Independence: treasury of Truman history

HARRY TRUMAN still can be seen every day in downtown Independence, Mo., his bronze figure leaning forward, cane in hand, on a marble pedestal, but almost as if he were walking along in front of the Independence Square Courthouse.

The red brick courthouse is where Truman served as Presiding Judge of the Jackson County Court from 1926 to 1934. His lifetime terrain was this small historic town within a half-hour drive of downtown Kansas City.

Independence was once the starting point of the Santa Fe, Oregon and California trails. Three gunshots and a "westward ho" would lead inexperienced easterners into weeks on the wagon trail.

Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

Harry Truman was 6 years old when his family moved to Independence. His wife Bess was born *and died in the house* that still stands at 219 N. Delaware St., within walking distance of Independence Square. The couple lived in that house during all their married life outside the White House. Bess remained there until she died in 1982.

His lifetime terrain was this small historic town within a half-hour drive of downtown Kansas City.

THE TRUMAN Home is a big white clapboard house built by Bess's grandfather in 1867 and kept now exactly as Bess left it to the National Park Service. Harry's coat still hangs on the coat rack, and the living room, music room and study are as full of family memorabilia as they would be in any family home.

Just visiting the Truman Home is enough to restore any lost faith in the American presidency. There is very little sign of Truman's years in the White House, no royal inclinations, just photographs of children and grandchildren, and of the piano that Margaret Truman was given for her eighth birthday, when all she really wanted was an electric train.

Harry and Bess ate breakfast and lunch every day at a tiny table for two against the wall in their old-fashioned kitchen, although Bess used to say that she couldn't stand it when Harry came home for lunch. It was bad enough that he ate toast and bananas for breakfast; for lunch he particularly enjoyed peanut butter *and sardines.*

One of many nice little touches in the house are the oilcloth cover on that little kitchen table, and the toaster where Harry made his own toast.

THE NATIONAL Park Service is restoring the house to the retirement years, when the wrought-iron fence was added for privacy and to keep visitors from carrying the house away piece by piece.

The shades are kept drawn about 18 inches above the sills, even though it gives the house a gloomy look, because that was needed to keep out prying eyes in the later years.

The first floor of the home is open to the public. The upstairs is closed, at Bess Truman's request, as long as her daughter and husband are alive. There are no barricades in the house, and the park service likes you to see it as a home and not as a museum, so only eight people are allowed into the house at one time.

Free tickets are available from the information center downtown near Independence Square. On busy midsummer days the tickets for the whole day could be gone by 11 a.m., so get them early.

The statue of Harry S Truman in downtown Independence.

THE INFORMATION CENTER is also the first stop on a shuttle tour of Independence. A minivan stops at each designated place along the looped route every fifteen minutes. A film in the information center shows you the daily lives of the Truman family before, during and after the presidential years. You'll see them sitting on the screened back porch of the house at 219 N. Delaware, playing cards, reading the newspaper, eating Sunday supper with friends.

If you want to see President Truman's life in its historic presidential sense, one of the main stops along the shuttle route is the Harry Truman Library and Museum, a low contemporary building that has been built around an outdoor courtyard.

Every day of the year you will find men and women leaning over the fence that surrounds the Truman gravesite, pointing out the inscription on the gravestone to their children.

THE LIBRARY is used for historical research but regular visitors browse the exhibits that put Truman's life and presidency in perspective, with special attention to the oval office, which has been authentically reproduced inside the museum.

Other Truman-related sites include "The Man from Independence" audio-visual presentation shown in the Independence Square Courthouse, on Independence Square. The presentation runs from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday.

The Truman Office Museum is also at the Courthouse. There is a 25-cent admission charge for adults. Also, at the Harry S. Truman Railroad Station is a pictorial exhibit regarding Mr. Truman's 1948 Whistle Stop Campaign that can be viewed during station hours. Amtrak service is available at the station.

Reminders of the frontier west and Victoriana abound in Independence. The 1859 Marshal's Home and Jail Museum, 217 N. Main, is the restored Civil War era residence of the county marshal, with limestone jail, museum wing and 1865 schoolhouse.

Harry and Bess ate breakfast and lunch every day at a tiny table for two against the wall in their old-fashioned kitchen.

THE JAIL served as headquarters for union troops during the Civil War and housed such famous personages as William Quantrill and Frank James. Admission to the Jail Museum is $1.50 for adults and $1 for students (children under 12 are free). The site is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily from March through December.

Independence is also the world-headquarters of the Reorganized Church of Latter-day Saints (RLDS). Joseph Smith Jr., founder of the Latter-day Saints movement, chose Independence in 1831 as the place for the "City of Zion," and what followed was a turbulent history culminating in a split: the Mormon migration to Utah, and the return of the RLDS, which established its world headquarters in Independence.

The auditorium, which faces the historic Temple Lot, is topped by a massive copper dome. Inside the Council Chamber, the impressive organ has 6,595 pipes ranging in size from a quarter of an inch to 32 feet. The Utah Mormon Visitors Center, also adjacent to the Temple Lot, displays church doctrine and history.

For further information on touring the Independence area, write City of Independence, Tourism Division, 111 E. Maple St., Independence, Mo. 64050.

In Cajun country, every meal is one that satisfies

By Susan D. Bliss
Smithsonian News Service

Travelers agree that south Louisana restaurants can serve up some of the tastiest regional food in the nation. Some Louisianans believe that's because restaurants have to compete with home cooking.

Louisianans generally are proud of their cooking. No one sitting in Maude Ancelet's living room in LaFayette, La., following a dinner of crawfish creole, shrimp etouffee and fig cake could wonder why.

And the kind of cooking that Maude enjoys is catching on with the rest of the country, thanks in part to the reputation and merchandising power of New Orleans restaurateur Paul Prudhomme.

America's new enthusiasm for the spicy, flavorful food that they eat every day in Lafayette, heartland of Cajun culture, doesn't surprise Louisianans.

Neither does it surprise Prudhomme, who says simply: "Cajun food is popular because it tastes good."

THE STYLE was developed by hardworking people who made use of whatever ingredients were available from their Louisana farms, bayous and coastline.

Their forebears were French-Canadian immigrants expelled by the British from Nova Scotia — then known as Acadia — in 1755. Settling in south Louisiana, the Acadians, or Cajuns, brought along their French language, food traditions and culture, adapting them to a subtropical region with a long growing season, flat terrain and plentiful waterways.

In south Louisiana, the Cajuns lived side by side with Indians, African and Caribbean blacks and French, German and Spanish landowners who had gathered in a bustling commercial center fed by Mississippi, Caribbean and Atlantic trade.

Cajun menus were spiced by the distinctive cooking styles of French ancestors and new neighbors. These environmental and cultural influences are well mixed in south Louisiana cuisine.

At Schwegmann's, a large New Orleans grocery store, 40-foot-long shelves are stacked with every size, color and shape of dried bean. Aisles are lined with boxes and bags of rice. Vegetable bins hold squashlike mirlitons, small green tomatillos and plantains. The fish bins are filled with jumbo Gulf shrimp, local crawfish and whiskery 10-pound catfish.

THE CULTURAL mixing process, or "creolization," percolated strongest in New Orleans, where "creole" cuisine is centered. Glenn Conrad, director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in LeFayette, traces the origin of "creole" back to "a person born in the colony. Hence, creole is a synonym for 'born here.'"

But to the New Orleans restaurant community, creole means Louisiana haute cuisine derived from classic French cooking.

Often, to "cook creole" means to combine French and Afro-American cooking. Usually, the city folk who do so can trace their New Orleans ancestry back to 18th-century French or Spanish colonists and African or Caribbean blacks. Outside New Orleans, in Cajun country, to "cook creole" means to cook soul food.

Mathe Allain, president of the Louisiana Historical Association, was born in France but makes her home in LeFayette. An enthusiastic cook herself, Alain has devoted many of her studies in Louisiana culture to the investigation of traditional foods.

"You have things like pralines, Louisiana transformation of a classic French recipe using walnuts dipped in sugar," Allain says. "Here, pralines are made with syrup — cane syrup, naturally — and pecans," which are grown nearby.

CARMEN RICARD'S crawfish etouffee is another Louisiana interpretation of a French classic. To thicken the sauce, Ricard begins her preparation with a roux. In France, this handy thickener is made with butter and flour, but in south Louisiana, where land was given over to sugar and rice cultivation, dairy products are not prevalent. Instead, a roux made with vegetable oil is the base for many a gumbo, creole or stew.

"You can make a roux in 10 minutes or one hour," Ricard says, depending on how dark you want it, "and just as the roux gets to the right point, you throw your seasoning in. That cools it down and stops the cooking process." To her roux, Ricard adds two pounds of crawfish, the tiny, lobsterlike crustacean that has helped make Cajun food famous.

To the New Orleans restaurant community, creole means Louisiana haute cuisine derived from classic French cooking. But often, to "cook creole" means to combine French and Afro-American cooking.

Over in Henderson, La., you can visit Seafood Inc., one of the region's biggest crawfish processing plants. "Henderson is just a Cajun town where everybody lives on catchin' crawfish," plant manager Lonny Guidry says.

Many Cajun good traditions are still closely tied to the agricultural year, even though fresh ingredients are now available through the seasons. Lucy Sedotal, who is from Pierre Part, La., (a Cajun town "you have to want to get to," according to local wisdom), for many years helped her husband "make a boucherie" (butchered hog) each fall.

"We'd make our own cracklins, salt meat and 'andouille' (smoked sausage)," she explained. "Then we'd put salt meat the leftover pieces you didn't know what to do with in a 5-gallon crock. The pig's tail went at the bottom." The scraps were preserved and used n cooking. Cracklins were eaten as snacks. "When you got down to the tail, you knew it was time to boucherie some more," she recalls.

CARMEN RECARD, a Creole, was born in New Orleans' French Quarter, but she learned to cook Cajun style from her late husband, who was raised in the coutry. She makes hogshead cheese at Christmas, a tradition based on the autumn butchering Sedotal describes. Richard's family eats black-eyed peas and cabbage, flavored with ham, at New Year's.

To a visiting Northerner, the abundance of shrimp, oysters and crawfish in south Louisiana is enviable, and Louisianians do take full advantage of their good fortune. When Sylvia Conrad was in high school, shrimp was so cheap that "our high school parties were shrimp boils."

Conrad, who is descended from early French settlers, uses Cajun recipes and also follows the food traditions fo the Creole parish where she was raised. Her seafood gumbo is thick with crab, shrimp and oysters, standard fare in New Iberia, La., where she lives.

Sharing food is the neighborly way in Louisiana. The shrimp in Maude Ancelet's etouffee was fished out of the Gulf of Mexico and donated for a family dinner the next night by her son-in-law. "I don't buy many groceries," Maude says.

"What we don't use, we give away," Elmo Ancelet, Maude's husband, adds. He gives a visitors a tour of the vegetable garden behind the house. Over the long growing season, it will yield enough Irish potatoes, carrots, little purple hull beans, okra, lima beans, four kinds of tomatoes, mirlitons, green eggplants, strawberries and cucumbers to feed family and friends most of the year.

The taste for fresh food expertly prepared dies hard, apparently. Carmen Ricard tells the story of her brother Arthur who lived in California. On a recent visit to New Orleans, he stocked up on fish, shrimp, crawfish and oysters. Lacking a container to transport his treasure, he packed his suitcase with ice and seafood and left his clothes in Louisiana.