

action to his many arbitrary arrests. Kirkwood used the K.G.C. bugaboo for political effect. That Knights of the Golden Circle existed in Iowa is simply a Civil War legend—a legend with nine lives.

My Friend Herbert Hoover

BY BILL WAGNER, IOWA ARTIST AND ARCHITECT

Way back nearly ten years ago, I was approached by someone who knew of my interest in Iowa History about doing some drawings for the reconstruction of a blacksmith shop. Later I found out that two other architects had turned them down; but no matter now, their loss has been my gain. Somehow it was deemed worthwhile for me to go to New York and "interview" Mr. Hoover and find out what he could remember about the blacksmith shop. I went, I was received, and I was scared! Promptly, I was put a little more at ease when Mr. Hoover said, "I'm a little hard of hearing; you will have to talk a little louder." Frankly, I was so scared, I doubt if I was making any noise at all.

All he could remember was stepping on a live coal that fell out of the forge one day while watching his father ply his trade; he said that he still carried the scar. When it came time to go, I mustered courage and asked President Hoover if I could do a little "horse-trading." This appeared to be a new deal to him and he wanted me to explain. I said that I had made a pen and ink drawing of his birthplace and could I trade this to him for a photograph of himself. "That's easy," he said, "and would you like it signed?" This was more than I had hoped for. I returned home, framed his picture, and assumed my sketch was in the circular file.

The first of August, 1962, a special delivery air mail envelope came with instructions that the contents be put in

the first display case dealing with Mr. Hoover's boyhood in Iowa. The "contents" was the sketch of his Birthplace that I had "horse-traded." To me, this little piece of architecture is one of the greatest in our country. I have drawn it many, many times. It has been reproduced on membership cards, notepaper, calendars, and now, I hope, on a stamp honoring Herbert Hoover. I would not trade the location of my Birthplace sketch with any other art work in Iowa.

From that day nearly ten years ago, I have had the good fortune to visit with Mr. Hoover many times on the various projects going on in West Branch: the Museum, the Library Restoration on Main Street, and the Restoration of the Old Meeting House that he attended as a boy in West Branch. The last visit was the latter part of August, 1964. It is difficult to explain how I felt after visiting with Herbert Hoover on each occasion; it was a feeling that I did not want the world to know; I felt if it did, it would cheapen the visit. Most visits were 10 to 15 minutes, maybe 20 minutes; a total of all visits would not exceed two hours. Yet, the time needed to tell all that happened in the two hours would be much greater; and the things that happened because of the visits multiplied like taking the square of a number.

Some time ago, I mailed to Mr. Hoover some 8 x 10 photographs of the addition to the Museum. He wrote back, through his son, Allan, that the entrance and the cupola were both too large and too pretentious, and that they had to come off. We convinced him that we all liked the entrance and that it added the dignity to the building that was needed. He finally agreed; but the cupola was a different story. Here I couldn't argue, as I, too, felt it was too large. Another architectural firm in New York had designed it and in their opinion the cupola was right. In this case, we at Wetherell-Harrison-Wagner agreed with Herbert Hoover, so we had the contractor take out a little over two feet on the height. I then took a new picture and brought it in with me on the last of August meeting. He looked at it without glasses, studied it for a minute, nodded his head and said, "It's okay now." He was happy and satisfied with the cupola.

Something like three years ago, Allan Hoover expressed his desire for me to do some thinking on what might be done with the Overlook Area. This area was always thought of, but never really mentioned as the area for the final resting place for the President and Mrs. Hoover. This was to me a great honor; and, needless to say, I carried myself away with ideas. Five attempts and a couple of years later, the design became simple and had the dignity that was Herbert Hoover. As usual with simple solutions, you wonder why you didn't think of them first.

In March of 1964, I gathered together the drawings and samples of stone; and went to New York to present the Overlook Area to Allan Hoover for his approval. Allan liked what was presented. About a month after my return to Des Moines, Allan wrote to me and asked if he could get about six more samples of stone like those I had left with them, as they had found a use for them (the sample referred to was charcoal-gray, heat-treated finish, about 3 x 6 x 1/2"). For some unknown reason, it took a couple of months to get the six samples from the stone company. I forwarded them to New York and promptly received a "thank you" and comment saying that they suited their purpose perfectly, but no hint as to what they were used for. There was also inquiry as to how much was owed; but, of course, there was no charge. A couple of weeks later, I had occasion to call Allan on some business. When finished, I said, "Allan, I know it's none of my business, but I am having an awful time with my curiosity; it's killing me! What did you want six more samples of stone for?" He laughed and said, "You know Dad! He smokes a pipe and uses kitchen matches to light it. He found that the stone samples made a perfect scratching block, and he wanted one on every desk or table that he might be sitting at anywhere in his apartment." This was priceless! A few more words and a few days later, a package came from the Waldorf Astoria; it contained one of the original stone samples and a note from Allan. "Are you taking up the use of kitchen matches?" The sample of charcoal-gray granite is worth more than its weight in gold.

Another person with whom I visited in regards to determining, if possible, the original appearance of the Meeting House, was a lady, Anna Vore, at Ackworth, Iowa. She is a little younger than Herbert Hoover, a relation of his, knew him as a child, and went to the same Meeting House.

Backing up a bit here, I must explain that on one of my trips to West Branch, I had taken John Henry with me. We talked, and I guess I did most of it. I mentioned the incident of the match scratching blocks, and the next day Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart of the *Register* and *Tribune* called and wanted the facts. I realized then that John Henry was a direct line to Elizabeth Clarkson Zwart. The story appeared in her column. So now with my visit with Anna Vore, she was showing me her Hoover scrapbook and the column about the scratching block. She chuckled about this story, and said, "It would be just like Bertie to strike his matches on his tombstone." Actually the sample was not the sample for the headstone but for some curbing. She had quite a collection of newspaper clippings pertaining to Herbert Hoover from the days he was running for President. Most conspicuous, because of their absence, were any pictures showing Herbert Hoover either smoking or holding his pipe. I remarked about this and Mrs. Vore said, "Oh, I disapprove of smoking, so any pictures showing him smoking, I threw away!" Another interesting item that came to light in the scrapbook were examples of doodles done by Mr. Hoover. These I had never seen before.

I have never met or known a man who had a keener interest in everything and observed everything more than Herbert Hoover. One day about a year ago, I received a note from Allan. "Dad says, if you don't mind, he would appreciate it if you would change the brand of stamps that you have been using." This really shook me! I hadn't been sticking any stamps on any envelopes! I went out front and asked Betty what stamps she had been using—she didn't know. So, we looked in the stamp box, and there was still one of Eleanor Roosevelt left. As my English wife says, "The penny dropped." I could see and hear the chuckle Mr. Hoover made when he

told Allan to worry me.

October 20-25, 1964, was almost as one day. I think I shall always think of it as one day, as I more or less moved to West Branch. I think I shall never forget the dignity and simplicity of the service and the crowd. Rev. Trueblood asked for a moment of silence before the prayer. At approximately 3:20 p.m., October 25th, there were between 90,000 and 100,000 persons standing in West Branch to pay final tribute to Herbert Hoover. There was silence, total silence except for three sounds—one TV Camera, one airplane, and one whinny from a horse across the valley. I'm sure many others were as startled as I when the Reverend made the remark that "The spirit of Mr. Hoover would need no lighted flame to carry it on eternally," because this was what I was thinking when he made such appropriate words.

On November 1, 1964, ten members of the Hoover Family and a dozen and a half friends of the family stood under a canvas canopy while services were given for the reinterment of Lou Henry Hoover along side her husband. West Branch, in general, did not know that this was to be the day. Those that did know were standing behind the family. The sun came out from behind the clouds about five minutes before. Almost simultaneous with the beginning of the service, the Methodist Church, from across the little valley, began to play its bells. It continued most fittingly, but unconsciously, to add the right background music during the service. There, I began to feel, and this became more firmly entrenched before the day ended, that those of us who were the fortunate few to have been so close to the Hoover Family during the past week were witnessing the creation of a great national shrine at the birthplace and final resting place of Herbert Hoover.

Impressive as the crowds were from Sunday, October 25th through Sunday, November 1st, one would have needed to have been one of that crowd, observing their actions and expressions, to feel fully what was taking place. People waited hours, at times, with quiet patience to pay their respects. Somewhere between 130 and 140 thousand came during the eight days. I witnessed the remarks of one young man and

the actions of an older couple who expressed to me the feeling that was expressed by the entire crowd. The young man was an Iowan from Council Bluffs, a draftee of about a year, who was one of the honor guard to stand at the grave site for the thirty days mourning. He said to me: "This is the greatest honor that I have ever had." This remark was made early Monday morning on the 2nd of November; we were sealing the vault and it was raining. The coming of the rain was most appreciated; it kept away almost everyone except an older couple who drove to the bottom of the hill. The husband unfolded a blanket and held it over his wife, and the two then struggled up the slippery hill. They stood quietly and reverently a minute as though in a sanctuary and then returned back to their car.



HERBERT HOOVER—WHERE HE WAS BORN, SERVED AND DIED

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.