

Bert Hoover

On a summer afternoon in the early eighties a chubby-faced, bare-foot lad might have been seen looking for pretty stones and fossils along the gravelled embankment of the railroad track at West Branch. Picking up pebbles, rubbing them vigorously to make them shine, and moistening them with his tongue to see if they would sparkle would doubtless be considered dull pastime for the average boy. But for Herbert Hoover — “Bertie” he was called at home — it was a matter of pure delight. Collecting choice specimens of stones was his hobby. Dr. William H. Walker, the dentist, could point out the beauty and fine qualities of an agate, and the peculiar characteristics of a fossil coral. And these were things that interested Bert.

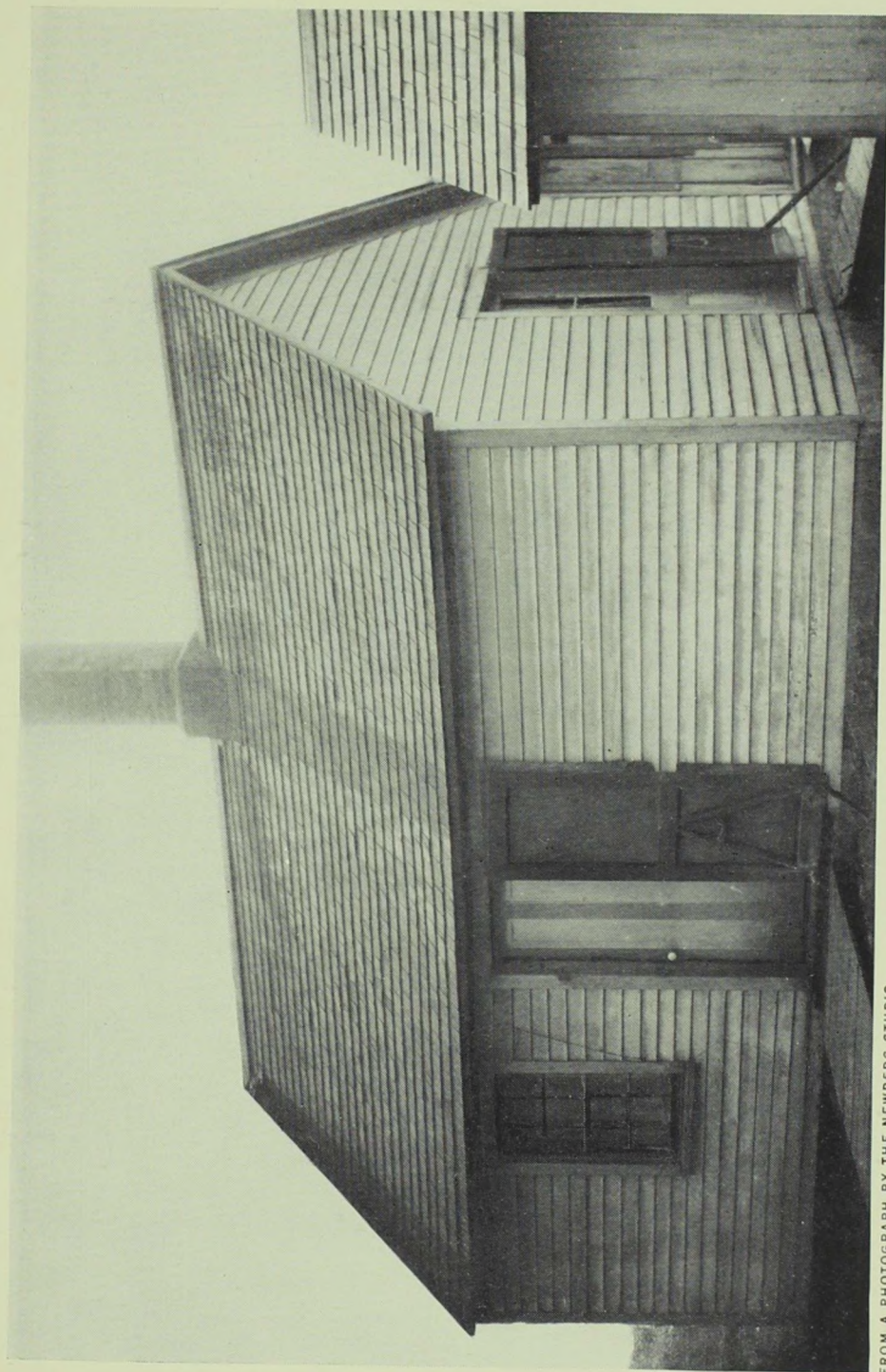
The boy's father and mother were Quakers, as were their parents and grandparents for several generations. His father, Jesse Hoover, the village blacksmith, was known for his stalwart character, his high ideals, and his strict adherence to the Quaker faith. Huldah Minthorn Hoover, his mother, was a gracious, womanly woman, a recorded minister of the Society of Friends, always ready to serve, and proud to associate with the most humble of the community. One might well say of her as Hamlin Garland has written of his own pioneer mother: “She

was neither witty, nor learned in books, nor wise in the ways of the world, but I contend that her life was noble. There was something in her unconscious heroism which transcends wisdom and the deeds of those who dwell in the rose-golden light of romance. Now that her life is rounded in the silence whence it came, its significance appears."

The humble little two-room cottage in which Hoover was born and spent his early boyhood still stands on the bank of the west branch of Wapsinonoc Creek. In a little room seven feet wide and thirteen and a half feet long he first saw the light of day. It is now used for a tiny kitchen but it is open to the public and its owner, Mrs. Jennie Scellars, is proud of the fact that her home was the birthplace of Herbert Hoover.

The boyhood of Bert Hoover was not particularly romantic. He was a boy among boys — "a reg'lar feller". He went swimming and fishing like other boys, caught rabbits in a figure-four trap, shot pigeons and prairie chickens with a bow and arrow, watched a torch-light parade at a Republican rally, and sold old iron to earn money for fireworks on the Fourth of July. A record of his school attendance during the spring of 1882 when he was seven years old is still preserved in the beautiful penmanship of his teacher, Mrs. R. Anna Painter. And he left his name with kind sentiments plainly written in the autograph albums of his friends.

A. W. Jackson, an early resident of West Branch,



FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NEWBERG STUDIO

THE BIRTHPLACE OF HERBERT HOOVER

remembers him as "round faced, chubby, serious, and pretty much in the way". By his teacher, Mrs. J. K. Carran, he is characterized as "industrious and determined". Whatever he did "he put his whole heart into, whether it was coasting down Cook's hill on his home-made sled, or diving into the old swimming hole down by the railroad track, or getting a hard lesson in school. He worked with all his might."

Another characteristic which he seems to have possessed as a boy was "keeping still when he has nothing to say." Even as a youngster he could express himself upon any subject that interested him; but he was never adept at "just making a talk for the sake of talking." He preferred to listen to the others if they had anything worth while to say; if not, he had something of his own to think about.

But Bert's boyhood days were not all filled with the boundless joys of youth. There were likewise days of hardship, of sadness and bereavement. When he was only six years old his father fell a victim of typhoid fever and died at the age of thirty-three. The family had just moved from the one-story cottage by the blacksmith shop into a two-story house behind the maples a little to the south. The estate was meager and the demands upon it were great. Mrs. Hoover turned to sewing: she was an excellent seamstress. Moreover, she was frequently called upon to minister at the Quaker meetings, for which she received no regular compensation but ac-

cepted occasional gifts from friends. By industry and economy she would have succeeded in holding the little family together but for her own untimely death, which occurred when Herbert was nine years old.

Completely orphaned, the lad found a home temporarily with his Uncle Allan and Aunt Millie Hoover on a farm near West Branch. The freedom of country life and the adventurous experience of the farm appealed to his youthful and exuberant nature. And his Aunt Millie's culinary ability appealed with equal strength to his ever increasing appetite. But there were also new duties and new responsibilities confronting him. Laurie Tatum, wise and friendly counselor who had often given him pennies and fatherly advice, was appointed guardian. He spoke to Bert about his conduct; he must be kind and brave and prudent, and help as much as he could on Uncle Allan's farm.

Uncle Allan and Aunt Millie made no distinction between Bert and their own son, Walter, of the same age. They awarded praise and blame with impartial justice and affection. Bert helped to bring in the wood, pumped water, learned to feed and harness the horses, and taught the young calves to drink from a pail.

When haying time came he conceived the idea of training one of the calves to draw a mowing machine. Uncle Allan heard of the plan but made no objection, so a harness was made for the calf. Next

a mowing machine was improvised with some boards and a cross-cut saw. Bert was the mechanic. When completed the machine "was a triumph. The wheels were borrowed from an old buggy, the framework was neatly sawed and nailed, and the steel cutting-edge, sharpened by patient toil with a file, actually moved back and forth like that of a big machine." Aunt Millie was called to admire it; Uncle Allan praised it highly. Then the calf was brought forth, fully equipped, and the traces were fastened to the whiffletree. Suddenly there was a commotion. The bawling calf, tail high in the air, tore through the barnyard. The mower crashed into a tree, the traces broke, and the calf escaped. The pride of boyish invention lay in a wreck against the trunk of an apple tree.

But the days spent on the farm were not all days of hilarity. There were busy days — days of training in industry and economy. The summer passed with its orderly cycle of work: the corn was plowed, the hay cut, the wheat and oats threshed, and the grain carried to the nearest mill for grinding on toll. Bert was too small to do a man's work, but he helped as much as he could. He observed that there was always plenty of work, and that the reward for service lay largely in the satisfaction of tasks well done.

If the influences of the first decade of a person's life determine the principal traits of his character, then Herbert Hoover owes much to his experiences

and early training at West Branch. And there seems to be considerable evidence that the boy was indeed father to the man. His boyhood days, with their joys and hardships, their lessons of industry and thrift, and their fine dreams of future success have borne abundant fruit.

J. A. SWISHER