. It's the one over in Englewood. But I can't think of the name of it. Over there by Petey Childers. I can't think of the name of it, honey. [pause]

This is the picture here in this living room that she'd sit and look at of Mr. Truman. And if I'd see her sitting here staring at that picture, I'd

come in and make her laugh about something and get her mind off of it.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever mention any other accidents that her car had been in?

LAMERE: No. She didn't know her car had been in that one, because I didn't tell her! [laughter] But I didn't tell her because I was afraid she'd be angry; I didn't tell her because I knew that she'd worry about me. That's the kind of person she was. She wouldn't worry about anything about that car.

Oh, I believe she did tell me that when she quit driving, she had come through there and hit that garage. And that's when she quit driving. That was the last time, she said when she hit that garage coming through there, she knew it was time to stop.

HARRISON: Was that before you started to work here?

LAMERE: Yes, that was before I came here, but she was telling me about it. She laughed about it.

SMOOT: Do you remember at what level Mrs. Truman kept the shades pulled?

LAMERE: Just a little higher, because she could see the school bus. She set her clock by that school bus. It'd come by here at three o'clock every day without fail. And so she'd set them so that she could see out a little bit higher than that.

SMOOT: I wanted to ask you—do you recall any storms or ice storms where any of the trees were damaged?

LAMERE: Yes. One night, and don't ask me what year, but that year that we had the hurricane went through here. I was just ready to go home that night

when that storm came up, and all the lights went out, and those big trees over there—where are we here—on this side, over here, on this side went down, two big trees went down. One of them came this way and knocked off some of the wires out of the house. She was pretty scared that night. I think everybody was. It was a terrific storm.

SMOOT: Were the trees on the side of the house or were they—

LAMERE: They were on the side. I mean, over by the fence. Yes. One of them was in the corner there. I'm all turned around here for some reason. But there was two or three big, big trees that went down. They were hollow inside.

HARRISON: On the alley or Truman Road?

LAMERE: On the Truman Road side. And one time some kid come around that corner there off of Delaware and came through the fence, and knocked the fence down one night. That had to be repaired. I don't think he drove any more for a while.

HARRISON: That was on the Truman Road side?

LAMERE: On Truman Road, uh-huh. He came around Delaware and he didn't make the corner, and he came through on the Truman Road side on the fence.

I was trying to think of something else that might have happened . . .

HARRISON: Did you ever use the gate onto Truman Road, or did you see that used at all?

LAMERE: Yes, it was used when the trash men would come. You know, those kind of things, they used it for, but that's all. And when she would have to go

to the hospital, the ambulance driver would use that entranceway usually.

HARRISON: Where was the mail delivered?

LAMERE: Secret Service got it first. And they'd bring it over here. They went through it first, and you know, she never got candy through the mail. I guess you knew that. They scrutinized everything, you know, but candy, she never saw a box of candy.

SMOOT: Were there always fresh flowers in the house?

LAMERE: No, no. No, huh-uh. There was always some greenery, you know.

SMOOT: Mrs. LaMere, I'd like to thank you for your time. You've been very helpful in the future interpretation of the Harry S Truman National Historic Site, and you've just been fantastic. And I'm sure history appreciates what you've done here today. I know I do, because I never would have gotten the chance to meet you and I just want to thank you.

LAMERE: You're welcome, and I've enjoyed doing it very much. [gap in tape]

SMOOT: Mrs. LaMere, would you state your full name and address and tell me what your birth date is, please?

LAMERE: Well, my name is Valeria LaMere. Everyone calls me Valerie. My address is 1310 West Maple, Independence, Missouri. I was born February 8th in 1926.

SMOOT: Are you a native of Independence?

LAMERE: No, I was born and reared in Waynesboro, Virginia.

SMOOT: And how long have you lived in Independence?

LAMERE: Since 1954.

SMOOT: I just have one final question. How often were you paid by Mrs. Truman?

LAMERE: Every week.

[End #3072; Begin #3073]

LAMERE: I'll never forget that moment. I promised her I'd never leave her, and I never did. [tape turned off]

SMOOT: Valerie, do you know these people in this picture? [See appendix item 7.] Have you ever seen these people before?

LAMERE: Oh, yeah, that's the Grays. Now I don't remember who this lady was.

HARRISON: The one on the left.

LAMERE: On the left, I don't remember who that was. But that's Mrs. Gray there. She was his secretary-treasurer.

SMOOT: Okay. This is the lady on the right hand side?

LAMERE: On the right hand side is Mrs. Gray, uh-huh. Of course, that's Margaret and her husband there.

SMOOT: Are there any special stories about any of these objects in the living room?

LAMERE: Margaret's boys gave her this for Christmas one year. I don't know what you'd call that, but you swing it and it just keeps swinging. I don't know what you'd call it. But she enjoyed it.

HARRISON: Just for the tape, it's a silver, I don't know what you'd call it, either, a silver thing on the mantle.

LAMERE: You see them in the stores, you know, but I don't know what you call them. These things were all here when I came. All this . . . that ship is something that catches everybody's eye. There's a lot of work in that. Oh, this. Mr. Gray brought her. You set this in the sun, and it plays music. Solar. I believe that one has "Happy Birthday" on it. I'm not sure. When you put it in the light. Don't tell me it doesn't work.

HARRISON: It does in the sunlight, yeah.

LAMERE: "You Are My Sunshine," that's what it is. But he brought her another one, but I've forgotten now what it was, but it played "Happy Birthday" to her.

HARRISON: Is this the. . . you were talking about Margaret's books. The one here, *White House Pets*.

LAMERE: *My Souvenirs* is the name of the book that Margaret wrote, and beautifully written. And you could read that to her over and over and over again, and you would enjoy it as much as Mrs. Truman did. It's a beautifully written book.

SMOOT: Now we're entering the downstairs bedroom. Do you remember this chair?

LAMERE: Yes. I went out and got that chair for her. A La-Z-Boy. I thought she was uncomfortable in the chair she was using, so I went out and bought that for her, and it was too big for her. She was, it swallowed her up. [chuckling] She was such a tiny little thing in that chair, so I ended up sitting in it, and she went back to her old chair.

There's her telephone stand, and her favorite letter opener. This was her favorite letter opener. Beautiful. She enjoyed this picture. Now, I don't know she'd lay here and look at that picture and just look at it and think, how beautiful. What was the name of that?

SMOOT: "Life in the Country."

LAMERE: "Life in the Country." She just enjoyed looking at that picture so much when she was ill in bed here.

SMOOT: Which bed did she sleep in?

LAMERE: This one on the left. This one was covered most of the time with mail, letters, things that she didn't want to get away from her. I mean, it was covered. But we both knew where everything was.

SMOOT: When you first came here to work, where did Mrs. Truman sleep?

LAMERE: She slept in this left bed.

SMOOT: When you first came to work here?

LAMERE: When I first came here.

SMOOT: Is this the same bed?

LAMERE: Yes, yes. This is the same bed.

HARRISON: We have these on just to kind of keep the . . .

LAMERE: Oh, I see. Yes. Okay. This is it. This is all the same. I see what you're doing. Okay.

SMOOT: So has this room changed at all since the first time you came to work here, and after Mrs. Truman's death, before you left?

LAMERE: No. Of course, we had to take the beds out and put the hospital bed in,

but this is the way it was when I first came here.

SMOOT: Do you remember when the hospital bed was put into this room?

LAMERE: I believe in ’80, but I’m not sure if it was ’80 or ’81. I can’t remember.

SMOOT: Who moved this bed out of this room?

LAMERE: Mr. Hobby did.

SMOOT: Alone?

LAMERE: I think he did. He did everything alone. He was a worker, a real worker, really. He was wonderful.

SMOOT: Where was the bed stored once he took it out of this room?

LAMERE: Up in the attic, on third floor. I called that the attic, but it’s the third floor. I don’t know.

SMOOT: What about this bed here?

LAMERE: Yes. It went out, too, because we brought a big table, a big round table so the nurses could have something to work with, and I put that in the corner for them.

SMOOT: But before the hospital bed was put into this room, these were the beds that were here?

LAMERE: Yes, yes, yes, everything. I remember one night, I was staying here all night, and oh, my, we heard the most awful noise you ever heard in your life in the middle of the night. Boy, I came running down these steps, and Mrs. Truman was sitting up on the side of the bed, and I said, “Well, honey, what was that noise?” She said, “What was it?” I said, “Well, I don’t know.” And she started getting up, and I said, “Where are you

going?" She said, "I'm gonna find out where that noise was." She says, "It was here in this room." Well, sir, I tell you, the Secret Service, we were all just really wondering what—it was terrible.

So I finally got her back to bed and settled down, and I started walking out and looked and that mirror there had fallen on the floor. And if you think that didn't make a noise. And it was down on the floor there behind that chest. [chuckling] But I'll tell you one thing, we all felt relieved when we saw that on the floor. [chuckling] Oh, my. Memories, memories.

SMOOT: Is there anything special about anything else in this room?

LAMERE: No, I don't think so. These little blue dishes here had Estee Lauder powders and things in them that someone gave her for Christmas one year. No. I love that picture of Margaret. It's so beautiful of her holding that baby like that. No, there's nothing else. Everything looks the same. Someone gave her this not too long before she died, but I've forgotten now who it was. It goes around and plays music.

[Moving into the music room] I used to play the piano for her. She loved it. I don't play very well. I'm just a, you know, haphazard player, but she'd tell me to come in and play, and I'd play for her. I think it brought memories back from Mr. Truman playing, you know? And then we had a nurse that could play, that played for her, and enjoyed it so much.

HARRISON: Would she sit here in the music room?

LAMERE: Well, usually, at the time that I was playing, she'd be in the bedroom, and she'd say, "Play a little louder, I can't hear you!" But the nurses now, when they came on, the Upjohn nurses came finally, they'd bring her wheelchair in here and sit and play for her, because she needed constant watching at that period of her life. And I didn't know it until I'd been here many years, that this was a gaslight in the music room here. I kept trying to find out where to turn that light on, and it wouldn't come on. [laughter] I believe the Grays gave her these things.

HARRISON: The crystal owl and the birds?

LAMERE: Yes, I believe those came from the Grays. I love that picture of her over the mantle.

HARRISON: Did she ever talk to you about her first lady portrait?

LAMERE: The only thing she ever told me was that this is the original, that the White House doesn't have the original, that it accidentally got packed and brought here. So she had another one made for the White House. Now, this is what she told me. And this is the original. Is that right?

SMOOT: What room did Mrs. Truman watch her baseball games in?

LAMERE: I brought my little Sony, I had a little nine-inch Sony, and I'd take it into the bedroom, because she was more comfortable in the bedroom than any room in the house. So I'd bring my little Sony and set it up for her. But now when the Upjohn nurses came, they brought her and she watched it in here.

HARRISON: Would she watch any baseball game, or just the Royals?

LAMERE: Just the Royals. Yeah.

HARRISON: You mentioned the Olympics. Were there any other sporting events—

LAMERE: Now she knew that I liked the Olympics. So I always said she watched them just so I could see them. She treated me so good, and she did a lot of things for me. I really believe that, you know, that she probably wouldn't have watched it, but she knew that I wanted to see it, so she sat there and she enjoyed it after I got her interested in it.

SMOOT: Now we're in the study of the Truman home.

LAMERE: When I first came to work here, I sat there. I stayed in this room. I wasn't allowed to sit with her when I first came to work here. She didn't know me, of course. And I stayed here. And when she needed me, she rang her little bell and I'd get up and go see what she wanted. But it was only about six months after that when she invited me to come in and sit with her.

So then I started staying with her constantly, and she wanted me with her. There's a picture missing here. Oh, here it is. This was a favorite, that was one of Margaret's favorite pictures of her.

SMOOT: Can you show me where the books were stacked?

LAMERE: Right here where you're standing.

SMOOT: Right here under the Audubon picture?

LAMERE: Right on this wall here. This whole wall was covered with books. And she had read every one of them.

HARRISON: Did she spend time in this room?

LAMERE: She came in this room in the five years that I was here, I believe she came in here twice. You see, this is where she and Mr. Truman sat, right there, on each side of that lamp. So, I didn't encourage her to come in here because I knew, you know, she still loved him. She thought about him constantly and when you'd talk about him, tears would come to her eyes. So I avoided that subject of Mr. Truman as much as I could. I didn't want her to be sad. I wanted her to be happy. So I avoided it and I avoided doing things that would make her think of him, you know. And this is where they sat all the time to read.

SMOOT: Did Mrs. Truman ever listen to the hi-fi?

LAMERE: No, never did. Never did. Everything looks so nice. Everything is the same. This is my calendar. I have a friend that works for the railroad, and they always gave me those big calendars, so I put it here and made notations on things. The reverend was gonna be out of town, so I'd try and do his work for him.

SMOOT: Reverend Hobby?

LAMERE: Uh-huh. I just made notations and marked the days off. Had one in the kitchen that I did that with, too. And they're still hanging, I see.

SMOOT: Why did you mark the days off?

LAMERE: Well, I don't know. I do that at home. I get mixed up as to what week it is since I'm not working, so I just mark the days off. I had my only wreck that I ever had in a car with Mrs. Truman's. I don't know if you all remember that or not.

SMOOT: Why don't you tell us about it?

LAMERE: Well, I had gone to get groceries or something, and I was coming across River and Truman, and this guy run a red light. Boy, he knocked me clear across, I almost went up the telephone pole trying to get away from him. And oh, I tell you, I was furious. He came over to the car, and I said, "Do you know whose car this it that you hit?" That was the only thing I could think of, I was so mad. And he said, "No, I don't." And I said, "Well, this is Mrs. Truman's car. Look at what you've done to it." But his car was completely demolished. I mean, he was coming through there like, you know, but I had three witnesses that he ran that light, so I was in business. Got her car fixed up right away. I never did tell her about it; she never knew about that. It would've worried her. It wouldn't have made her mad, it would have worried her about me, because that's the kind of person she was. She would have worried and worried for fear I'd have been hurt or something, you know, and so I never told her anything that would worry her.

SMOOT: Who fixed the car?

LAMERE: Oh, you're asking me a name again. Down here on Noland Road. I can't tell you the name of it. I'd have to go by it to see it.

HARRISON: What part of the car was damaged?

LAMERE: He hit the right hand front side, the front door and the front bumper. Of course, her car was a good car, a well built car, so it didn't take the beating that his car took. If it had been one of these cars like I'm driving

now, it would have been a has-been, you know?

Oh, how beautiful you have the dining room fixed! These were the White House dishes in the closet here. Beautiful. Now that chandelier, Margaret sent, I think she sent that to her from New York, I think. I know Margaret gave it to her, and I think it came from New York.

HARRISON: Was that during the time that you worked for her?

LAMERE: No, it was here when I came here. Mrs. Truman told me about that. And this here, how long had I been here before I realized that I could stick a piece of pie in there and warm it up? Did you all know this? It took me a long time to learn that. Boy, after I found out that that thing had a shelf in it and could heat food, I had a ball, I'll tell you. I warmed up my pie quickly. You know, that's unique. That's something that you don't see every day.

HARRISON: So you did actually use that?

LAMERE: Oh, I did, after I found out what it was. I just thought the heat come up through there. I didn't know that you could open that door and stick pies and stuff in there, you know, but when I found out, boy, we really used it. You see, I came in here green. Nobody showed me anything. Mrs. Truman was in that gold chair, and that's where she stayed. If I found out anything, it was by accident because there wasn't anyone here to tell me where anything was. I had to find it, you know? So it took me a long time to find out a lot of things here.

SMOOT: Was there ever any music in this room, in the dining room?

LAMERE: Yeah. Her stereo sat right there. Mr. Truman's stereo sat right there, and I used to play that. But not too much, because I was afraid I wouldn't hear her if I had that on, so it was very seldom that I ever turned it on. But once in a while I did, and then when she became quite ill, the nurses wheeled it into her bedroom and played it all the time real low for her to have music.

SMOOT: What kind of music did she like to listen to?

LAMERE: Mrs. Truman didn't. She never did. When she became quite ill, the nurses did it. I don't know if she enjoyed it or not; they just did it. They thought it would soothe her, I think, to have music when she was in bed. But I don't know.

You still have the same plants here. They're well taken care of. They're flourishing.

HARRISON: There were quite a number of house plants in the house. What was the source of those?

LAMERE: Just greeneries.

HARRISON: Did people send those to Mrs. Truman?

LAMERE: They were all here when I came here, and Reverend Hobby took care of the plants. He was a green thumb. He also had a rose garden out in the back of here that he took care of. Of course, at holidays, birthdays, and so on, the house was filled with flowers. Oh my, you just couldn't get through here for the flowers.

SMOOT: Were there any other decorations besides flowers?

LAMERE: No, no.

HARRISON: Did she have flowers from the garden or anything like that, other than for holidays and birthdays?

LAMERE: I used to go out and pick flowers and bring them in. Yeah. Lilacs and things like that that she liked.

SMOOT: When Mrs. Truman had her ninety-sixth birthday party, where did she sit?

LAMERE: She sat at the head of the table here. She sat here, and then when she'd finish her mail I'd push her back here, and we had a big table sitting here with gifts on it. And at home, I had two poinsettia electric tree lights. They're homemade, I bought them, and I'd set those there on each end and turn them on. It was beautiful, red lights, and then we'd put the gifts all around those tree lights. And she really liked that.

[End #3073; Begin #3074]

LAMERE: Oh, maybe Alice was coming to visit her or something, I don't know.

SMOOT: Who's Alice, do you know who Alice is?

LAMERE: Well, her last name was Pikert. She helped me here once in a while.

SMOOT: You ready Steve? We gotta go to court on August 3, 1982.

LAMERE: Court?

SMOOT: That's what it says, court at 10:30.

LAMERE: Oh, wait a minute, what did I have to go to court for? I went to court. Oh, it was for that wreck, that was for that wreck, that's what that was for. That's when it happened, do I have it marked here when the wreck

was?

SMOOT: I don't see it.

LAMERE: Well, that was the only time I went to court. So that's about when that wreck happened. So now we know. It was in 1982.

SMOOT: Okay, so we were talking about plants.

HARRISON: You were talking about Mrs. Truman sitting at the head of the table, which is the north end of the table, and you'd push her back to the west end of the buffet, and you had the table with the decorations in the northwest corner of the room.

LAMERE: Uh-huh. And then we'd set the cake that Mr. Talge always made for her, that went there, that last one said, "Four More To Go," and we set that right there. And then we put all the other refreshments on the whole of the table. We had a lot of refreshments. She did love to eat. I never had any problems feeding her. She loved to eat.

SMOOT: Who cooked Thanksgiving dinner?

LAMERE: I did, her last one. I didn't stay. But I usually . . . Now Mr. Talge, now that's the only one I cooked for Thanksgiving. Now I'd cooked the Christmas dinners, but every Thanksgiving that I worked here, he brought dinner in to her. The whole thing—turkey, everything. And one year she was in the hospital on Thanksgiving, and he took it there and gave her dinner there, and the nurses and the Secret Service, anybody that took care of Mrs. Truman had dinner there at the hospital—wine and all, white wine, the works. He did that every year, and he was very

good to her, very good to her.

He knew what foods she liked, and he'd always bring her food over here, and she could afford to buy her own food, but he enjoyed doing something for Mrs. Truman, so he'd cook up a turkey or a chicken or something during the year and bring it to her, you know. Very good to her.

HARRISON: You indicated earlier that there were some holidays that you and your family spent here? Or that was earlier?

LAMERE: No, later. Later we did, after she got to know my family better, and they'd come over and visit with her, and she got to know them more. Then she'd invited them to come and eat dinner with us on Christmas and Thanksgiving. So they did.

HARRISON: And where would you have that meal?

LAMERE: Right here in this dining room.

HARRISON: And where did everybody sit? Were there special places to sit, or did it make any difference?

LAMERE: Well, if I remember rightly, Mrs. Truman sat here at the end, and I sat over there because it was easy access for me to get to the kitchen, and my husband would sit here and my son would sit here.

HARRISON: Did you use special dishes? Was she particular about dishes that were used?

LAMERE: Oh, no, I usually would get something different. She had so many sets of dishes, that I'd go get something different that she wasn't used to seeing

every day, and fix up the table with it, something I didn't use all the time.

And she loved oysters, too. I'll tell you, that was something she liked. My son works in computers, and he was a manager of some company in Houston one time, so I wanted to go down there before Christmas, just before Christmas, to visit him. So she told me to go. But she said, "You know what to bring back, don't you?" So I brought back raw oysters, fresh raw oysters, and did we have a feast. I'll tell you, we'd sit in that bedroom and both of us sat there and devoured those raw oysters till we was almost sick.

And then she went to the kitchen with me, and I had never ever fixed scalloped oysters, because I was gonna eat them raw. I'm not going to cook those buzzards. And she said, "Let's scallop some of them." And I said, "Well, I don't know how." "Well," she says, "I do. Come on." So I wheeled her into the kitchen and she sat there at the table and made scalloped oysters, fixed them herself. And they were so good. But that was very fun.

She'd come out there a lot of times and watch me cook, you know. She loved to sit with me and talk while I did things. One time I wanted to do something in the kitchen, so I gave her a book and she was apparently sitting there behaving herself. I went out to the kitchen, and the next thing you know, here she comes walking with her walker. I don't know how she ever made it from that bedroom clear back to that

kitchen, but I'll tell you, she didn't make it back. I had to take her back in a wheelchair. That was as far as she could get. But she wanted to come out in that kitchen with me. [laughter] So there she stood—surprised me. But she did love to come out there with me.

HARRISON: Can you recall any other occasions when people would have joined her for meals here in the dining room?

LAMERE: No, we didn't. No, I didn't fix meals for anybody else. I did good to fix a meal for her.

SMOOT: When you fixed Mrs. Truman's meals, did you eat with her?

LAMERE: Yes. Unless Margaret was here. When Margaret was here, I didn't eat here with her at all.

HARRISON: But you'd fix the meals for her and for Margaret?

LAMERE: Oh, yes, I'd fix them, and then I'd stay in the kitchen. Kitchen looks the same. I miss this kitchen. I enjoyed cooking out here, I did. I know a lot of people think she should have had garbage disposals and everything else. Well, she did. [laughter] Oh, my. The same toaster, all these pictures here. Grandma Moses pictures. Oh, there's my other calendar with all my little markings on them. Oh, my. Flip through those pages—hard to tell what you'd find on them. All kinds of goodies.

SMOOT: When did you first start marking the days on the calendar?

LAMERE: Probably from day one that I came, because I've always done it for years and years. I've always done that. That's just a habit I have. It's an odd one, but I do it. Then I used to mark the calendar to say who was going

to be working what days and what hours. I used to sometimes put that on the calendar, too. That's a different refrigerator than was here when I first came. She had a great big one, and it kind of started going out on us, so we bought this one. One of the other girls—I broke my foot one night, and had a cast on, so I wasn't here when the other girl bought that one.

HARRISON: Do you remember what year that was?

LAMERE: That I broke my foot?

HARRISON: Well, that, and when you got the new refrigerator, both.

LAMERE: Not really. I don't really remember, no. I know Mrs. Truman paid me whether I worked or not. If she was in the hospital, I'd go see her and she'd write my check out just like I had worked. When I was off with my broken foot, she made me take my money whether I worked or not. And you know, there's not many people that do that. That was a noble thing that she did.

And I didn't expect it, you know? But that just shows you a little bit of her character, too. This is a radio I believe, isn't it, that bunch of books here? Yeah. It took me how many years to discover that was not a bunch of books setting there. I couldn't believe it. I went to pick it up one day and that flew open, and my word, that's not books, that's a radio.

And this table here, I don't know how many years it was before I realized it was a warming table. Really, I'm the most unobserving

person I suppose that you can say, but I just look at things and say well, that's what that is.

HARRISON: Did you use that cart?

LAMERE: Yes, after I figured out what it was, you know. Yeah, I used it. I used it on all of her birthday parties and Christmas parties. I tried to get Margaret to give it to me, and she wouldn't do it. There it is. This has a chopper in the drawer somewhere that you chop with. I wanted that bowl so bad. I used that nearly every day here.

HARRISON: That wooden bowl?

LAMERE: It's a wooden bowl in the pantry, and the chopper perhaps is in the drawer here. It's a cast iron job. You probably will never, ever see another one like it. [looking through drawer] Somebody's lifted it. I guess Margaret took it, maybe. It was a cast iron flat plate like thing, and you'd chop with it, and boy, the job that thing did. Oh. But she loved olives and cream cheese chopped up together, and put that on bread for a sandwich. So that's what I chopped those olives with. She enjoyed that quite often for her lunch. It's good. Try it sometime. It was real good. No, I don't see it. It's not here, not here. I don't see anything else.

We used that gas heater quite often. This kitchen got pretty cold. And I was scared to light it. My sister-in-law was burned quite badly one time with one of those, and I was scared to death of it. So I'd make Mrs. Peterson light it. When she came in the mornings, I'd say, "Don't you turn that off now, because I won't relight it." So Mrs. Peterson

would leave it on for me. But they'd never burn it all night, because they were afraid to. So the kitchen got kind of cold at night.

HARRISON: And what about the air conditioner that was in the window here? Did you use that?

LAMERE: Oh, yes, and Mrs. Truman insisted that I use it. Now I'm a conservative person, and I'm that way at home, too, but I'm more that way when I work for somebody. I try to save them every penny I can. And she'd say, "You got that air on?" I'd say, "No, I don't need it." "You go turn that on," and she'd tell me what to turn it on to, you know, and she'd make me turn it on and use it. She'd say, "You need that." But a lot of the time I didn't. I'd tell her it was on and it wouldn't be on, you know, because they're expensive to use.

Is that a new bell there, or is that the one the Secret Service had? I can't remember if that's it or not. There was one here in the kitchen in that area, and when she'd push her buzzer it would ring. That might still be a part of that.

HARRISON: She had a button in her room?

LAMERE: Yeah, it was on a chord, and I put it under her pillow at night or by her chair during the day. And if she needed me and I was back here, or I was upstairs, she'd ring that and I would hear it. Because one time, she said she just screamed and screamed and screamed. Well, you can hear how far this is from the kitchen, and I didn't hear her. So, I'll tell you something really embarrassing.

I had an old cow bell at home. My husband has heart trouble, and I make him ring that cow bell. Well, he was doing pretty good, so I thought I'd bring that cow bell over here, and I'd make her ring that from the living room. And she did ring it one time, and you know what? I heard it, and I thought it was the ice cream truck going by. I'll never forget that as long as I live. [laughter] I thought, well, I never heard an ice cream truck go by before. But that's what it was.

And I went in later and she said, "Didn't you hear me calling you?" And I said, "Oh, I forgot I gave you that bell. I heard you and thought it was the ice cream truck." [laughter] So then we got that other thing rigged up from the Secret Service, so that took care of that. But that embarrassed me. But she just laughed. She laughed about everything. She never got mad, never got mad at me. I did anything I wanted to do and got by with it, too. Bless her heart.

[On the back porch] They had grapes out here, white—oh, they've taken the grape vines down.

HARRISON: We had to cut them back for the restoration work. But they'll be back.

LAMERE: Oh, I see. Well, they were white grapes, and we used to watch the squirrels and the birds eat those, and then the bird house I put up out here on this side of the back porch here in this corner might still be there, I don't know.

HARRISON: I don't recall seeing it. Was it wood—a wren house?

LAMERE: A little wren house. I just got it up here at Midlands, but she enjoyed

watching the birds come and go, because she sat there on the porch all day.

HARRISON: Did you ever use the grapes for anything?

LAMERE: No, we'd just eat them. We never used them. Well, I told her, that was cruel. She had them all wrapped up in the rose bushes, you know? You couldn't get to them. The rose bushes and the grapes intertwined each other. You couldn't get to either one.

But there used to be a bird that made a nest right there on the porch in that grape vine, and the cats got him every year. So you know, I went out there and tore that nest out, because I said that's cruel. So I went out and tore it down.

SMOOT: What kind of furniture sat on the back porch during the time that you were here?

LAMERE: It was that white wrought iron porch furniture, the great big round white table, and she had chairs with cushions, and she had her lamp out there, and had a clock on the wall, and she'd take her telephone out. It'd be out there if she had a call. I'd take the phone out for her, as far as I can remember.

HARRISON: That white porch furniture was there from the time that you got here?

LAMERE: We put it out there in the summer time, and then reverend would take it to the basement in the winter. He kept that porch just as clean as he kept the house. It was just nice out there; any time you wanted to go out, you were just comfortable.

HARRISON: I wanted to ask. You mentioned the phone, and we're here by this phone. Where did she have phones in the house?

LAMERE: Well, it seems to me like when I first came here there was one here. And there was one in the study, and there was one in her bedroom. But I believe I had this one taken out because I didn't see any need for it, and I left the one in the study—oh, no, there was one in the hall. Now that was his, when he was in the White House, I believe that one in the hall was his personal phone, I believe. It was an old black phone, one of the real old ones. Is it still there? So there were one, two, three phones in the house.

HARRISON: So the black phone in the hallway was still there—

LAMERE: I believe there was one upstairs too, though. I think there was one upstairs.

SMOOT: Do you remember where it was?

LAMERE: In the room I slept in. Yes, there was one upstairs.

HARRISON: And then which one would Mrs. Truman use?

LAMERE: The one in her bedroom, downstairs. [pause] A lot of dishes and things used to be in there.

HARRISON: You mentioned the bell that she would ring, except for the cow bell! I wondered is this it?

LAMERE: This is the one, yeah.

HARRISON: Right here on the buffet in the dining room.

LAMERE: Yeah, that's the one. You've got it glued down. Well, that's a good idea,

right. [laughing] Yes, that was the one.

HARRISON: The epergne here was apparently a gift to her parents when they were married. Did she ever mention it?

LAMERE: Never talked about it, no. It set there all the time I was here. I don't know a thing about that. [in the foyer] But this is where the other phone was. I believe that was Mr. Truman's personal phone, and it sat right there. It was one of the real old black ones, you know? Her coats always hung right here, that she wore every day.

HARRISON: What doors tended to be used in the house? How would people get in and out?

LAMERE: Oh, the front door and the one in the kitchen.

HARRISON: The south kitchen door?

LAMERE: Uh-huh, that was the limit. Because we kept these locked most of the time, except if the Secret Service was in the house, we'd open them for air to come through.

SMOOT: Was this door in the living room ever opened?

LAMERE: Oh, yes, for air. But no one used it. It was always kept locked. I was sitting here one time reading in this chair over here—

SMOOT: In the living room?

LAMERE: Yes, and she was sitting in the bedroom reading. We were kind of back to back, you know. We both had a good light. And this door was open. I heard some lady come say, "Well, we made it this far. So far, so good." Kept on making those kind of remarks, you know, and I put my book

down and I come out here and met her right here in the door, right here. I said, “Just a minute,” I said. “Who are you?” “Well,” she said, “this is the Truman home, isn’t it?” I said, “Yes, but what are you doing in it?” [chuckling]

“Why,” she said, “they told me at the library I could see the Truman home.” And I said, “Yes, but from the outside, ma’am, how did you get in the yard?” Well, she said, “The gate was open.” So the next thing you know, there’s the Secret Service, and her husband had gotten in by that time, and they just talked very kindly to her, you know, escorted her out. But she was very indignant that she couldn’t come in here. [chuckling]

I guess Bob Lockwood probably told you about the time a man was crouching down over here, and the Secret Service saw him. He come over with a flashlight, and this man didn’t look up, and the Secret Service tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Hey, whatcha doing, buddy?” He says, didn’t even look up, he says, “I’m getting a souvenir. Hold this flashlight, and I’ll get you one, too.” [laughter]

They used to tell us a lot of things that happened, you know. [laughter] I guess that was the end of his souvenir day. [Harrison directs the women to go in and sit down while he puts the other tape back on the recorder.]

SMOOT: This has been a fun interview, Steve.

LAMERE: Have you really enjoyed this?

SMOOT: Oh, yes, I sure have.

LAMERE: Oh, oh, that's good. I was afraid I wouldn't have anything to tell you. [chuckling]

SMOOT: Steve and I are going to start calling you Valerie Wonderful.

LAMERE: [laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW

APPENDIX

1. Trudy Johnson photograph of Valeria LaMere and Bess W. Truman, February 1981, during a party for her ninety-sixth birthday. (HSTR photograph collection)

2. Photograph of President Jimmy Carter and Bess W. Truman's staff, Sept. 2, 1980. (Courtesy of the Jimmy Carter Library)

3. Photographs of Valeria LaMere and Bess W. Truman, July 1978. (Courtesy of Valeria LaMere)

4. "Bess Truman: This First Lady Was Seldom Photographed," *The Great Years of Kansas City* 2:6 (January 1984).

5. "First lady pays visit to eatery," *The Examiner*, August 9, 1979.

6. Christmas card and envelope from Andy Gray to "Val Wonderful," December 1979.

7. Photograph of Mrs. John Carlin, Bess W. Truman, and Georgia Neese Clark Gray (HSTR catalog #26496).

8. Trudy Johnson photograph of May Wallace and Valeria LaMere in the dining room of the Truman home during a Christmas party, December 1980. (HSTR photograph collection)

9. "Small party to celebrate Bess' 96th," *Kansas City Star*, February 12, 1981.

10. "Mrs. Truman to mark 97th year with party," *Kansas City Star*, February 12, 1982.

11. Captioned photograph of Valeria LaMere in front of the Truman home, *The Examiner*, October 19, 1982.

12. "Confidants recall a quiet, gracious lady," *Kansas City Times*, October 19, 1982.

Item 1

Item 2

Item 3a

Item 3b

Item 3c

HSTL Vertical File
"Truman, Bess W. — Death Tributes"

The Great Years of Kansas City

A Senior Citizen Publication

BESS TRUMAN: Photos Of Her Are Rare

(See page 5)

Volume 2, Number 6 COMPLIMENTARY COPY January, 1984

Item 4a

BESS TRUMAN: This First Lady Was Seldom Photographed

Bess Truman was often referred to as "the not oft' photographed first lady". The photographs reproduced in this issue were obtained through the courtesy of Gary Plowman of Studio Three Photography in Plowman Gallery, Independence, Missouri. In July, 1978, Mr. Plowman was invited to the Truman home to photograph Bess Truman. Because photos of her were so rare, one of the pictures he took then was used on national TV after her death.

Mrs. Valerie Lamere, who was Mrs. Truman's companion for the last five years of her life, has graciously agreed to share her experiences of life with the first lady.

Mrs. Lamere, who had worked for several years as a nurse companion, had always dreamed of being asked to become Mrs. Truman's companion. One day she was surprised to receive a phone call from a woman who asked Mrs. L. if she would be a cook for Mrs. Truman. Mrs. L. told her that the only cooking she had ever done was for her husband and she did not feel that she could cook for someone else. The next day another woman called, again having the same request. Again Mrs. L. assured her that she was not a cook. The third call she received was from Mrs. Truman herself, who invited Mrs. Lamere over for a visit. Of course, this invitation could not be refused. A rapport between the two seemed to occur immediately — the rest, as they say, is history. During their visit, Mrs. Truman invited Mrs. L. to tour the kitchen. Mrs. L. thought, now why would I want to do that, but tour the kitchen she did and she also ended up cooking. It's interesting to note that Mrs. Truman was often to be found in the kitchen with Valerie, telling her how to prepare different dishes. She was always easy to please and described every dish as "delicious".

Life at the Truman household was considerably different that that Mrs. L. was accustomed to. For one thing, there was the secret service. Any time she and Mrs. Truman left the house they were accompanied by the secret service. At first, they even accompanied Mrs. L. when she went grocery shopping, etc., but eventually Mrs. Truman lent her her car and Valerie was allowed to leave without a secret service escort. In fact, the only accident Mrs. L. ever had was, naturally, while she was driving Mrs. Truman's car. A man ran a red light and hit Mrs. L. — her first words were, "Do you know whose car you hit?" The driver was, understandably, very apologetic.

Despite rumors to the contrary, the last few years of Mrs. Truman's life were not always secluded. She and Valerie often went out to eat, generally at different restaurants so the reporters would not find them; also, they shopped together frequently. In fact, one of their expeditiions together was just to find Mrs. L. a coat, secret service included. Another unpublicized fact is that Mrs. Truman enjoyed having a few guests into her home for little parties.

Valerie Lamere and Bess Truman

Many of these activities were the direct result of Mrs. L's encouragement. In fact, one of Mrs. Truman's long time friends, a Mr. Gray, always referred to Mrs. L. as "Valerie wonderful" because he felt that she was responsible for bringing laughter back to Mrs. Truman's life.

Mrs. Truman never stopped grieving for Mr. Truman. One day Mrs. L. suggested that they have lunch on the screened-in porch and Mrs. Truman agreed. What Valerie did not know until later was that Mrs. Truman had not set foot on that porch for five years because she and Mr. Truman had spent so much time there.

Bess Truman answered huge amounts of mail. Every letter she received was read and answered. Later when her health was failing, much of this correspondence became Valerie's responsibility, but no letter went unaswered. Another of her favorite pasttimes was watching baseball on TV. Mrs. Truman was an ardent baseball fan. Even near the end of her life, she often became very insistent that no one turn off the game.

An interesting aspect of life with the first lady was the entertainment of the famous guests who sometimes dropped in to visit Mrs. Truman. Mrs. Lamere said that the guest she personally enjoyed most was President Carter. He was so gracious to the staff. When Mrs. L. asked him if she could take a picture, President Carter replied that he had a staff photographer with him and he would be glad to have him take the pictures. Everyone on the Truman staff received an autographed picture from President Carter.

Bess Truman was, indeed, a first lady in every sense of the word. Her first thoughts always seemed to be the consideration of others.

Once again, our thanks go to Valerie Lamere and Gary Plowman for sharing this information with us.

Once again, our thanks go to Valerie Lamere and Gary Plowman for sharing their memories and pictires with us.

Item 4b

THE EXAMINER
Thursday, August 9, 1979

First lady pays visit to eatery

By MATT WALSH
Executive Editor

The side door at Kross' Lounge and Restaurant in Sugar Creek swung open about 1:30 p.m. Wednesday. A thin man in a blue blazer held the door open.

Inside the lounge, the noise mysteriously hushed. Everyone's eyes focused on the doorway.

Momentarily, a woman in a wheelchair appeared. It was Mrs. Bess Truman, the former first lady.

Aided by her companion and nurse, Mrs. Frank La Mere, and two Secret Service agents, Mrs. Truman entered the restaurant for lunch.

Not out of disrespect, but simply because they were entranced by the presence of the 94-year-old wife of the late President Harry Truman, none of the men in the lounge stood. As if they were hypnotized, they only watched the silver-haired woman quietly pass by.

A short time after Mrs. Truman and Mrs. La Mere were seated in the back of the restaurant, Independence City Councilman John Carnes, who had eaten lunch there a few minutes earlier, requested on a written note to the Secret Service agents if he could speak to Mrs. Truman.

Mrs. Truman granted the visit, and it was during that time Carnes told Mrs. Truman he considered her to be his "No. 1 constituent."

After her hour-long lunch, which consisted of iced tea and the day's special, Swiss steak, Mrs. Truman and her companions departed the restaurant without fanfare — a trait that has long been associated with the former first lady.

She exited a rear door that led to Sterling Avenue, where a green Chrysler Newport with Missouri license No. 5745 was waiting.

Mrs. La Mere and the Secret Service agents helped Mrs. Truman into the car. And when a photographer began taking pictures of her she held a handkerchief in front of her face.

Mrs. Truman said it was her first visit to Kross', but that it wasn't unusual for her to be out for lunch. When asked if she eats lunch out

ɔe Examiner Publishing Co.

Examiner Photo by Duane Woner

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Item 6b

Item 7

Item 8

Small party to celebrate Bess' 96th

Mrs. Truman

By The Star's staff

FEB 12 1981 PM

There will be flowers, cards and a small party with chocolate cake and ice cream on Friday for Mrs. Bess Truman, former first lady, to mark her 96th birthday anniversary.

The flowers and cards will be from well-wishers and will include a plant from the Independence City Council. The Missouri House of Representatives has adopted a resolution honoring Mrs. Truman on her birthday.

The party will be held by Mrs. Truman's employees, said Mrs. Valerie N. La Mere, who works in the Truman home in Independence. About 10 persons are expected.

"We have a birthday party every year," Mrs. La Mere said. "She really enjoys it."

Robert Lockwood, in charge of the Secret Service division watching over Mrs. Truman, said she remains in good spirits after returning home Jan. 24 from an extended stay at Research Medical Center. He said she has not left her home on Delaware except to visit her hair dresser.

Mrs. Mary F. Wallace, Mrs. Truman's sister-in-law who is expected to attend the party, said that although Mrs. Truman suffers from physical ailments expected of a person her age she remains alert and interested.

"She is perfectly clear in the head, I might say," Mrs. Wallace reported.

Item 9

Mrs. Truman to mark 97th year with party

By The Star's staff

It has been a rough year for former First Lady Bess Truman.

But on Saturday, she will celebrate her 97th birthday anniversary.

Mrs. Truman, widow of former President Harry S. Truman, spent 47 days in the hospital after fracturing her hip May 6 and suffering complications.

Mrs. Truman is confined to a wheelchair and her ability to speak has been diminished by strokes. She gets around-the-clock nursing care in her home on Delaware Street in Independence.

The household staff reads mystery novels to her in the afternoons. "She likes her whodunits, you know," said Valerie La Mere, a nurse employed in the home.

The household staff, secret service agents and a few close friends will attend a small birthday party Saturday. Mrs. Margaret Truman Daniel, the Trumans' only child, is not expected to be in town.

Although Mrs. Truman remains frail, her health is relatively stable, those close to her report. Dr. Wallace Graham, her physician, said Mrs. Truman remains alert.

"She is doing beautifully; she is doing fine."

Item 10

Fred Blocher/Staff

Valerie LaMere, housekeeper and companion during the last five years for Bess Truman, remembers the former first lady as a dignified yet sensitive woman.

Item 11

KC Times

Mrs. Harry Truman "B"

Confidants recall a quiet, gracious lady

By Charles R.T. Crumpley and Justin Mitchell
Members of the Staff

They shared moments with a private person

Valerie LaMere, Bess Truman's housekeeper and companion since 1977, clasped her hands Monday as she recalled removing her rings Sunday night to keep from scratching the former first lady's skin as she cared for her in her final hours.

"I talked to Mrs. Truman yesterday," Mrs. LaMere said. "I told her I loved her. Every day I told her how much I loved her. I know she heard me, because hearing is the last thing to go." OCT 19 1982 AM

She paused to hug Mary Wallace, Mrs. Truman's sister-in-law, as they reminisced in Mrs. Wallace's living room about their friend, who had lived next door. Mrs. LaMere said she left the Truman home at 219 N. Delaware St. at 10:30 p.m. Sunday, about six hours before Mrs. Truman died.

"But I didn't know she was going to die so soon," she said gently. "Otherwise, I would have stayed."

The recollection gave a rare glimpse into the closely guarded life of the former first lady in her final years. A half-mile away, Robert Lockwood, the long-time chief of Mrs. Truman's Secret Service detail, provided another rare personal glimpse of a public figure who guarded her privacy. Mr. Lockwood told of an independent woman who brooked no incompetence from her house staff.

"She appreciated very much the truth," said Mr. Lockwood, who retired in March after nine years of heading the Secret Service detail assigned to protect Mrs. Truman. "I found her to be a very gracious person."

But she could be stern as well, he added. On many occasions, he said, he approached Mrs. Truman "not really fearing her but knowing that she didn't want to hear what I had to say."

The secret to dealing with her was

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Item 12a

MEMORIES

Truman "B"

Continued from Page A-1

to be frank, he said. And despite the effects of age — the 97-year-old Mrs. Truman had difficulty walking in recent years and could barely speak in the last year — "she was a very perceptive woman," Mr. Lockwood said. OCT 19 1982 AM

Mrs. Truman noticed details, he said, and she never hesitated to ask a piercing question. Once, he said, she noticed that the shrubbery surrounding her home was ragged and asked when that deficiency would be corrected.

But Mrs. LaMere remembered nights when the Truman staff "worked together like a big family."

"She was the most thoughtful person," Mrs. LaMere said. "She didn't treat me like somebody who worked for her. I've taken care of doctors, lawyers, and almost everybody was always ready to put you down. All except Mrs. Truman. And if anybody had the right to, she did."

For often misunderstood reasons, Mr. Lockwood said, he believes that Mrs. Truman shunned interviews mainly to "protect the presidency."

She did not deny interviews solely to keep her family from the public eye, he said. His impression was that Mrs. Truman did not want to give her opinions of President Harry S. Truman's actions, because those views — especially if distorted by an overeager reporter — might confuse historians.

She rarely went to the nearby Truman Library, Mr. Lockwood said. He took her there twice after Mr. Truman was buried there in 1972, but he said she did occasionally ask to be driven around the library grounds so she could look at the building. She particularly enjoyed new construction there, he said.

Mrs. Truman continued to attempt to do things for herself until such tasks became impossible, he said. Only after a couple of uneventful falls about five years ago did she allow full-time employees like Mrs. LaMere to help her.

Mrs. LaMere, who cared for seven persons before Mrs. Truman, remembers vividly the day she was called: Aug. 19, 1977.

She said that she initially refused the job and that it took a personal plea from Mrs. Truman to persuade her to accept the post. That personal approach, something Mrs. Wallace said was characteristic of Mrs. Truman, did the trick.

Until recent years, Mrs. LaMere and Mrs. Truman went out every Wednesday, so the former first lady could have her hair styled, eat lunch or dinner and occasionally shop in Independence.

At the house, Mrs. LaMere said, she read mostly mystery stories to Mrs. Truman and listened to stories of the Truman presidency. "The last thing I read to her," she said, "was a newspaper."

"One day I told her I thought God had sent me to her to care for her. She's been a dear friend for me, and I'm going to miss her."

Item 12b