

The Years Following 1933

The daily mail was voluminous, but Lou Hoover struggled to answer the letters of a multitude of personal friends and well-wishers who expressed their affection and admiration for the First Family. Parting with Camp Rapidan, so full of happy memories, was one of the hardest things the Hoovers had to do. They gave Camp Rapidan to the Federal Government and expressed the wish that the camp be made available to future presidents.

They also decided that Bert would not seek public office again and that they would go back to California to live rather than move back into their S Street home in Washington. On board a train early in March, Lou read an editorial by Willis J. Abbot in the *Christian Science Monitor* that helped her understand the political situation:

If the Democrats in Congress should leave largely unchanged Mr. Hoover's plans for the reconstruction of the business structure, there might be a demand for recognition of his services. It is hardly likely, however, that Democratic policy will permit this. The party which out of office, devoted so much attention to the successful endeavor to "smear Hoover" is not likely when in power to leave undone anything for the completion of that particular task.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she read the editorial on March 7th in the *New York Herald-Tribune*:

To step down from high office as simply and with as complete courtesy and dignity as did Mr. Hoover, is in a great American tradition. But it none-the-less stirs a wave of admiration that deserves noting even in these crowded days. Let it be added that the reserved friendliness and the complete good taste with which Mrs. Hoover graced the White House, were not less marked in her leaving. Wherever their future may lead them, here are two citizens of whom America can always feel proud.

Editorial note was also made of the fact that Mr. Hoover refused to accept his salary of \$75,000 a year while he was president, turning each check back into the treasury. It was also noted that he built Camp Rapidan at his own expense and gave it to the government. "President Hoover looms larger in defeat than he ever seemed to at the peak of his power, perhaps because in the waning days of his term he felt free to say whatever he wanted to."

Finally returned to Palo Alto from that "perilous, pitiless pinnacle" that was the White House, Lou Hoover appreciated the tranquility of her San Juan Hill home on the campus. At last she had time for friends, books, family, and fishing trips with her husband. Busily, quietly, above all naturally, she took part in many community and University activities. Hospitality continued to play an

important part in her life and she entertained not only personal friends but also many campus organizations in her home.

She was known to always be doing something, little or big, for somebody. Her daily mountain of mail reflected this, with many appeals for advice or help. Some letters were from professional chisellers but many were from people who turned in their desperation to a lady they knew to be kindly and very resourceful. They ranged from requests for pieces of Mr. Hoover's neckties, autographed photographs, and endorsements of products for advertising purposes, to pleas for personal advice and money. She devoted the time between her eight o'clock breakfast on the terrace and noon to going through the mail and dictating to her secretary, but she also wrote answers to many warm personal letters herself.

Lou Henry liked the freedom of being a private citizen. She did her shopping in Palo Alto and sometimes paid by check without revealing her identity in advance. Saleswomen were startled by the name on the checks handed them by this quiet, unassuming customer.

Her lack of ostentation showed again when asked to contribute a dress to the Smithsonian Institution for their collection of historic gowns worn by the First Ladies of the Land. Instead of sending her inaugural gown, Lou Hoover sent a lovely dress of aquamarine tinted satin. It was

simply fashioned with a softly draped bodice and a skirt with pointed flounces. "This gown has no particular historical associations," she wrote in the accompanying letter. "It was just a dress that I enjoyed wearing, and for that reason I selected it from the others I wore in the White House."

The Smithsonian request was followed shortly by one from Mrs. Roosevelt asking for a portrait to hang in the White House. For this purpose Lou chose a painting by Lydia Field Emmet that hung in the Girl Scouts' National Headquarters in New York City. The picture was not hung in the White House during Roosevelt's administration and it remained for Bess Truman to reopen the subject in 1949. Hoover chose to commission a copy of the portrait from life executed in 1932 by Philip de Laszlo. This was graciously accepted by the Trumans and hangs in the White House today.

It was difficult to retire completely from public life. November of 1934 saw the former First Lady helping with the Community Chest Drives in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, following her stipulation that she represent the Girl Scouts.

"Because of her kindly spirit and her never failing interest in the less fortunate men and women of the world," explained the chairman of the Woman's Crusade in Los Angeles, "we have asked Mrs. Herbert Hoover to appear on our symposium entitled 'Women Leaders of Today and Tomorrow.'"

"I am glad to be here as a Girl Scout," responded Lou, "an active member of that great group of girls who are the women of tomorrow We hear much today about the need of right leadership. But we need to be good followers, too. Leadership develops with such an attitude and thus our cause is strengthened. It is together we get good things achieved. And we must be wary of would-be leaders who want to destroy our standards."

One public activity from which Lou Hoover did not wish to retire was the Girl Scout movement. In the fall of 1935, the former First Lady politely declined her first invitation to the White House since she left it in 1933. Lou explained that it would be impossible for her to go to Washington because of her responsibilities at the long-planned Girl Scout National Convention in San Francisco. She wrote: "I feel that the spirit of effective mobilization demands me to be at my post of duty here."

She entered into planning for the San Francisco meeting with enthusiasm. When the convention of 1,000 executives and leaders of the nationwide Scout movement swung into action on October 2, 1935, she was unanimously elected president of the National Girl Scout Council.

In her acceptance remarks, Lou Hoover conceded:

The modern Girl Scout may have learned new bits of slang, but fundamental principles have not changed. The

Girl Scout of today has a new uniform, but the same courageous heart beats beneath it. She has learned many new mannerisms, but the same character looks out.

After the convention, Lou Hoover visited the National Scout Headquarters in New York and went to see her husband's new office, which he had just opened. After the holiday festivities that year, Lou turned to her Girl Scout interests again. Having served in every capacity within the Scout movement, she fulfilled the relentless demands upon her as president with gracious ease. In Duluth for the Hiawatha Regional convention in May, 1936, she was described by a newcomer:

To me as I watched her work with the leaders and the scouts at the conference, it seemed she was sweet without being sugary; competent and able without being arrogant, dominant or aggressive. She was that rare combination of simplicity and friendliness and quiet dignity that keeps familiarity away. I liked her tremendously.

The new president of the Girl Scouts wore her neat green Girl Scout uniform with pride right through the convention, including the banquet when most of the women were quite dressed up. This was always her policy in order to give the feeling of all-rightness to women who brought no dinner dresses along.

At the banquet, Lou said:

Girl Scouts are progressive. The fundamentals of honor, trust, loyalty and friendship cannot be changed but our uniforms, methods of approach and program are constant-

ly changing to keep up the interest. We do not try to teach or preach. It is the quality of fellowship, of leader and scout working together that makes Girl Scouting.

Lou was inwardly distressed by the continuing barrage of assaults upon her husband's character but in talking it over with her son, Herbert, she said:

Your father does not try to defend himself against the poison propaganda, but is trying to explain in magazine articles and speeches the philosophy of life which he has been forced by events to symbolize. It is the issue of human liberty and individual initiative versus government controls of both.

With excited and pleasurable anticipation, Lou and her husband drove to Los Angeles to attend Allan's wedding on March 17, 1937. Miss Margaret Coberly was a family favorite and all had looked forward to her adding the name of Hoover. Herbert, Jr., was his brother's best man and Peggy Ann was a flower girl. Herbert's other children, Peter and Joan, watched the proceedings with their mother. The Rev. Dr. D. Charles Gardner, Chaplain Emeritus of Stanford University, performed the afternoon ceremony at the home of the bride's parents, Mr. and Mrs. William B. Coberly, while Lou beamed happily at her new daughter.

The newlyweds flew to Nassau in the Bahamas for their honeymoon and the senior Hoovers went to New York. When the honeymooners returned

on April 16, the two couples met again in Des Moines, Iowa, and drove to West Branch where they talked about the plan to restore the Hoover birthplace cottage.

Back home in California, Lou Hoover remained very active with the local Girl Scouts. She helped to launch the annual Girl Scout financial drive in Palo Alto in the spring of 1937. The climax of the program was her talk on "What Scouting Means to a Girl."

Soon she was off to Savannah, Georgia, for the Silver Jubilee convention of the Girl Scouts convened in the city where the organization had its birth. The National President expressed her own pleasure in meeting within a stone's throw of the first meeting place of the charter members with Juliette Gordon Low, founder of the organization. She also recalled presiding at the Savannah meeting of 1922:

Our girls, out of all proportion to their age, their experience, or their numbers, are exerting their influence on our country. The old order changes. The whole world has been changing its ways as it does during every quarter century. We hope we have been keeping pace with it in ways that are good. We hope we have seen some of its more general mistakes and have avoided them.

At the 1937 convention, Lou unveiled a bronze memorial tablet dedicated to Juliette Gordon Low, in the Girl Scout headquarters building. This building, which was the converted stable of the

Low home, had been given by the founder to the Girl Scouts. In her remarks, Lou said: "This building has housed Girl Scout activities for a full quarter of a century, during which the organization has grown from the original group of twelve to a nationwide movement with a membership of 400,000."

She was an interested and amused spectator when twelve girls representing the original Girl Scouts, re-enacted the first meeting in 1912. They all wore the dark shirtwaists, bloomers and large hair ribbons of the 1912 period, did dumbbell exercises and played games that were the vogue when the movement began.

Gathering war clouds took Herbert Hoover back to New York to direct the National Finnish Relief Fund. Lou Henry took on a familiar role in overseeing the preparation of clothing and supplies for homeless refugees. She maintained an apartment at Waldorf Astoria Towers and aided her husband in his collection of documentary materials on the causes of World War II. Her days were full of relief work but she maintained her active interest in scouting. Clad in the simple green uniform of the Girl Scouts, Lou Henry as honorary Vice President of the National organization, summed up her many years of scouting activity with a lesson drawn from the new war in Europe:

With all the national and international evils loose in the

world, homemakers are the real peacemakers. As we look across the ocean and see the turmoil in other lands and realize what we have to do with our citizenship to preserve our ideals, the full value of the Girl Scout movement is brought home to us.

She discussed the peacetime program of the Scouts at a Northwest Regional conference in Seattle early in May, 1941:

It is just as necessary in peace time to build a good strong country as it is to stop and protect it against the threat of war. The emphasis in scouting is always on the need for good homes and good communities and the part that Girl Scouts can play in helping to build them.

Reporters wanted her to discuss American neutrality and asked her if she thought American youth, through such organizations as the Girl Scouts, could do anything to keep the United States at peace. "The Girl Scouts can do exactly what any other group of citizens can do," she replied. "That is, teach restraint and tolerance and interest its members in the discovery of truth and in remaining emotionally balanced. The Girl Scout program grows increasingly important through the years."

In the spring of 1941, Lou Hoover enjoyed a few weeks at her Stanford Campus home and was especially fascinated by watching the installation of the Belgian carillon in the tower of the Hoover War Library, preceding the dedication of this new building which was built to house her husband's extensive collection of war documents.

For the fiftieth Stanford Commencement that June, Lou Hoover was one of the speakers in the Laurence Frost Amphitheater. At the conclusion of her talk she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship degree from her *alma mater*. "It gives me a warm feeling around my heart," she replied, "to receive this recognition from the school that I have loved for so many years."

Back in New York more and more of Lou Hoover's time was spent in relief work as the war demands became very heavy. An insidious physical and mental fatigue began to take its toll although she thought herself to be in good health. She died suddenly and peacefully of a heart attack in the Waldorf Towers apartment on January 7, 1944.

The Girl Scouts, complying with the request that no flowers be sent, established a national fund in memory of their devoted and tireless leader. Meanwhile, hundreds of editorials from all over the country eulogized Lou Henry Hoover at the time of her death. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

In her unobtrusive way, Mrs. Herbert Hoover was all her life a force for human betterment. The one instance in which she came into public prominence she never sought, her leadership of the Girl Scouts of America, is slight measure of her widespread but unpublicized activity in all manner of works for young people. She is mourned by a multitude of friends who had reason to love her.

Chancellor Ray Lyman Wilbur of Stanford University characterized Lou Hoover as "a fine friendly American woman who will be remembered as a successful wife and mother."

Chancellor Wilbur continued:

Complimentary things are usually said about noted people when they die. It is significant that all these things were said of Mrs. Hoover while she lived. She was recognized during her lifetime as a uniquely intelligent woman, who refused to let official formalities interfere with her deep and friendly interest in people. The place where the Hoover family lived, whether in California or China or the White House, was never a house or a mansion. It was, because of Mrs. Hoover, a home.

Writing in the Girl Scout magazine, *The American Girl*, Will Irwin declared:

She kept up her scholarly interests all her life. When she broke into the conversation, whether it was on the mining business or American politics or Chinese history, she knew what she was talking about. Tolerant of human frailties, she did not tolerate them in herself. She was almost too kind. The people whom she helped over the hard places with money, with sympathy, and with counsel must have run into the thousands. Never, even in the darkest days of the depression which hung over the White House like a cloud, did she give any sign of waning courage. She died the youngest woman of her years I have ever known.

The tribute of the *Palo Alto Times*, was equally penetrating:

"As long as Americans cherish honest work,

neighborliness, truth, integrity, courage and democracy, Lou Henry Hoover's essential spirit will live. She has not said goodbye."

Lou and Herbert Hoover lie under marble ledger stones on the crest of a hill overlooking the little town of West Branch—where Herbert was born in 1874.

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