



By Raymond H. Geselbracht

# Young Bess in Hats

Before She Became Mrs. Harry S. Truman, Before She Became First Lady

Young Bess Wallace had beautiful eyes, large and round and expressive. She knew her eyes were beautiful and wanted people to notice them and to see the young woman's heart and personality they revealed.

We know this because we can see it in the photographs taken of her during the first 30 years or so of her life. She also liked to express herself through her clothes, especially her hats.

One of her teachers remembered that Bess, when she was a high school girl, “was always dressed in the very latest.” Her best friend recalled that “Bess always had more stylish hats than the rest of us did, or she wore them with more style.” This stylishness is apparent in the early photographs, too.

The later Bess Truman—the one remembered as First Lady from 1945 to 1953—seems a different person. She was not easy to know. She was a very private person forced to live as a very public one. She believed, as she said when her husband was just entering the national political spotlight, that a woman’s place in public was “to sit beside her husband, be silent, and be sure her hat is on straight.”

When she became First Lady, she refused to give press conferences. A reporter protested her decision, and she replied, “I am not the one who is elected. I have nothing to say to the public.” She felt the same way about photographers and would have stopped them taking pictures of her if she could. Since she couldn’t, she usually showed how she felt when a camera was pointed at her—she frowned, and she looked, as one historian has noted, “as if her feet hurt.”

“Nobody hates to have her picture taken more than . . . [Bess] does,” her husband said in 1951. “The only good ones we have of her were taken by accident.”

### **Before She Became Famous, A Different Bess Truman**

Harry Truman knew his life had been guided by some destiny and that he would be remembered as an important historical figure, and he was content this should be so. “The truth is all I want from history,” he wrote to a White House aide in February 1950.

*Opposite page top:* Bess Wallace, probably in 1901, at about the time she graduated from high school. A friend remembered that she “always had more stylish hats than the rest of us did, or she wore them with more style.”

*Opposite inset:* Bess Wallace, about three years old in Independence, Missouri.



*Left:* Bess Truman at the 1944 Democratic National Convention, where Harry was nominated for Vice President. As First Lady, she was a private person, believing that a woman’s place in public “was to sit beside her husband, [and] be silent.” *Right:* Bess Wallace, age 15, in her first suit wearing a boater hat, October 1900.



Bess Truman felt different. The truth was not what she wanted for herself from history. She wanted to evade history and its unfortunate gaze entirely. She didn’t want people she didn’t know talking about her or poring over pictures of her.

But once, when she was young—when she was Bess Wallace, not yet Bess Truman—when she didn’t have to worry about being remembered by history, she had welcomed the photographer and his camera and had revealed herself in photographs. She knew they would be seen, not by millions of people she didn’t know, but only by people she knew intimately and loved, her family and friends. No one else cared about them.

She could smile in these photographs and show who she was and how she felt about life. She was not yet the often dour woman of the later photographs, but a beautiful child, a simple, charming girl, and, finally, a stylish young woman who looks at the camera with wide eyes and unprotected emotions. She looks out from these photographs at someone—at her family and friends, but

now also at all of us, at the strangers she never imagined would be interested in her.

Bess Wallace’s most striking feature was her big round blue eyes. She had pretty hair too, and other charms, as the young Harry Truman noticed right away when he and Bess started attending Sunday school together at the First Presbyterian Church in Independence. This was in 1890. Harry was six, Bess was five. Harry was immediately and, as it turned out, for all time taken with her.

“I saw a beautiful curly haired girl,” he remembered. “I thought (and still think) she was the most beautiful girl I ever saw. She had tanned skin, blond hair, golden as sunshine, and the most beautiful blue eyes I’ve ever seen, or ever will see.”

### **With Golden Curly Hair, A Fondness for Hats**

As the years went by, it became evident that the young Bess Wallace that Harry Truman was in love with was, as the early photographs show, fond of hats. She lived in an age of hats, and she apparently loved wear-





Left: Bess Wallace wearing a tricorn hat and glasses at about age 15. Right: Bess Wallace at about 20 years old wearing an elaborate picture hat.

ing them. In the earliest photograph showing her in a hat, taken when she was about 12 years old, she is wearing a boater, a simple hat with a medium crown and brim.

In a photograph taken about three years later, Bess is also wearing a boater, this one with an extravagant trimming, in an especially beautiful photograph. She's 15 years old and is wearing her first suit. Her expressive eyes look out of the photograph with tenderness, touched with a little young melancholy.

Another photograph of Bess wearing the same hat and probably the same suit was discovered by the Truman Library in 2008. She's sitting with her brothers and other relatives on the front steps of what was then her grandparents' home at 219 North Delaware Street in Independence, Missouri. She's leaning to her right, with her head turned slightly to the left, just as in her birthday photograph, and, again, she seems far off in some thought or memory.

One can imagine that the loose tress of hair on the left side that one sees in both photographs was carefully arranged so by the young woman. If the tress fell loose in this way when Bess went to school, Harry Truman certainly noticed it and loved it together with everything else about her.

Bess's taste in hats was almost always rather conservative, but sometimes she put on something that looks more daring to modern eyes. A photograph taken when she was about 15 shows her in a tricorn hat and, remarkably, wearing glasses.

In another photograph from this time or a little later, she wears what appears to be a so-called Phrygian cap, or Liberty cap. Some mischief was going on the day this photograph was taken, because the tiny image, no larger than a dime, which is pasted on the matting surrounding the portrait of Bess in the boater hat, is accompanied by photographs of Bess's brothers, Frank and George, wearing the same cap.

### **A Photograph of Bess That Harry Never Saw**

Two photographs of Bess survive from the time she graduated from high school. The first is the class photograph for the Independence High School class of 1901, taken on the school's front steps. Bess is on the far right in the second row. She has a lively smile and shows some of the impish wit that would stay with her through life.

Harry Truman is in this photograph too, probably daydreaming about Bess. They're about as far apart in the photograph as they can be, and Bess is probably not thinking about Harry. The romance was at this time one-sided. "Nobody dreamed of them being sweethearts in the days when they were in high school," one of their teachers remembered.

The second photograph of Bess from this time, a studio portrait, may have been considered her graduation photograph. It shows a beautiful young woman looking serene and self-possessed, posed seated



Bess wearing an assortment of hats: an elaborate picture hat, undated (left); another picture hat in her yard, 1907 (center); and a large sombrero-like hat held in place by huge and fierce-looking bodkins, in a studio portrait from 1911 (below).

with her chin in her hand, a spray of flowers in her hair.

It's hard to realize Bess is only 17. The photograph was donated to the Truman Library in 1994 by a niece of William Bostian, the Independence postmaster's son, who may have been one of Bess's boyfriends before Harry Truman started courting her. Harry was not given a copy of this photograph.

Had he been, he would never have lost it, though it might have been worn out by his dreamy gazing. Bess's family strangely did not keep a copy of his photograph, or at least it was not among the family photographs in the Delaware Street house when Bess died.

Bess's favorite type of hat for dressy occasions during the long years between her graduation from high school and her marriage in 1919 was the picture hat. The crowns were sometimes deep, sometimes shallow, the brims more or less wide. Bess's picture hats were relatively simple, avoiding the excess of flowers, feathers, ribbons, and tulle that sometimes cluttered the hats of the period.

One day in about 1905, Bess put on maybe the most elaborate picture hat she ever wore, and a very formal dress as well, and

walked down the front steps of the Delaware Street house. Someone took a picture of her standing by the front veranda with two unidentified women. The occasion has been lost. Bess was with her grandparents by this time. Her father had committed suicide in June 1903, and Bess, her mother, and three brothers moved into the big house at 219 North Delaware.

### **Bess, Having Fun, Shows Her Moods to the Camera**

On another occasion when Bess was out having some fun, probably in 1906, she apparently decided to have a picture taken in a photograph booth. She is wearing a picture hat, one with a shallow crown and, for her, a rather grand feather. The trimming was in fact so fine, and Bess's mood so impish, that she decided to turn her back on the camera. The photograph shows the back of her head and the very fine feather on her hat.

Bess is again wearing picture hats in photographs taken in 1907 and 1908. One shows her standing in an outdoor setting, perhaps in the yard at 219 North Delaware. There are flowers in the trees, flowers on the brim of her hat, and she appears to be

dressed entirely in white; everything looks like spring.

The second photograph, a studio portrait, is more somber. Bess's hat is dark, she's standing very erect and is tightly strapped in her dress. Her expression is serious and mature.

In a dated studio portrait from 1911, Bess is wearing what is probably the most bizarre hat she ever owned. It looks almost like a sombrero and is held in place by huge and fierce bodkins. Bess's dress looks a little wild too. Perhaps something special was happening that day. Bess's eyes are wide open and full of fun, almost glittering with suppressed mirth. A Sears catalog from about this time shows a hat not unlike this one of Bess's. Both have deep crowns, wide and unusual brims, and upright feathers.

If a picture hat was usually suitable for more or less dressy occasions, Bess sometimes needed something more sporty. She was an athletic young woman who liked to be outside doing things. She liked walking, fishing, playing tennis, ice skating, and, when the automobile appeared, motoring. Once she and Harry Truman began going out together in 1910 or 1911, she did these things with him.







Independence High School class of 1901. Bess is seated in the second row, far right; Harry is standing in the back row, fourth from the left.

### Bess and Harry Dressed Up For Picnics along the River

Bess and Harry especially liked picnics, and the long walks down to the Missouri River that went with them. They would walk down River Street to the landing on the river, of-

ten accompanied by Bess's brothers Frank and George and their wives Natalie and May. One day when they were down at the landing, Bess, Harry, and the rest of their party stood for photographs against a railing at the Independence Water Works. Bess held her shoulders at a jaunty angle, which one sees in some other photographs; it must have been a characteristic pose. She wore a simple, sporty hat for this outdoor occasion. Maybe she and her companions fell into a sardonic mood, because they all turned around and showed their backs while the camera took another picture.

Bess's favorite hat for sporting occasions, to judge from the photographs that survive, was the simple slouch hat, a comfortable companion for these outings, white and rumpled, the brim hanging down to shield her eyes.

She wore it to play tennis, go fishing, and ride with Harry in the Stafford motor car that he bought in 1914. When Bess died at age 97, there were two slouch hats in her closet.

Bess hoped to marry Harry in the fall of 1917, but when the United States entered World War I in April of that year, Harry's patriotic heart drew him in. He enlisted in the Missouri National Guard, and he knew he would be sent to France to fight. Maybe he would be killed, or be maimed and crippled. He felt he couldn't marry Bess until he returned home in one piece.

Bess did the best thing she could do to remain close to him during their long separation—she had a portrait photograph made for him to carry near his heart. "Dear Harry," she wrote on the back, "May this photograph



#### To learn more about

- Harry and Bess Truman, go to the "Truman at 125" issue of *Prologue* at [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2009/spring/](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2009/spring/).
- Harry's long courtship of Bess, go to [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/winter/](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/winter/).
- The Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, go to [www.trumanlibrary.org/](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/).



Bess's favorite hat for sporting occasions, such as tennis, fishing, or rides with Harry, was the simple Slouch hat.



Bess's wedding day, June 28, 1919.

when exchanging vows with Harry at Trinity Episcopal Church in Independence. No photographs were taken at the church, but two were taken during the reception at 219 North Delaware Street.

Thirty-three years after Bess Truman's wedding photograph was taken—after she had endured, often unwillingly but with a fatalistic acceptance, three decades of a life too much in the public eye—she smiled for a photographer an untroubled smile such as she had seldom shown in a photograph since the days of her youth.

It was the night of March 29, 1952, and she was at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner at the National Guard Armory in Washington, D.C. It was very late, almost 11 p.m. The attention of hundreds of prominent Democrats was fixed on the podium, where President Harry S. Truman was preparing to say something of great importance to the future of the Democratic Party. Bess listened anxiously as her husband made his way through his speech. A photographer took a picture of her in which

bring you safely home again from France.” When she sat for this most important photograph, Bess chose not to wear a hat, and something happened to her when she looked at the camera. Her eyes widened and all the love in her heart seemed to show through them.

Margaret Truman, in her biography of her mother, noticed the true and poignant emotion that this photograph radiates.

“I have always considered it a remarkable study in character,” she wrote. “The photographer had the instincts of an artist. He caught Bess Wallace’s unique blend of strength and femininity, and he also captured the regret and doubt that were troubling her in that tumultuous year. There is no smile on her face. She looks straight at the camera, as she had forced herself to look at life—serious, determined, but not uncaring. I also see now a vulnerability that I never saw before.” Harry carried the photograph in his shirt pocket, over his heart, the two years he was gone to war. It was on his desk at the Truman Library when he died.

Bess gave this photograph to Harry in 1917 when he enlisted to go to war. “May this photograph bring you safely home again from France,” she wrote on the back.

### 30 Years after the Wedding. Bess Smiles for the Camera

When Bess’s wedding day finally came, on June 28, 1919, she chose to wear a picture hat





HAT WITH VEIL \$248 18E7020

\$148 18E7028

\$135 18E7040

\$198 18E7044

CAP WITH VEIL \$198 18E7032

89¢ 18E7048

\$198 18E7052

\$175 18E7056

45¢ 18E7060

\$110 18E7070

\$110 18E7064

\$125 18E7074

**Hats for Motor and Sports Wear**  
 Wear the Right Hat at the Right Time. Average Shipping Weight, 2 Pounds.

The Sears catalog, ca. 1912, featured "Sports Wear," although Bess favored the humble slouch hat.

she's looking down grimly at the table where she's sitting, holding her face in her hand. She must have known what her husband would say that night; he didn't keep secrets from her. But still, she had to wait to hear the words she longed to hear.

She was right to feel anxious about what her husband would say. He had taken a long time to settle upon the decision he was about to announce. Sometime before this night, as Truman was thinking what he would say in his speech, he mentioned to one of his aides the pressure he was feeling from some prominent Democrats to run again. The aide point-

ed to the portrait of Bess on the President's desk—the one she had given him in 1917, the one he had kept near his heart all the time he was in France during World War I. "Would you do that to her?" the aide asked. Truman thought for a moment. "All right, that settles it," he said.

Finally, Bess heard the words she longed to hear. "I shall not be a candidate for reelection," Truman announced to the crowd of Democratic Party leaders at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner. "I have served my country long enough, and I think efficiently and honestly. I shall not accept a renomination. I do not feel

that it is my duty to spend another four years in the White House."

Now Bess could smile. A photographer took a picture of a most ingenuous smile spread over the First Lady's face. She could smile with all her heart, because she would soon be going home again, to live the private life she loved.

She spent the rest of her life, almost 30 years, among family and friends in Independence. Somewhere in her big old house on Delaware Street she kept safely stored away for a future time the photographs of young Bess Wallace, who willingly showed her beautiful eyes, showy hats, and lively spirit to the camera. **P**



Bess was elated at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Washington in March 1952 after her husband announced that he “shall not be a candidate for reelection.”

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

All the photographs used in this article are in the holdings of the Harry S. Truman Library. The image from a Sears catalog is taken from JoAnne Olian, editor, *Everyday Fashions, 1909–1920, as Pictured in Sears Catalogs*, page 78. Other sources used: Mrs. W.L.C. Palmer oral history interview, January 18, 1962 (Bess dressed in the very latest; “nobody dreamed of them being sweethearts”); Mary Paxton Keeley oral history interview, July 12, 1966 (Bess wore stylish hats); Margaret Truman, *Bess W. Truman* (p. 132, “be sure her hat is on straight”; p. 64, 1917 photograph a remarkable study in character; pp. 381–382, Truman

looking at photograph when he decides not to run for another term); Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Wives* (“I have nothing to say to the public”); David McCullough, *Truman*, (“as if her feet hurt”); President Truman interview with William Hillman, November 6, 1951, Truman papers, President’s Secretary’s Files (“Nobody hates to have her picture taken more”); Truman handwritten memorandum to George Elsey, February 15, 1950, Elsey papers (“The truth is all I want for history”); Truman handwritten memorandum, May 1931, Truman papers, President’s Secretary’s Files (“the most beautiful girl I ever saw”); and *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman: 1952–53* (Truman’s speech at Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner).



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