

An Unplanned Life

A Memoir by **George McKee Elsey**



An Unplanned Life

"To view the complete page image, please refer to the printed version of this work."

An Unplanned Life

A Memoir by George McKee Elsey

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS
COLUMBIA AND LONDON

Copyright © 2005 by
The Curators of the University of Missouri
University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 65201
Printed and bound in the United States of America
All rights reserved
5 4 3 2 1 09 08 07 06 05

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Elsey, George M., 1918-

An unplanned life : a memoir / by George McKee Elsey.

p. cm.

Summary: "Memoir of the author's experiences working in the White House during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, including inside accounts of his work on classified documents, U.S.-Soviet relations, and Truman's "Whistle-Stop Campaign," and his long association with the American Red Cross"—Provided by publisher.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8262-1622-9 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8262-1622-6 (alk. paper)

1. Elsey, George M., 1918- 2. Political consultants—United States—Biography. 3. Presidents—United States—Staff—Biography. 4. Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945. 5. Truman, Harry S., 1884-1972. 6. United States—Politics and government—1933-1945. 7. United States—Politics and government—1945-1989. 8. United States—Foreign relations—Soviet Union. 9. Soviet Union—Foreign relations—United States. 10. American Red Cross—History—20th century. I. Title.

E840.8.E45A3 2005

973.917'092—dc22

2005018186

 This paper meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48, 1984.

Designer: Stephanie Foley

Typesetter: Crane Composition, Inc.

Printer and binder: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

Typefaces: Granjon and NeutraText

☞ In Loving Memory

Sally Phelps Bradley Elsey

February 15, 1921–November 19, 2004

Contents

A Few Words of Introduction	...ix
Chapter One From Oakmont to ONI	...1
Chapter Two The Map Room	...18
Chapter Three Normandy	...48
Chapter Four Back to the White House	...61
Chapter Five A New President	...80
Chapter Six Into Everything	...133
Chapter Seven 1948	...158
Chapter Eight “A Passion for Anonymity”	...173
Chapter Nine Korea	...194

viii Contents

Chapter Ten Sally, Averell, and the Red Cross213

Chapter Eleven Pullman and the Pentagon231

Chapter Twelve Capstone242

Acknowledgments263

Index265

A Few Words of Introduction

This is a memoir, not an autobiography. The Canadian writer Robertson Davies defined autobiography as a “pernicious form of fiction.” I shall stay clear. This will not be a complete account of my life. Rather, it will be an easy flow of recollections—of people and events—as I remember and choose to record them. If some episodes are presented at greater length than their importance warrants, it is because they stand out so clearly in my mind. If the memoir must have a title, it will be *An Unplanned Life*. Why? This will become apparent as you read.

From time to time, fragments of conversation will appear as I noted them at the time, but this is not the place for an abundance of documents, letters, or photographs. Only a few of these will be included. Nor is this the place for descriptions of places where I worked or that I visited, no matter how fascinating they seemed to me at the time. Goethe, in his journal for May 7, 1786, wrote on reaching Taormina, Sicily, “Thank goodness, everything we saw today has been sufficiently described already.” So it will be with the White House, the Pentagon, the “Marble Palace” of the American Red Cross. No descriptions of them or of Baghdad or Belgrade, Geneva or Jerusalem, Moscow or Manila, Seoul or Cetinje, or a score of other places well remembered but “sufficiently described already.” Except for one place not well described—Oakmont, Pennsylvania.

So let the tale begin with Oakmont.

An Unplanned Life

Chapter One

From Oakmont to ONI

Mother, Dad, and I arrived in Oakmont by train in the early morning of September 15, 1925. Dad was on a year's sabbatical from teaching chemistry at the University of Kansas. We had been in Lawrence for seven years, moving from Palo Alto, California, where I was born on February 5, 1918, when Dad was teaching and completing his Ph.D. at Stanford. Rather than stay in Lawrence for research and writing, a common practice for faculty members in their free year, Dad opted for a change of scenery and mode of life. Welcomed at the research laboratory of Westinghouse Electric, where the director told him to look around and dig into anything he found interesting, Dad found the place fascinating. He was impressed by the brilliance of the physicists, chemists, and electrical engineers—among them several Russians who had fled the Bolshevik revolution. As the sabbatical year drew to a close, Dad decided that industrial research was more to his liking than teaching. He resigned his tenured post at the university and joined Westinghouse, then one of the country's best-known and most highly regarded industrial giants. His association with Westinghouse was to last fifty years.

Dad and Mother knew only one couple in the Pittsburgh area, Paul and Ida Faragher. Ida had been their high school classmate in Modesto, California, and they had become acquainted with Paul while he was earning his Ph.D. The Faraghers were settled in Oakmont, twelve miles north of Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River. Wishing to be near the only people they knew, Mother and Dad chose Oakmont too. It became my hometown then, and I still so regard it.

Oakmont in 1925 with a population approaching five thousand was an interesting community. It was a blend of city suburb, small industrial town, and business center for a countryside still dotted with family farms.

Some men commuted by train to the downtown offices in Pittsburgh of great corporations such as United States Steel, the Aluminum Company of America, and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Others, like Dad and Paul Faragher, drove to fringe areas where laboratories could sprawl over less expensive land—Dad to East Pittsburgh and Paul to the Aluminum Company’s lab in nearby New Kensington. Founded in 1889, Oakmont had its own small industrial base. Two steel fabricating plants and a paint factory were among those alongside the railroad tracks. Their officials and blue-collar workers made up a good portion of the town’s residents. The nearby hills and valleys were dotted with small dairy farms and truck gardens. Farmers came into Oakmont to sell their produce and to shop, some in cars so old they drew curious children—I among them. Many of the dairy farmers sold their milk to the Oakmont Dairy, but not “Old Jane.” She brought her milk into Oakmont, delivering it to her faithful customers from a horse-drawn buggy—an object older and of even greater curiosity than the earliest Model T Ford. (It was on a small farm next to “Old Jane’s,” owned by the grandfather of one of my grade-school classmates, that I learned to milk a cow and handle a horse-drawn plow. Neither talent has been put to the test for more than seventy years.)

The population blend of this mixed economy was reflected in my grade school and high school classes. In Lawrence, my playmates had been cookie-cutter faculty children. Not so in Oakmont. My classmates, from third grade through high school, were racially, religiously, ethnically, and economically mixed. Their parents ranged from well-to-do to below the poverty line. Some spoke Italian, Greek, or a Slavic language at home. But we were all equal in the classroom and on the playground. A youngster accepts without reflection the environment he or she is in. Not until I entered college and once again found myself in a homogeneous group did I appreciate the value of growing up in a multi-cultural setting such as Oakmont’s. (And that is why, as I write this, I am glad our grandsons are experiencing in their school years the blend of cultures that defines our nation.)

What was it like to grow up in Oakmont in the early years of the twentieth century? The main street, somewhat pompously named Allegheny River Boulevard, was a blend of houses and small shops along its one-mile length. Large shopping centers and supermarkets were decades in the future. A grocery store was likely to be a single room no

larger—and frequently smaller—than a school classroom. Here one bought the staples—flour, sugar, canned fruits and vegetables, packaged baked goods, and so forth. (Frozen foods were in the future.) No one served himself. A clerk stood behind a counter. You gave your order, “Two cans of string beans, please.” If you thought the clerk’s memory was good enough, you might name three or four other items at the same time. She would move back and forth, pulling your items from the shelves and filling your market basket—if you brought one. Otherwise, she put everything in a “poke,” western Pennsylvania talk for a large paper bag, penciling the price of each purchase on the bag and toting them all up at the end. No “scanners,” just simple grade-school arithmetic, told you the amount owed.

We favored the A&P grocery store. Next to the A&P and in the same building was Ed Henke’s butcher shop. If the cuts of meat you wanted were not in the display case, Ed would step into the big refrigerator, come out, and chop your lamb or pork chops as you wanted them. A door or two away, the Libertos dispensed seasonal fruits and vegetables from their own or their friends’ farms. What wasn’t grown locally came by train from the Pittsburgh wholesale produce markets. If you hungered for fish, you waited until Friday and then crossed the street to Volkwein’s. In addition to groceries, Mr. Volkwein provided fish that came out from Pittsburgh in large insulated boxes on the first morning train on Fridays (and only that day). Frozen fish, like frozen vegetables, was in the future.

Oakmont had a family-owned bakery, but many—we among them—bought breads, cakes, and pies from a truck that came out from Haller’s Bakery in Pittsburgh twice a week. The driver would knock on the kitchen door, and you took your pick from his large display basket. If you had ordered something special on his previous visit, that would be ready for you. My mother was not the best customer. She enjoyed baking pies and cakes herself. As for milk, unless you were a customer of “Old Jane’s,” the milkman left his glass bottle at the door early each morning, so early that in Pittsburgh’s cold winters the paper cap that sealed the top was apt to be pushed right out of the bottle by the frozen cream. (In those days, before homogenized milk, the cream rose naturally to the top. The first thing one did on bringing the bottle into the house was to pour off the cream into its own pitcher—unless it was frozen!)

Oakmont had all the other necessary stores, all small and mostly family owned. The two drugstores had soda fountains, with the owner-pharmacist about as busy making ice cream sodas and milk shakes as filling the prescriptions of the town's physicians. Doctors and dentists practiced from their homes or from small offices above the stores on the Boulevard. The sole hardware store was owned by Mr. Bossert, who, when not advising on which tool was best for the task at hand, was likely attending to the town's business. He was our "burgess," the archaic term for mayor. Another one-room business was the First National Bank of Oakmont, across the street from the railroad station. It had outgrown its first home in the basement of the local Carnegie Library. (Almost every small town had its own bank until the Great Depression killed off thousands of them. Ours survived.)

Mr. Lenchner made men's suits from the front room of his house. Mr. Rodnok sold twenty-five-cent tickets to his movie theater (120 seats) and ran the projector himself. After the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, Oakmont had a state-owned liquor store—no private liquor stores were allowed in Pennsylvania. The conservatism reflected in the tight liquor laws was apparent in many other ways, not the least being rigid "blue laws." All businesses were closed on Sundays. The one exception in Oakmont was Pilgram's stationery and gift shop, where Fred Pilgram was allowed to sell the Sunday papers. My father was a faithful customer of Fred's, always buying the Sunday *New York Times*, which came out from Pittsburgh on a midmorning train.

When Oakmont's shops could not meet our needs, Pittsburgh's department stores were only twenty-five or thirty minutes away by train. But going "into town" wasn't necessary very often. We were content with our community, its businesses, churches, schools, and library—all within easy walking distance. Oakmont was, after all, only one mile square. It was a town where people knew one another, sometimes more about one another than you wished. When my father's sister Caryl was visiting one time from Chicago, she and I went for a long walk around Oakmont. I kept introducing her to other walkers. "You seem to know everybody," she remarked with surprise. "Sure, everybody knows everybody here," was my answer. An exaggeration, but not much of one.

There was one exception to this "small-town-ness." The Oakmont Country Club, perched on a hill above the town, overlooking the Allegheny River, had been founded in 1903, one of the nation's earliest golf

clubs. It was Oakmont's one claim to fame. Many national tournaments had been held there and would continue to be. The club scarcely entered the consciousness of most of us. It was for "Rich Pittsburghers" who sped up the hill in their Cords, Franklins, Duesenbergs, and other luxury cars for afternoons of golf. Some members would arrive by train, to be met by the club's station wagon (whence the term). The club was several notches above most Oakmonters. The closest many of us came to it was as spectators at a tournament or, as was the case with some of my high school classmates, as caddies for the members. (There were no golf carts then; caddies carried the bags.)

Oakmont was a fine place to grow up. It was a happy place—until the Great Depression.

Historians mark the Stock Market Crash of October 1929 as the beginning of the most severe and longest lasting economic depression in the country's history. At the time, the Crash meant nothing to most youngsters, but my seventh-grade class was a bit different. Our arithmetic teacher was introducing us to business economics. We were learning how to write checks and balance an account, courtesy of the local bank, which provided the supplies. We learned how to compute interest on our imaginary savings accounts and what stocks and bonds were all about. We progressed to the point of making imaginary investments in stocks, most of us choosing stocks of Pittsburgh companies whose names were familiar to us. But instead of the paper profits our teacher expected, based on her experience of the Roaring Twenties, we watched with dismay as our fictitious stock portfolios fell through the floor. Our real-life education was beginning.

As the Crash turned into the Depression, Oakmonters began to suffer. Each year was worse than the one before. Some local businesses cut down on working hours, laid off workers, then shut down entirely. A few scraped along with just enough business to avoid bankruptcy. Many local merchants folded. Farmers came to the back door, begging housewives to buy at whatever price they could afford. Blue-collar workers fared the worst, but white-collar employees felt the pinch too. The fathers of some of my friends were fired outright. Dad was among the lucky ones. Westinghouse, like most big companies, began across-the-board salary cuts, 5 percent, then 10 percent, then another 10 percent. The checks were smaller, but they came every month. We felt ourselves among the fortunate.

One hundred and forty boys and girls were in my class entering Oakmont High School in September 1931. Only 103 graduated four years later. The families of some of the missing had left town in search of work elsewhere. Many had dropped out on reaching age sixteen, when compulsory schooling under state law ended. They sought work at whatever jobs they could find, even if only for a few cents per hour, to help their struggling families. Grim though the situation seemed to us in Oakmont, we knew that we were considerably better off than most of those in the Greater Pittsburgh area with its soup kitchens and thousands of homeless living in grim makeshift shelters.

By 1935, only 6 percent of the country's households earned as much as three thousand dollars a year. With the country in such dire straits, few youngsters fortunate enough to stay through high school could look ahead to higher education in any form. College was unthinkable for most. Even trade schools were out of reach. Unlike later years when "getting into college" was a tortuous challenge, in the midthirties anyone whose parents could scrape up the funds was likely to be welcomed at his or her school of first choice. Colleges ceased to be selective. They needed students. Twenty members of my graduating class were admitted to the schools they had chosen. Most economized by living at home and commuting to one of Pittsburgh's universities. A few attended schools, easily reached by a short drive, in nearby Ohio or western Pennsylvania. The other eighty-three? They looked for work.

Dad had hoped that I could go to Stanford as he, his brother, and two of his sisters had. In mid-Depression, the cost of four years of trans-continental train trips ruled that out. So where? It was up to me to find the answer. I had become intrigued by Princeton's recently established School of Public and International Affairs, which I had first read about in *Reader's Digest* at the onset of my senior year in high school. The SPIA (now renamed the Woodrow Wilson School) was intended to prepare young men (no women—they were thirty years in Princeton's future) for careers in government or foreign service. I wrote for a university catalog, read it through and through, and looked up everything I could find about Princeton in Pittsburgh's main library. Princeton seemed everything I could hope for. Mother and Dad were skeptical. Princeton was a long day's journey by car or train from Oakmont. However, one of Dad's closest friends, a fellow chemist, was on the Princeton faculty. Howell and Hannah Furman could be counted on to keep a

watchful eye on me. Costs would be a problem. Princeton's tuition was a staggering \$450 a year. Only the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was as high. Always the optimist, I applied for admission and a scholarship. I had done well in high school, graduating first in the class, but I realized how inadequate Oakmont High School's preparation had been when the college entrance exam scores came in. Mine were mediocre—and that's putting the best light on them. Nevertheless, I was admitted with a \$400 a year scholarship, so hungry was Princeton for students in that Depression year, especially for students from public high schools to help soften its image as an elite place for eastern prep school graduates.

(Because the September 1934 issue of *Reader's Digest* was the origin of my interest in Princeton and attendance there was a major factor in shaping my career, I had the issue bound and have lovingly preserved it to this day.)

The first term at college was tough. Eighty-three percent of my classmates were from prep schools, mostly large, well-known eastern ones. They were far better prepared than I. However, by the second term I had learned how to study effectively, and by sophomore year all was going well. I made good friends, most of them in the 17 percent high school contingent and from families whose Depression era incomes kept us on modest budgets. No Philadelphia debutante parties for us, no weekends in New York nightclubs such as my short-lived classmate, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, enjoyed. Princeton's two movie houses sufficed.

Princeton had no fraternities. They had been abolished in the nineteenth century. All students lived in dorms on campus all four years. In the first two years, we ate in University Commons. Late in sophomore year, after a nerve-racking week of being called on in one's room by visitors from the eighteen "eating clubs," one hoped to be invited to join one of the clubs where he would take his meals in junior and senior years. My closest friends and I compared notes on the "bids" we had received and negotiated our group of seven into Court Club. Court was well down on the list as far as social standing was concerned, but it offered exactly what we wanted—a congenial group of hard-working students. So devoted to our studies were we that in our senior year Court Club was awarded an oversize silver cup called the Armstrong Trophy. This was an award to the club whose seniors had the best academic record of any club. In fact, we had the highest average any club had