



Fences and Fame: The Truman Home Fence



Harry Truman opens the gate to take his morning walk. TRUMAN LIBRARY.

We believe that anybody can be the President and that when he is through, he can go back to being just anybody again.... It has not been that simple for me.

--Harry S Truman

Fencing out the public

The rambling Queen Anne Victorian home of Harry and Bess Truman sits on a corner in an old neighborhood in Independence, Missouri. After Harry Truman became president in 1945, the house, which had changed little since it was completed by his wife's family in 1885, became surrounded by more than shady maples and oaks: now, hundreds of celebrity seekers surrounded the house. Souvenir hunters pulled leaves off the

trees, ripped flowers from the ground, and pried boards off the house. Others were bolder. Once, hearing voices, Mrs. Truman discovered two sightseers wandering through her house.

So, in 1949, a black iron fence, erected by the Secret Service, surrounded the Trumans' home, separating the president from the people.

An unwelcome intrusion

While not a particularly imposing fence, it loomed large on the Trumans' personal landscape, an unwelcome intrusion. "Never did like it and never will like it," was the president's opinion. Unfortunately, the Trumans had little choice.

For the Trumans, their home on the quiet street represented refuge and stability. They looked forward to escaping the public glare of White House living and believed that, once out of office, the family could return home to their quiet former

life. There was no Secret Service protection for retired presidents in 1953 when Truman left office, so the Trumans could move with freedom. They even discussed tearing down the black iron fence.

But Harry Truman soon discovered that he would never again be able to live like "just anybody." Even before their return home from the White House, the Trumans realized that the fence would have to stay. It was a constant reminder that their old life was gone forever.



Crowd around the Truman home, 1953. TRUMAN LIBRARY.

The view from across the street

In 1953, Truman's cousin, Ethel Noland, who lived across the street, observed, "Of course, since Mr. Truman came back from Washington, the tourists are omnipresent. They're there when I first look out in the morning. They walk down Truman Road, and they survey the house from all sides.

And finally, you find them standing out in front. And one always goes across the street and takes a picture of those at the front gate. It seems to me that's almost an unwritten law, that they shall do this."

The price of fame

Despite the aggravation, Truman was considerate to sightseers. He understood the symbolism of the presidency and remembered the day in the early 1900s when, as a young man, he had run down a Kansas City street to catch a glimpse of the visiting President Theodore Roosevelt.

He also understood people. He wrote, "I realize that they come to see 'that man from Missouri.' And I try, when I am at home, not to disappoint them. I wave to them, and when I have time I exchange greetings with them and occasionally pose for a picture."

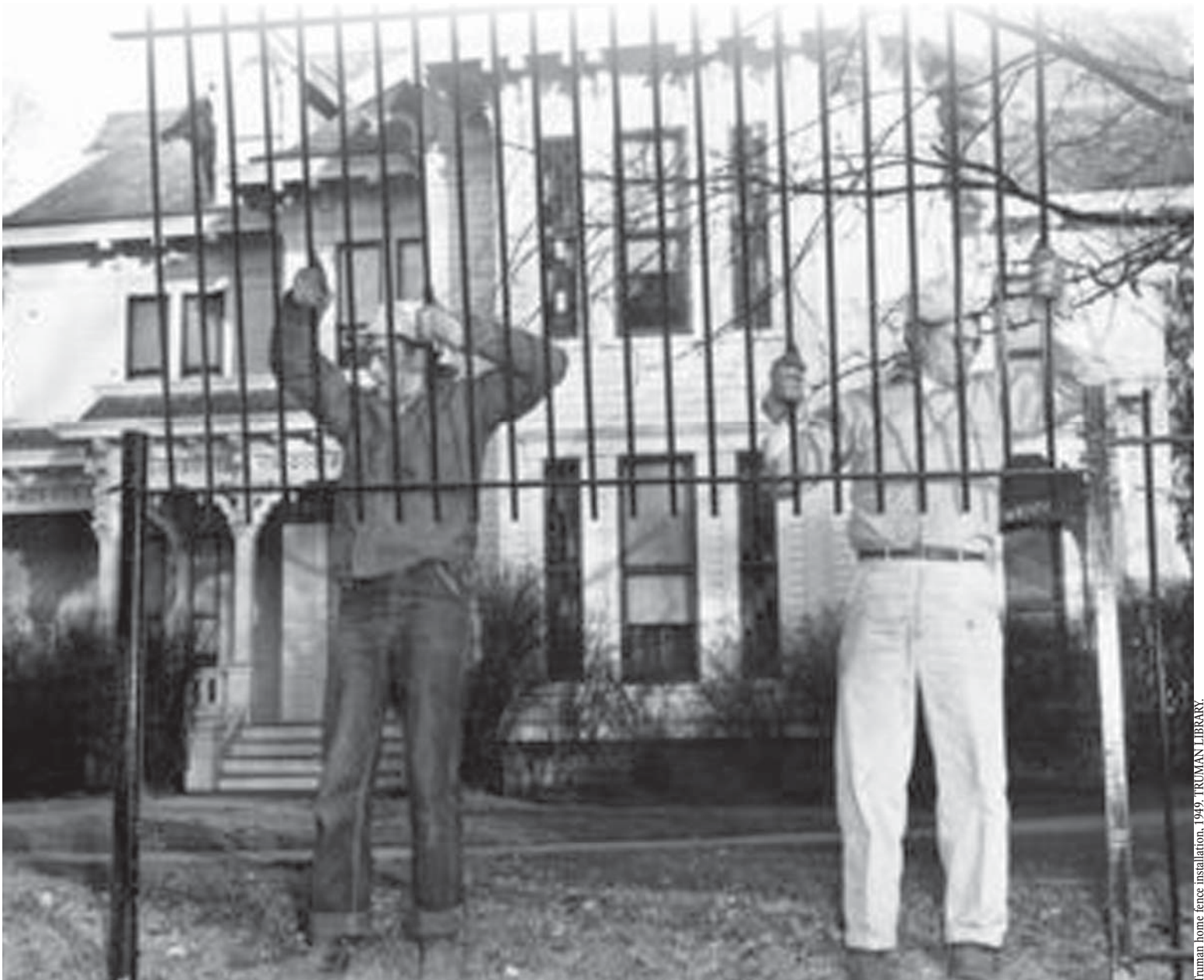
Truman described a day when he went out for one of his morning walks and found a car parked in front of his house with baggage piled all over it: "Is this where Truman lives?" the fellow at the wheel shouted at me. I said it was, and he called, 'Are you Truman?' I answered I was. 'Well,' he said, 'me and the old lady are on a motor trip, all the way from the island of Maui in Hawaii. Been all over the country, but seeing you walk out of that house, big as life, tops everything else we have seen. Would you mind if I just got a picture of you standing there?'"

Climbing back down the ladder

"A man in his right mind would never want to be president if he knew what it entails," wrote Harry Truman. Resisting the lure of never-ending fame can be exhausting. "It takes a tough citizen to climb down the ladder after being at the top," Harry wrote Bess. President Truman's determination to retain his humility and make the distinction between himself and his office, however, serves as a reminder that democracy can and does work.

Nevertheless, the Trumans' black fence—a

symbolic as well as a literal barrier between the president and the people—still stands today. Perhaps, for any aspiring presidents, it can serve as a reminder of the sacrifices their fellow Americans will expect and the self-discipline their fellow Americans will demand. Perhaps, for the rest of us—those expectant, demanding, fellow Americans—Harry Truman's simple iron fence can serve as a reminder of the qualities of character we might consider when deciding who those leaders will be.



Truman home fence installation, 1949. TRUMAN LIBRARY.