



From the back platform of the Truman Special, the president beams as his daughter, Margaret, accepts a bouquet from Julia Ferguson. Iowa City was one of several whistle-stops on Truman's one-day campaign trip across the state.

Tall Stalks and Plain Talk



Truman's 1948 Whistle-Stop Campaign in Iowa

by David E. Balducchi

From dawn to sunset on a hot September day in 1948, incumbent Democratic presidential candidate Harry S. Truman challenged rock-solid Republicans in the Tall Corn State to vote for him. Delivering a hard-hitting speech outside Dexter, and whistle-stop speeches in seven other Iowa towns, he was fighting hammer and tongs to retain the presidency.

The small-town Missourian whom President Franklin D. Roosevelt plucked from the Senate in 1944 as his running mate had served only 83 days as vice-president before assuming the momentous responsibilities of the presidency upon Roosevelt's death in April 1945. Now, in 1948, the plain-spoken Truman was seeking the presidency in his own right. His opponent, New York governor Thomas E. Dewey, was heralded as a shoo-in to end 16 years of Democratic rule of the White House. Dewey chose Earl Warren, the popular governor of California, as his vice-presidential nominee. Both were moderates from powerhouse electoral states. For Republicans, Dewey-Warren was a dream ticket.

Truman's prospects looked bleak. In the spring, Io-

wan George Gallup's national poll showed that only a third of the public approved of Truman's handling of the presidency. The *New Republic* grumbled that the Democratic Party was dying under Truman, that he lacked strength and vision, and that he should quit. Much of the establishment press, as well as pundits and politicians, thought like former Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce who, at the Republican National Convention in June, said Truman was "a gone goose . . . a man of phlegm, not of fire."

But Truman was a tireless campaigner, conveying boundless vitality and confidence in his handful of major policy speeches and dozens of brief whistle-stop appearances. Instead of defending his own policies or attacking Dewey and other moderates, Truman went after the 80th Congress. Voter frustration over industrial strikes, mounting inflation, and rising prices had resulted in a Republican takeover of Congress in 1946. Now the Truman administration and the Democratic Party cast Congress as unwilling to enact economic and social legislation, solve postwar housing shortages, and provide for the needs of U.S. farmers and

workers. Particularly relevant to the Farm Belt, Congress extended the Community Credit Corporation but eliminated the provision for leasing or purchasing additional grain storage bins. Farmers anticipated a bumper crop in 1948, but without sufficient storage, they would be forced to sell in a depressed market instead of waiting until prices rose. It was in this atmosphere that Truman would bring his meet-the-people campaign to the Midwest.

The catalyst for Truman's whistle-stop trip across Iowa in September was a personal invitation to the National Plowing Match in Dexter, 40 miles west of Des Moines. On April 27, Truman was scheduled to welcome at the White House the National Association of Radio Farm Directors, in town for an annual conference. Jake More, chair of the Iowa Democratic State Central Committee, had requested through presidential aides that Truman grant a few private moments to two midwestern directors, Melvin Hansen, of WOW Omaha, and Herb Plambeck, of WHO Des Moines, which sponsored the plowing match. Howard Hass, Plambeck's assistant, and Howard Hill, Iowa Farm Bureau president, were also there. Plambeck later wrote, "We were given five minutes . . . but Mr. Truman, apparently happy for a momentary break from overpowering world problems, entertained us with earthy small talk for 12 minutes before I could extend the invitation to come to our Conservation Field Day and National Plowing Matches in September." The president tried to dissuade them, indicating that his presence would cause planning and security issues that they may not have banked on. "I felt it was his way of letting us down easy."

During the summer, however, Jake More apparently had continued his efforts to convince the White House to accept the invitation. Only three weeks before the September event, the plowing match organizers were notified that Truman would appear. The president desperately needed to carry the Farm Belt, and this was an excellent venue for Truman—just as the campaign approached full throttle and the crops were nearing harvest.

At a September 9th news conference, Truman sketched out his campaign tour to the West Coast and back, with whistle-stops in Iowa and a major speech in Dexter. "I expect to be in Des Moines—Dexter, just outside of Des Moines, on the 18th." A reporter remarked, "The Democrats out in Iowa say that you are going to make your first stop on the 18th at 6:30 in the morning,

at Davenport." The president crisply replied, "Well, this is not unusual," inviting a wave of laughter. Truman was an early riser. Having farmed for 13 years in Missouri, he was used to getting up with the chickens.

How to pay for the cross-country trip was still unresolved. Four days before departure, a group of wealthy Democrats were invited to the White House and ushered into the Red Room. According to the memoirs of his daughter, Margaret Truman, the president got up on a chair and informed them that without some instant cash, "the 'Truman Special would not get beyond Pittsburgh.' Two men immediately pledged \$10,000."

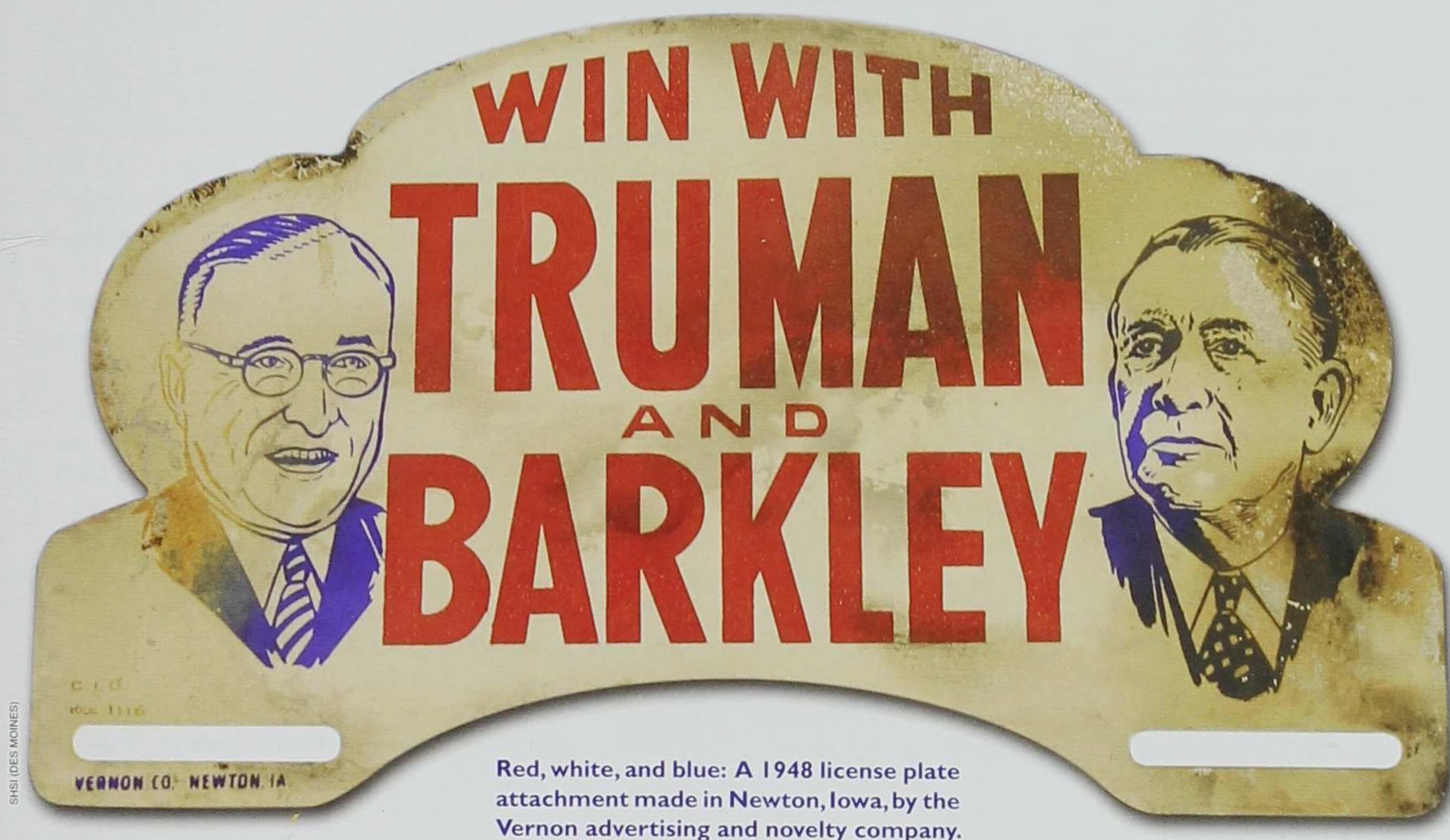
The speech in Dexter would be his first major campaign speech on farm policy. It developed slowly from drafts by Truman, Clark Clifford, special counsel to the president (and later, in 1968, secretary of defense), and other aides. On the 14th Truman wrote in his diary that it had been "another hell of a day" and that he "had the gang in at 6:00 p.m. and worked on farm speech for Des Moines."

For the president's briefer remarks at whistle-stops, William L. Batt Jr. had set up a six-man research division by June. "We were looking for generalists," Batt explained, and "exceedingly knowledgeable guys who knew the issues before the country and who were also good at research and good at writing." For each campaign issue, the researchers developed or summarized policy papers, talked to federal, state, and local politicians, and pieced together scraps of intelligence about opponents' positions.

"The President wanted to get in some local color," Batt added. For that, the researchers drew upon the WPA American Guide Series, prepared for each state by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. The researchers got a complete set out of the Library of Congress for the president's train, and purchased another for their office. "The WPA Guides are a gold mine about every community of any size in the United States. . . . We had a quick sketch of the town; and the history of the town; and the geography of the town; and the sociology of the town, which we pirated out of the WPA Guide."

The research division reported directly to Clifford and Charles S. Murphy, assistant general counsel. Clifford's assistant George Elsey said the researchers "worked like dogs and ground out an incredible amount of material." From this, top political aides prepared an outline—a "rhetorical blueprint," in the words of speech professor Halford Ryan—which fit well with the president's off-the-cuff speaking style.

Late on the morning of the 17th, Truman and 24-



Red, white, and blue: A 1948 license plate attachment made in Newton, Iowa, by the Vernon advertising and novelty company.

year-old Margaret departed for Union Station. (First Lady Bess Truman would join them in Des Moines.) They boarded the 17-car Truman Special, with various cars devoted to White House staff, a physician, Secret Service and U.S. Signal Corps men, dozens of reporters and photographers, and various state and local politicians who would accompany the president for parts of the trip. The First Family was quartered in the last car, the armor-plated car that Roosevelt had christened the Ferdinand Magellan during his presidency. The car had air-conditioning, three-inch bullet-resistant glass, four bedrooms, a dining room, and a wood-paneled observation lounge (Margaret called it the "sitting room"). The rear door opened to a platform with brass railings.

Truman's vice-presidential nominee, Kentucky Senator Alben Barkley, was at the station to say goodbye. As the president boarded, Barkley hollered, "Go out there and mow 'em down." A smiling Truman responded, "I'll mow 'em down, Alben, and I'll give 'em hell." A *Time* reporter overheard Margaret admonish her dad, "You ought not to say 'hell.'"

Elsemy boarded the train "with briefcases filled with notes and outlines." He was in charge of the back-platform remarks. They would be drafted en route and would follow a basic format. Truman

would be introduced, and then he would make a humorous remark, allude to some local color or issue, endorse the state candidates, jab at the Republican Congress, and exhort the crowd to vote. Nearing the end, if his wife was on the train, he would introduce her as "the Boss," and then Margaret, "as the Boss's Boss." Margaret later recounted that Bess, beneath her smiles, did not appreciate those introductions. Margaret told her father about her mother's objections, perhaps hoping to prevent a potential domestic brush-up. Truman unhesitatingly replied, "It gets a good laugh," and the introductions remained.

September 18, Saturday, Rock Island, Illinois, 5:45 a.m., back platform of the Truman Special. The train had left Chicago before dawn, after stops in Baltimore, Pennsylvania, and Ohio the previous day. Now it pulled into the Rock Island train yard. Three thousand early risers stood waiting to see their president. Truman stepped out from behind a dark blue velvet curtain and up to a lectern adorned with the presidential seal. He wore a dapper French blue, double-breasted suit with a darker blue print tie. Loud speakers atop the car broadcast his remarks. After commenting on

how startled he was to see such a large early-morning turnout, Truman warmly endorsed Senate candidate Paul Douglas of Illinois, and former Iowa Senator Guy Gillette, who was seeking a Senate seat again. Then he promptly took aim at the Republican Congress. "You know the issues in this campaign are not hard to define. The issue is the people against the special interests, and if you need any proof of that, all you need to do is to review the record of this Republican 80th Congress. You remember in 1946, when everybody said he wanted a change, that he thought the country had had enough, . . . you elected a Congress that I think has given you enough! Now, if you are going to stay at home again—if you are going to shirk your public duty again, that is what you will get again, and that is just exactly what you will deserve. Thank you very much."

Attacking the Republican Congress in Iowa would take some nerve. In 1948 Iowa was living up to its Republican tradition. Its governor, two senators, and eight members of the House of Representatives were all Republicans, and Republicans dominated its state legislature.

Davenport, Iowa, 6:10 a.m., back platform. Batt's researchers would have read in the Iowa WPA guide that the first train into Iowa crossed the Mississippi at Davenport in 1856. Now the Truman Special crossed into Iowa. The president spoke for two minutes before a crowd of 3,000 to 4,000. He said he had been surprised to see so many people "get up so early" in Illinois, but not in Iowa—"the greatest farm state, I guess, outside of Missouri." Warming up for the afternoon's major speech, he declared, "Today at Dexter, west of Des Moines, I am going to tell you just exactly what my program is on the farm and the farmer, and then you will have a chance to make a choice between Republican and Democratic forward-looking administrations. . . . You know, in 1946 a little over one-third of the population voted, and look at what you got! . . . If the people turn out and express their will, then we have the Government which is intended by the Constitution. If you don't do that, . . . you are liable to continue something like the 80th Congress."

In a clumsy bit of timing, just as Margaret, wearing a blue and black silk dress with a pearl necklace, appeared for her introduction, the train pulled out. (The engineer had been instructed to stay on schedule.) Unfazed, the president's party retreated to the sitting room. Truman postponed breakfast to talk with area politicians (several had boarded the train in Rock Island). Others met with press secretary Charles Ross to go over the Dexter schedule.

Iowa City, 7:25 a.m., back platform. After an introduc-

tion by state senator Leroy Mercer, Truman stepped forward to address a crowd of 4,500. He expressed immense satisfaction at having "good Iowa Democrats on the train with me." Drawing from notes prepared by Elsey and based on material from the research division, Truman gave his audience an unexpected history lesson. "One of the first things that those ancestors of ours who settled this part of the world thought of was education. The first thing that they set up was a church. The next thing they set up was a schoolhouse. The University of Iowa is one of the first of the educational institutions set up. . . . You know, Missouri and Iowa were from the same territory, first Louisiana, then Missouri territory, then Iowa decided they wanted to become independent and became the great State of Iowa where the tall corn grows. . . . I have been fighting with the Congress of the United States in an effort to get an educational bill through that would be helpful to all those universities that are overcrowded. . . . When our educational program breaks down, then we are fertile field for 'isms.' Education is the best defense against totalitarianism."

Truman dotingly introduced Margaret, who was given a bouquet of red carnations by Pi Beta Phi sorority sister Julia Ferguson of Shenandoah.

Oxford, 7:49 a.m., back platform. Only a few miles west of Iowa City, Iowans came out to see Truman in hefty numbers, perhaps a few thousand. The president said, "I don't have to stand here and convince you . . . that the Democratic Party stands for what is best for the farmer. I am going to elaborate on that down in Dexter, which I understand is a hotbed of Republicanism. . . . I want to urge you people who live in the great farming communities to remember that the Government of the United States is a Government of the people. . . . In fact, you are the Government. In order to implement that Government and make it work as it should, you must exercise the greatest of all privileges, the privilege of voting."

Truman complimented the six bands that had greeted him, and then introduced Margaret. When she spoke, the train's public address system failed. As the locomotive pulled out, the Truman troop waved and headed west to the next stop, 54 miles away.

By now, readers of the *Des Moines Register* would have seen that morning's editorial cartoon, by J. N. "Ding" Darling. The cartoon perhaps reflected the sentiments of many Iowans. Titled "WE WILL ALL BE LISTENING MR. PRESIDENT," it depicted Truman on a stage framed

Eager to hear the president, curious crowds gathered early at railroad stations for Truman's brief stops. Right: Iowa City, about 7:30 in the morning

SHSI (IOWA CITY); IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN, SEPTEMBER 18, 1948



by cornstalks addressing an enormous crowd representing the rural West. Thus far, many had been listening to "Mr. President," but nowhere would Truman find a better turnout than at the National Plowing Match.

Grinnell, 8:55 a.m., back platform. Seven thousand people, the largest whistle-stop crowd of the day, were waiting in every available spot. Some perched on telephone poles and railroad signposts. Introduced by Samuel N. Stevens, president of Grinnell College, Truman called himself "a synthetic alumni," warmly noting that the first honorary degree he had received was from Grinnell (in 1944), and that he treasured "it above all the others I've received since." He introduced Margaret earlier than usual, perhaps in light of the failure of the public address system in Oxford.

Truman told the crowd that Iowa was a wonderful state. "I was raised down here in Jackson County, Mo., which is just like this Iowa country. It has black soil, raises corn and wheat and oats and alfalfa and lespe-deza [for pasture and hay] and soybeans and most everything else . . . and I'm happy to see the prosperity as I come across this great State." Bumper crops of wheat and corn were vital, he told them, "for we have been under these emergency conditions, responsible for keeping millions and millions of people from starving to death." (Beyond the Marshall Plan, the president had ordered the Berlin airlift that summer.)

Like all of Truman's whistle-stop remarks, those at Grinnell lasted only a few minutes. But he reminded the crowd of his afternoon speech at Dexter, to be broadcast by radio, for more on his farm program.

Glenn Meldrem boosted his five-year-old daughter, Kathleen, up to the back platform, and she presented Truman an ear of corn, a symbol of Iowa's abundance. Photos of a beaming president, holding an ear of corn on his left, and Kathleen on his right, soon appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and other papers.

Des Moines, 10:20 a.m., back platform. The Truman Special arrived on schedule in Iowa's capital. It halted between 4th and 5th streets. A small contingent of politicians boarded and disappeared behind the velvet curtain backdrop into the car's sitting room. Among the group was Bess, wearing a slate blue suit, white blouse, and dark blue accessories. She had arrived in Des Moines at 6:30 a.m. from Independence, Missouri, and waited at the Hotel Fort Des Moines.



GRINNELL CORN FOR TRUMAN — President Truman received an ear of Iowa corn as one memento of his dawn-to-dusk trip across the state Saturday. Kathleen Meldrem, 5, is shown presenting the ear to the president as he stopped at Grinnell.

New York Times photographer George Tames shot this ideal campaign image—a smiling child held by a smiling president—in Grinnell.

The temperature stood at 80 degrees as Truman spoke to what a local reporter called "a relatively small morning crowd." But Truman's remarks were twice as long as his other speeches that morning. Again using only notes, Truman recognized the Des Moines Bruins baseball team for winning the Western League pennant, adding that he still hoped that Kansas City would someday win the American Association pennant. He declared that the bumper crops over the last years made a tremendous contribution to winning World War II. Then he recollected that "land on which I used to raise 60 bushels of corn an acre is raising 100, and I understand up here you are now raising 165 bushels of corn an acre. That's the most wonderful thing in the world, and I want to see that kept up. I want to see that prosperity continue which has been the result of a Democratic policy so far as the farmer and the workingman and the little businessman is concerned."

After Mayor Hector Ross presented Truman with

the Des Moines Order of the Golden Plow, someone in the crowd yelled, "All you need now, Harry, is a mule." Others cried, "Pour it on, Harry." Those voices were probably Truman's aides. Years later, Clifford disclosed that he and others would often go out among the whistle-stop crowd and shout such exhortations to fire up the crowd, if it did not occur naturally. According to Elsey, those in the president's party wore a blue lapel button with a white star, which was enough to get through the police lines and reboard the train. It was after 11 a.m. when the train left Des Moines for the 40-mile ride to the plowing match at Dexter.

The Truman Special arrived at the Dexter depot as the local high school band played "The Missouri Waltz." Wearing a grey fedora, the president bounded into the back seat of a green Cadillac convertible, joining Plambeck and Ross Oliver, district conservationist. Iowa Highway Patrol officers lined the route. A 37-car motorcade drove a mile north to the 160-acre model farm owned by Lois Agg and rented by Roland Weesner and his wife. Plambeck later recalled that Truman was in a "jovial mood," talking about farming and politics, pleased to be away from "the prison" (as he sometimes called the White House) and "ecstatic" to see the huge crowds.

More than 20 committees and 1,000 Iowans had worked to prepare for the annual plowing match and soil conservation demonstrations. Just as the president had warned Plambeck and the other organizers, the decision to speak at Dexter prompted the Secret Service to get involved—although Plambeck later said that little of the general plan was actually changed.

Plowing matches of the previous two years had attracted 50,000 spectators each. Organizers now allowed 100 acres for parking, in anticipation of 35,000 vehicles, plus an area for small aircraft. The president's party drove slowly past spectators lined 12 deep. "We were going down rows of airplanes," *New York Times* photographer George Tames recalled. "I'd never seen so many airplanes, parked on both sides of the road with farmers sitting either on the wings or on the struts or somewhere, watching the President come by. They were very stoney-faced, no reaction, just watching him. The President was looking at them and when he stopped and he got out of his car, he said, 'Those farmers are not going to vote against me; they're making too much money under me.'"

Truman spent nine minutes greeting dignitaries. Mrs. Lloyd Mitchell of Van Meter greeted him with a red

carnation, a gift from Iowa farm women, and pinned it to his suit lapel. Across the road at the Weesner farmhouse, eight Iowa women were finishing preparations for a sit-down dinner after the speech. Starting up the stage steps, Truman halted to shake hands with Claudia Lee Atherton, as George Crane, former state sales tax chief, pushed her wheelchair forward.

A breeze rippled the U.S. flag and 10 state flags atop a huge scoreboard for plowing match scores. As the president reached the stage, Bess resolutely got up from her folding chair, walked over to him, and moved the carnation from his right lapel to his left, to the momentary glee and applause of nearby onlookers.

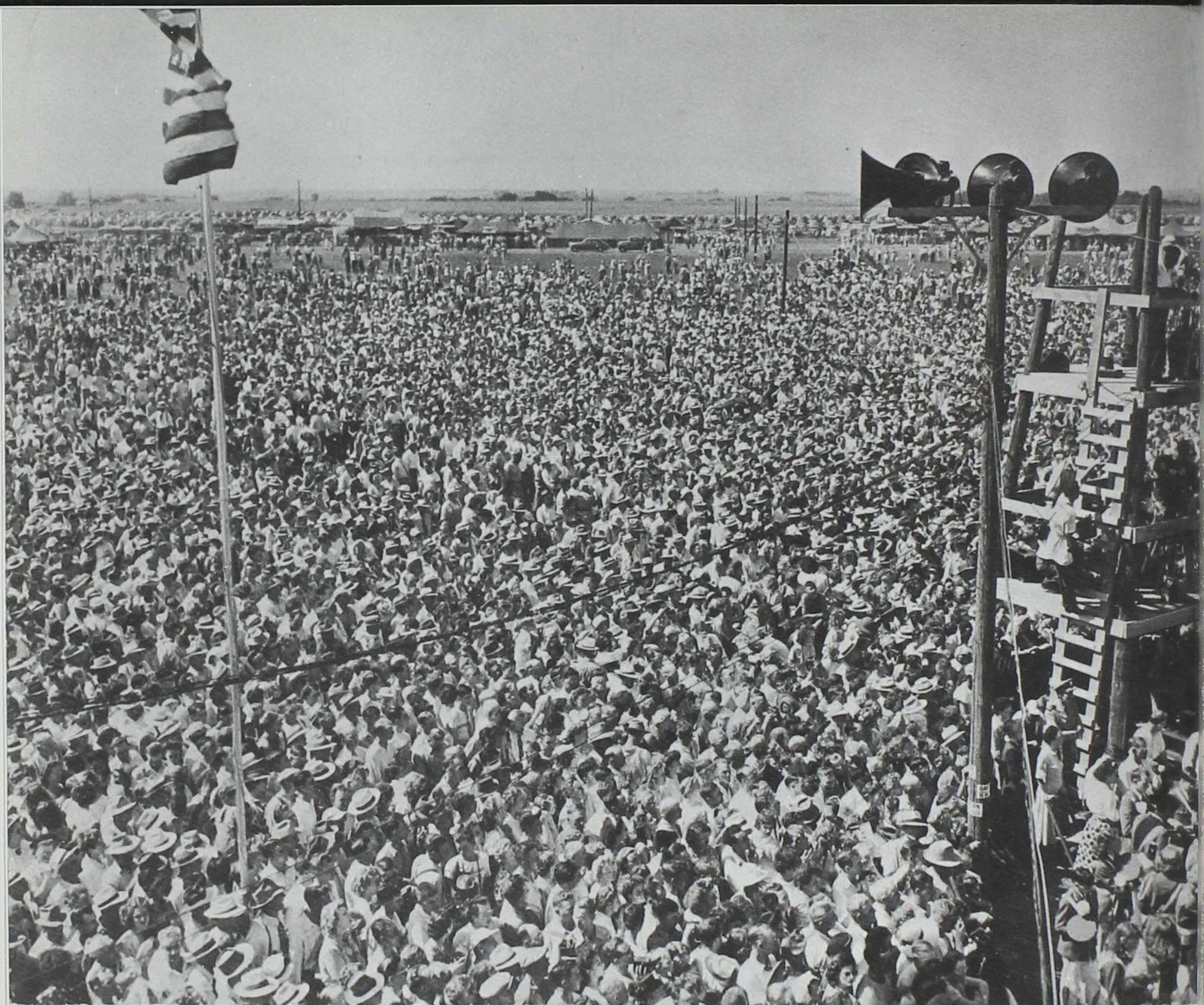
In his autobiography, Plambeck recalled, "I had been chosen to introduce the President, but no one told me how. Thus, instead of the traditional, 'Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States,' I proceeded with my carefully scripted, radio timed 55 second introduction which apparently set a new world record for breaking rules about Presidential introductions."

Just before leaving his chair, the hatless Truman took out green sunglasses from his suit jacket and placed them over his spectacles. He was greeted with booming applause as he shook hands with Plambeck and looked out upon what must have been a breathtaking sight. Before him was an enormous congregation spread fanwise on ten acres of alfalfa.

With the sun blazing, the cocky Missourian who had pledged to "give 'em hell," proceeded to do so for 25 minutes. Truman had made a few hand-written edits to the speech and added a few remarks during delivery, but he otherwise stuck to the prepared text, which was an unabashed frontal assault on Republican governance. His underdog message began with the nexus between peace and prosperity. Then, he launched into a scathing attack.

"You remember the big boom and the great crash of 1929. You remember that in 1932 the position of the farmer had become so desperate that there was actual violence in many farming communities. You remember that insurance companies and banks took over much of the land of small independent farmers—223,000 farmers lost their farms.

"... There is every reason for the American farmer to expect a long period of good prices—if he continues to get a fair deal. His great danger is that he may be voted out of a fair deal, and into a Republican deal. . . . The Wall Street reactionaries are not satisfied with being rich. They want to increase their power and their privileges, regardless of what happens to the other fellow. They are gluttons of privilege."



The Republican-leaning throng did not react to this blatant swipe at the GOP. The redoubtable Truman took another jab with the same invective. "These gluttons of privilege are now putting up fabulous sums of money to elect a Republican administration.

"... The Republicans are telling industrial workers that the high cost of food in the cities is due to this Government's farm policy. On the other hand, the Republicans are telling the farmers that the high cost of manufactured goods on the farm is due to this Government's labor policy. That's plain hokum. It's an old political trick. 'If you can't convince 'em, confuse 'em.'" The crowd responded with faint laughter.

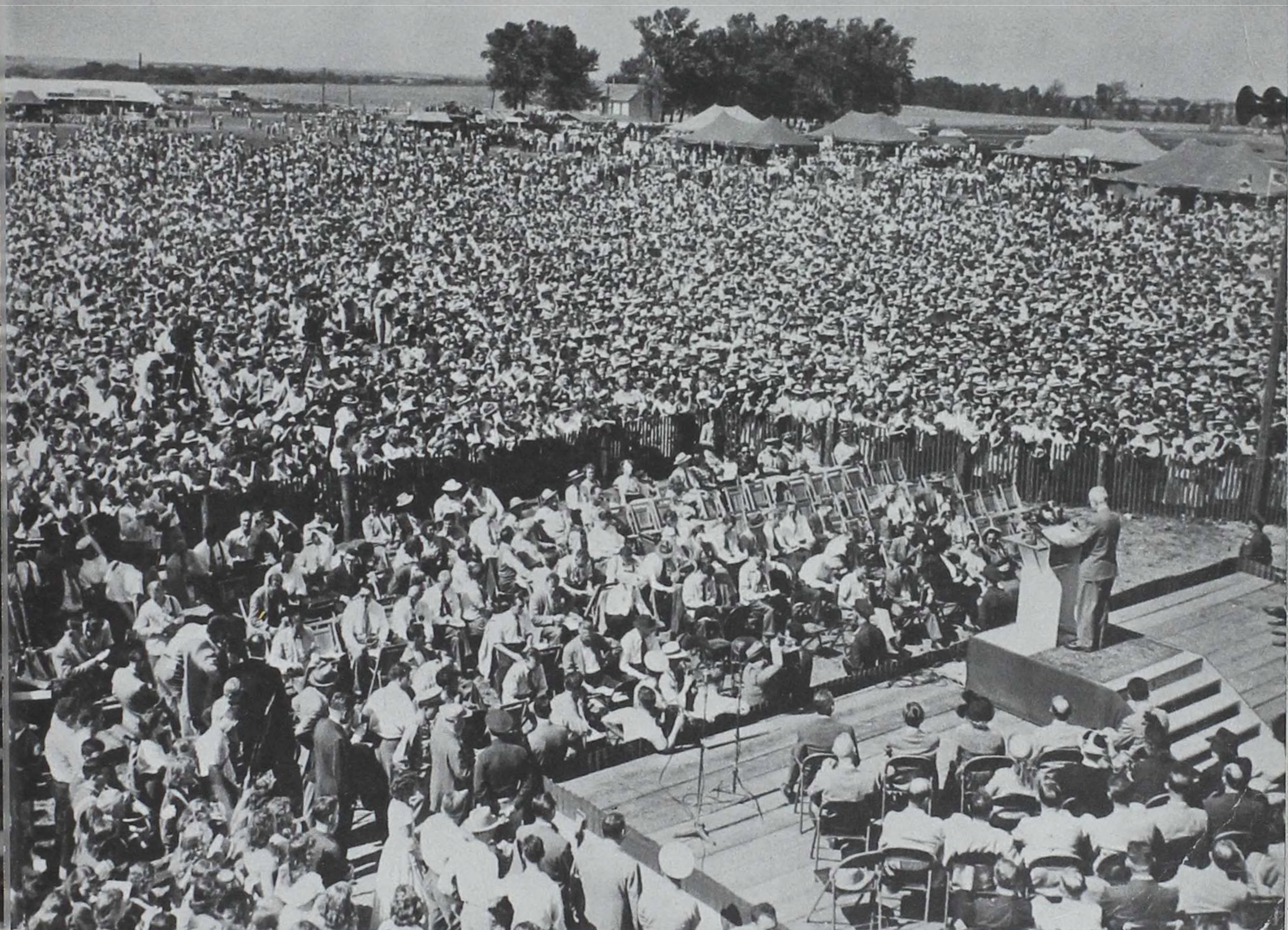
"... This Republican Congress has already stuck a pitchfork in the farmer's back." As he spoke, Truman turned to his right and chuckled, seemingly conceding

this soapbox exaggeration. Again, the crowd laughed.

"They are preventing us from setting up storage bins that you will need in order to get the support price for your grain. When the farmers have to sell their wheat below the support price, ... they can thank this same Republican 80th Congress that gave the speculative grain trade a rake-off at your expense.

"... In this 20th century, every great step forward has come during Democratic administrations of the National Government. Every movement backward has come under Republican auspices, and it is the people who have paid dearly for these reactionary moves." With this comparison, Truman received his only boos.

"I'm not asking you just to vote for me. Vote for yourselves! Vote for your farms! Vote for the standard of living that you have won under a Democratic administration!



SHSI (DES MOINES)

Get out there on Election Day, and vote for your future."

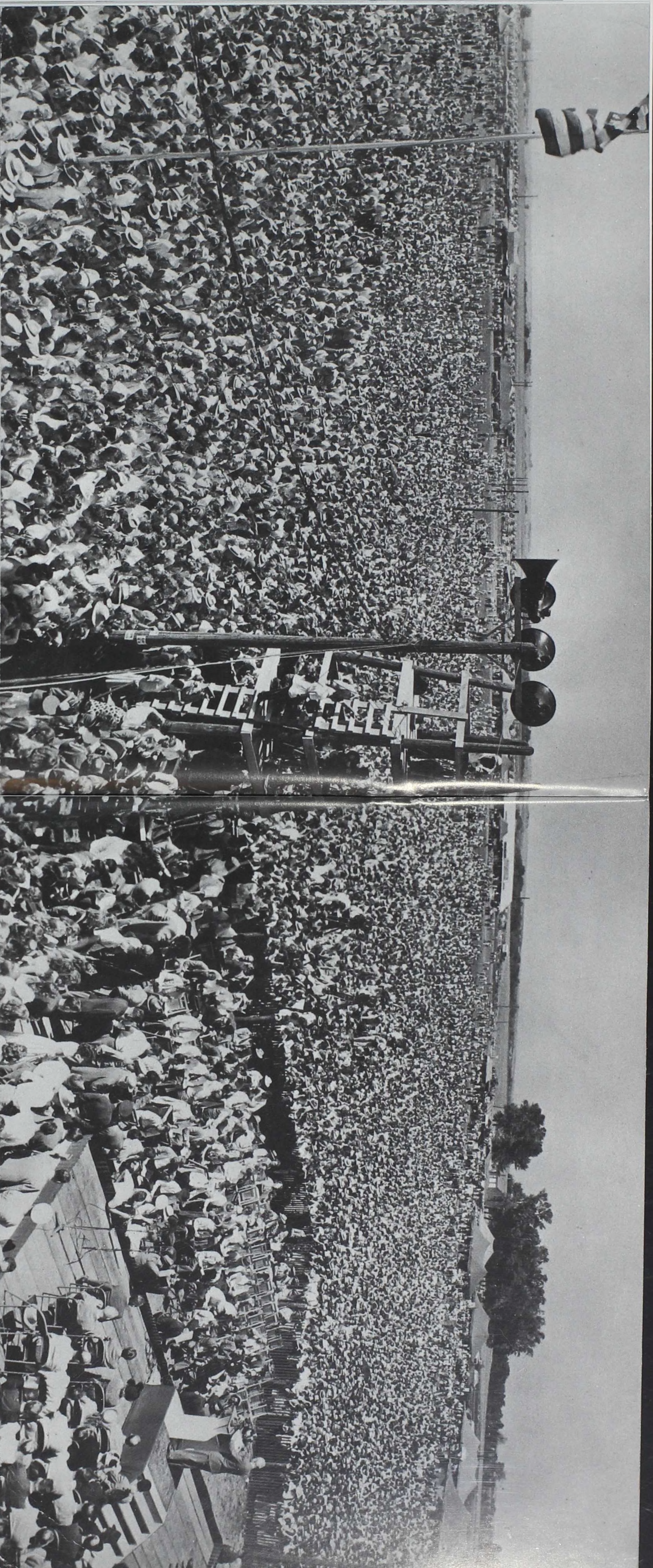
Truman received applause 13 times during the speech (and used the phrase "gluttons of privilege" seven times). The audience was friendly, but not enthusiastic. It was not a partisan gathering, and unlike at some later whistle-stops, Truman's remarks did not bring people to a cheering frenzy. The president was speaking to down-to-earth people—a multitude of farmers (a few wealthy but most not), city dwellers, working-class families—who mainly had come to the plowing match for a good time, and to see an American president in person.

Years later, Esther Peitzman of Johnston recalled coming for just that reason. She and her husband, Herbert, walked nearly a mile from a parking lot, carrying blankets and thermoses of water. Accompanied by

To woo the farm vote, Truman sought common ground with the plowing match audience of 75,000 to 100,000: "I don't need to tell you how long it takes to get a good crop, and how big the dangers are. . . . At the last minute, a sudden drought or flood can wipe you out."

Gilbert and Mabel Collins, who farmed near Johnston, they stood 100 yards directly in front of the main stage. Peitzman thought that Truman sounded decisive and "said what he thought." As Democrats, the Peitzmans hoped Truman would win. After the speech, they watched farming demonstrations. It was dusk before they got home.

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SHIRLEY MONROE

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Roland Weesner (far right) and his family hosted the First Family at the Dexter plowing match. At the Weesner home, eight women prepared a hearty dinner to follow Truman's speech. "The women who cook the dinner," the *Des Moines Register* reported, "will hover in the background, ready to bring in a hot round of 'seconds' or 'thirds,' if necessary."

driven together in a 1941 Ford sedan, also to see their first president and the plowing matches. It was the largest crowd the boy had ever seen, but he had a clear view of Truman from atop the shoulders of his father, Vane. Bright likened the event to a fair, with tent displays of the latest farm gadgetry, machinery demonstrations, food vendors, and people everywhere. The crowd, Bright reflected, gave Truman a polite, but not overwhelming reception.

After the speech, state committee chair Jake More and others escorted the perspiring Truman from the scorching hot stage to a stifling hot tent. The temperature was nearly 90 as the guests sat down at tables spread with red and white checkered tablecloths, set with white china and cut glass, and adorned with vases of zinnias. Truman sat between farmers Howard Walker of Dexter and Ralph Mortimer of Dallas Center, with Bess and Margaret a few seats away. B. J. Palmer,

president of WHO Radio (Des Moines) and WOC Radio (Daventry), sat down directly across from the president and hollered, "Anyone who doesn't take off his coat has got a dirty shirt." Truman laughed, and promptly shed his suit jacket. Reporters noted that everyone "ate heartily of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, buttered corn, baked beans, tomatoes, relish, cheese and coffee," with huge slices of apple pie for dessert. Truman talked about the delicious food and the large turnout, but not politics.

During the meal, a few of the president's staff played a prank on Margaret, telling her that local leaders had requested she sing "Ave Maria." Her father was in on the joke. Margaret, who had been trained as a concert singer, was nevertheless justifiably anxious and unprepared to sing on a stage in an open field. After a few moments of fretful contemplation, she marched over to her father and asked him to call it off, which he did.

Following lunch, an ebullient Truman was photographed with Jean Carter of Dallas Center, queen of the plowing match, and he then set out to view farming demonstrations. Walking briskly over a newly plowed terrace, he spotted a woman fidgeting with her camera. He paused so she

could snap a photo. "I hope it turns out for her," he remarked to Plambeck.

Back near the stage, Plambeck was urged to hold an impromptu interview on stage. The president "grinned widely" while the crowd gathered and the press corps scrambled back to their seats. Truman talked warmly about his farm days, a device he used in many interviews. Plambeck brought up his reputed ability to "plow one of the straightest furrows of anyone in your community." "That statement was made by a very prejudiced witness," Truman replied. "That statement was made by my mother. I did have a reputation though, of being able to sow a 160-acre field without a skip place

in it. My father used to always raise so much fuss about a skip place on an oat field or a wheat field."

Truman had begun the trip with an aching throat. "The dust at Dexter, Iowa just west of Des Moines, didn't help it any," he wrote later. "Dr. Graham just sprayed, mopped and caused me to gargle bad tasting liquids until the throat gave up and got well."

Des Moines, 4:10 p.m., back platform. In high spirits, the president boarded the train as the Des Moines Moose band played the state song. He had returned to Des Moines in a 50-car motorcade from Dexter, waving to 80,000 spectators along the way. Now he savored the turnout at the plowing matches. "I estimated that there were 10 acres of people, and there are 43,560 square feet to an acre. Now you figure how many people were there! I judge that there were at least 100,000 out there, and it was a most cordial and pleasant place to be."

Despite the big crowds in Iowa, *Time* and *Life* magazines did not give the underdog Truman much credit. *Time* reported that Truman's Dexter speech had sounded "frantic—and just a little ludicrous. The performance was interesting; but since Mr. Truman has never shown much capacity for leadership, it promised little of accomplishment." *Life* published a photo of a small group of farmers at Dexter, which included a woman shading her eyes from the sun and an elderly man holding a straw hat, but it was without context, thereby downplaying the huge turnout, which most reporters estimated between 75,000 and 100,000.

Melcher, 5:08 p.m., back platform. Now heading south towards Missouri, the Truman Special stopped briefly at what the Iowa WPA guide called "one of the larger coal-mining towns in Iowa." Truman told the crowd of 3,000, "Vote for yourselves and vote for the welfare of the country; and if you do then I won't have to move out of the White House." Probably tired by now, Truman committed a minor gaffe. "I had a wonderful time riding around Ohio today." He caught himself and explained he had meant to say Iowa. The crowd "roared good naturedly."

Chariton, 5:36 p.m., back platform. As the locomotive pulled into Chariton, some of the 7,000 spectators broke through the ropes and ran alongside of the train. The American Legion junior band played "Hail to the Chief" and Truman opened his six-minute remarks, lamenting that this was the last stop in "I-a-way." With the crowd reacting nine times with applause and laughter, Truman reflected, "I feel Iowa is beginning




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Roland Weesner (far right) and his family hosted the First Family at the Dexter plowing match. At the Weesner home, eight women prepared a hearty dinner to follow Truman's speech. "The women who cook the dinner," the *Des Moines Register* reported, "will hover in the background, ready to bring in a hot round of 'seconds' or 'thirds,' if necessary."

driven together in a 1941 Ford sedan, also to see their first president and the plowing matches. It was the largest crowd the boy had ever seen, but he had a clear view of Truman from atop the shoulders of his father, Vane. Bright likened the event to a fair, with tent displays of the latest farm gadgetry, machinery demonstrations, food vendors, and people everywhere. The crowd, Bright reflected, gave Truman a polite, but not overwhelming reception.

After the speech, state committee chair Jake More and others escorted the perspiring Truman from the scorching hot stage to a stifling hot tent. The temperature was nearly 90 as the guests sat down at tables spread with red and white checkered tablecloths, set with white china and cut glass, and adorned with vases of zinnias. Truman sat between farmers Howard Walker of Dexter and Ralph Mortimer of Dallas Center, with Bess and Margaret a few seats away. B. J. Palmer,



president of WHO Radio (Des Moines) and WOC Radio (Davenport), sat down directly across from the president and hollered, "Anyone who doesn't take off his coat has got a dirty shirt." Truman laughed, and promptly shed his suit jacket. Reporters noted that everyone "ate heartily of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, buttered corn, baked beans, tomatoes, relish, cheese and coffee," with huge slices of apple pie for dessert. Truman talked about the delicious food and the large turnout, but not politics.

During the meal, a few of the president's staff played a prank on Margaret, telling her that local leaders had requested she sing "Ave Maria." Her father was in on the joke. Margaret, who had been trained as a concert singer, was nevertheless justifiably anxious and unprepared to sing on a stage in an open field. After a few moments of fretful contemplation, she marched over to her father and asked him to call it off, which he did.

Following lunch, an ebullient Truman was photographed with Jean Carter of Dallas Center, queen of the plowing match, and he then set out to view farming demonstrations. Walking briskly over a newly plowed terrace, he spotted a woman fidgeting with her camera. He paused so she

could snap a photo. "I hope it turns out for her," he remarked to Plambeck.

Back near the stage, Plambeck was urged to hold an impromptu interview on stage. The president "grinned widely" while the crowd gathered and the press corps scrambled back to their seats. Truman talked warmly about his farm days, a device he used in many interviews. Plambeck brought up his reputed ability to "plow one of the straightest furrows of anyone in your community." "That statement was made by a very prejudiced witness," Truman replied. "That statement was made by my mother. I did have a reputation though, of being able to sow a 160-acre field without a skip place

in it. My father used to always raise so much fuss about a skip place on an oat field or a wheat field."

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to wake up to the situation. . . . Now, there are people in this United States that would like to go back to that condition, when labor was receiving an average of 45 cents an hour and when the farmer was getting 3 cents for hogs and 15 cents for corn and burning the corn because it wasn't worth the price. The same people now have made an attempt to do away with the price support program which is responsible for this immense production which we have had in the last 7 years and which has kept millions of people in this world alive. . . . I have come to the conclusion that the people in Iowa like their President and appreciate what he's trying to do for the common people."

As at other whistle-stops, the throng responded most enthusiastically when Truman asked if they would like to meet his family. Then, with the platform full of Trumans, the president noticed Steven Carter, the Fourth Congressional District candidate from Leon, standing nearby, whom he had intended to introduce earlier. Carter recalled, "Two boys came alongside the car with an ear of corn in each hand. Not knowing that they were my own boys, for nothing had been said to him, he, while his protectors were shuddering, separated the crowd and beckoned the two little boys to come forward. He picked them up in his arms and held them and took from each their ear of corn. I told him they were my boys."

Carter continued, "At that instant he turned to me and he said: 'You know, today I won the election at Dexter, Iowa.'"

Truman made later stops that day in Missouri at Trenton, Polo, Kansas City, and his hometown of Independence. A sleepy president went to bed near midnight at 219 North Delaware, where he had lived since marrying Bess in 1919.

Most reporters were nonplussed about the Iowa crowds and agreed that Truman's assault on Republicans was the desperate act of an inept leader to frighten voters. Commentary by the *Washington Post's* Joseph Alsop typified that of most political pundits: the "flatly unemotional President is almost comically miscast in the old role of William Jennings Bryan," the great orator and Democratic Party populist who lost three presidential elections.

Two days after Truman left Iowa, continuing his 15-day tour out west and back, Republican nominee Thomas Dewey campaigned in Des Moines in his only Iowa appearance. According to Truman's staffer Matthew Connelly, the New York governor made a tactical

mistake in dogging Truman cross-country, practically following the same route. Dewey came off as arrogant and urbane, a city slicker. In contrast, Truman was down-to-earth and straightforward. A reporter from the Dewey train told Batt that Dewey's speeches were all the same, while Truman's were alive with local lore and issues.

Truman ended the campaign tour on October 2. In 15 days he had traveled 8,600 miles, made 124 campaign stops, and delivered 134 speeches. In mid-October, a Gallup poll indicated that Dewey was still leading in 20 states, Truman in 10, and Strom Thurmond in 4. *Newsweek* polled 50 leading political reporters (including Richard Wilson of the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*). They unanimously predicted a Dewey victory.

But Truman shocked nonbelievers on Election Day. Contrary to conventional wisdom, he carried 28 states, including Iowa, and received 303 electoral votes. In his memoir, Truman proudly pointed out that he carried the large agricultural states: Missouri, California, Iowa (by 3 percentage points), Illinois, Texas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ohio. Despite splits at the extreme ends of the Democratic Party, where ultraconservatives defected to the States' Rights (Dixiecrat) candidate, Strom Thurmond, and ultraliberals to the third-party progressive candidate, Iowan Henry A. Wallace, the combative Truman had harnessed enough of the old Roosevelt coalition of liberals, laborers, minorities, and farmers to win.

Over the years, journalists who witnessed the campaign have recounted and reexamined their impressions of who would win. News correspondent Robert G. Nixon, who rode on the Truman Special throughout the campaign, began to "question all the political wise-aces who were saying that Truman had not a chance to win," when a farmer in Dexter told him, "What [Truman] says and how he says it makes sense." Robert Donovan of the Republican *New York Herald-Tribune* thought Dewey would be elected but afterward believed that Truman won the election at the National Plowing Match. James Reston of the *New York Times* said that the 1948 election was "a case of who got it wrong more, the Republicans or the reporters." According to CBS News reporter George Herman, post-election mail from people who had participated in Roper polls revealed that they had changed their minds for three reasons: (1) they couldn't vote for a guy with a mustache; (2) Truman had run so hard they just could not vote against him; and (3) their grandparents or parents were Democrats, and they couldn't bring themselves to vote for a Republican. Truman biographer David McCullough tells of a Guthrie County, Iowa, farmer

who was going to support Dewey, "but when voting time came, I just couldn't do it. I remembered . . . all the good things that have come under the Democrats."

Historians, too, have debated the role of the whistle-stops and the Dexter speech on Truman's victory. In Iowa and throughout the Midwest, Truman was idiomatic, sure-footed, and hard-hitting. His unmerciful attacks helped convince voters that moderates were not in control of the Republican Party and that conservatives could not be trusted to ensure prosperity.

Perhaps the people's common-sense calculation that they had no reason to throw out a Democrat was as persuasive as declining grain prices and Truman's dire forecast of another Republican depression. Certainly the immense turnouts in the Tall Corn State provided political adrenaline to Truman's whistle-stop odyssey.

The hot oratory of the Democratic campaign may have had adverse policy consequences. A half-century later, in a letter between two members of the research team, Frank Kelly told Batt, "I [later] worked for the Senate and encountered some thoughtful Republicans who felt that Truman's hard blows in the campaign had been a factor in the atmosphere of bitter partisanship that made it difficult to get bipartisan support for Truman's [Fair Deal] proposals." Even so, Truman's luckless Fair Deal plans were the foundation for some later New Frontier and Great Society programs, and his foreign policy the blueprint for victory in the Cold War. ♦

BROCHURE: SHS (IOWA CITY); BUTTON: SHS (DES MOINES)



Claims of what Governor Thomas Dewey got done in his home state were trumped by what Harry Truman got done on Election Day.



Author David E. Balducchi works for the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., where he became acquainted with individuals who participated in the whistle-stop campaign. This article is dedicated to Albert Balducchi, Iowan and World War II veteran, who voted for Harry S. Truman.

NOTE ON SOURCES

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Detailed annotations are in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).