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FRONT VIEW OF HOOVER BIRTHPLACE



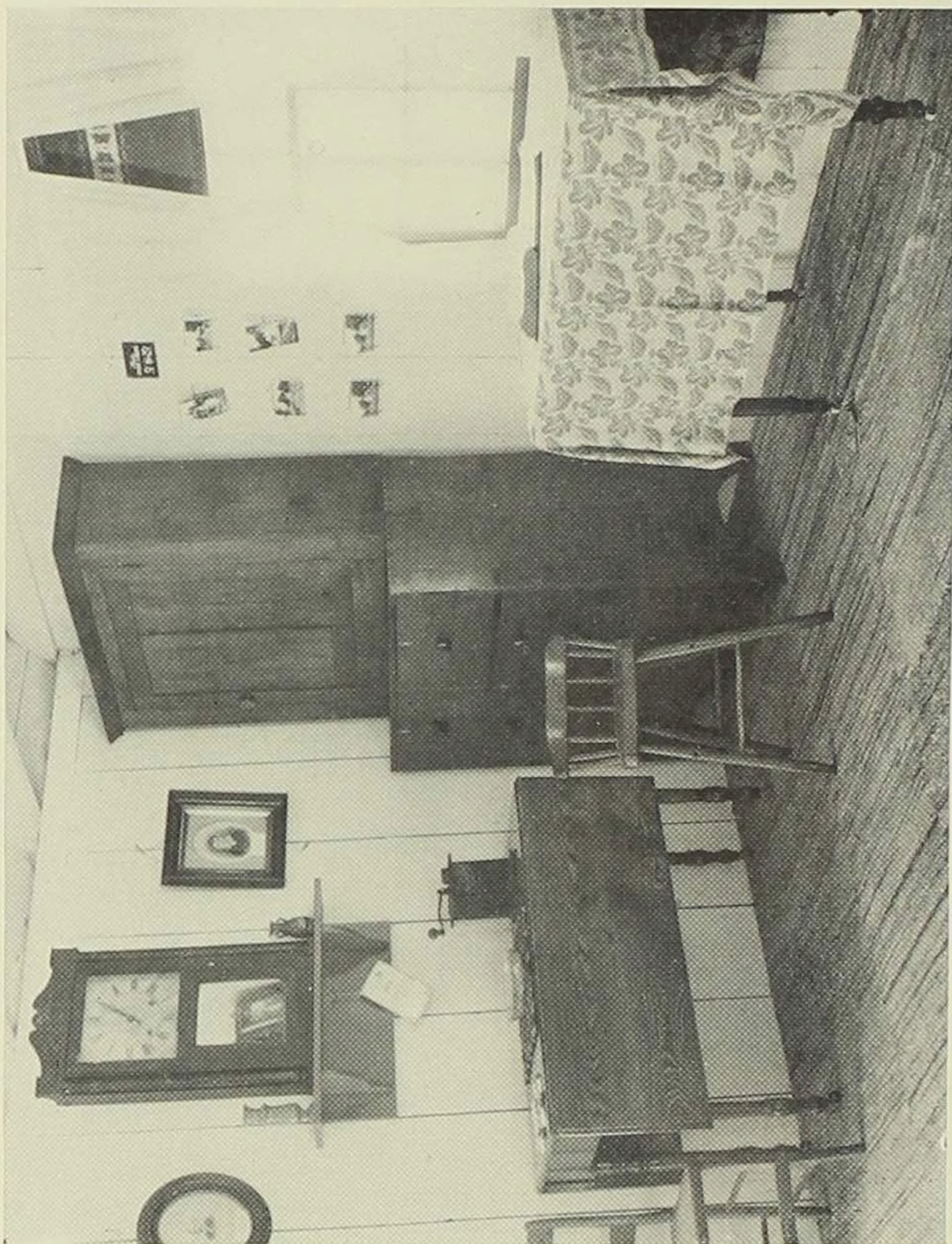


PHOTO BY C. F. KENT

KITCHEN-LIVING ROOM OF HOOVER BIRTHPLACE



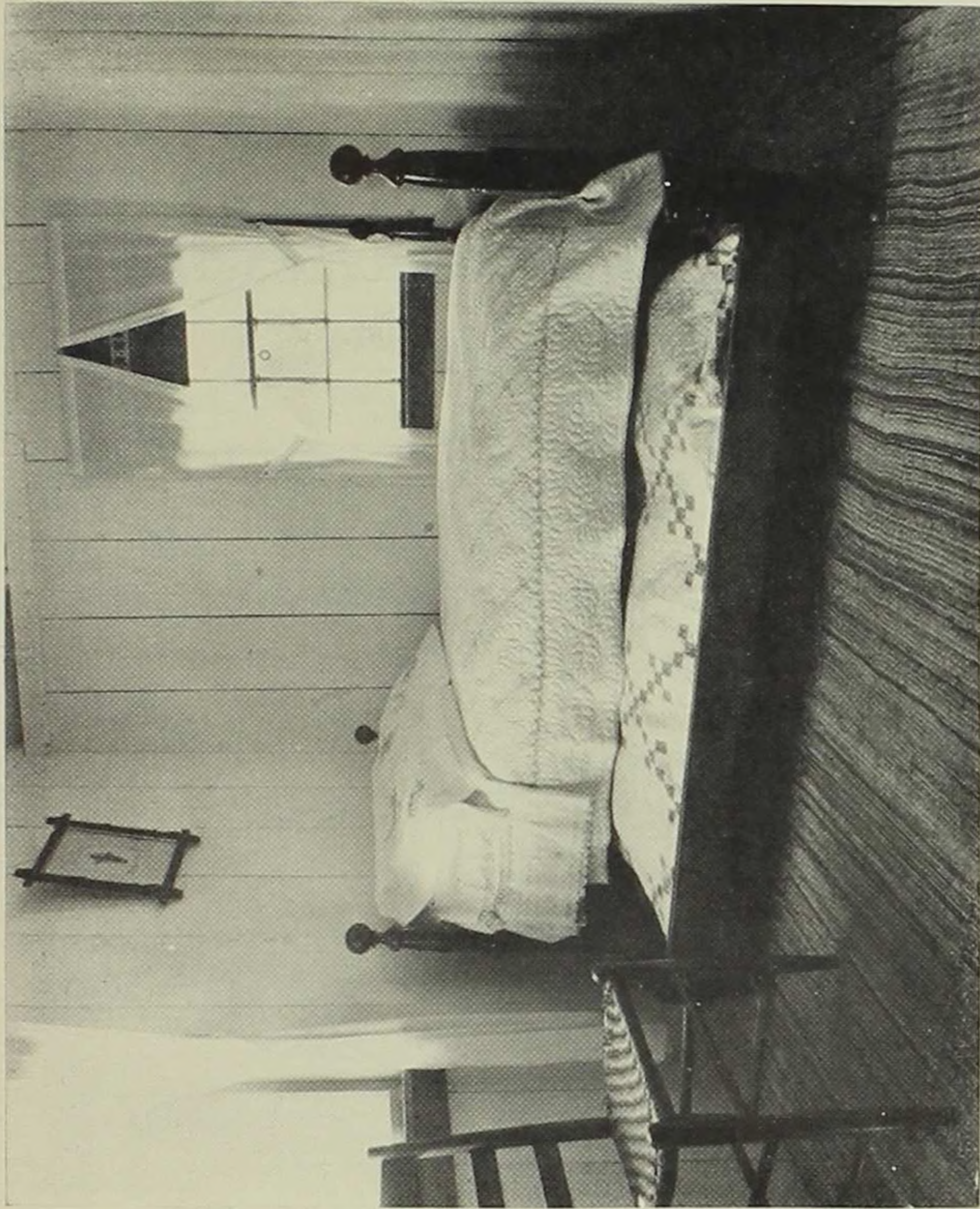


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BEDROOM OF HOOVER HOME



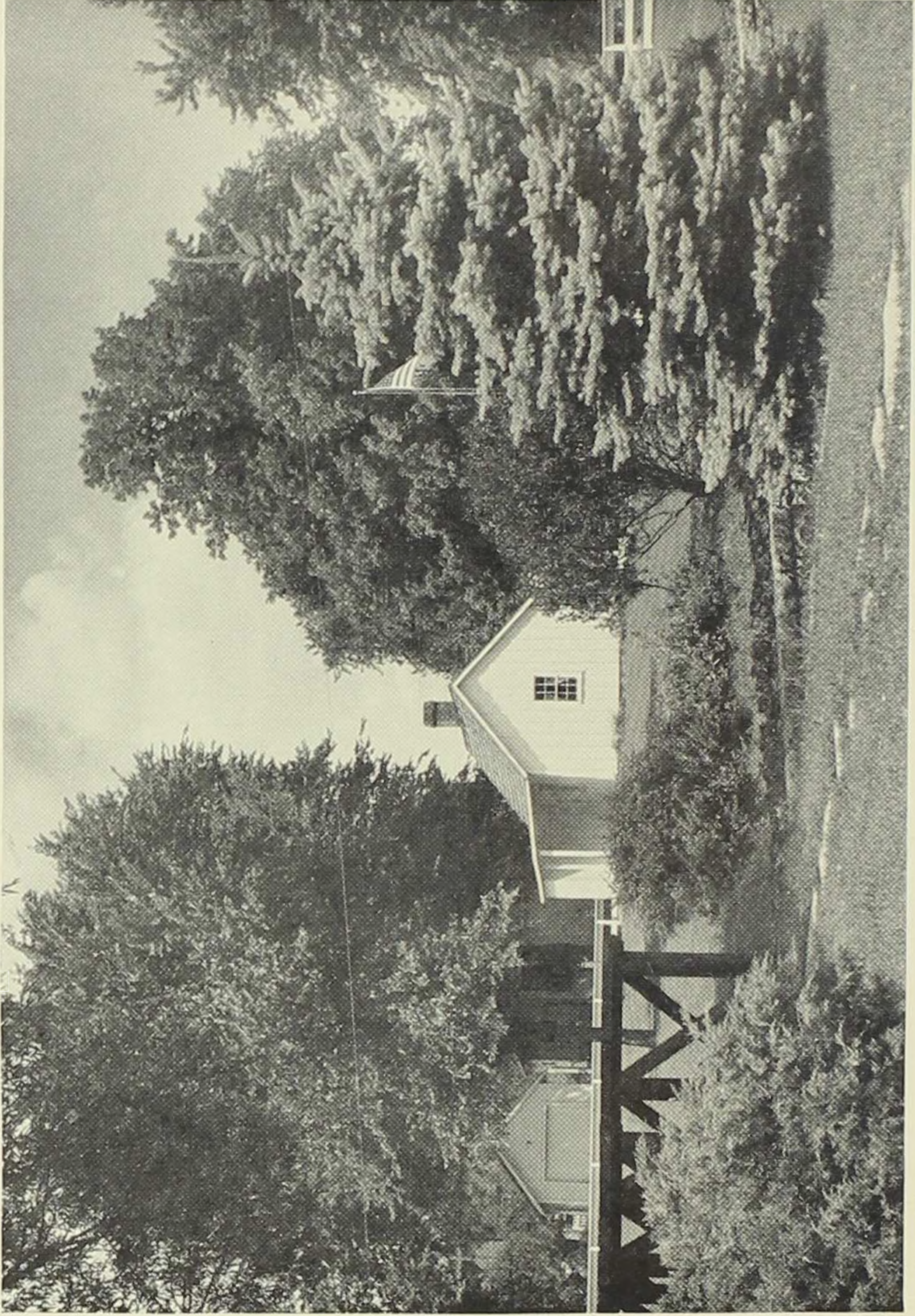


PHOTO BY C. F. KENT

VIEW OF HOOVER HOME FROM THE SOUTH



## The Hoover Birthplace

On the west side of Downey Street and a block south of Main Street in the town of West Branch stands a tiny cottage, which has become historic and which commends itself to widespread attention. Well may one ponder the influences that may come from a little home, or indeed from a little town. For in this diminutive two-room cottage in West Branch was born Herbert Clark Hoover — the first President of the United States born west of the Mississippi River.

West Branch had its beginnings in the decade of the fifties, the townsite being located on the west branch of the Wapsinonoc Creek. David Tatum was one of the first pioneers to settle in the vicinity of West Branch, arriving in 1850. Such well-known settlers as Samuel King, James Townsend, Thomas Barrington, Joseph Steer, Michael King, and Eli Hoover — a sturdy Quaker farmer with a penchant for carpentry and masonry — were present by 1853.

A post office was established at West Branch in 1854 with Samuel King as first postmaster. King kept the post office and a grocery store in his residence, which was located on the south side of



Main Street. A little later the post office was removed to the house of James Townsend who kept a typical pioneer inn, known as "Traveler's Rest", where many a weary wanderer found repast and refreshment, and where John Brown was received as a free and welcomed guest in the fall of 1856.

It was not until the construction of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railroad, that the town of West Branch was platted. In those early days the railroad was one of the chief points of interest in the little village. In the summer of 1871 one train passed each way through West Branch daily on the route between Burlington and Cedar Rapids, both carrying freight and passengers. The northbound train was of special interest to the populace, and a goodly number of citizens could be counted upon to be at the station upon its arrival. This train was scheduled to arrive about 4 P. M. Frequently it came an hour or two later. The engines of the two trains were unique. Instead of bearing numbers, they were named after distinguished men. One was called *Fitz Henry Warren* and the other *W. W. Walker* — honoring two early Iowa railroad builders. Each engine was equipped with "a single pair of drive wheels and carried a big smokestack, shaped like a balloon." The engines used wood for fuel, and West Branch, like other stations along the way, main-



tained a supply of fuel where the engines wooded up.

In 1873 a two-story frame, steam gristmill was built near the railroad and north of Main Street at a cost of \$7000. The first regular hotel was erected near the depot by Frank Savage during the same year. In January 1875 the West Branch Bank was established by a stock company, with a cash capital of \$25,000, which was soon increased to \$50,000. In February of that year a petition was signed by thirty-two legal voters within the limits of West Branch, stating that it contained 353 inhabitants and praying that an election be held "to vote upon the propriety of incorporating the village."

Meanwhile, in 1870, Jesse C. Hoover, the third son of pioneer Eli Hoover, was united in marriage to Huldah Minthorn, the daughter of a Quaker family recently arrived from Canada. Upon their marriage, young Jesse Hoover, following the mechanical bent of his father, left the farm to become a blacksmith and mechanic at West Branch. In 1874 an event occurred in that vicinity which was not widely heralded at the time, perhaps because it happened in the two-room cottage of the village blacksmith. On August 10th of that year Herbert Clark Hoover was born. It is reported that the elated father commented: "Well, another U. S.



Grant is born." But it is doubtful if anyone at that early date could have had the wisdom to prophesy that Herbert Clark Hoover would become President of the United States. Beside Herbert, there were in the Hoover home two other children — Theodore, an older brother, and May, a younger sister.

The humble birthplace of Herbert Hoover had been built on a part of the quarter section of government land entered by Aaron Baker, January 23, 1852, as the N. E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  Sec. 7, twp. 79, range 4. This land extends northward and eastward to the intersection of Main and Downey streets in West Branch. Mr. Baker soon transferred the land to Samuel King, who during the same year, 1852, sold it to Timothy Kirk. In 1856 Mr. Kirk sold seven acres of the northeast corner of this quarter section to Steer & Co. In 1870 J. M. Wetherell purchased five acres of this area, and in April of the following year, platted it into town lots, selling lot 41 to Eli Hoover and lots 42 and 43 to his son, Jesse C. Hoover.

The little two-room cottage which was erected on lot 42, and which became the birthplace of Herbert Clark Hoover, was a modest dwelling, constructed chiefly by the sturdy hands of Jesse Hoover, assisted by his father. The foundation stones were boulders hauled from the open prai-



ries. Auger holes, still visible in the rafters, give silent testimony that the timbers from which the substantial framework of the cottage were hewn had been lashed together and floated raft-like down the Mississippi River, perhaps from the forests of Wisconsin to the lumber mills at Muscatine, whence they may have been transported overland by oxen or horse teams to the site of the little cottage on the west branch of the Wapsinonoc. The two-room house in which Herbert Hoover spent his early childhood was simple in every detail. The little room,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  feet long and 7 feet wide, in which he was born, looked out upon a yard and playground. The living room, used as a parlor, kitchen, and dining room combined, lent itself to the development of a social atmosphere.

The side walls of the Hoover cottage were not lathed and plastered as they might have been in later years. Instead, the walls were of wide "barn boards", placed in a perpendicular position and closely fitted together by skillful hands. "Inside, to keep out the cold, the cracks were carefully taped with strips of cloth, and the walls inside and out, were whitewashed, immaculate and clean."

"Twelve-pane windows were kept shining, and the doors of vertical boards, homemade, were hospitably opened, with their latches of old-fashioned type, to lift at the pressure of the thumb."



The cottage had, for an additional sleeping room, "a shed annex" which provided a bedroom for the journeyman who sometimes assisted Jesse Hoover during his busy days as the village blacksmith. It is reported that E. D. King was occupying this sleeping room on the night of August 10, 1874, when he was called to summon the doctor on the occasion of the arrival of Herbert Clark Hoover. Adjoining the "shed room" was the back porch. Nearby was the old wooden pump, and dangling from it an old-fashioned gourd dipper gave visible evidence of economy, utility, and thrift. Beneath the pump spout was a tub, in which, on a summer evening, the barefoot children would wash their feet before retirement.

Enclosing the house yard, when Herbert Hoover was a small boy, "was a three board fence, topped by a flat board on which daring youngsters walked, and a white picket gate swung its welcome to visitors." Perennial shrubs and old fashioned flowers grew profusely within the yard that surrounded the Hoover cottage. It was a typical Quaker home where peace and quiet prevailed, and where industry, thrift, and culture were ever present.

As early as 1871, perhaps, Jesse Hoover erected a blacksmith shop on Lot 41, just north of the cottage, which at that time belonged to Eli Hoover.





PHOTO BY C. F. KENT

CORNER OF BEDROOM





PHOTO BY C. F. KENT

STATUE OF ISIS

*Gift of Belgian Children to Herbert Hoover*



Not long afterwards Huldah Hoover wrote: "Jesse gets plenty of work to do for himself and a hand; still the trouble is he don't get the cash for near all his work, which makes it pull kind of hard."

But Jesse and Huldah Hoover were young, ambitious, and industrious. They would make their own way in the world and be successful. They would purchase the lot on which the little shop stood. They would live in the little cottage a few years and then purchase a larger dwelling. These were dreams which were destined to come true.

In the decade of the seventies West Branch was a typical frontier village. The stage road from Davenport to Iowa City constituted the principal street extending from east to west through the village. A block south of the stage road and Main Street was the little Hoover cottage, and beside it was the village blacksmith shop, operated and managed by the sturdy Jesse Hoover.

In 1879 the little cottage and the shop nearby were sold and the Hoover family had moved into a larger dwelling a block farther south and on the opposite side of the street. In that portion of the village which lay north of the main thoroughfare and along Downey Street was the Quaker Meeting House, and on the summit of the hill farther north was the village schoolhouse, where knowl-



edge and culture were dispensed freely. "A combination of organizations and institutions could not be more perfectly arranged as a setting for the development of a broad and civic outlook. American civilization as a whole was epitomized in this village." It was a modest youth who came up through this environment who was destined to become the only man born west of the Mississippi River to be elected President of the United States.

A little more than a year after the Hoover family moved into their new home on South Downey Street, Jesse Hoover contracted a fever and died at the age of thirty-four, on December 13, 1880. Huldah Hoover bravely sought to carry on, and to nurture her children in their own home. But her own untimely death on February 24, 1884, at the age of thirty-five, brought an end to this carefully planned program. Thus at an early age the interests and welfare of Herbert Hoover came to be guided by the hands of foster parents.

At the country home of Uncle Allan and Aunt Millie Hoover, young Herbert enjoyed the privileges of home life. Cousin Walter, a lad Bert's own age, was his constant companion. Together they worked and played, farmed and fished, as boys of ten will do. But in the winter of 1885, at the age of eleven years, it was "Westward Ho" for Herbert. He went to live with his uncle, Dr. H.



John Minthorn, at Newburg, Oregon. Soon he was studying engineering at Stanford University.

Eleven years passed before Herbert Hoover returned to West Branch. He was on his way to London. As a mining engineer, in the employment of the Rothschilds, he would supervise gold mining in Australia — a position of great responsibility for a youth of twenty-two years. Four years later friends at West Branch learned that Herbert Hoover and his young wife, Lou Henry Hoover, were in the midst of a Boxer uprising in China. Subsequently, there were years of engineering and of mining — difficult, exacting years. Then came World War I, Food Conservation, and Belgian Relief work. When there were millions of orphans and needy children in Europe, Mr. Hoover was first among their friends and sponsors. In a sense he was foster father to them all. His humanitarian interests brought him to the fore and made him an international figure. In 1923 he was Secretary of Commerce in the cabinet of President Warren G. Harding. On April 13th of that year he was in Des Moines, stopped at Le Grand to see Aunt Millie, and came quietly into West Branch.

Almost forty years had passed since that winter day in 1885, when Herbert Hoover left the little town of West Branch for his new home in the West. Meanwhile the little cottage on Downey



Street had become significant. It had come to be widely known as the birthplace of Herbert Hoover, a member of the President's Cabinet. Meanwhile, too, the little cottage itself had been remodeled and enlarged. In 1879 the cottage had been sold to G. M. D. Hill. In 1885 it was sold to Z. T. McCaleb. In 1887 it was purchased by Victoria Hill, who sold it in 1890 to R. P. Scellars. Mr. Scellars was a builder, and had visions of a larger home. He purchased another dwelling which he moved on to the Hoover lot. He turned the little cottage one-fourth around, so that it faced the south instead of the east. Then he placed the larger building east of the cottage and joined the two buildings as one, affording a larger dwelling. Thus the little Hoover cottage became the kitchen in the home of Mrs. Jennie Scellars, and thus it was maintained for many years.

In 1928 when Herbert Hoover was nominated for the presidency, the Hoover-Scellars home suddenly became a place of national interest. Visitors came from far and near to see it. It was fast becoming a national shrine. "Hoover Day" at West Branch in August of that year "was preceded by an influx of notables, as well as newspaper, magazine and movie folk, artists, photographers and hosts of prominent people". On the morning of the arrival of the presidential candidate, Mr. and Mrs.



Hoover with their relatives and immediate friends breakfasted at the little cottage, and later visited many of the scenes of Mr. Hoover's childhood.

When Mr. Hoover was inaugurated President of the United States in March, 1929, a special train went from West Branch to Washington in order that hundreds of his immediate friends might witness the ceremony. It was a great day for West Branch. America is America because here it is possible for a youth to go from a tiny cottage to the White House. Mr. Hoover had done that. In doing so he had exemplified one of the very fine traditions of American life, and had made the little cottage at West Branch a focal point of American interest.

From the time that Mr. Hoover first became nationally prominent, citizens of West Branch were interested in his advancement, and were proud of the little cottage that had been his boyhood home. Whenever an occasion was afforded, West Branch rallied to the support of Herbert Hoover. Later when Mr. Hoover became President of the United States, there was an increased interest in the Hoover birthplace. In August, 1929, West Branch observed the president's birthday in an impressive ceremony in which it dedicated a native boulder and bronze tablet at the site of the president's birthplace.



As the years passed, Mrs. Herbert Hoover and her two sons, Herbert, Jr., and Allan, conceived the idea of restoring the Hoover cottage to its original appearance. To that end, Allan Hoover, in 1935, purchased the Scellars property and a dozen adjoining town lots. Subsequently, in 1938, the one and a half story front that had been added by Mr. Scellars was removed. That part of the building that constituted the original cottage was placed in its former position. The rooms of the cottage were restored to their former status, and a search began for some of the original furniture.

In 1939 prominent citizens of West Branch and other Iowa communities, who had long been interested in the Hoover home, formed an organization which they incorporated as the Hoover Birthplace Society. Since that time this organization, in cooperation with a large number of other interested citizens, has gone far in developing the Hoover home as a national historic shrine.

While simplicity marks the site, there is nothing surrounding the premises that suggests austerity. "Morning glory vines again climb over the back porch and an old-fashioned gourd dipper hangs on a post near the old wooden pump." Two hundred feet south of the cottage, on a substantial foundation, is a statue of Isis — The Goddess of Life — with the inscription: "I am that which was and is



and shall ever be, and no mortal has yet lifted the veil which covers me." The statue was designed by a Belgian artist especially for the Hoover birthplace, and was presented by a committee of Belgian school children, Belgian refugees, and soldiers of the Belgian Army in recognition of the distinguished services rendered by Herbert Hoover in administering Belgian relief during and after World War I.

Between the dooryard and the statue the west branch of Wapsinonoc Creek meanders slowly along its way just as it did when Herbert Hoover played along its banks as a barefoot boy. The yard surrounding the little cottage is again enclosed by "a three board fence, topped by a flat board", and the white picket gate again swings its welcome to visitors just as it did in days of yore. A little west of the Hoover cottage a new modern dwelling has been erected for the use of the custodian of the premises, and extending to the south and to the west for a distance of thirty rods or more is an open area which has been recently acquired by the Hoover Birthplace Society to enlarge and extend the park area surrounding the Hoover home.

But with all its surrounding improvements, the birthplace of Herbert Hoover remains the center of interest. As a visitor approaches the cottage from



the front, he comes first to a small porch. Entering the doorway he finds himself in a modest little room. The walls and ceiling as well as the doors and window sills are of rough-hewn boards. But they are immaculately clean and white as they were in the days of Huldah Hoover. Some of the furniture is from the original Hoover household. There is a sturdy drop-leaf dining table preserved from the early home, and beside it stands a highchair now weathered and worn, but highly prized as the one used by Herbert Hoover. In the adjoining bedroom where Mr. Hoover was born is an antique walnut bureau — a family heirloom — and beside it a trundle bed similar to one that was in the room when the Hoovers occupied it.

The preservation of the Hoover birthplace is significant, not for what it is, but for what it exemplifies. Steadfast and unremitting toil marked the progress of Bert Hoover from the little white house on Downey Street to the big White House on Pennsylvania Avenue. Herbert Hoover will long be remembered as the first Iowa-born man to achieve the Presidency of the United States. His birthplace is a shrine — for Iowans, for Americans, and for grateful citizens throughout the world. It is a challenge and an inspiration to youth everywhere.

J. A. SWISHER