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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Harry Truman, Leader of the Freeway

By MATTHEW ALGEO

ONE hot June morning in 1953, a retired couple from western Missouri packed their Chrysler New Yorker with 11 suitcases and started driving east. A few hours later, they stopped at a diner in Hannibal, Mo., and ordered fruit plates and iced tea.

“We thought we were getting by big as an unknown traveling couple until we went to the counter to pay the bill,” Harry Truman later wrote of that lunch. “Just as we arose from the table some county judges came in and the incog was off.”

What made Truman, less than six months removed from the presidency, believe he could travel incognito in the first place? It’s true that former presidents quickly drop from public consciousness. (Did you know that George W. Bush is preparing to throw the ceremonial first pitch at the Texas Rangers’ home opener? Or that Bill Clinton gave a speech to the European Union Parliament in Brussels last week — in the shadow of President Obama’s celebrated European tour?) But they remain famous, and surrounded by assistants and security agents.

In Truman’s time, things were quite different. When he retired, 10 years before the Kennedy assassination, former presidents had no Secret Service protection. Nor were they entitled to pensions. Truman’s only income was an Army pension of \$111.96 a month, and he refused to “commercialize” the presidency by accepting lucrative business offers or extravagant speaking fees. Like his hero Cincinnatus, the Roman leader who forsook power to return to his farm, Truman believed he could easily make the transition from leader of the free world to, as he put it, “plain, private citizen.”

So, that first summer after leaving the White House, Truman and his wife, Bess, did what ordinary Americans do every summer: they took a

vacation. For 19 days they drove around the country, from their home in Independence, Mo., to the East Coast and back again.

Harry and Bess Truman were frugal travelers. They ate a lot of fruit plates at roadside diners. In Decatur, Ill., they stayed at the Parkview, a motel on Route 36 where rooms cost about five bucks a night. (That motel is now a prison for work-release inmates.)

And like countless other road trippers, they crashed with friends. In Indianapolis, they stayed at the home of Frank McKinney, the former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and his wife, Margaret. When the McKinneys' daughter Claire came home late from a night of dancing, she found the former president banging away on the living room piano.

In Frostburg, Md., the Trumans stopped at the Princess Restaurant, where they splurged on chicken dinners (70 cents each). The cook, George Pappas Jr., a World War II veteran, recognized his old commander in chief right away. Telephones all over town started ringing, and soon business was booming at the Princess. "I had been there before," Truman wrote, "but in those days they didn't make such a fuss over me. I was just a senator then."

A little farther down the road in Frederick, Truman stopped at Carroll Kehne's Gulf station for gas and a Coke. When Kehne asked him to give his mechanic, Albert Kefauver, a hard time for being a Republican, Truman declined. "It's too hot to give anybody hell," he explained. After Kehne died in 1994, his son found Truman's Coke bottle and donated it to the local historical society.

In New York City, the manager of the Waldorf Towers offered the Trumans free use of a suite, an offer they gratefully accepted. The former first couple spent eight days sightseeing in the city. They took in Broadway shows ("Wonderful Town," "My Three Angels") and ate at trendy restaurants. (At the 21 Club the maître d'hôtel was careful to seat them far away from Gov. Thomas Dewey.) Everywhere the Trumans went, they took cabs.

On the drive home, a state trooper on the Pennsylvania Turnpike pulled Truman over for careless driving. He had been blocking traffic in the left lane, cruising along at 55 miles per hour with a line of cars behind him.

In Columbus, Ohio, the Trumans checked into the Deshler Hotel, prompting squeals of delight from hundreds of teenage girls attending a Future Homemakers of America convention there. (The elegant Deshler was long ago replaced with an office tower; the F.H.A. is now the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, and nearly a quarter of its members are male.)

The trip taught Truman — and the rest of America — that former presidents are anything but plain, private citizens. Shortly after he got home, he lamented to a friend, “I can’t seem to get from under that awful glare that shines on the White House.”

In January 1958, Truman was forced to sell off the family farm in Grandview, Mo., to make ends meet. Later that year, Congress granted former presidents pensions of \$25,000 a year plus \$50,000 for office expenses.

Today, former presidents receive nearly \$200,000 a year, and practically unlimited office expenses. The rent alone on Bill Clinton’s Harlem office was more than \$500,000 last year. And former presidents rarely drive themselves anywhere.

In 1953, The Times said of Harry and Bess Truman’s trip: “It is ... as it should be that an American ex-president, accompanied only by his wife, with no retinue and no ceremony, can drive his own car around the country and no one think it unusual. It cheers one up, somehow.”

More than half a century later, it still does.

Matthew Algeo is the author of the forthcoming “Harry Truman’s Excellent Adventure: The True Story of a Great American Road Trip.”