On June 19, 1953, Harry Truman got up early, packed the trunk of his Chrysler New Yorker, and did something no other former president has done before or since: he hit the road. No Secret Service protection. No traveling press. Just Harry and his childhood sweetheart Bess, off to visit old friends, take in a Broadway play, celebrate their wedding anniversary in the Big Apple, and blow a bit of the money he’d just received to write his memoirs. Hopefully incognito. In this lively history, author Matthew Algeo meticulously details how Truman’s plan to blend in went wonderfully awry. Fellow diners, bellhops, cabbies, squealing teenagers at a Future Homemakers of America convention, and one very by-the-book Pennsylvania state trooper—all unknowingly conspired to blow his cover. Algeo revisits the Trumans’ route, staying at the same hotels and eating at the same diners, and takes readers on brief detours into topics such as the
postwar American auto industry, McCarthyism, the nation’s highway
system, and the decline of Main Street America. By the end of the 2,500-
mile journey, you will have a new and heartfelt appreciation for America’s
last citizen-president.

Personal Review: Harry Trumans Excellent Adventure: The True
Story of a Great American Road Trip by Matthew Algeo
Truman is the definitive biography of the man from Missouri. But I felt that
book did not give enough coverage to the twenty years after Truman left
office. Harry Truman's Excellent Adventure, by Matthew Algeo, is a partial
remedy to that. A relatively apolitical book, it covers a 1953 car trip
Truman took with his wife, Bess, from their home in Independence,
Missouri, to Washington, DC, up to New York City, and back to
independence. Harry drove while Bess sat in the passenger seat,
watching the speedometer to make sure Harry didn't speed. There was no
secret service protection in those days, and while Harry and Bess tried to
tavel in anonymity, the press managed to track the couple down from time
to time.

For those accustomed to thinking of Harry Truman as the plain spoken,
quick tempered man who once threatened to punch a music reviewer for
panning his daughter's singing, this book will come as a surprise. One
factor that comes through is Truman's meticulousness. As the former
owner of a men's clothing store (known as a haberdashery back in the day)
Truman was always a snappy dresser, with a pocket kerchief carefully
folded so that all four corners showed. The former president was just as
particular about the way he packed his luggage (so that clothing emerged
perfectly folded), the care of his new car (with Bess keeping tab of the
gasoline expenditures), and the trip route (planned by Truman himself,
long before the days of GPS).

Another factor of Truman's personality that emerges is his essential
populism. He was not a demagogue populist like Pat Buchanan, or a
corporate pseudo-populist like Glenn Beck. Harry Truman was always for
the "little guy". He loved people, cared about them (he even took a two
hour side trip to spend time with an elderly woman he'd never met), and
was genuinely interested in learning about their lives.

Some have complained about the author's insertion of himself into the
narrative and comparisons of present-day America with Truman's era. But
Algeo's contemporary narration points out how America has changed since
1953. In some ways for the better: racial integration, and equality of the
sexes. But we are a less personal, more corporate country than we were
in 1953. Harry Truman would be saddened to know how many of the little
diners, shops, and motels he stayed at have either gone out of business or
been co-opted by large corporations. (I could never imagine Harry
shopping at a Walmart.) Despite the number of times I smiled when
reading this book, there were tinges of sadness as well.