

LEVI BOWLES AND THE HOOVER SKETCHBOOK

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. WAGNER

A very important little sketchbook was discovered some months ago in the Herbert Hoover Library. Compiled in the 1920's by a man named Levi Bowles, the book contains his descriptions of the Hoover family and artist's drawings of the old Hoover structures. The sketches have played a significant role in the restoration work going on in West Branch, Iowa, aiding architect William Wagner in his attempts to preserve in every way possible the authentic appearance and charm of this historic site. Mr. Wagner's reproduction of the original sketchbook follows his summary on the life of Levi Bowles taken from memoirs in the Hoover Library.

"Levi Bowles, by his daily walk, his quiet manner, his clear understanding of the things of the world, helped those who knew him to a better vision of Him whom we reverently call the Father of us all. Even his dry sense of humor seemed to have a real significance."

Levi was the son of Ephraim and Elizabeth Epperson Bowles, third in a family of twelve children, of Scotch ancestry. He was born on a farm near Plainfield, Indiana, on January 5, 1856. He died on the evening of Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1942, at his home in West Branch, Iowa. During his childhood years, the Friends Meeting, strong family ties, and the country school were dominating influences upon Levi. One relative wrote, "No difference what happened, and many things did happen, we went on forgiving and loving each other."

In the fall of 1866, the Bowles family moved to Iowa, spending the first winter near Oskaloosa. A year later they went to what is now known as Stuart. In 1873, the family moved to Jewell County, Kansas. Levi had earlier returned to Indiana where he remained for four years. He rejoined the family the year they moved to Kansas, where he "took out papers on a claim" on a quarter section which he set about improving.

This was the time when the religious revival movement

reached the Kansas Friends community. Neighbors and families were forced to make a decision. Levi placed his loyalties with the more conservative group, because he believed in the gradual development of spiritual life. He was appointed an Elder while still in his twenties. Feeling the need for more education, he returned East to Barnesville, Ohio, to attend the Friends Boarding School. Here he made friendships that were to last his lifetime.

He married Hannah Elizabeth Mendenhall on May 7, 1885, whose ancestry also traced back through Iowa and Indiana, to North Carolina Friends. Levi built a new house on his homestead and into this they moved.

Dry years, a grasshopper invasion, low prices and high interest rates caused the family to move to Spring River Friends Neighborhood near Gelela, Kansas in 1894. While at Jewell County, both Levi and his wife taught in the District Schools. During their first year in Cherokee County, Levi taught in Spring River Friends' Academy. The Bowles family remained in "Quaker Valley." Levi worked for the continued improvement of his community, being active in the establishment of the county telephone system and the graveling of the county roads.

In 1915, the Bowles family moved to Scattergood Seminary near West Branch, Iowa, where Levi and Elizabeth were Superintendent and Matron. The four years of close association with the students and teachers were happy and enjoyable ones.

In 1919, Levi, age 63, and his wife moved into the town of West Branch where he set up a shop to vulcanize tires. Some years later, he closed the shop and from his granddaughter learned the fundamentals of bookbinding. He practiced and experimented on his own. Later other people's worn books found their way to him and he derived the craftsman's satisfaction of restoring battered treasures back to sturdy, usable books.

All through the years his spiritual life continued to develop and his ministry in the Friends Meetings, given in the spirit of meekness and love of his Master, were helpful to those who were privileged to hear him.

One incident, talked about humorously for many months, happened during a meeting at which Levi was sitting on one of the facing benches. During one of the silent intervals when the Friends were buried in their own thoughts, they were startled beyond words when one of their members shouted, "Get out of there you black devils!". The unfortunate Friend had fallen asleep and dreamed the crows were eating his freshly planted corn.

The poem quoted here from his own writings is so like Levi Bowles, and it shows up the essence and practical application of his mystical religion.

THE SILENT MEETING

I went to meeting in silence,
In silence I sat it through;
I went to my home in silence,
But my heart was watered anew.

The tendering, secret touches
Of my Heavenly Father's love,
Made glad the recess of His presence,
Like an olive leaf plucked by a dove.

The lingering sense of His goodness,
And the lingering praise of His name
Added incense anew to the altar,
And jewels to the crown of His fame.

I felt the true love of the Father,
To my friends as they sat apart,
Endearing each one to the other,
Cementing heart to heart.

Oh! let no unhallowed offering
Intrude on such hallowed ground,
While the wings of the mystic aura
Waft in on the soundless sound.

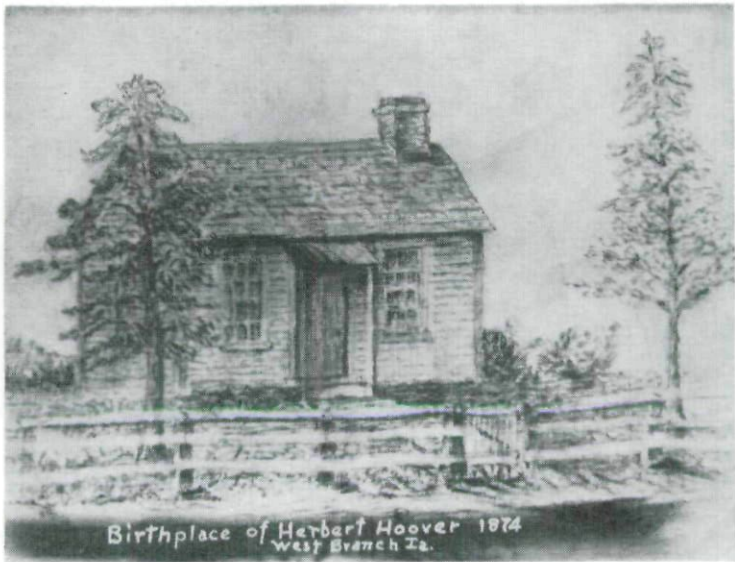
The following quotation from his weekly column in the *West Branch Times*, as prompted by daily events, reveals the guiding forces of his life and faith in people:

The Bible teaches that 'there is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding.' Not only some men, but all. It also teaches that this spirit in man is the candle of the Lord, ready to receive the current of Divine energy which enables him to cease to do evil and to learn to do good.

HOOVER SKETCHBOOK

In this book is a group of pictures showing some aspects of the life of the Hoover family while they lived in West Branch.

The first is the home of Jesse and Huldah R. Hoover at the time of the birth of Herbert C. Hoover, the 10th of Eighth Month, 1874. This home is owned at present by Jennie Scellars, who turned the house around and added more rooms to the front of it. The old part is sufficiently intact so with the assistance of the present owner it was possible to make a drawing of the original part which is correct in detail.



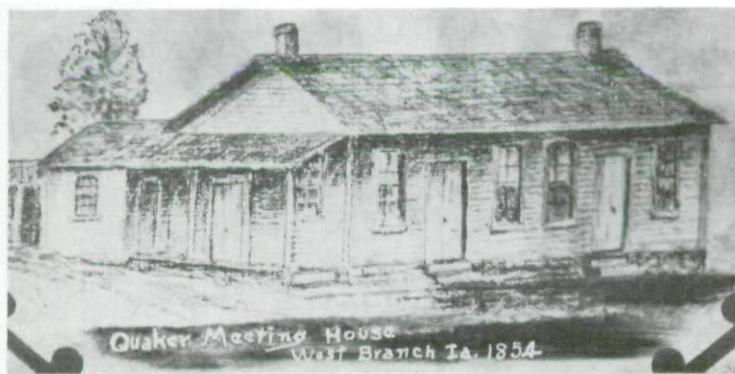
Henry Standing, as the artist, should receive full credit and one can be sure as he looks at the sketch that he is seeing the Hoover home as it was when Herbert Hoover lived in it.

In arranging this group of pictures much time and careful labor has been expended, but it has been an interesting task and I have made truthfulness of detail the object of much research.

8th month 21, 1928.

Levi Bowles
West Branch, Iowa

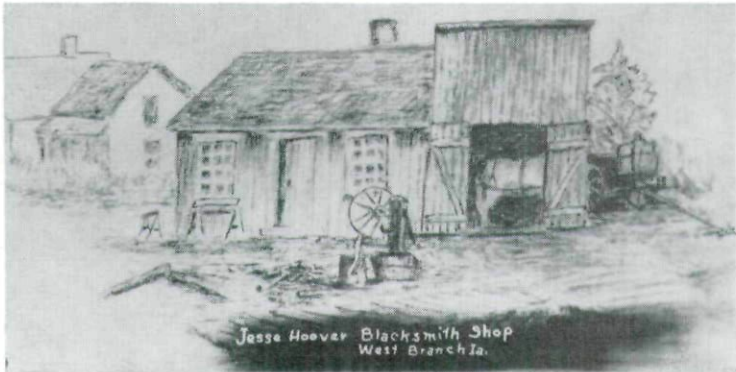
It has been said of the Quakers that when forming a new settlement they first put a roof over their heads and then built a meeting house and a school house. This is a picture of the first meeting house in West Branch. It was erected in 1854, soon after the first settlers came. The lumber was sawed about ten miles to the northwest near what is now Newport and was hauled to the grounds.



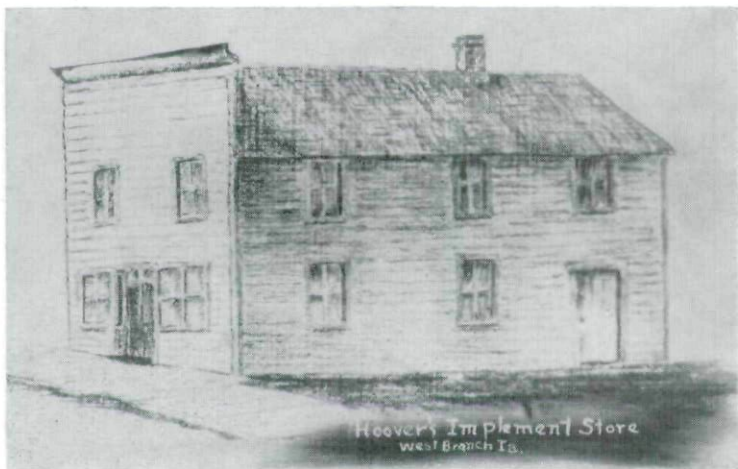
This is where Jesse and Huldah Hoover went to meeting and where she was recorded as a minister, after the Friends were convinced that God had given to her a gift in the ministry of the Gospel. She is represented to us by those who remember her as a young woman of strong character and attractive personality, imbued with an ardent desire for the spiritual welfare of her fellowmen. She and Jesse Hoover attended a private school one mile east of West Branch which was in charge of Joel and Hannah Bean. It was perhaps here that the attachment was formed that resulted in their marriage and made it possible for West Branch now to be entertaining one of her native sons as the Republican nominee for the presidency of the United States.

There is now living in West Branch an aged woman who was with Huldah Hoover at the time of her death. It is she who tells us that the last words of Huldah Hoover was a fervent prayer for her children and for people everywhere. Her purified spirit was immediately taken to be with the God she so much loved.

This is a picture of Jesse Hoover's blacksmith shop where Herbert played as a boy. He is said to be carrying a scar made when he stepped on a piece of hot iron from the forge.



As with the Hoover home, I could find no picture of the shop, but from Jesse Hoover's brother David, now of Le Grand, Iowa, I secured the general description of its appearance. With the help of other old residents, a sketch was made of the shop which shows it as it was at that time. Later a photograph was made from the drawing.



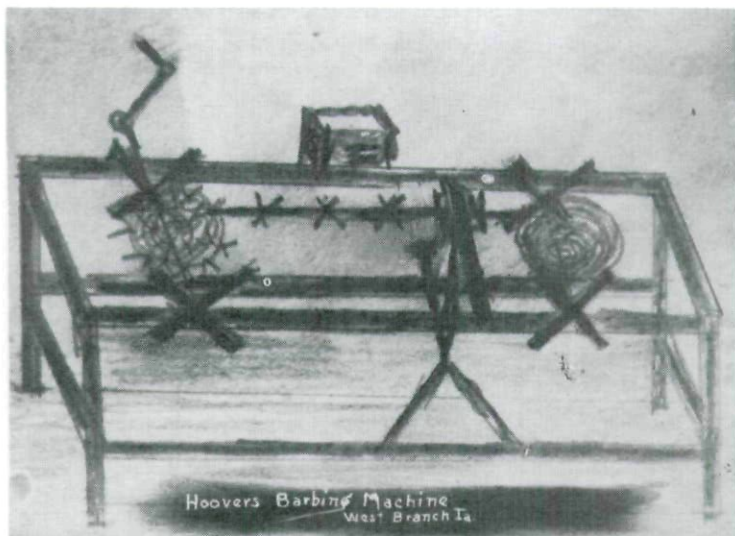
Jesse Hoover is represented as a jovial, good natured blacksmith, efficient in his line. Pearson Thomas tells us that the farmers used to have their horse shoes pulled off in the spring and hung up in the shop until needed again in the fall. One day when a customer came in to have his horse shoes replaced they could not find the shoes. Jesse Hoover remarked that he did not know what had become of them but the mice were very bad around there.

Here is a picture of one of the hammers that Jesse Hoover used in his shop. [Hammer is not shown here.] Milton and Dudley Vincent, two retired farmers now living in West Branch, bought an Aultman and Taylor threshing machine off him. It was one of those Vibrators which had on one side of the separator the picture of a starved rooster, naked except a few tail feathers, and just below it were the words, "Fattened on and Aultman and Taylor Strawstack."

A year or two later the Vincents bought a clover huller attachment. Jesse Hoover took it to the farm and installed it on the machine. He left the hammer on the wheat riddles and it went off into the strawstack. Years later while manure was being hauled away from the same spot this hammer was found. I procured a picture of it by consent of Milton Vincent, and have added it to my collection. The hammer was found after Jesse and Huldah were deceased, and it is still in the possession of Milton Vincent.

On the opposite page is a pencil picture of the store building in which Jesse Hoover sold farm implements after he had been a blacksmith. It was located on the spot where the Bowles Auto Supply House now stands. Again the old residents were asked for assistance, and the picture here given accurately represents the old time setting.

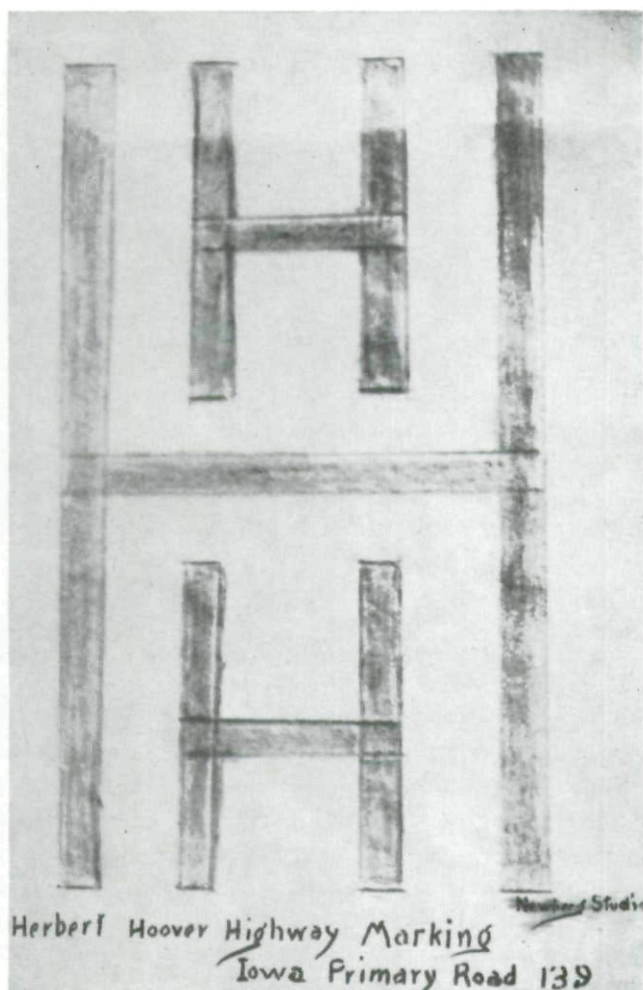
Next is a picture of the Hoover barbing machine. At that time I was living in Kansas and my father owned one of these machines. I worked it and from my intimate knowledge of its construction made this sketch. Two strand twisted wire soon supplanted the hand machine and it went to the limbo as every thing does after serving its day and purpose.



The barbing machine just described was installed upstairs in the implement store. Jesse Hoover went to the farm of Daniel Cookson, two miles south of West Branch, rolled up his wire and brought it to his machine and barbed it. This barbed wire was in continuous use on the Cookson farm until the 28th of Seventh month, 1928. The descendents of Daniel Cookson who are now living on this farm had it taken off on that date and rolled up for preservation. By their courtesy I took it to the Newbergh Studio at Iowa City and had its picture taken and am now offering it as an historical relic. The rolls of wire were dipped in hot tar after being barbed, and it was a kettle of this tar that Herbert Hoover set fire to and made it necessary to call out the fire department.

The people of West Branch early recognized in Herbert Hoover the seeds of an illustrious career, and to perpetuate his memory, in 1923 they named the road running through West Branch "The Herbert Hoover Highway" with the three H markings shown on the opposite page. This road connects the old River to River Road, now #32, with the Lincoln Highway, now #30.

Iowa City and Tipton cooperated with West Branch, and the road from Iowa City to Stanwood was marked with the



three H sign and is today a great public highway.

On the opposite page is a picture of an autograph of Herbert C. Hoover written when he was nine years old in the album of Addie Colip, now Clark.

If his wish were gratified it would stop war and end half the troubles of humanity. [The autograph is missing from Levi's book.]

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