Dear Harry

Love Bess

Bess Truman’s Letters to Harry Truman
1919–1943

Clifton Truman Daniel

Truman State University Press
For Polly, Aimee, Wesley, and Gates.
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Preface

My grandparents, Harry and Bess Truman, had one of the great marriages in American politics, a rock-solid partnership based on shared values, mutual respect, and love. It was the foundation for one of the most successful, highly regarded presidencies in United States history. Of course, you’d never know that from my grandmother.

Grandpa was an open book. He’d tell you exactly what was on his mind. Often, he wrote it down. In addition to his public papers, he preserved scads of receipts, notes, diaries, and other private papers, including 1,316 letters that he wrote to my grandmother between 1910 and 1959. He firmly believed that the American public had the right to know and learn from the mind of their president.

My grandmother, on the other hand, had not been the American public’s president. She thought her business was her own damn business and nobody else’s.

She was naturally shy and hated having her picture taken. In most of the photos from the 1944 Democratic Convention, which put Grandpa on the ticket with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Grandpa and my mother, Margaret, are grinning from ear to ear, waving and shaking hands with everyone in sight. My grandmother is just sitting there, the expression on her face suggesting she has just smelled something horrendous.

Despite being born at the top of Independence, Missouri, society, she was modest and self-effacing. And her view on the role of the political wife ran contrary to that of her predecessor, the gregarious and outspoken Eleanor Roosevelt. “A woman’s place in public,” my grandmother said, “is to sit beside her husband, be silent, and be sure her hat is on straight.”

As first lady, she discontinued the regular press conferences instituted by Mrs. Roosevelt and issued only a succinct biography. Her favorite interview method thereafter was through written questions. Her most frequent answer, in print or in person, was “No comment.”

A good deal of this reticence was due to tragedy. Her father, David Willock Wallace, had committed suicide in 1903, when my grandmother
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was eighteen. She adored him, and his death was sudden, unexpected, heartbreaking, and in that day and age, shameful. She never spoke of him. What other thoughts and feelings she had were reserved for family and close friends, and she was determined to keep it that way.

During their courtship and marriage, my grandparents must have exchanged more than 2,600 letters. That’s a guess because the Truman Library has only about half of the correspondence—Grandpa’s half. Most of her half is gone.

One evening close to Christmas in 1955, Grandpa came home from his office in Kansas City and found my grandmother sitting in the living room burning stacks of her letters in the fireplace.

“Bess!” he said in alarm. “What are you doing? Think of history!” “Oh, I have,” she said and tossed in another stack.

Fortunately, she did not pitch them all into the fire. Thanks to what Ray Geselbracht, special assistant to the director of the Truman Library, called “poor housekeeping,” we know that at 10:20 p.m. on the evening of July 15, 1923, while Grandpa was at his annual National Guard encampment, my thirty-eight-year-old grandmother was in bed, lonely and unprotected, waging war on the local insect population, species undetermined.

“There was a big black bug on my bed when I turned the sheet down and I had to kill it myself,” she wrote indignantly. “But that wasn’t the first time I had wished for you.”

This and the other 184 letters my grandmother overlooked were not tied in neat bundles and squirreled away in a trunk or box. Most had been pushed to the backs of desk drawers or tucked between the pages of books as bookmarks. Truman Library archivists found them in the early 1980s while carrying out an inventory of the contents of my grandparent’s home. Liz Safly, the library’s recently retired research room supervisor, took them to the library in the trunk of her car. “Just think what would have happened if I’d had an accident,” she said.

The letters span twenty years, from 1923, when my grandparents were newly married and my grandfather was beginning his political career as eastern judge of Jackson County, Missouri (county judges are actually county administrators in Missouri), to 1943, when he was a U.S. senator a year away from being nominated for vice president. There is also a single letter from March 1919, written by Grandma to Grandpa while he was still overseas following the end of World War I.

The Bess Truman I knew was a little old lady. She was kindly, as long as you didn’t drop your marbles down her furnace grates or climb up on the roof of the house, but she didn’t say much beyond, “How was your trip?” “Play with that outside!” or “Where’s your mother?” The Bess
Truman I discovered in her letters was a talker. She could go on for pages reporting family and political news, making wry observations about people and events, or just recounting shopping, eating lunch, or the amount of ironing she had to do.

She was also a worrier, fretting endlessly about everyone’s health, my mother’s and grandfather’s in particular. At the start of the July 1923 National Guard encampment, when Grandpa reported that he’d stood a perfect physical exam, she wrote back that she was glad to hear it but wanted to know just what the camp doctor said about his tonsils. “Bet he didn’t even look at them,” she grumbled.

Yet she could blithely ignore her own woes. During that same 1925 encampment, she sprained her foot. How, I don’t know, but I’ll bet you my mother had something to do with it. Despite the fact that it must have really hurt, she put off having it treated. “I am very sorry about your foot,” Grandpa wrote to her in admonishment. “If you’d just be as anxious to take care of yourself as you are to doctor me and the young lady, you’d be all right nine times in ten. You should have had the doctor when your foot first hurt you.”

About many things, good and bad, she had a sense of humor. While removing the wrapping from her foot, which she did herself, she reported using up “most of the benzine in the county.” Two years earlier, when it took her dentist more than an hour to remove her infected tooth, she said it had worn him out worse than it had her. In 1937, when Grandpa was a U.S. senator, she wrote to him that she wished he’d organize a committee to investigate “the mucilage on the flaps of Gov’t envelopes. I have got to get out my tube of glue every time I use one of those brown ones.”

Along with her sense of humor came a sharp tongue. When the dentist, Dr. Berry, initially put off removing her tooth in July of 1923 because he said he wanted to consult a colleague, my grandmother figured he was just waiting for “some day when it rains, I reckon, and he can’t play golf.” In the same letter containing the mucilage committee crack, she reported that she was hoping to catch a cold that was running through the rest of the family so she wouldn’t have to attend a luncheon given by “Nutty Mrs. Webb.” Days later, when the luncheon had turned out well, she recanted, saying she had done “the poor old gal quite an injustice.”

She loved politics and not only expressed her opinion, often negative, but took an active role. She read the papers daily and saved or sent Grandpa all relevant articles and editorials. While he was at camp in 1923, during his tenure as eastern judge of Jackson County, she reported that so many women were clamoring to have their dirt roads oiled that “they must have a league out there.” In the summer of 1926, she directly intervened,
with the help of Jackson County Democratic boss Tom Pendergast, to keep Grandpa from making an alliance that might have hurt his chances of being elected presiding judge that fall.

More than anything though, what comes through my grandmother’s letters is love. When she and Grandpa were apart, they wrote to each other as often as twice a day, usually starting by exulting over a letter received or complaining about one that hadn’t arrived.

“I just had your Thursday letter,” she wrote on July 19, 1923. “Had been sitting at the front window waiting for the postman for hours.”

He came right back with: “I sure raised sand with the adjutant yesterday morning when I didn’t get a letter, but it came in the afternoon and boy! how nice it was.”

They rose early and stayed up late to write. Letters even invaded my grandmother’s dreams. “I was powerfully glad to get your special late last night,” she wrote on July 22, 1923. “And then I dreamed that I got still another one, which was very nice as long as it lasted.”

If she missed sending a letter, her excuse was thorough …

“I was so delighted to get that ‘special’ this morning. It made me sick not to have sent yours that way yesterday— but there wasn’t anybody here who could take it to the P.O. (Frank and Fred were both gone all day) and I just felt like I could not make it up town and back and I didn’t have enough stamps at home. Sorry as I can be that you won’t have even a piece of a letter today for I know how much I would have missed mine.”

… or interesting:

“It was so blazing hot last night I didn’t have the nerve to keep on enough clothes so I could have a light long enough to write a letter.”

But there were few excuses. She couldn’t go for very long without touching base and telling him how she felt. “Lots and lots of love,” she ended her last letter to him near the finish of his July 1925 encampment,

“and please keep on loving me as hard as ever. You know I just feel as if a large part of me has been gone for the last ten days.

Devotedly, Bess”
Acknowledgments

I’d like to thank my agent, Bob Diforio, for believing in this project and taking it on; Kate Morton Schuler, for transcribing my grandfather’s letters while I was busy with my grandmother’s; the Truman Library staff—Liz Safly, Randy Sowell, Sam Rushay, and particularly Ray Geselbracht—for encouraging me and doing everything they could to help; and my editor and publisher, Barbara Smith-Mandell and Truman State University Press, not only for publishing these letters but also for helping me present them in the best light.
Editor’s Note

My grandparents were busy people. Like those of us today who use e-mail, Facebook, and Twitter, they wrote fast—grammar, spelling, and punctuation be damned. My grandfather could trot out nearly endless sentences that included lists of names, items, or activities without using a single comma. He changed the spelling of people’s names, sometimes from one letter to the next. Both he and my grandmother used capital letters whenever it suited them—or not. My grandmother strung together thoughts with dashes and ampersands, often launching into a sentence without the help of the first-person pronoun. Every once in a while, inexplicably, one of them might throw in a semicolon somewhere.

I have left all of this intact. Rather, I should say that I have put it all back, because when I first began transcribing the letters, I could not resist the urge to clean them up. That, according to my editor, was not the best course of action and I agree with her. Like anyone, my grandparents had a unique way of corresponding.

Their handwriting was tough to decipher, Grandpa’s especially. His Ns looked like his Us, his Bs like his Ls, and his Is like his Rs. If I absolutely could not read something, I put [illegible] after it. If either of my grandparents misspelled a word, I left it as is and followed it with [sic]. When they left out a word, I put it in for them with brackets. My grandmother sometimes noted the day and time, but rarely put dates on her letters, so I added these based on postmarks, although occasionally it seemed that the post office had not advanced the date on their postmark stamp.

If I took something out, say a laundry list of my grandfather’s daily activities or meals, I put an ellipsis [...] in its stead. I only did this with Grandpa’s letters because they’ve been public for nearly thirty years. And I never removed something, be it laundry list or menu, when my grandmother responded to it. For example, in 1923, when he reported every item of a huge dinner he’d eaten on the road to camp, she wrote him back that he’d have to be “pretty strenuous to keep that front down.”
For the rest of his life, my grandfather would remember the day he first saw my grandmother. It was 1890 during Sunday school in Independence, Missouri. He was six. She was five. The meeting stirred him so much that he even included mention of it in his memoirs. He fell in love right then and there, and as far as anyone knows, he never looked at another woman.

My grandmother, on the other hand, paid him no attention whatsoever. They went all the way through grade school and high school together, my grandfather carrying a torch and my grandmother completely unaware of it. They were tutored in Latin together and may have occasionally wound up at the same social gatherings, but most often they moved in completely different circles. Grandpa’s father, John Truman, was a farmer and livestock trader. My grandmother’s father, David Willock Wallace, was a politician, son of a former Independence mayor, and son-in-law of George Porterfield Gates, co-founder of the highly successful Waggoner-Gates Milling Company.

Grandpa was shy and, because of farsightedness and thick glasses, not the least bit athletic. My grandmother was the equal of any boy on the schoolyard. She threw a ball hard and fast, whistled through her teeth, and excelled at tennis and golf. It was widely known that she could hold her own in a fight and possessed a wicked uppercut. In later years—in the White House, in fact—Grandpa gleefully let slip to Clark Clifford that she had been shot put champion at her ladies’ finishing school.

In the classroom, however, he could only sit, his chin on his palm and a dreamy smile on his face, mooning at her. He counted it a banner day if she let him carry her books home from school. The only thing she felt in return was kindness and sometimes pity, because he had to work after school.

After graduating from high school in 1901, Grandpa spent two semesters at Spalding’s Commercial College in Kansas City, and then when his father suffered serious financial losses speculating on grain futures, took a job as a timekeeper for a railroad construction contractor to help make
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Bess at age four, above left, about a year before she met Harry in Sunday school (TL 62-103), and in 1898, center (TL 62-109). Harry in 1897, above right (TL 62-412).

Harry in the first grade, ca. 1891, right (TL 62-768). Harry and Bess in the 1901 senior class photo, below (TL 66-9984).
ends meet. In 1903, he was hired as a clerk at the National Bank of Commerce in Kansas City. Two years later, he moved to the Union National Bank and took a position as a bookkeeper. He earned praise and promotions at both institutions and might have made a career of banking had John Truman not taken over the running of his mother-in-law’s six hundred-acre farm in Grandview and called his two sons—Grandpa and his brother, Vivian—home to help.

My grandmother, meanwhile, had her world turned upside down. In many ways, David Wallace was an ideal father—outgoing, intelligent, and generally considered one of the nicest, most thoughtful, and most generous men in Independence. He was a handsome, dashing man with a thick, bushy moustache who rode his huge black horse at the head of every holiday parade. I suspect that were David alive today he might also be described as “being in touch with his inner child.” It probably didn’t take much for Bess and her three brothers to entice him into a game of tag. My grandmother adored him.

Unfortunately, when it came to his career and his marriage, David Wallace was in over his head. He had wooed and wed Margaret Elizabeth “Madge” Gates, daughter of one of the richest men in town, and for the rest of his life he fought a losing battle to keep her in the style to which she had become accustomed.

He won several solid political appointments, including Jackson County treasurer and deputy surveyor in the Kansas City office of the U.S. Bureau of Customs, but
he never attained higher rank. To keep up appearances, he borrowed heavily, particularly from his father-in-law, which must have been hugely embarrassing because George Gates never thought David to be an ample provider in the first place. And it was never quite enough. Although my grandmother wore the latest fashions and counted the children of the town’s gentry among her friends, she could not go to college like many of them because her father simply could not afford to send her.

As the debt worsened, David turned increasingly to drink. Never a temperate man, he was now more and more often carried home by friends and deposited, insensate, on his front porch. Madge never said a word to him about any of it. Like most of the women of her time and station, she kept her nose out of her husband’s affairs. She even dutifully, and without reproach, nursed him through one hangover after another. She had no idea how far or fast he was sinking.

Early on the morning of June 18, 1903, David arose before dawn, dressed, and went into the bathroom on the second floor of their home at 608 North Delaware. There, he pressed a pistol to his head behind his left ear and pulled the trigger.

My grandmother was heartbroken and, I think, furious with him for the rest of her life. When her friend Mary Paxton ran to her side that morning, my grandmother was in the backyard, pacing in stony silence, dry-eyed, her hands balled into fists at her sides.
Madge came apart at the seams. She retreated from society, forever shamed by the stigma. Her father rescued her and her four children, Bess, Frank, George, and Fred. They fled to Colorado Springs for a year, away from their neighbors’ scrutiny, then moved into the Gates mansion at 219 North Delaware. My grandmother would call it home for the rest of her life.

Following their return from Colorado, Bess studied literature and history at Barstow, a young ladies’ finishing school in Kansas City. At home, she renewed old friendships, played tennis, saw an occasional show, and went on picnics and to parties. She even entertained one or two suitors, but none of these relationships was serious. Not only was she deeply ambivalent about marriage after her father’s suicide, but she also had become Madge’s full-time companion and sole source of emotional support.

Grandpa, meanwhile, didn’t have time for much of anything but plowing, sowing, reaping, tending animals, and repairing equipment. He had enjoyed life as a city bank clerk.
About the Author

Clifton Truman Daniel is the oldest grandson of former U.S. President Harry S. Truman and son of the late E. Clifton Daniel Jr., former managing editor of the New York Times, and best-selling mystery writer Margaret Truman. Mr. Daniel is director of public relations for Harry S Truman College in Chicago and is the honorary chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute in Independence, Missouri. He is a frequent speaker and fundraiser and the author of Growing Up With My Grandfather: Memories of Harry S. Truman.