

The Harry S. Truman Library – Plans and Reality

By PHILIP C. BROOKS*

Harry S. Truman Library

ON a typical morning one might see, arriving at a long handsome building atop a hill in Independence, a graduate student to do research at the Harry S. Truman Library, a touring family to visit the museum, a former Government official to talk with the former President of the United States or another official to confer at the Library about depositing his personal papers, a magazine writer to do a feature article on the Presidency, a reporter and a photographer to cover a presentation ceremony, a group of school children to tour the museum with a volunteer woman guide to tell them about the exhibits, a Girl Scout official to discuss the donation and placement of a willow tree, or a number of tourists to see the former President leave on his way to luncheon.

All this comes about because of the focus of American attention on the Presidency and on the men who have occupied that office. Our founding fathers set up three coordinate branches of Government and avoided the trappings of monarchy, but they probably did not foresee how every site, every paper, every occasion, every reminiscence associated with the President would have a magic touch. This is manifest in popular fancy, folklore, literature, and other fields as well as in scholarly analysis. The founders probably did not anticipate one of the most significant aspects of American democracy—the close relationship of the man in the street with

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the President. Americans enjoy feeling that they know the President personally and have a vested interest in his official, his political, and his personal life. President Kennedy said not long ago that "everybody has a piece of the White House"¹ and that everybody is affected by the decisions that are made there. He must have realized, too, that this public fascination with a President continues after the administration ends, for he was by then familiar with many Presidential shrines, including two Presidential libraries.

The melange of activity at the Truman Library that has been suggested indicates that, four and a half years after its dedication, it is well launched as an institution embodying the research program that is its core and the historical materials that support it; the exhibition of gifts to the President as well as educational displays and the showing of art treasures; and a share of the attention that is focused on the former President himself.

Indeed, the bringing together of all these interests characterizes the Presidential libraries as administered by the National Archives and Records Service. For at Hyde Park, Independence, and Abilene—and in the future at West Branch—will be preserved the papers, books, audiovisual materials, and museum objects derived from a Presidential administration, in a locale significant in the life of the President. No one of these elements would be so significant without close relationship to the others. With all of them brought together one can understand the man and his times more completely than could be done in any other way. This was the intent of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the establishment of the Library at Hyde Park,² and Harry S. Truman followed the pattern, fully appreciating its meaning. Although these libraries have the same basic task of preserving historical materials and of giving people a better understanding of the Presidency and of the pertinent period of American history, each has its special characteristics.

The intent of this article is to tell how the Truman Library has developed in light of the plans of its founders, and to emphasize some of its unique features. In general it has progressed along the expected lines with reasonable success, thanks to the experience of the Roosevelt Library, to the support of other General Services Administration elements, and especially to the enthusiastic and understanding cooperation of former President Truman. Its unique

¹ Television interview with Ray Scherer, NBC Network, April 11, 1961.

² Herman Kahn, "The Presidential Library—a New Institution," in *Special Libraries*, 50:106-113 (Mar. 1959).

features are due to its location, to the period it represents, and very much to the character and interests of Mr. Truman.

Readers of the *American Archivist* are familiar with the original plans for the Library through an effective article by David D. Lloyd published in 1955.³ Mr. Lloyd is executive director of Harry S. Truman Library, Inc., the corporation that built the building and did the heavy work of planning the Library with Wayne C. Grover, Archivist of the United States. In his article Mr. Lloyd described the Library as an outgrowth of Mr. Truman's "deep interest . . . in the archival and historical professions and the sciences of preserving and expounding our national history." He said that it was Mr. Truman's desire that the Library "serve as an active center of study and research, not only for his own period in the Presidency, but also for the whole range of contemporary events, bringing new resources and facilities for such study into fruitful use in the midregion of our country." Mr. Lloyd noted that after writing his memoirs Mr. Truman would turn his reputation over to the historians, but that "over and above these personal motives, he has a broader and entirely impersonal interest in record keeping and history writing. Few men in public life have more sympathy for these twin occupations or are doing more to encourage and cultivate them." Mr. Truman's constant support of the Library certainly has borne out that statement.

Mr. Lloyd discussed the constitutional independence of the office of the President and the justification for his taking his papers with him, the problem of care arising from the accelerating growth and variety of the historical materials in the White House, the need to make the papers available, and the concurrent obligation to protect the confidences involved in the communications of the President. All these matters have been explained in the official statements of the National Archives and Records Service and discussed extensively among the members of the profession.⁴

Another factor of especial importance to the Truman Library, not so generally recognized as those just mentioned, was the necessity mentioned by Mr. Lloyd of consulting the convenience of the former President before that of scholars or anybody else. After all, the papers have always been considered his when he leaves the White House, he is the person most concerned in their use, and he is the one in whom the writers of various documents have confided.

³ "The Harry S. Truman Library," in *American Archivist*, 18:99-110 (Apr. 1955).

⁴ See especially "Statement of Dr. Wayne C. Grover" in U. S. Congress, House, Committee on Government Operations, 84th Cong., *Hearings on H. J. Res. 330, 331, and 332*, June 13, 1955.

It is quite natural that the concerns of the former President have been a major element in our planning. The remarkable thing is the extent to which he has encouraged the staff to handle the Library and its holdings on a purely professional basis.

Mr. Lloyd further cited Mr. Truman's eagerness to stimulate study and research and general public education in matters of government throughout the Midwest and to serve the needs of the State universities and other institutions of learning in his part of the country. Special efforts have been made to reach this objective.

Some misgivings were expressed both before and after the opening of the Truman Library, chiefly about the moving of the Presidential papers so far from Washington and the effect of the proposed acquisition policy of the Presidential libraries on historical societies and manuscript collectors, who feared that these Government institutions would jeopardize their own efforts. Mr. Lloyd foresaw some of these qualms, and his article emphasized that it is better to have complete collections of Presidential historical materials in various locations than incomplete ones all in one place and that it is necessary to have them where they will serve the wishes and needs of the former President himself. He also stressed the importance of having a highly qualified staff to handle the materials with complete objectivity, a principle that had proved sound at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. The advantages of this type of institution to researchers have been stressed by independent scholars, notably by Lyman H. Butterfield in a letter to the *New York Times*.⁵

Some criticism is still heard, naturally, for the field of discussion is broad and complex. The suggestion is made that personal and official Presidential papers be separated. But this is not feasible because of the manner of their filing and because a single document often falls into both categories; such a separation would also be far more difficult in twentieth-century complexity of paper than in the comparative simplicity of early nineteenth-century documentation. It is suggested that the freedom of these papers from congressional demand should end when the incumbent is no longer President. This would make a President wary lest a succeeding administration exploit confidential matters for political purposes. Many of the confidences involved are not simply matters of the executive as against the legislative branch; they also embody information entrusted to the President by persons outside the Government. What better way to protect all these confidences than to

⁵ July 21, 1957, pt. 4, p. 6, col. 6.

place the papers in the custody of the Government and in a depository devoted solely to one President?

More positively it may be said that the concentration of a Chief Executive's papers with related materials in one place helps to prevent dispersion of research materials such as befell the papers of many earlier Presidents. As to other institutions with collecting ambitions—the National Archives and Records Service has not threatened the holdings or the prospective holdings of another depository if the papers are assured adequate preservation and accessibility to scholars, nor is it likely to do so.

These objectives in the preservation of Presidential papers were achieved in a joint resolution of Congress, August 12, 1955, which established a pattern for the transfer of Presidential papers to the Government.⁶ It authorized the Administrator of General Services

to accept for deposit . . . the papers and other historical materials of any President or former President of the United States, or of any other official or former official of the Government, . . . subject to restrictions agreeable to the Administrator as to their use; and . . . to accept for . . . the United States, any land, buildings, and equipment offered as a gift to the United States for the purposes of creating a Presidential archival depository.⁷

A review of the successive steps in the development of the Truman Library is in order. The building was dedicated and donated to the Federal Government in an impressive ceremony on July 6, 1957. Republican as well as Democratic leaders took part, emphasizing the intent that the Library should be a nonpartisan and non-political research institution devoted to the objective study and portrayal of the Presidency, largely through the career of Mr. Truman. It then began operations in a building acclaimed for beauty as well as serviceability, to the great credit of the corporation that built it and the thousands of donors who contributed to its financing. The corporation generously provided operating equipment as well as room for expansion. The building has been maintained in exemplary fashion through the Public Buildings Service, another arm of the General Services Administration to which the Library itself belongs.

In the strenuous days of assembling the materials of the Library and making them ready for use, the first step was to arrange the museum exhibits for the dedication and then to develop them to the point of opening the museum to the public on September 16, 1957. More than half a million persons—including the touring

⁶ See Elizabeth H. Buck, "General Legislation for Presidential Libraries," in *American Archivist*, 18: 337-341 (Oct. 1955).

⁷ 69 Stat. 695.

public, many visitors of special interest, and more than 80,000 students from elementary school through college ages—have visited the museum. They see an impressive display of historical and art treasures given to the President as tokens of esteem for the man or his office and many objects insignificant in themselves but important as expressing the regard of citizens for their Chief Executive. Most important, perhaps, are series of objects, documents, and pictures arranged according to themes illustrating the nature and the history of the Presidency.

The museum is not merely one more assemblage of valuable and interesting objects to entertain or educate the public. It is, as Herman Kahn pointed out in his article about the Roosevelt Library in 1959, an integral part of the Library.⁸ It plays a significant role in conveying to the citizens of a democracy a better understanding of the Presidency and through it of government. Much of its meaning would be lost without its association with the papers and other historical materials, and much of the background information about the exhibits could not be obtained except through the papers. Conversely, the student in the research room would miss much of the color and tone of the times he is studying without the museum. And the general public would see very little.

After the opening of the museum much labor went into the placement of the Presidential papers, books, and audiovisual materials in the building and their preparation for use. Two staff members sent from the National Archives had been working on the papers for nearly four years. Now all the materials were shelved in the building, and the hard work of listing and study began.

The most challenging task was the review of the papers to decide which could be opened for research in accord with the legal stipulations of the gift of the papers to the Government. The conditions of access, requiring the closing of papers involving legitimate confidentiality, are much the same as at Hyde Park, and the pattern of review is similar. Nearly all the Presidential papers that are likely to be in demand soon have been reviewed, and the vast majority of them have been opened. In the process the staff, aided by persons familiar with the Independence area, have been building up the specialized knowledge that is one of the principal advantages of the Presidential libraries.

The research materials were shelved, their arrangement was perfected, and sufficient finding aids were provided to permit the research room to open on May 11, 1959. It can certainly be claimed as a contribution to the "right to know" that a large part of Pres-

⁸ Kahn, in *Special Libraries*, 50:109.

ident Truman's papers were opened only six years after the end of his administration. Nearly 150 researchers have used the papers — predominantly professors and graduate students working on books and dissertations. Their diversity both in geographical distribution and subject interests has been encouraging. They have come from New Hampshire and California, from Florida and Oregon, and from many places between; from great universities and small colleges. They have worked on civil rights, agricultural policy, the St. Lawrence Seaway, labor strikes, antitrust problems, Presidential press conferences, economic controls, the Marshall Plan, the senatorial career of Mr. Truman, his biography to some extent, and many other topics. This means that the Library is truly a national institution with a subject field of wide scope. Already four books have been published based in part on its holdings, and many more are being written. Feature writers, magazine authors, television producers, and purveyors of more transitory but more conspicuous products have used its materials.

Serving the research student is in a sense the ultimate purpose of the Library. His writings will in time reach the general public, as the exhibits in the museum do more directly. Making its resources available is, of course, a basic responsibility of any institution, but the responsibility is especially significant in a Presidential library because the papers from the White House relate to the public business and because the important role of the President makes the history and nature of his actions vital to researchers.

Even while the basic holdings of the Library were being put to use, efforts to build up its holdings began. In these early days of the Library, while many actors in the drama of the Truman era are still with us, acquisitions constitute our most pressing task. As one well-known manuscript collector has said, "The librarians who are remembered are those who gave their attention to building up great collections. Those are their monuments. And in the last analysis it is the building up of the great collections that has proved to be the greatest service the librarians could have rendered to scholarship."⁹

We are seeking to acquire as many personal papers as possible of men and women associated with Mr. Truman at one time or another — before, during, or after his Presidency. Our acquisition policies were clearly set forth in a statement issued in 1958.¹⁰ A

⁹ Howard Peckham, "Aiding the Scholar in Using Manuscripts," in *American Archivist*, 19:223 (July 1956).

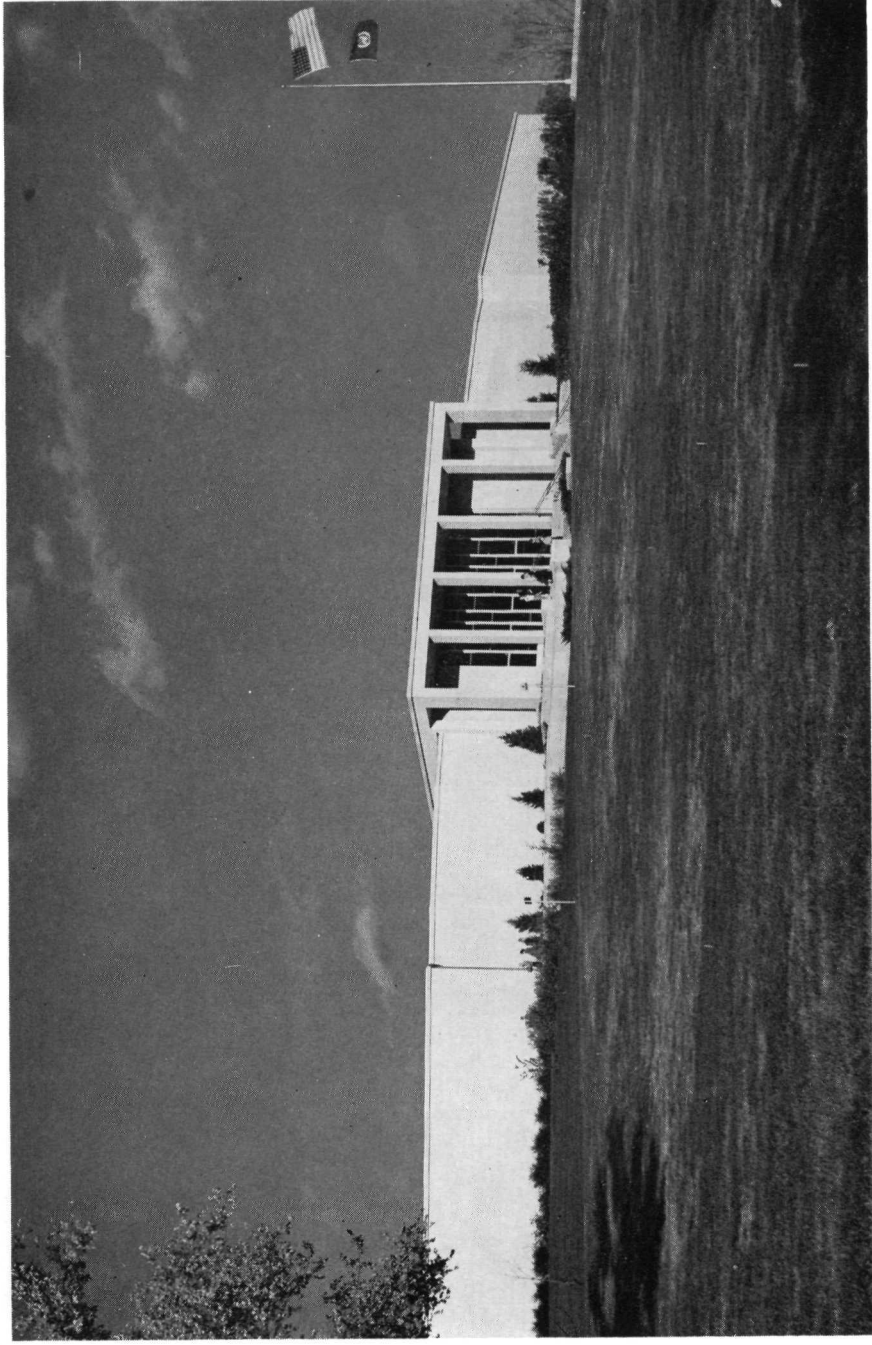
¹⁰ Harry S. Truman Library, *Acquisition Policy of the Harry S. Truman Library* (Aug. 19, 1958).

similar process has gone on at Hyde Park, to the great enrichment of that Library's research potentiality.

More than 150 persons have been approached in the belief that they would like to have their papers lodged with those of President Truman to round out the story. Of these more than a third have agreed to such deposits, and negotiations are pending with as many more. About 20 have already sent their papers to the Library, and their names suggest the additional sources that we may anticipate for scholarly use. One of the first was Oscar H. Chapman, who gave us his well-ordered file representing his Interior Department service from 1933 to 1953 and his political career. Another Cabinet officer who deposited papers accumulated in a colorful career in several posts was J. Howard McGrath. His papers concerning Democratic Party activities have been supplemented by donations from Stephen A. Mitchell and John M. Redding. Files of such men as James E. Webb and Stephen Spingarn, and more to come from former budget officials and members of the Council of Economic Advisers, presage a unique gathering of materials for the study of financial and economic matters. Papers of Frieda Henock are only the first to come from women significant in public life. Students of mining and labor problems will welcome the papers of men such as James Boyd. The list will go on to include men prominent in foreign affairs, agriculture, law, commerce, and other fields.

The papers of private persons are deposited under legal agreements on access similar to those for the Presidential papers. These collections are handled with the same care for their integrity as for that of archives. Some donors have said that the assurance of this treatment, at the hands of objective Government archivists, has induced them to deposit their papers in a Presidential library rather than elsewhere. We feel a responsibility to merit their confidence.

The book collection, designed primarily to support research in the papers and in the Presidency as an institution, has been augmented by gifts and by a regular purchase program. Two special developments, however, warrant mention. One is the grant of \$48,700 from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1958 to finance the main purchase program. Books, other printed items, and microfilm were selected for their bearing on the career and administration of Mr. Truman, the history and nature of the Presidency, and American foreign affairs. These have given shape and meaning to the amorphous collection of 9,000 books, largely diverse gifts, that came from the White House. There are now more than 50,000 titles. The other outstanding development was the purchase of the



TRUMAN LIBRARY BUILDING

Courtesy Harry S. Truman Library



THOMAS HART BENTON'S SYMBOLIC MURAL—"The Opening of the West"

personal library of Prof. Samuel Flagg Bemis, dean of American diplomatic historians. This carefully chosen collection, strong in foreign imprints and periodical material, provides an excellent working foundation for the student of foreign affairs.

The audiovisual collection has been materially augmented by several thousand still photographs, many sound recordings of Truman speeches and ceremonies, and a number of motion pictures. These materials have been acquired from private donors, newspapers, radio and television stations, and research institutions. Experience has already shown that these items are much in demand by writers, producers of television and radio programs, students of speech, and many others.

The museum collection, too, has been developed. Exhibits are changed from time to time; and new materials are added, such as current political cartoons, valuable art and historical objects (still given to Mr. Truman and transferred by him to the Library), and political campaign items of the past. The magnificent mural, "Independence and the Opening of the West," by Thomas Hart Benton, has focused the eyes of the art world and the western-history-minded public on the museum. It was financed by Harry S. Truman Library, Inc., and the Edwin Austin Abbey Memorial Trust Fund for Mural Painting. The three-year process of its production was a memorable experience for the staff and for visitors.

As the second Presidential library under the General Services Administration aegis, we had the great advantage of drawing on the experience of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. Most of the developments discussed above are similar to those at Hyde Park and to those that will take place at Abilene and West Branch. There are, however, some notable features unique to the Truman Library.

Pervading the whole scene at Independence is the vivid personality of the former President himself. He is having what his predecessor hoped for but did not live to enjoy, an opportunity to spend his postpresidential years in his office in the Library. But his days are not devoted to leisurely retrospection, contemplation, and reminiscent writing. The focusing of public attention on him combines with his own exuberant nature to keep him exceptionally busy. A staff of four is occupied with his correspondence, his speaking schedule, his visitors, and countless other matters. He is at the Library at 7:30 in the morning, before anyone else but the guards, setting a contagious example of energy and of happy devotion to work.

It would be regrettable, in a situation like this, to have a man

who was either dictatorial to the point of disregarding the professional principles on which we seek to conduct the Library or uninterested to the point of minimizing our enthusiasm. Mr. Truman is neither. He encourages a clear delineation between his suite and the Library proper—a wise policy that keeps our staff from being involved in his current personal business and leaves us to manage the Government operation. He has never intervened in a personnel appointment, has left entirely to the Library staff the approval of applications to use the papers, and has recognized that museum exhibits must be selected and arranged according to our plans and practical necessities. When he is interviewed by scholars doing research at the Library he consistently tells them that he is giving them his opinions but that they must study the sources and draw their own conclusions.

All this forbearance does not mean any disassociation from the Library. Mr. Truman is always cooperative in giving us background information, in planning for the entertainment of visitors (whether a Presidential nominee, a retired small-business man eager to meet the former President, a group of Army generals with a visiting foreign dignitary, or a sailor on leave from a navy yard) who want to see both him and the Library, and in the handling of gifts that frequently come to him. He enriches our lives by taking visitors around the Library, interspersing reminiscence and comment in his explanations of exhibits. The number of conflicting scheduled events or uncertainties of plans is, in such a whirl of activity, amazingly small.

Perhaps the salient feature of Mr. Truman's presence, and the one that has most aroused his enthusiasm, is his appearance before student groups in the auditorium. In the busy school-tour period of the springtime he talks to groups of students as often as half a dozen times a week, inspiring them to understand the Government and to be prepared to take part in it and inviting them to ask questions. He has said that talking to young people is the most important contribution he can now make.

One unique aspect of the Library is derived from Mr. Truman's own special interest in the development of the office he once held. This is the selection of the history and nature of the Presidency as a major field of emphasis in the book and microfilm collection and in the museum. Mr. Truman keeps proudly in his own office—and uses—a collection of biographies and published writings of the Presidents. Effort is being made to acquire for the Library as full a collection of books as will exist anywhere on the development of the Presidential office and how its incumbents have administered it.

This same interest has led to our acquiring microfilm copies of all the papers of the Presidents from the Library of Congress as the film is produced and microfilm copies of the Adams papers from the Massachusetts Historical Society. Closely related is the series of museum exhibits on the six phases of the President's job, as they have been described by Mr. Truman. In discussions of plans for exhibits Mr. Truman more than once has said, "Don't play up the old man too much. Build up the history of the Presidency."

Another unique feature of the Library involving Mr. Truman is the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs. This body, largely planned by Mr. Lloyd and Dr. Grover, is a nonprofit corporation made up of prominent friends of Mr. Truman interested in research activities, college presidents of the Midwest, and notable scholars. Its board meets annually to discuss problems of acquisition and research in the Truman period. Institute funds, in large part honoraria for lectures transferred to it by Mr. Truman, have been used to provide grants-in-aid to some 28 scholars, to acquire research materials for the Library, and to support one conference of scholars on research problems. The institute plans another conference, made up of persons who have used the Library, for the coming spring. The opportunity to have public servants like Chief Justice Warren and former Secretary Acheson, college executives like President Ellis of the University of Missouri and Chancellor Murphy of the University of California at Los Angeles, and scholars like political scientist Thomas Blaisdell and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., meet with Mr. Truman and with a number of other scholars is stimulating indeed.

Still another enterprise at the Truman Library is an institute project, the new oral history program. As the work on the papers and on acquisitions progressed, it became increasingly evident that we were not obtaining documentation of many important aspects of the Presidential story. It seemed especially vital at this high level of Government to get at the "whys" that historians are always seeking. The frequent visits to the Library of those who took part in the complex affairs of the Truman administration reminded us that there were still at hand witnesses to much of what went on. Thus the institute board at its meeting in 1961 authorized the inception of a program to interview as many of these people as possible, using a recording machine.

Procedures for this type of program have been developed at Columbia University and elsewhere. In general we plan the same type of activity. Work is underway, with a plan to have one staff

member interview persons in the Kansas City area, one or more at other places in this country, and one abroad. By this means we hope to avoid much of the speculation and exaggeration that have made up the "legends" of past Presidents. Admittedly many of those we interview will be older people talking about events of long ago, and subject to human fallibility. Still, they will be able to give useful factual information provided that competent interviewers guide them to the discussion of the most important subject matter. The researchers using the products of this work will have to criticize their sources as they should any kind of raw material. But they can be sure that the Library will gather the information as objectively and carefully as possible.

The variety of activity and of visitors mentioned has probably suggested to the reader that the Library is often immersed in publicity. This is but one more effect of the presence of Mr. Truman and of the interest of the community in him and in the Library. As a major facet of Mr. Truman's own current interests, the Library figures in the daily telling of his life story by reporters, feature writers, and television and radio personalities. It is doubtful that many research institutions find themselves so much in the public eye.

Surely none could have any finer support from the community. One especially valuable tie is a close collaboration with the Jackson County Historical Society. More generally, although the Library is primarily a national institution and its users come from all over the country, the people and the press of Independence and of Kansas City have claimed the Library as their own. They have welcomed it as one of the many cultural elements in the community and have emphasized it as a tourist attraction. Indeed, the Library has brought thousands of visitors to the region.

Still another special feature of the Truman Library derives from Mr. Truman's own experience and interests. Among the historical materials in the Library, particularly museum objects, are several significant items related to Mr. Truman's military career. This is not only a telling experience of his earlier years; it represents an abiding interest manifest in his long and close association with the 35th Division, and it has real bearing on his concept of the President's role as Commander in Chief. Thus we have been asked to absorb on deposit, and to exhibit as may be possible, a collection now being accumulated by the historical committee of the Thirty-Fifth Division Association.

So it may be seen that the Library staff does not sit back undisturbed and meditate upon its problems. It does have problems,

nonetheless. One of them might be the very distraction brought by the variety of activities mentioned. This is a challenge to good management, but it is not overwhelming. Further, most of this activity is a part of the career that we seek to observe and to document.

Another problem might be (and some writers not acquainted with the Library have assumed that it is) that the close relationship to the former President would make impossible any objectivity in the handling of research materials. The solution to this lies in the perceptiveness of the staff to its own liabilities and in strict adherence to professional principles. The test of our success would seem to be the reaction of the more than a hundred serious researchers who have studied in the research room. Only one or two have assured us that they were going to write sympathetic accounts of the President, and we have tried politely to let them know that we are really not interested in such assurances.

A real problem is the professional or technical one of maintaining the distinction between archival materials, such as records of Presidential commissions, and personal papers, including those of the President; between the materials that came directly from the White House and those (sometimes files originated by the same men) that came from private donors; between materials governed by official regulations such as security classification and those that are strictly unofficial. But this problem is unique here only in its frequency. The solution lies again in a trained professional staff; three of our archivists came from the National Archives and the others have absorbed the same teaching; the librarian and museum curator were experienced professionals when they joined the staff.

It is too early to reappraise the course of the Library and its solutions to its problems. Many of its holdings and activities are still in the formative stage. It is building for the future. Although some of the future authorities on the Truman era are surely among the young men and women who have already done research at the Library, the most active period of study is likely to come 10 or 15 years from now.

One truly significant feature of the Library is an outstanding staff of competent people, devoted to their important task and conscious of their educational mission. In their hands lies much of the responsibility for a body of information that will provide future knowledge and appraisal of the Truman era. They do the work, while the Director confers, plans meetings, and writes articles.