

Harry Truman's Excellent Adventure: The True Story of a Great American Road Trip

By Matthew Algeo

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Reviewed by Douglas Towne

As road trips go, it wasn't the wildest journey ever taken — the driver's heavy foot on the accelerator and penchant for a glass of bourbon when staying with friends were reportedly the most decadent activities. But considering the circumstances, the craziness of the journey was unprecedented and is almost certain never to be replicated. Imagine a U.S. President, six months out of office, packing up his Chrysler and driving with his wife halfway across the country unaccompanied by Secret Service agents or any attendants....

The outing was Harry S. Truman's three-week summer trip in 1953 with his wife, Bess, motoring from their home in Independence, Missouri, to the East Coast and back again. They traveled alone; at the time, Congress wasn't even willing to give ex-presidents a pension, much less bodyguards. With Harry behind the wheel and Bess riding shotgun, the couple hit the road, patronizing roadside motels and cafes often on the recommendation of locals. It was these unpretentious pleasures that the Trumans yearned for after years of stressful political life in Washington, D.C.

The Trumans tried their best to avoid publicity but their plan went awry. The couple's unusual journey caught the nation's fancy, setting the wire services ablaze with articles about their activities and speculation as to their destinations. Local law enforcement agencies, in particular, kept a sharp eye on their route terrified should something happen to the former president when he came through their jurisdiction. The infectious excursion is wonderfully recounted in a riveting book recommended to me by SCA member Wayne Shannon, *Harry Truman's Excellent Adventure: The True Story of a Great American Road Trip*.

The book provides an intriguing early biographical sketch of Truman, who had a longstanding interest in roads. In 1926, he became president of the National Old Trails Road Association and had a blast driving around to select sites for the group's "Madonna of the Trail" statues honoring pioneer women. "This is almost like campaigning for President," he wrote Bess from Kansas, "except that the people are making promises to me instead of the other way around."

Equally intriguing is the book's political history. Who knew that Vice President Henry Wallace was replaced by the Missouri senator on the 1944 Democratic ticket because

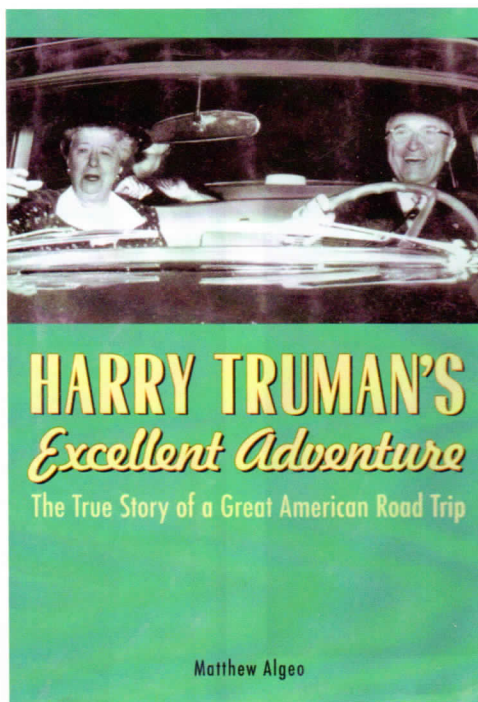
Wallace dabbled in mysticism, astrology, and was considered just a too little strange? The selection of "Give 'Em Hell Harry" was joked as another "Missouri Compromise" since the other candidates were considered either too liberal or conservative. President Franklin Roosevelt went along with the choice even though he hardly knew Truman.

Setting the stage for the adventurous, post-presidential journey, author Matthew Algeo recounts how in 1953, Harry and Bess returned to Independence "as plain, private citizens" to reside in their humble, slightly ramshackle Victorian house. Truman relished planning out his upcoming vacation. "I took out the road map and figured the distance — exactly 1,050 miles from my garage door to the door of the Senate garage," he wrote. "I decided on the best places to stop over on the way, as I always used to do. I like to take

trips—any kind of trips. They are about the only recreation I have besides reading."

The couple started their excellent adventure by departing Missouri during an intense heat wave, riding with the windows down since their Chrysler had no air conditioning. Harry wore a white suit, though he did drive in his shirtsleeves, while Bess wore a rayon print dress. Truman loved driving; even when he was president he would occasionally take the wheel of his limo, much to the consternation of his Secret Service agents.

The trip's stated purpose was to visit friends in



Washington D.C., their daughter, Margaret, in New York, and to deliver his first major speech as an ex-president to the Reserve Officers Association Convention in Philadelphia. The lure of the open road, however, may have been the biggest catalyst. After nearly eight challenging years in the White House during which the country went from World War II to the Korean War, Truman reveled in the trip. He was described as “carefree as a schoolboy in summer,” and he would recall the vacation as one of the most delightful experiences in his eventful life.

Some nights they stayed in little motels; other nights they visited with friends, and all along the route, they ate in roadside diners. Occasionally crowds would swarm them, beseeching Truman for an autograph or a handshake. In towns where they were recognized, worried police officials safeguarded the famous couple. To their delight, sometimes the former president and first lady went unrecognized. The book weaves historical accounts of the Truman’s trip with the author’s experiences when retracing the route. Alego revisited many of the places the Trumans patronized and even managed to interview some of the people who interacted with the first couple. “I discovered a Harry Truman who drove too fast, who was a pretty good tipper, who loved fruit and his wife who might have loved it even more,” writes Alego.

Time has not been kind to the businesses the Truman’s visited along their route. Bud’s Golden Cream stand has given way to a KFC in Hannibal, Missouri. In Decatur, Illinois, the Parkview Motel is now a correctional facility and Grove’s Restaurant has been replaced by a McDonalds. You get the picture. Even the few success stories are often gloomy. At the McLure House, a hotel in Wheeling, West Virginia, brown water came out of the tap and the hotel’s coffee shop offered pre-packaged cinnamon buns.

The Trumans’ road trip marked the end of an era: never again would a former president and first lady mingle so casually with their fellow citizens. The story of their trip is the story of life in America in 1953, a time of unbridled optimism and unmitigated Cold War fear. The book documents the monumental changes that have occurred since then and raises the question: has America or its roadside changed more in the last 60 years? I highly recommend you read the book and decide for yourself.

Douglas Towne is editor of this journal. His father, Robert Towne, once exchanged early morning greetings with former President Truman as they passed each other in downtown Kansas City during a blizzard.

THE STORY COCO PALM



THE GRACE BUSCHE
1953

DAVID P. P.