

*Comrades and Klansmen*

THE CRUELEST LIBEL in Truman's whole story is that one about a frayed major of artillery about to become both insolvent and unemployed who was put into politics by a corrupt political boss. It is a very familiar story, and comes plausibly from those times. It was in the spring of Truman's decision to enter American politics that Edward L. Doheny and Harry F. Sinclair secured the leases for the Elk Hill and Teapot Dome oil reserves. And Harding's Secretary of Interior received a loan of \$100,000 brought to him in small bills in an inconspicuous satchel. When the time came for the expression of the American wrath, the country was concerned instead with the furies and counterfuries aroused by the Ku Klux Klan. Also, the boom had begun. It was an improbable time for a Democrat, though a major in the reserves to which Truman had been promoted on January 10, 1920, to begin a political progress toward the Presidency of the United States.

Harry Truman sometimes wore his oak leaves on ceremonial occasions. But fewer and fewer occasions were ceremonial. He was an unsuccessful civilian going back and forth from his insolvent store on Twelfth Street to his mother-in-law's house in Independence. The only dramatic thing about the man and the store was that they made a center for a good many young fellows at loose ends who congregated in common recollections of dramatic times together in camp and in war.

Such gathering places of the bored and the disappointed have served good and bad causes. After the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan was founded in such a place more to combat boredom than Yankees or freedmen. In such places in Munich, in April 1922, veterans were listening to an ex-non-com named Hitler. It is almost forgotten that the hates he preached were loudly talked

in little rooms and some great halls in America in 1922. The old hates sharpened against Negroes, Catholics and Jews, and foreigners. But the sharpest hates and fears were against the new Reds. On one government transport, 249 alleged revolutionaries were shipped to Russia. The New York Legislature refused to seat five Socialists elected to the Assembly from New York City. It was perhaps not odd that the strongest protest against that came from Alfred E. Smith who was to feel the sharpest sting of prejudice in 1928.

"Although I am unalterably opposed to the fundamental principles of the Socialist Party," he said, "it is inconceivable that a minority party, duly constituted and legally organized, should be deprived of its right to expression so long as it has honestly, by lawful methods of education and propaganda, succeeded in securing representation, unless the chosen representatives are unfit as individuals."

There was no sympathy for Reds but also no preoccupation with hates among the Irish Catholic boys who gathered at the store of the Baptist and the Jew on Twelfth Street. Instead, that place was store, unemployment agency, schoolroom, small loan center, confession booth and club. As time went on it seemed to become more of the others than the store.

"My whole political career is based on my war service and war associates," Truman said.

That political career was not off to a precipitate start. As in other states, veterans in Missouri let the politicians know they were home. In August 1921, just before the American Legion came to Kansas City to establish its reputation for boisterousness in its third national convention, Missouri had voted a bonus for every veteran. Harry Truman at that time was not the only veteran who needed help or thought he did. Perhaps the fact that hard times were already knocking on the door of the haberdashery then made him a supporter of bonus legislation throughout his career even when it was practically his only opposition to the policies of Roosevelt. But in the first years after the war, Truman watched other veterans turn to politics.

Indeed, not the politically famous 129th Field Artillery but the 140th U. S. Infantry (which grew from the 6th Missouri) made the first pattern of the soldier in politics in Missouri. The 140th Infantry brought together Colonel Bennett Champ Clark,



of St. Louis, who had been nursed in American politics by his father, Speaker Champ Clark, and Captain Jacob L. ("Tuck") Milligan, of Richmond in Ray County adjacent to Jackson. They were the big veterans in politics. Truman was just a war veteran then, though later he was to defeat one of them and surprisingly outstrip the other.

Milligan, a twice-cited hero of the Argonne, was one of the first veterans to be elected to Congress after the war. On a pro-League platform he had been elected to fill a vacancy early in 1920 in a district next door to the Kansas City stronghold of League-fighting and Wilson-hating United States Senator James A. Reed. Milligan's friend and fellow officer, Colonel Clark, was on the other side of the state and the League issue. They remained friends and friendly politicians. Clark helped organize the American Legion in Paris, became one of its national commanders, and, against the opposition of Pendergast but with the help of Senator Reed, was elected United States Senator in 1932. Veterans Clark and Milligan were the ones who were headed toward the top in Missouri and American politics. Their records in the 140th Infantry were behind them and the 129th Field Artillery was just a body of the demobilized who dropped in occasionally for talk, company and comfort at a haberdashery store.

They had votes for a fellow veteran, however. Truman in 1920 even crossed the line into the Republican Party, to help elect as county marshal Major John L. Miles, of Independence and the 129th Field Artillery. It would be difficult to find a better measure of the strength of the ties which bound that group of veterans together. Miles was not only a Republican, he was, in that election, the rural Jackson County champion of Arthur M. Hyde, who won the Republican nomination for Governor that year—and the election, too—with Pendergastism as one of his chief targets. (It was Hyde whom Senator Reed, speaking for the Pendergasts, described as a "steam whistle on a fertilizer factory.") Miles was not only a respected soldier. Like Hyde, he was also a Fundamentalist and a reformer. He fought crime as Republican marshal, sheriff, and Kansas City chief of police. He failed in the American twenties which began with the angry Ku Klux and ended with the agile gangsters. In recent years he has been living in semi-retirement.



But in 1918 Truman had tested his quality as comrade in arms in the 129th. On election day in 1920, which brought Hyde and Harding and Miles into office, and which brought women for the first time to the polls, Truman took his mother with him and in Miles' case got her to cast her vote with his for a Republican. Old John Truman must have turned over in his grave in Forest Hill Cemetery. In 1922, though the Pendergasts did not mind, some other Democrats remembered well enough to pull an explanation from Truman.

"You have heard it said that I voted for John Miles for county marshal," he told a Democratic campaign picnic. "I'll have to plead guilty to that charge along with some five thousand other ex-soldiers. I was closer to John Miles than a brother. I have seen him in places that made hell look like a playground. I have seen him stick to his guns when Frenchmen were falling back. I have seen him hold the American line when only John Miles and his three batteries were between the Germans and a successful counterattack. He was of the right stuff, and a man who wouldn't vote for his comrade under circumstances such as these would be untrue to his country. I know that every soldier understands it. I have no apology to make for it."

Apparently that explanation sufficed. The charge did not plague Truman in other elections. Five thousand soldier voters were a lot of voters in Jackson County in those days, before the vote in Kansas City began to rise in an eccentric relationship to the population. The soldiers were not to be sneezed at—not in practical American politics. There were 143,571 of them, out of 166,000 who had been in service from Missouri, who had applied for the bonus from the state at the time when Truman was running for his first county office. The veterans had power and it could be seen. It was shown in Kansas City. The American Legion, which Truman had joined early and helped to organize in Missouri, staged its greatest demonstration up to that time on the corner by Truman & Jacobson's store in its third annual convention, in October 1921. Apparently the Legion established its hell-raising convention tradition in Kansas City, which seemed appropriate in that town so often called sinful. One historian of Legion history speaks of it as "the dawn of hilarity" in that organization's annual affairs. And if later,