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Truman Home Visit Brings Press Horde

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(Staff Writer)

The Presidential visit to the Truman home Saturday was about par for the course, even down to the performance of the national press corps.

Between 700 and 800 persons crowded the west side of Delaware and along the fence of the Truman home on the south side of Truman Road, on a beautiful sunny afternoon. President and Mrs. Ford arrived at the home around 3 p.m., following the unveiling of the Truman statue on Independence Square, spent about 20 minutes inside visiting with Mrs. Bess Truman, and left. With the Fords were 20 to 30 members of the national press.

Everyone local is expected to get out of the way of the national press. They, of course, expect it. Every time the national press comes to town, the local press takes a beating — literally. Take my advice. Get out of their way. Have you ever been elbowed by Helen Thomas, the White House correspondent from UPI? Take my advice. Don't be.

The situation at the Truman home Saturday was this. The local press was corralled behind a barricade on the east side of Delaware near the front gate. We had to come in to the barricade from the south. Some of us who were already acquainted with the national press and have the scars to prove it wondered if the barricade was there to protect us from the national press. This was a bit different from past years, when the national press were the only members of the news media allowed on the east side of Delaware. The closest we usually get to the front gate is the west side of Delaware, where the crowd is.

None of what I say should be taken as any criticism of the Ford administration. The national press doesn't care whether Republicans or Democrats are in office.

Just before the President got to the Truman home Saturday, some of the local press asked police not to allow the national press to roam free as they had in the past. Everyone will be behind the barricade, police said, including the national press.

That was the first big mistake. We got trampled. Even though we could hear them coming like a thundering herd, what could we do? We were cornered like rats.

This is a play-by-play of what happened. A minute or two before the arrival of the President and the First Lady, the Daniels (Margaret Truman Daniel, husband Clifton Daniel, and son Clifton Truman Daniel) came out of the Truman home and walked to the front gate to wait for the Fords. Mrs. Mae Wallace, sister-in-law of Mrs. Bess Truman came out on the porch, took pictures of the crowd (and the press) and went back inside.

Pretty soon, the Fords arrived. When they got out of the car, they didn't stop to talk to anyone. They waved at the crowd, spoke to the Daniels, who then escorted them immediately into the house. That may have made things worse, as far as the press was concerned. I don't really

know whether the national press thought the Fords would linger at the gate a while or not and didn't hurry at first to get up there and take their shots. They may have deliberately hung back a little and then ran like hell just to make it look like a hassle. They don't confide in us.

Whatever the case, they came charging like troops with fixed bayonets. Have you ever been hit with a camera? One of the veteran national press photographers swung his camera at me (or so it seemed) and missed -- just grazed my shoulder. Another one jostled the tripod of a local press member and got warned to stay away. Then came gum-chewing, well-built Helen Thomas like a juggernaut, and whammo, into my ribs went the elbow. I don't know what Thomas was after — she wasn't carrying a camera. As we all know, one of her privileges at the White House is asking the first question at presidential press conferences. Maybe she intended to leap the barricade and lay that old first question on the President. Maybe she didn't see the barricade.

Later, the national press complained about being behind the barricade, so they were allowed to stand on the north side of the gate. That's where they were when the Fords came back out. We were still behind the barricade.

It was really all over in about half an hour or so. It just seemed longer. The Fords didn't linger on their way out, either, They waved once more at the crowd, got back in, and soon were off, headed north on Delaware. And about three or four cars back came the national press, sharpening their bayonets for whatever came next.

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