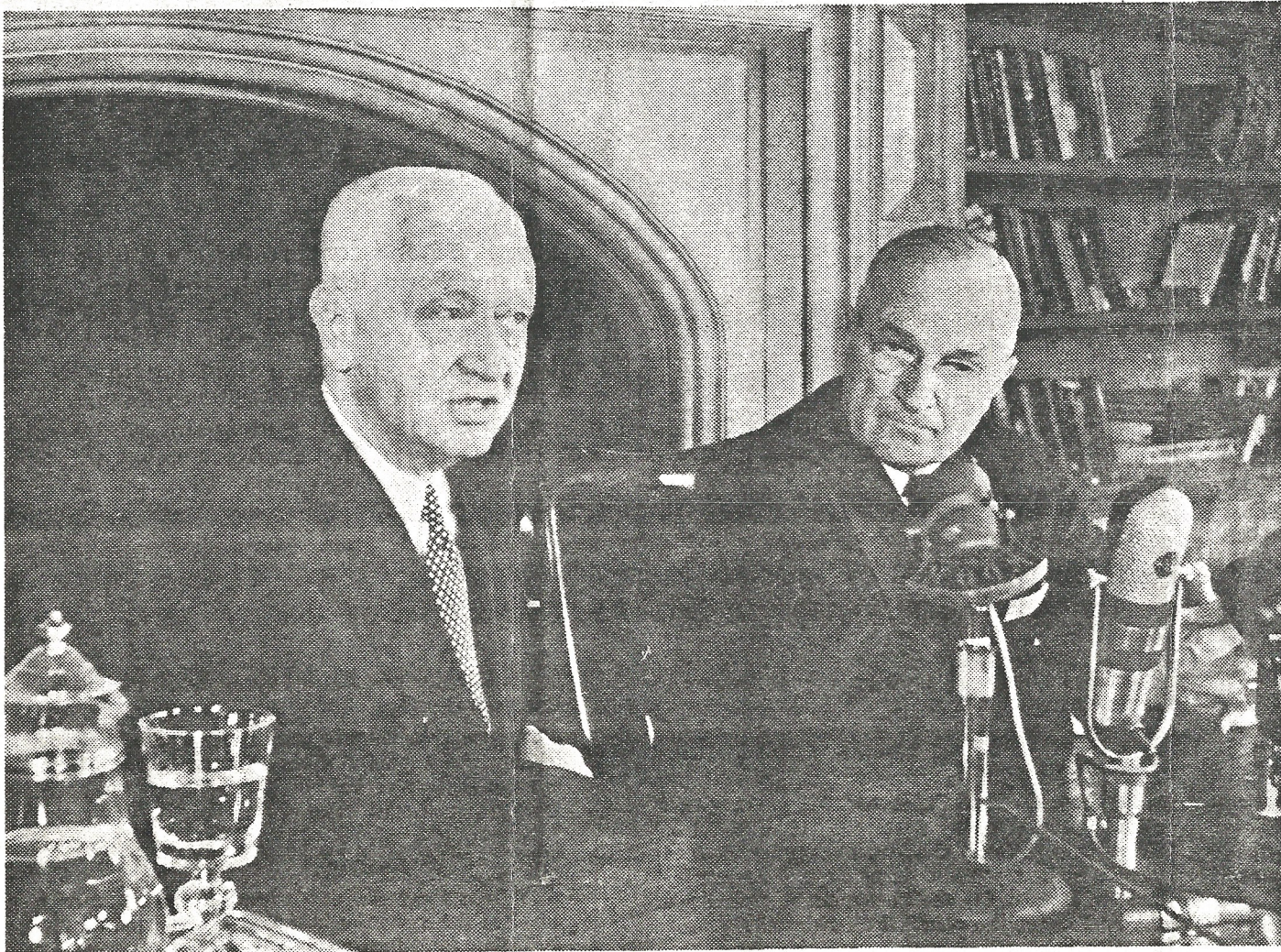


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Memories of Truman, Eaton . . And Dewey

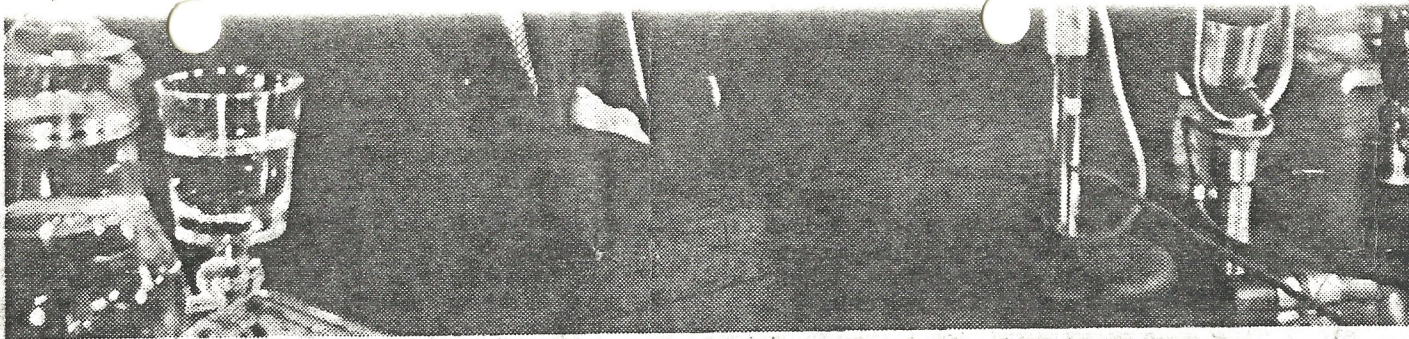


Old friends industrialist Cyrus Eaton and former President Harry S. Truman held a press conference in Cleveland in 1955 prior to a dinner which raised funds for the Truman Library in Independence, Mo.

By HOWARD SKIDMORE

The former president was telling of his visit to Chicago while we were seated in a meeting room of Kansas City's Hotel Muehlebach. It was Nov. 5, 1958, exactly 10 years (plus two days) since that 1948

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By **HOWARD SKIDMORE**

Harry S. Truman started the story in a rather off-hand manner. But it soon became evident that to him, at least, it was a special story.

"I was in Chicago not long ago," the former president began, "sitting in an open car outside the Tribune Tower."

Chicago Tribune! Harry Truman! Who could forget that combination. Who could forget the delightfully acrimonious verbal feuding between the "give 'em hell" Democratic candidate and the self-lauding "World's Greatest Newspaper"? The caustic exchanges had enlivened the 1948 presidential campaign, a contest that was not otherwise notably lively. This was true, at least, as far as the smugly confident Republican contender, Thomas E. Dewey, he of the trimmed mustache and tight-buttoned demeanor, was concerned.

The Chicago newspaper also had provided — not intentionally — the hilarious highlight of the unexpected Truman triumph. A news picture showed the broadly-grinning president holding aloft a newspaper. It was the morning-after-election front page of his Midwest nemesis. The banner headline read, "Dewey Defeats Truman." It was perhaps the greatest journalistic gaffe — Truman's smile made it almost an endearing one — since the United Press' "false armistice" of the First World War.

Howard Skidmore, former public relations executive and railroad official, is a free-lance writer living in Carmel.

The former president was telling of his visit to Chicago while we were seated in a meeting room of Kansas City's Hotel Muehlebach. It was Nov. 5, 1958, exactly 10 years (plus two days) since that 1948 election. As he talked, I looked directly into his eyes, indistinctly blue behind the thickness of his steel-framed eyeglasses. Was the Truman anecdote a serious one, perhaps a footnote to history? Or was he leading up to a laugh? It was hard to tell with this smooth-faced old poker player. (He had once lost \$600 over a weekend on the presidential yacht, but he generally played better than that.) I would have to hear him out.

Before going on with the retired statesman's story, perhaps I should explain how we found ourselves talking quietly at a luncheon speaker's table. It's an account with some unusual elements, including a millionaire farmer-philosopher, the atom bomb, a place called Pugwash and the "landlord of the Kremlin."

Truman earlier had told me that this was the first meeting of the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce he had ever attended. This I found surprising. For a longtime politician of the region, it seemed amazing

(Continued)

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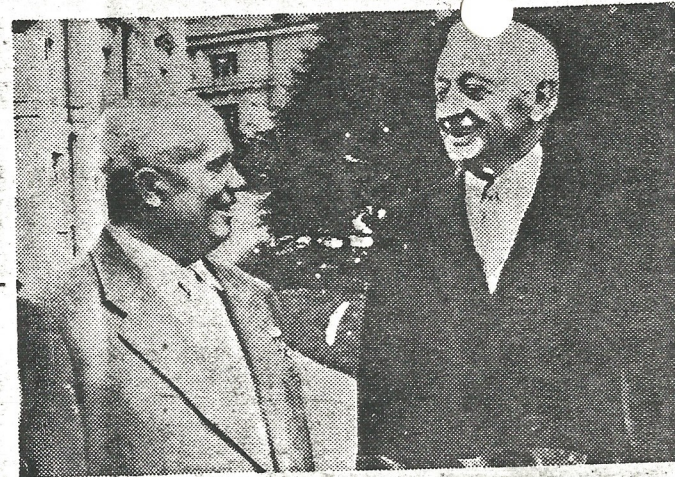
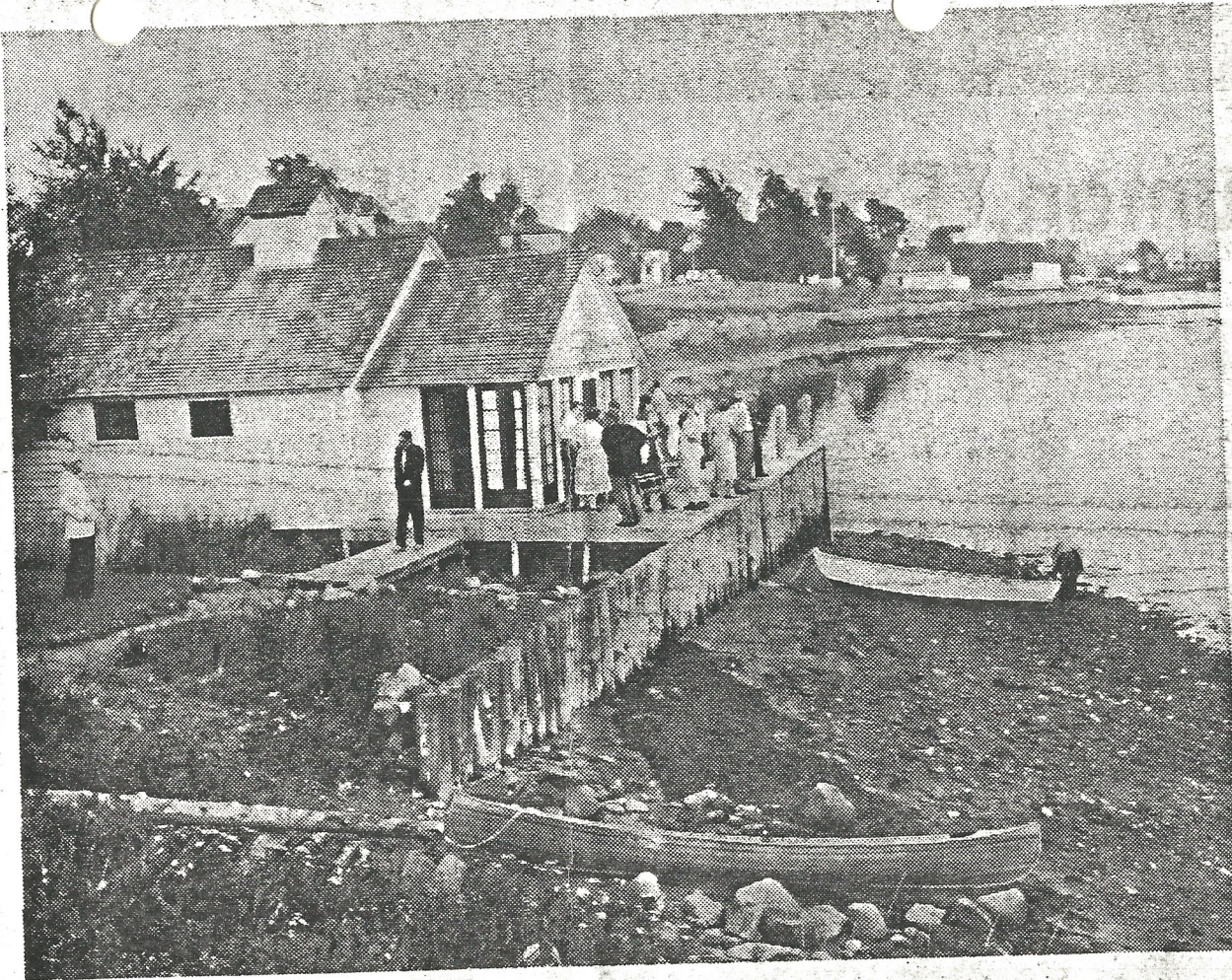
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Cyrus Eaton's concern for the future of the world led him to meet with then-Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the Kremlin in 1958. A year earlier he had called together international scientists at the Eaton family home in Pugwash, Nova Scotia (left), to discuss ways to lessen the nuclear peril.

that he could have eschewed for so long the rubber chicken of the community booster circuit. However, he later told the same thing to my boss, Cyrus Eaton, so I had not misunderstood him.

The ex-president's attendance at the affair was a tribute to old-friend Eaton. Furthermore, it came at a time when a more timid public figure might have thought it wiser to be absent. By his presence, the first citizen of Independence, Mo., was still showing that independence of mind and action once so infuriating to such critics as the editorial-page pundits of the Chicago Tribune.

Eaton, a Cleveland industrialist, tall, silver-haired and courtly in manner, had come to Kansas City with two purposes. One was to attend as a director and major stockholder a board meeting of

interest in Russia by paying a visit to Moscow and Leningrad.

In the Kremlin, Eaton had a wide-ranging 90-minute conversation with the ebullient Nikita Khrushchev, recently elevated to premier. Both once farmboys, both youthful in spirit (the American 74 and the Russian 64), the consummate capitalist and the chief commissar struck it off swimmingly.

The seeming incongruity of a friendly palaver between Adam Smith and Karl Marx captured the attention of the world's press. Back in the U.S., leading organizations in numerous cities sought the corporate leader as a speaker. In Washington the National Press Club turned out a capacity audience of 500 to hear the peace-seeking traveler state his case for friendly relations and trade with the Soviet Union.

ism in Europe and Asia, and the Marshall Plan to aid European recovery.

The congressman was one of the eight Americans to sign the United Nations Charter in 1945. Such internationalism earned him the epithet of "turncoat" from the isolationist Chicago Tribune.

Uncle Charley, as his nephew always referred to him — although they were more like brothers — was also from Pugwash. And whenever anyone drew a blank at the whereabouts of that village (whose name is Indian for "deep water") the jovial congressman would feign surprise. "Why," he would exclaim, as if everyone surely knew it, "it's midway between Shin-nemacas and Tatamagouche."

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Eaton, a Cleveland industrialist, tall, silver-haired and courtly in manner, had come to Kansas City with two purposes. One was to attend as a director and major stockholder a board meeting of the local power company. The other was to deliver an urgent message to the 600 men packed in the room.

In a time of Cold War polemics, Eaton's plea was an unusual one. In fact, coming from a man who controlled some \$2½ billion dollars' worth of railroads, steel mills, iron and coal mines and utilities, it was very unusual. Simply put, what he had to say was this: The United States should put its mind to getting along better with the Soviet Union before the atom bomb did them both in.

The "capitalist who looks like a cardinal," as one British journalist had recently dubbed him, had learned a worrisome lot about the bomb in, of all unlikely-sounding places, Pugwash, Nova Scotia. This instruction had come from some of the very scientists who had helped develop and construct the first nuclear weapons.

Twelve years after Hiroshima, Western scientists felt an urgent need to meet and talk informally with their counterparts from the other side. They wanted to assess the threat to mankind of the new weaponry, not then as well known as later, and to seek ways to lessen the danger of nuclear confrontation. Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell endorsed the meeting, and Eaton put up the funds to fly the participants, including a number of Nobel laureates, to his old family home in the Canadian fishing village of Pugwash.

Two months before his Kansas City speech, the tycoon-farmer-scholar went to another conference of nuclear scientists, this one at Kitzbuhel and Vienna, with the Austrian government as chief sponsor. While abroad he fulfilled a longtime personal and business

interests in Russia by paying a visit to Moscow and Leningrad.

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But not everyone was enthralled with this American business leader who had sat with the pudgy Soviet leader and had neither lectured him nor come away to denounce him. One apoplectic congressman complained that Eaton was illegally meddling in the nation's foreign relations. The Chicago Tribune editorially fulminated that he might once have been a business genius, but he was now obviously a communist dupe or soft in the head.

Any criticism from that quarter was, of course, only high praise in Harry Truman's eyes. Anyway, as senator, vice president and later, president, the Missourian had known the Ohioan long and well, and knew he was neither a dupe nor in his dotage.

Sen. Truman had once given crucial support to a major Eaton undertaking. Early in World War II the Clevelander had planned recovery of a large body of iron ore that lay deep beneath Steep Rock Lake in the Canadian wilderness. His idea was to dig a tunnel that, once the final plug was blown with dynamite, would drain the lake as though it were a giant bathtub. Truman, then head of a special Senate committee to speed war production, gave the project his blessing as helpful to the national defense.

There was another tie between the politico and the magnate. Eaton's uncle was Rep. Charles A. Eaton of New Jersey, influential chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Truman, then president, counted the congressman among the few "good" Republicans. His help had made possible the two outstanding achievements of the Truman first term, the Truman Doctrine to halt the spread of commun-

ism in Europe and Asia, and the Marshall Plan for European recovery.

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A former Baptist minister, Uncle Charley had once been pastor to John D. Rockefeller. When the oil philanthropist played golf he liked to have close at hand in his foursome his spiritual mentor, his doctor and his dentist. Young Cyrus caddied, and so began his business career under the tutelage of the world's greatest tycoon.

Years later, when Eaton had made his own millions, he was able to reciprocate for Truman's earlier help. The 1948 campaign was drawing to a close and Democratic money, the life-blood of politics, was drying up. In fact there wasn't enough money to pay for the last special train that was scheduled to take the Truman family home to Independence to vote. Things were bleak. Pollster Elmo Roper had even suspended his final polling effort because the election result seemed obvious. Then Cyrus Eaton stepped forward. He put up the needed \$6,000, and the train took the Trumans home to vote . . . the last train ride of the campaign and it was a big one.

Another Eaton assist was given when Harry and Bess Truman came to Cleveland in 1955. I conducted a press conference for the former president and escorted a media group which accompanied the Trumans to the Eaton farm to inspect shorthorn cattle. That evening a \$100-a-plate dinner, arranged by Eaton, raised a substantial contribution to the Truman Library at Independence. The money came largely from Republican businessmen who by then had learned to admire the nation's 33rd president.

And so, at last, we return to the story of the Truman visit to Chicago. Truman, honorary grand marshal of the Columbus Day parade that year, was sitting in the car on Michigan Boulevard, waiting for the marching to begin.

Harry S. Truman

He continued his story: "The editor of the paper came down from the tower with a copy of the edition just off the press in his hand. He handed it to me."

Aha, I thought, a peace offering. How nice. The Tribune asks to be forgiven for editorials that had once denounced the man in the car as the worst president, a crook, an incompetent and stupid. But Harry Truman, it turned out, was burying no hatchet.

"I handed the paper right back to him," he said, "I told him, 'I wouldn't wipe my nose with that.'"

That, of course, is an approximation of the former president's words. The salty language (but never in mixed company) of the onetime dirt farmer and wartime artillery lieutenant was well known.

Was the gleam behind the eyeglasses amusement? Or the steely glint of retribution exacted? It was hard to tell. But the chairman of the meeting had started the program and the storyteller and I turned away from each other.

Thinking of it later, I found it hard to believe that Harry Truman would nurse a grudge for a decade. It was true he had a great capacity for anger and indignation. But those feelings he generally released by telling about it in a letter to his sister or daughter. Often he vented his frustration in a letter to the offender, which he left in his desk, unmailed.

In fact, I have a hunch that after relishing the astonished look on the editor's face Truman had reached over to accept the paper and to shake the newsman's hand. However, it was also true that such editorial abuse of an incumbent chief executive had probably not been seen since Abraham Lincoln was likened to an ape. But the president himself, let it be admitted, had not been exactly an innocent bystander.

Truman's characteristic humility was shown when, after less than three months as vice president, he was suddenly thrust into the top position. "I don't know whether any of you fellows ever had a load of hay or a bull fall on you," he told reporters, "but last night the whole weight of the moon and the stars and all the planets fell on me. I feel a tremendous responsibility. Please pray for me. I mean that."

With the prayers of the newsmen, including the Chicago Tribune's representative, presumably solidly behind him, the new leader went on to enjoy wide public support. The war was won and the United Nations started. By 1948, however, the 80th Congress,



To humanize his man in the public eye, short, craggy-faced Hagerty let it be known that Dewey had been made an honorary life member of the Good Egg Club, sponsored by a trade organization. The trophy was an ashtray surmounted by a bronze egg. When a businessman wrote suggesting Dewey shave off his mustache to win votes, it was duly noted in the press that the candidate was giving it "serious consideration." Still the candidate just couldn't seem to relax. When Hagerty arranged a golf outing for Dewey with a group of political reporters, the candidate regrettably shot an 83, outshining all his guests.

As a fledgling New York newspaperman, I had spent a brief period alone with Dewey and found him gracious. Of course, my paper, the Herald Tribune

Harry S. Truman inscribed this photograph to Howard Skidmore after a fund-raising dinner for the Truman Library, held in Cleveland in 1955.

That son was later to write, in a foreword to a book about his father, "The warmth and compassion my father had . . . were often masked by an exterior that came across as more forbidding than intended." Seems like an understatement.

The next day, all the governors were asked to assemble on the lawn at the hotel's entrance for a

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In mid-year, the president traveled to the Pacific Northwest. At Spokane, he picked a fight. The local newspaper and the Chicago Tribune, he declared, were "the two worst papers in the country." They opposed his programs and had helped elect "the worst Congress we've had since the first one met."

His Midwest foe retaliated immediately in a front-page editorial: "Mr. Truman has added his name to the long list of political crooks and incompetents who have regarded The Tribune as first among their foes.

"Mr. Truman's tactics are, of course, transparent. He is desperate. He started his trip fearing he was unpopular. Now he knows that he is. The tour has been a flop . . .

"Thanks in no small way to the Tribune, the people of this nation know Mr. Truman for the nincompoop he is."

Two weeks later, the Republican party chose Gov. Thomas E. Dewey of New York, former "gang-buster" prosecutor, as its candidate. Fifty leading Washington correspondents in a poll unanimously predicted he would win if the Democrats nominated the incumbent.

The Republican candidate, whose stiff manner and appearance had caused him to be compared to the little man on the wedding cake, worked hard to overcome a reputation for aloofness, even arrogance. In that he was aided by his capable press secretary, James C. Hagerty, who would later win power and prestige as President Eisenhower's aide.

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As a fledgling New York newspaperman, I had spent a brief period alone with Dewey and found him gracious. Of course, my paper, the Herald Tribune, was the leading Republican journal and that might have had something to do with it. In 1950, however, when I observed him at the Governors Conference in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., his quirkiness continued to prevail.

Dewey and Gov. Earl Warren of California, who had been his running mate two years earlier, were sitting with their wives on the golf club veranda. New York State's chief executive seemed relaxed, secure in the last public office he would ever hold.

The two teen-age Dewey sons passed by with two of the three pretty Warren daughters. Warren said, "You can tell that one's a Dewey, can't you?" referring to the eldest son. Dewey replied, "His mother and I hope that someday he will be."

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The next day, all the governors were asked to assemble on the lawn at the hotel's entrance for a photo session. Life magazine had arranged for a large outline of the United States to be traced with tape. A photographer was on the roof to make an overhead shot.

Each state's chief executive was asked to stand in the appropriate space, holding a light cardboard sign with his state's name. Dewey threw his sign on the grass and urged Gov. Frank Lausche of Ohio to do the same. "Gee, Tom, we're here, we might as well go along with it," said Lausche. Dewey was having none of it. The picture was made and appeared across two pages in the magazine. New York's name lay on the grass.

When Hagerty, having a quiet drink in the Old White Club with a newsman friend, was told what his
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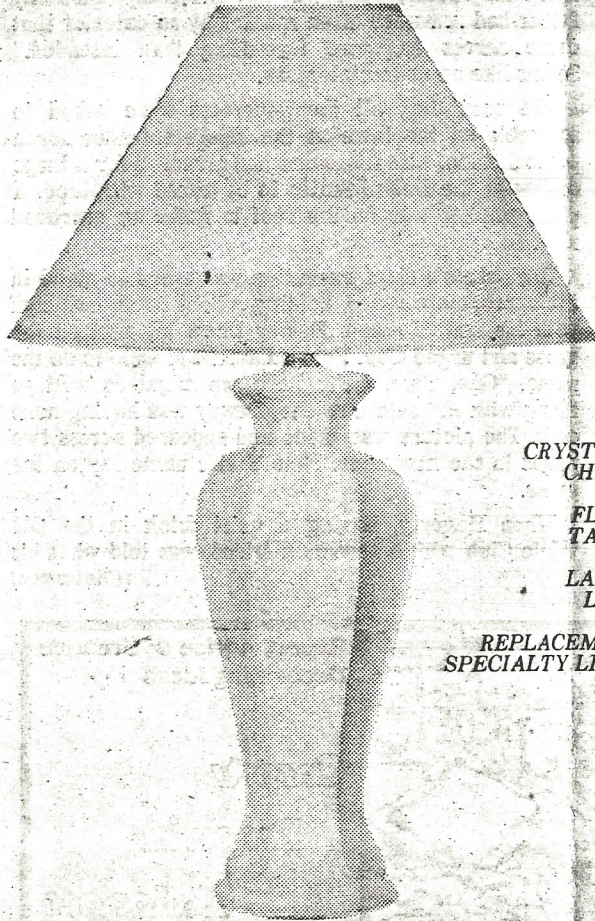
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Harry S. Truman

principal had done, his chin sank to the table and he put his hands across the top of his head. Well, better days were coming with Ike.

After the 1948 conventions, both candidates headed west by train. His fighting spirit up, the Democrat declared, "I'm going to fight hard, and I'm going to

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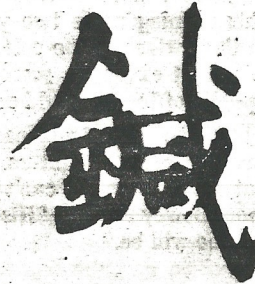
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give 'em hell." Exuding confidence and playing it safe, the Republican, it was later said, attempted to "sit on the fence while keeping both ears to the ground."

The only excitement from the Dewey tour came in southern Illinois. The train's engineer overshot a water stop; as the train backed up, the crowd was running forward. No one was hurt, but the candidate (presumably before his press aide could clap a hand over his mouth) said the engineer was a "lunatic" who perhaps should be shot at sunrise. There went the railroad workers' vote.

Just before the election, the Chicago Tribune announced half-heartedly it was choosing Dewey because "we consider him the least worse of the candidates." The editorial excoriated his opponent: "Mr. Truman is not only the worst president this country has had, he has the least capacity for the office. While he is incapable of great betrayals, he is possessed of an invincible stupidity and a political morality that has never risen above the ghost voting and the draft of the Pendergast machine."

After his stunning victory, the "worst president" was humble, with no I-told-you-so words for pollsters, press or politicians. Soon, however, there appeared on his desk a new paperweight. It was a lead miniature reproduction of his Midwest adversary's early edition with its risible headline.

Newspapers around the country lauded Truman for his self-confidence and courage. The "World's Greatest Newspaper" accepted its bete noire's victory in a restrained vein:

"Mr. Truman is entitled to congratulations for having made a valiant fight against what were thought to be overwhelming odds." Whatever congratulations the victor was entitled to, the editorial did not state them in so many words. Turning to the defeated party, the paper looked into a cloudy crystal ball and predicted: "If the same forces control the next Republican convention the party is finished." Four years later, in Chicago and with no change in basic policies, the Republican convention launched Dwight Eisenhower into two terms in the White House.

In defeat, Tom Dewey (I suspected Jim Hagerty was feeding him the lines) mustered up the human touch. He said he felt like the man who had awakened inside a coffin with a lily in his hand and said to himself, "If I'm alive, what am I doing here? And if I'm dead, why do I have to go to the bathroom?" A great line, but delivered much too late. □