

Such Orderly, Good People

Behind the Scenes in the Hoover White House

HERBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM (WEST BRANCH, IOWA)



President Herbert Hoover and First Lady Lou Henry Hoover welcome wounded war veterans at a 1931 garden party. Social events like this one depended on dozens of White House staff working behind the scenes.

by Ginalie Swaim, editor

WHAT WE AMERICANS SEE of the White House is carefully selected and scripted. An elegantly appointed Blue Room is decorated for the holidays. A sparkling white portico serves as a reporter's backdrop. On the South Lawn the president romps with the First Dog. In the Rose Garden foreign dignitaries are greeted. These views are nearly as iconic as the White House itself.

What we do not see are the White House employees who vacuum the carpets, prune the shrubs, and serve the meals. The hundreds of individuals who work behind the scenes at the White House acquire unique perspectives on what it is like to work for the individuals we have elected.

This fall the State Historical of Iowa welcomes a new traveling exhibit that takes us behind the scenes—"The Working White House: Two Centuries of Traditions and Memories." And in this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, we present the impressions and memories of a few White House employees who worked for President Herbert Hoover and First Lady Lou Henry Hoover, both born in Iowa.

These accounts are excerpted from oral history interviews housed at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch.

"The Hoovers were great believers in lots of help, domestic and otherwise," writes former White House Chief Usher Irwin Hood "Ike" Hoover (no relation to the president). "Servants simply fell over each other around the White House. Every department was the same, from the kitchen to the attic."

In his memoir, *Forty-Two Years in the White House*, he listed the employees during the Hoover years: "the Chief Usher and two assistants, the housekeeper, Mrs. Hoover's lady's-maid and two assistants, the President's valet, four Negro doormen, one man in the storeroom, one engineer, three firemen, one electrician. There are four regular butlers. In the kitchen are one head cook, three assistants, and one dishwasher. Two men take care of the ground floor, one man the parlor floor, four men the upper floors. There are also two maids who look after these rooms and two other maids who do general work about the house. One man polishes the hardwood floors and one carpenter with one assistant does repairs. Mrs. Hoover had two secretaries at all times and three during the social season. There is one man who checks at the public entrance and one who attends to the dogs. There are about ten employees attached to the social room and their duties are concerned principally with the White House proper. In addition to these who are on the job regularly there is the garden force of about ten men. . . . Extra employees are brought in for all the social affairs: waiters for the dinners and hatbox attendants for the receptions."

Such memories, along with those of five other staff, add complexity and dimension to our understanding of the couple who called the White House home from 1929 through 1933.

Alonzo Fields (head butler)

"President Hoover was the most orderly man I've ever come in contact with. . . . I've talked to a number of butlers who had worked for them. They said that they were the finest people to work for. You had to be orderly. You couldn't slub around at no time. . . . In those days, you had a table for the help, and a table for the family. President Hoover wanted you to have what he had on his table. He would say, 'Has the rest of the family (he didn't call them "the help") had this? I'd like for them to taste it. I think it's very good.' You never had to go to Mrs. Hoover or the President and say, 'Fields is sick, and his wife is in poor condition, and they're in need.' Somehow or another, they always seemed to know it. And you would receive benefits without anyone pleading to them."

"Now the other First Ladies, true, if you went to them and told them the condition, naturally they would give a hand. But not with the Hoovers. . . . She seemed to know it beforehand."

"... [My recollections of her are] kindness, fairness, dignity. She wanted dignity in her home at all times. Of course, as I say, they had a routine. You knew the dinner hour. You knew that you set up for tea every afternoon at a certain time. And you were dressed and ready to serve the tea. If there were any social activities, that would be included, too. But dinner was always at eight o'clock. At eight o'clock, you announced dinner. Even if it was just he and Mrs. Hoover, the President would still have on his tuxedo. Perhaps he had learned that abroad when he was abroad so long. He would dress at dinner,

just like that old custom here in the Back Bay that people used to talk about. They were such orderly, good people, that's all I can say. They had their fun. . . . But you didn't find any bootleggers coming into the White House."

Agnes Thompson (personal maid)

"Everybody tried to live as one big family. And Mr. Hoover's valet, Boris, would tell you this: 'Any little disagreement,' he said, 'don't let them know it, because this would make them very unhappy if they thought their household help couldn't agree.'"

". . . I never worked for anybody before. As I said, I married young, so, of course, what little experience I had was with my needle—doing things on the side—so [Mrs. Hoover] said, 'Well, that part is all right. I can teach you,' and she did. She taught me well. Not only the things that I was to do as her personal maid, but the things to do to get along with people and to be able to work later. Those were the things that were instilled through just the contact that I had in serving her. And never a time when mistakes were made was I treated crossly. It was always in the capacity of a mother telling a child—explaining how they should be, and 'we'll try another time.'"

Irwin Hood "Ike" Hoover (chief usher)

"When Coolidge reigned, we thought he was an odd person, but with the coming of Hoover we changed our minds by comparison. Coolidge was quiet and did queer

little things, but Hoover was even more peculiar. He would go about, never speaking to any of the help. Never a good-morning or even a nod of the head. Never a Merry Christmas or a Happy New Year. All days were alike to him. Sunday was no exception, for he worked just as hard on that day if not harder than on any of the others. There was always a frown on his face and a look of worry.

"... Of all the administrations, the hardest one to work for was that of President Hoover. Not that the hours were longer, for I have put in many more hours under previous administrations. But the Hoovers were dictatorial, attempted to do more than any of the rest, were extensive entertainers, stayed closer to the White House, were much easier of access to the outside world, seemed to know more people, felt they must entertain them, and generally were up and doing all the time.

"... I am told by a newspaper man that the reason things seemed so different around the White House during the Hoover Administration was because he was the first very rich President I had served under. That may be true, but I do not believe it. They were both very plain people. The President was apparently very modest in his ideas. It was only in his liberality toward Mrs. Hoover that led one to believe he had a great deal of money. ... She was very liberal with her family and with supplies for the household and never seemed to question the amount or cost of the food consumed. In the way of furnishings for the White House, she was positively extravagant. In the first two years of her occupancy there was practically no limit to anything or any idea that struck her fancy.

"... When the Government of-

ficials who had charge of the disbursement protested, their ruffled feathers were always smoothed and they were told not to worry; it was known there would be a deficit and it would be paid out of the President's pocket. And it was. Thousands of dollars were paid by the President for things that became Government property."

Katurah Brooks (maid) and Phillips P. Brooks (butler)

Phillips: "All the time I served him I think he said something to me only two or three times. Once when I was there serving tea, I was so accustomed to serving her, then Hoover. One day he said to me, 'What kind of cheese is this?' I jumped. We just took it for granted that he didn't talk to us."

Katurah: "I never will forget one thing that Mrs. Hoover said to me. She said, 'Katurah, if you ever decide to build a house, be sure to have your kitchen on the southern exposure.' She said, 'You get the sun all day. It comes up and it comes over and you get it in your kitchen all day.' And we did. That kitchen was the coolest in the summer and the warmest in the winter. We get part of the sun all day. ... She was the type of person who was always interested in anybody's project if it was worthwhile."

Phillips: "Those last days from the election all the way through were sad days; they were just blue, that's all. And those days back before the election weren't too good. And then he was defeated. It was bad! My wife was in Palo Alto on election night. She might be able to tell you something."

Katurah: "When the Roosevelts won? Yes. We stayed up and got the

returns by radio, and all of a sudden Mrs. Hoover said, 'Well, it's all over and we'll go to bed.'"

Katurah: "She had a friendly way of having us do things. I remember one Sunday I was on duty, and Mrs. Hoover came upstairs and knocked on the room and came in. She said, 'Katurah, that magnolia tree looks as though it's thirsty down there; would you mind to give it a couple buckets of water?' I did."

Phillips: "Mrs. Hoover used to love magnolia trees. She would get men to climb all the way to the top to get these big blooms. In the center of the dining room table in the state dining room—big, huge table—she would arrange this one bloom on this big, brass, round tray and put water in it and set this in the middle of the table, and it was a beautiful sight. She seemed like she knew everything."

Katurah: "We decided she had eyes in the back of her head. One afternoon she was getting dressed for tea. She had her back to me, and I was in the closet getting out this particular blouse, and without turning around she said, 'Not that one, Katurah; I'll take the one next to it.' It was frightening to death, but I know she couldn't see what I was doing, so we just decided she had eyes in the back of her head."

Lillian Rogers Parks (daughter of seamstress Maggie Rogers)

"Each one who comes in wants to do everything her own way. Each First Lady wants to do everything her own way. Each President wants things his way. And you go along with the things that they want. ... Well, you don't like changes. It's very hard to get used to a lot of

changes. It's hard for the cooks. It's hard for the butlers. It's hard for everybody to get used to drastic changes. . . . They try new things and you don't approve of it. But you can't say anything. And maybe after a while, they'll see that maybe it doesn't work. I should say the servants know more about a house like that than the people that come in. But still, you can't tell them. You don't dictate to them. If they ask you, or say where are such-and-such a thing, they'll see it your way sometimes.

"I liked Mrs. Hoover for her ways, her kindness, thoughtfulness, and the way she would run the house.

". . . Regardless of who was the President at that time, it was a bad time. Mr. Coolidge got out just in time. He certainly did. And it wouldn't make any difference, it could have been a Republican or a Democrat, anybody who came in there. . . . You couldn't blame him for everything. And Mrs. Hoover was so concerned. Those things used to upset her. The newspapers would write things. You could tell. If in the morning there was something that

she didn't like, Agnes would say to my mother, 'There's something in the paper this morning that I think has upset Mrs. Hoover.'

"You could tell when you'd go into her room in the morning, or when you were around her, like the maids, the personal maids, that she was upset about things that would be said about him. I remember the last words that she said to my mother when [Mrs. Hoover] was leaving the White House. That morning my mother blacked out leaning over a file cabinet. . . . And they brought my mother upstairs, and took her in the housekeeper's suite, and laid her on the bed for a while. So Agnes came up and she said, 'Mrs. Rogers, if you can, please come and tell [Mrs. Hoover] goodbye.' So my mother went from the third floor to the second floor and met her in the hallway. And she said, 'Maggie, my husband will come back someday to do great things.'

". . . Now, the oval room on the ground floor, a day or two before the Hoovers left the White House, Mrs. Hoover had all the employees come into that room. And she gave us a little talk to thank us for being

so kind to her. She said, 'Now, you have a uniform on. And when you put your street clothes on, you look different, when you put a hat on, a coat, or whatever. And perhaps I will pass you and won't recognize you. But wherever you see me, please speak to me.' Those were her parting words.

". . . If you really want to see how a hurricane goes in the White House, you want to be there when one family is going out, and another family's coming in. . . . They get up from bed, they have their breakfast, and you've got to get them out of there. Somebody else is coming in." ♦

NOTE ON SOURCES

The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library holds the following oral history interviews of former White House staff, all conducted by Raymond Henle: Katurah and Phillips P. Brooks (September 1, 1970); Alonzo Fields (July 24, 1970); Lillian Rogers Parks (February 12, 1970); and Agnes Thompson (November 16, 1966). All are copyright Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, Inc. This article also includes excerpts from Irwin Hood (Ike) Hoover, *Forty-Two Years in the White House* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934). Thanks to the staff at the Hoover Library for their assistance.

White House Exhibit at State Historical Society of Iowa

"The Working White House: Two Centuries of Traditions and Memories" offers a rare view of the inner workings of America's most renowned residence through experiences, firsthand accounts, and artifacts of the largely unrecognized people crucial to the everyday lives of our first families. It examines the occupational culture of this uniquely private yet public place, and addresses race and gender, the evolving nature of work at the White House, and how presidents and employees have viewed one another.

"The Working White House" runs through March 6, 2009, at the State Historical Building, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines. Details: www.iowaHistory.org. This traveling exhibition is from the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, developed with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and the White House Historical Association.

In connection with this exhibit, the State Historical Society of Iowa offers two opportunities to meet Barry H. Landau, author of *The President's Table: Two Hundred Years of Dining and Diplomacy*.

- "History for Lunch: Barry Landau, speaker," Thursday, October 23, noon-1 pm., Centennial Building, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City. Bring your own lunch. Limited seating. Details: 319-335-3911.

- "A Gala Evening at the President's Table," Friday, October 24, 6:30 p.m., State Historical Building, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines. Enjoy presidential wines and spirits and dine with Barry Landau. Presented by the Iowa Historical Foundation, which supports exhibits and programs of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Reservations to the black-tie gala are \$125 per person. Contact IHF executive director Barb Filer at barb.filer@iowa.gov or 515-281-8823.