

Harry Truman, Poker Player

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“You know I’m almost like a kid— I can hardly wait to start.”

When Harry Truman was asked in a televised *Person to Person* interview in 1955 what he did to relax, he responded, “Well, my only relaxation is to work.” This was no doubt almost true, but Truman forgot to mention something he loved to do, something that took a lot of time, demanded close attention, consumed a certain amount of emotional energy, and must have caused him some anxiety from time to time. But it probably couldn’t be considered work. Truman forgot to mention that, for relaxation and to enjoy the company of friends, he played poker.

It’s not clear when Truman started playing poker. The first record of his enjoyment of card playing, not specifically poker, is in a letter he wrote to Bess Wallace on February 7, 1911, when he was twenty-six years old. He had just started courting Bess and wanted to tell her all about himself. He was a religious person, he said, but “I like to play cards and dance . . . and go to shows and do all the things [religious people] say I shouldn’t, but I don’t feel badly about it.”

Although it is hard to imagine that Lieutenant, and later Captain, Truman went through his two years of service during World War I without playing poker, the first clear record of his

Truman’s worn and scratched poker chip case was transferred from the White House to Truman’s post-presidential office and then came to the Harry S. Truman Library.



poker playing is of games played in the early 1920s, when he was a county judge (or, more correctly, county commissioner) in Jackson County, Missouri. Several of his poker buddies told stories in later life about playing poker with Judge Truman. The games were played across the street from the county courthouse, in a room on the third floor of a building at 101 North Main Street in Independence. In about 1924, the poker players decided to become a club, called the Harpie Club because harmonicas, or French harps, were played at a lighthearted dedication ceremony. Judge Truman was apparently the honorary and unofficial head of the club. There were about eighteen members, mostly veterans of World War I, and also many county employees.

The club met for a poker game usually one night a week. Games had a ten-cent limit with three raises. Truman probably played regularly

with club members until he left for Washington to become a U.S. senator in 1935. He got immense enjoyment from the games and apparently never took them too seriously. One club member, Bruce Lambert, called him a “chump” who always stayed to the end of a hand. “He wanted to see what your hole card was, and knew anyone got a kick out of winning from him and he accommodated . . . but if he could whip you he got a big kick out of it,” Lambert said in a 1981 oral history interview.

Truman came to one Harpie Club meeting, held at a member’s home this time, while he was President. Of course, things were different now than they had been in the early days. The presidential entourage was all there, and club members wouldn’t sit down until Truman did. But a poker game got going nonetheless. Truman was lucky this night and accumulated a big pile of chips in front of him. But then a Secret Service man came

up to the President, tapped him on the shoulder and said it was time to leave. “The President jumped up hastily,” one of the poker players, A. J. Stephens, remembered in a 1966 oral history interview,” and said, ‘Good-bye boys,’ and shot out the door, leaving all those chips, which were cashable for money. I wonder to this day who got the money.”

Truman almost certainly played poker with his army reserve buddies during summer encampments in the 1920s and 1930s. He looked forward every summer to escaping from the sometimes serious worries of his political and business life in Kansas City and being a soldier with his friends out in the countryside, riding horses, playing war games, sitting around under the tent at the end of the day. The large collection of Truman’s war gear preserved at the Truman Library includes three well-worn decks of cards, circumstantial evidence of warm evenings passed in games of chance. Harry Vaughan, who later became President Truman’s military aide, was probably a regular player in these games, and he might have started playing poker with Truman as early as 1918. In a 1963 oral history interview, Vaughan remembered a tactic that Truman particularly enjoyed. “He liked to bluff and he did it on numerous occasions, but don’t count on it. . . . It was of greater delight to him to chase me . . . out of a hand and then show me that I had him beat; that was worth a month’s pay. And he did it all too frequently.”

Poker, like everything else, took on for Truman an aura of providence in the thrilling, frightening weeks and months that followed the shock of President Roosevelt’s death on April 12, 1945. Six weeks later, on May 26, Truman left the White House for the first time since becoming President. It was a modest outing, to the Burning

A poker game aboard the *Williamsburg*, July 4, 1949. Clark Clifford is on Truman’s left. Monrad Wallgren, former U.S. senator and governor of Washington State, is on Truman’s right. This is probably the only time Truman allowed himself to be photographed playing poker while he was President. (Harry S. Truman Library)



Tree Club in Bethesda, Maryland, to have dinner with some present and former members of Congress.

After dinner, a poker game started, and Truman did all right. “Luck always seems to be with me in games of chance and in politics,” he reflected. But now that he was President of the United States something was different for him, whether he was playing poker or leading the nation. “No one was ever luckier than I’ve been since becoming the Chief Executive and Commander in Chief,” he reflected in a May 27, 1945, handwritten note. “Things have gone so well that I can’t understand it; except to attribute it to God. He guides me, I think.” Presumably this sense of divine involvement in his poker games diminished as time went by and he got used to being President.

Truman’s favorite poker venue while he was President was the presidential yacht *Williamsburg*. “You know I’m almost like a kid; I can hardly wait to start,” he wrote to his wife, Bess, as he looked forward to a poker outing on the *Williamsburg* in the summer of 1946. The President, together with some of his regular poker buddies, and perhaps some special guests too, would typically board ship on Friday afternoon and sail on the Potomac River until Sunday afternoon. Truman liked an eight-handed game best. His cronies joined him around the table. Fred Vinson, secretary of the treasury and later chief justice of the United States, was his favorite poker companion. Other reg-

ulars included Clinton Anderson, secretary of agriculture and later a senator; Stuart Symington, a Missourian who served Truman in several positions, including secretary of the air force; and longtime friend Harry Vaughan, now Truman’s military aide. Future President Lyndon Johnson sometimes joined these games too, his attention focused more on the political talk than on the cards. Truman’s young naval aide and later special counsel Clark Clifford organized the games. Clifford had replaced a naval aide who told the President that he didn’t drink and didn’t play cards. Truman listened to this with interest and very quickly found the man a good job somewhere else. He liked Clifford better; his new naval aide did drink and play cards, the latter so skillfully that he usually won a little money.

Poker was only one element in the regimen of relaxation and companionship aboard the *Williamsburg*. The President and his friends enjoyed long, leisurely meals, and hours spent telling stories about life, politics, and Truman’s part in American history. When a poker game got under way, though, the players focused on their cards and their stake. Each player started the game with a \$500 stack of chips, and if anyone lost it all, he could get a second \$500 stack. About 10 percent of every pot was put in a “poverty bowl,” which was distributed \$100 at a time to players who had lost their second stack. This was a lot of money in the 1940s, but presumably over time no one ever won

Truman and Winston Churchill on the train in Fulton, Missouri, March 6, 1946, only a few hours following a poker game in which Churchill lost a substantial sum. (Harry S. Truman Library)



or lost very much. Truman once admitted to Bess, following a poker game played on the Fourth of July, 1947, not on the *Williamsburg* this time, that he had lost \$3.50. The big winner that night, Truman's chief of staff, Adm. William D. Leahy, won about \$40.

Winston Churchill joined in one of Truman's poker games during his visit to the United States in 1946. Churchill and the presidential party were on their way by train from Washington to Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill would tell the world about an "Iron Curtain" that had descended upon Europe. This night, however, the great man's oratory was about his poker prowess gathered over forty years. Truman was worried about the honor of American poker players, and he and his companions felt they would have to play their best. As the game progressed, though, Churchill lost steadily, and his stack of chips dwindled. After about an hour of this disastrous play, Churchill left the room for a moment. Truman told his companions that they would have to let up some. "But, Boss, *this guy's a pigeon*" one of the players, Harry Vaughan, burst out. "If you want us to play our best poker for the nation's honor, we'll have this guy's pants before the evening is over." The players did let up on Churchill some,

but not enough to let him go back home claiming he had beaten the Yanks.

Truman may have intervened on at least one other occasion to change a player's luck. Sometime in 1951 or 1952 he invited his assistant press secretary, Roger Tubby, to join in a game at the Little White House at Key West, Florida. Tubby was a young man with three children and a modest salary, playing against men with more money to lose and more experience with the cards. Truman noticed that Tubby's losses were mounting. It was his turn to deal. As the hand went on, the players dropped out one by one, until only Truman and Tubby were left in the game. Then Truman folded too, announcing that Tubby had won the sizeable pot. The players turned over their cards, and Tubby saw the hand that had kept Truman in the game to the end. "He didn't even have a pair," Tubby remembered in a 1977 article. "He had just stayed in the game to make the pot big so I could get back my losses." Or had Truman perhaps stayed in simply because that was what he enjoyed to do? In either case, Tubby's finances were improved.

After coming back to Missouri in January 1953, Truman made poker part of his very active retirement. He seems to have had two main groups

of poker buddies. One was headed by Tom Evans, a politically active Kansas City businessman who probably became acquainted with Truman in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Evans became one of Truman's very best friends. In the 1930s, he started taking Truman to poker games at the exclusive 822 Club in downtown Kansas City. Truman was Tom Evans's guest. It's doubtful he could have afforded to be a paying member, and it's also doubtful the Republican businessmen who dominated the club would have invited him to join; at least until he became President of the United States. Then they made him an honorary life member. Truman wrote to thank the club president for conferring such an honor on him. "If I can manage it," he wrote, thinking of future poker games, "I will make it costly for you." Truman probably played with his 822 Club friends many times in the 1950s and 1960s. A photograph in the Truman Library's holdings shows him and Tom Evans sitting with others in a smoke-hazed room in the 822 Club suite, looking down intently at their cards.

The other poker group was headed by Eddie Jacobson, Truman's old haberdashery partner and lifelong friend. Jacobson would invite several of Truman's Jewish friends to his home on 72nd Street. One of the

players, A. J. Granoff, remembered that the games were lighthearted affairs and that Truman greatly enjoyed himself. He “was a lot of fun,” Granoff recalled in a 1969 oral history interview. “He’d sit next to me, he’d lean over and look at my cards and say, ‘I got you beat already.’” Truman and Jacobson enjoyed teasing the somewhat prudish Granoff. “Truman would . . . [try] to embarrass me by telling some off-color story,” Granoff remembered, “and then claimed that I blushed. Maybe I did.” Then Jacobson might join in, and Granoff would blush again, and Truman and Jacobson would roar with laughter.

Truman would sometimes get together with a similar group of his Jewish friends at Oakwood Country Club in south Kansas City. Randall Jessee, a well-known television journalist in the 1950s, was present at one of these games. He noticed that Truman’s old failing as a poker player was still with him. “He stayed in every pot when he should have gotten out of a few,” Jessee recalled in a 1964 oral history interview. Truman just couldn’t bear to fold; he wanted to be in to the end. He had a special weapon, though, which he used to improve the odds. It was called “Vinson” after his favorite poker companion from presidential days. Jessee couldn’t make anything of this strange game. “It’s low ball, high ball, I never did understand. [Truman] was pretty good at [it], because

nobody else understood what we were doing. So every time we played Vinson, he would win. . . . It was dealer’s choice. . . . So Mr. Truman, about every time he was dealer, he’d say, ‘Well, we’re going to play Vinson now.’”

Probably only a few of Harry Truman’s poker venues are remembered very well today. There are most likely rooms scattered here and there in the Kansas City area where the future or the former President of the United States got together with friends and played poker; and chances are that Senator, Vice President, and President Truman enjoyed games at quite a few unknown or little known locations in and around Washington, D.C.

Truman loved poker for some of the same reasons that he loved politics. There was a vitality in the game that let him share in the lives of people he liked and see them as they really were, underneath whatever formalities they usually had to adopt when they dealt with a judge, senator, President, or former President. Poker also gave him a chance to make his friends happy in some small ways, which was very important to him. “I’ve tried all my life,” he wrote to Bess in 1937, “to be thoughtful and to make every person I come in contact with happier for having seen me.” There’s no record of anyone ever leaving a poker game with Harry Truman feeling unhappy.

Note on Sources

Manuscripts and oral history interviews cited in this article are in the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri. Letters from Harry Truman to Bess Wallace Truman are in the Papers of Harry S. Truman: Papers Relating to Family, Business and Personal Affairs. Truman’s handwritten note of May 27, 1945, is in the President’s Secretary’s Files. Truman’s letter to the 822 Club president, Will M. Drennon, May 9, 1945, is in the Miscellaneous Historical Documents Collection.

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