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## Lou Hoover—Gallant First Lady

On March 4, 1929, under threatening skies, Lou Hoover attended the inauguration of her husband as President of the United States in colorful ceremonies held outside the Capitol. She remembered her early faith in a young man working his way through Stanford. On this day she saw that faith fulfilled more completely than she could have expected, when Herbert Hoover became the thirty-first President of the United States.

When the White House became her responsibility, Lou Hoover made that a home, too. Lou Henry Hoover was, perhaps, the most fully experienced First Lady ever to enter the White House. All First Ladies learn the traditions, duties, graces and limitations of living in the White House. Lou Hoover already knew them. She knew Washington and she knew the world firsthand, by living in both. She knew the officials and the foreign diplomats, many of whom she had known abroad, and had hundreds of friends of her own, whom she never forgot.

Sensitive to the historical significance of the White House, Lou Hoover re-established the President's Study, which had been used by all the Chief Executives from Adams to McKinley,



but was changed into a bedroom by the Theodore Roosevelts to help accommodate their large family of children. Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation in that room and Lou Hoover, after studying a painting which depicted the event, discovered some of the original furniture stored away in an attic. She refurbished the room and restored much of the original furniture.

Lou Henry enjoyed discovering in the Monroe law office in Fredericksburg, Virginia, much of the old French furniture acquired by President Monroe after the British burned the White House during the War of 1812. She had many of the pieces copied and placed in the East Room, the huge formal reception hall on the first floor. She refurbished other public rooms and also quarters for the White House staff to make them all more comfortable.

She showed her fondness for children by making special occasions for them. The annual Easter egg rolling on the White House lawn was attended by thousands of children who scampered up and down gleefully, rolling their gayly colored eggs and putting on impromptu races. The Girl Scouts did folk dancing accompanied by the Marine Band and the Boy Scouts were commissioned to find lost children.

Lou Henry took on countless duties to ease her husband's work, to spare his time, to extend the friendliness of the White House to visitors, and



to keep up the human relations with Washington which her husband's obligations did not permit. Her days were as fully scheduled as his.

She dedicated orphanages, christened ships, and appeared officially to represent the President on special occasions for many organizations. With the help of her four young women secretaries, she made official entertaining as easy and informal as possible.

Lou Hoover was conscientious about maintaining social precedents, but she also introduced a number of innovations. Guests at state dinners and receptions were guided by the social secretaries and helped to mingle at will in the drawing room to keep the functions from being too regimented. Menus for receptions and dinners became much more generous than in previous years.

Many receptions were scheduled for specific groups in the course of each year. The largest one, by far, was held on the First of January at the White House and was open to the public. On New Year's Day, 1930, a long line of people waited from midnight to get in and shake hands with the Hoovers, even though the official time of starting was 11:00 A.M. By nine o'clock Lou Henry was worried.

"We can't keep all those people waiting another two hours," she told Bert. So the door was opened and the crowds surged in, in orderly fashion, all intent upon greeting the First Family. Be-



fore the day was over, 9,000 people had gone through the reception line.

Lou Henry found it a very exhausting experience, even though the President sent her away for a little rest several times during the day. Discussing it afterward, Bert said, "We should abolish all big receptions, because they put too much physical strain on you."

"They are just as much a strain for you, too," replied Lou, "but I know that thousands of people will be disappointed if they can't visit the White House and meet the President. So I'm afraid that the New Year's reception is one of the precedents we must follow while we are in the official residence."

Tradition assumed there would be the conventional Diplomatic receptions, Cabinet dinners, receptions for members of the Senate and House of Representatives, for Army and Navy officials, and many others. From past experience, Lou Hoover knew that these functions were sometimes stiff and formal so she planned ahead meticulously for each event.

Guests at afternoon receptions, instead of being obliged to balance their teacups on their knees, found a number of small tables on hand on which to rest them. Cords which once divided special guests and ordinary guests at the public receptions were taken down by order of the First Lady so that a Congressman's secretary could mingle



freely with Cabinet officers and Diplomats. This was a break with the tradition of former White House mistresses.

Lou Hoover also created an informal atmosphere for her White House teas, which were unlisted on the official social program. From the cards of those who made formal calls at the White House, she compiled her invitation lists but there were many last-minute invitations to chance visitors to Washington. A close-knit circle of her personal friends aided in putting guests at their ease on these occasions. The First Lady herself, always hatless and gloveless, took her place in the Green Room with one of her secretaries and chatted easily with her guests in groups of twos and threes as they were escorted in by the aides. Lou Hoover always asked some of her friends to pour tea in the state dining room behind, reached by going through the Blue Room. She herself always planned the dainty open-faced sandwiches, tea, iced cakes and candy, and arranged for beautiful bouquets, lovely linens, and silver to make her teas enjoyable. In order to make the full rounds, she gave teas always once and sometimes twice a week.

Lou Hoover was deeply hurt while giving the usual round of teas for the wives of Congressmen. On July 12, 1930, she invited Mrs. Oscar De Priest, wife of the Negro representative from Chicago, along with the others. In order not to of-



fend Southerners, she had arranged the tea on two different days, bringing in Mrs. De Priest with a group of women sounded out in advance as to their prejudices.

The tea party went off well and the tactful hostess was pleased. But at breakfast the next day, she saw her name in the headlines. The color drained out of her face. "Look, Bert!" she cried pointing to them. "It says, 'Mrs. Hoover Defiles the White House!' They can't mean it. Oh, it just can't be true!"

"Well, I guess that is the way lots of Southerners feel about Negroes," he replied.

This tea party caused a great commotion in Washington and particularly in the South. There were speeches and editorials in the South about Mrs. Hoover defiling the White House and on June 13 the Texas Legislature passed a resolution denouncing her for entertaining Mrs. De Priest.

Newspaper stories ran on for days and the issue just would not die. Editorials rebuking the First Lady appeared in the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Austin Times*, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and the *Jackson Daily News*. In general, the editorials from the North were as laudatory as the ones from the South were censorious. She was complimented for her stand and praised by editors of the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Journal*, the *New York World*, the *Chicago Daily*



*Tribune*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Boston Evening Transcript*.

Lou winced as she read one editorial from the *Mobile Press* stating:

Mrs. Herbert Hoover offered to the South and to the Nation an arrogant insult yesterday when she entertained a negro woman at a White House tea. She has harmed Mr. Hoover to a serious extent. Social admixture of the negro and the white is sought by neither race. The negro is entitled to a social life but that the two races should intermingle at afternoon teas or other functions is inadmissible.

In contrast, the following editorial in the *Bristol, Virginia*, paper helped bolster her courage:

The President of the United States is President of all the people, white, black, red or yellow. The First Lady entertained a Negro at the White House as a courtesy from one branch of government to another. Mrs. Hoover is internationally minded. Politically she put into practice the brotherhood of man and religiously the fatherhood of God, even if the individual is an image carved in ebony.

Because of constant government pressures the Hoovers took no vacations. Lou Hoover planned Camp Rapidan, one hundred miles from Washington in the Blue Ridge Mountains, as a weekend retreat for the President. She designed and oversaw the construction of several log cabins clustered around the main building with its big living room and open fireplace.

Weekends found Lou Hoover a gracious camp



hostess in a setting of trees and streams. Shod in flat-heeled walking shoes, she hiked along the mountain trails, across stepping stones and fallen logs, leading the way and talking to her guests of many things. She often covered eight or ten miles a day, carrying a basket to bring back woodsy plants for the "memory garden" at the Girl Scouts' Little House in Washington.

On many of the Rapidan weekends the First Lady was able to entertain in the delightfully informal setting of the camp as there often were officials with whom the President needed to talk.

As Thanksgiving approached, Lou Henry longed to be out of the public eye and to have a family gathering for the holiday. Herbert and his family were in Pasadena, California, and could not make the trip. But Allan, who was registered for a two-year course at the Harvard School of Business Administration, came to Washington to be with his parents. On Thanksgiving morning Lou and Bert Hoover attended church services and then went for a ride into the country. The remainder of the holiday was celebrated in the White House with a quiet family dinner, early enough in the afternoon for Allan to catch the train back to Boston.

On the way to the station, his mother confided to Allan that she was upset and worried because she had detected some unfriendly attitudes toward the President. "You wouldn't believe it,"



she said, "but some people are actually blaming your father for the Wall Street crash."

Lou Hoover was distressed to see her husband working day and night, struggling with problems of the depression, keeping an inhuman schedule as he strained every effort to create new employment with new construction and improvements. She led a campaign among women to give up silk clothing and dress in cotton to help the Nation's textile industry. Weekends at Camp Rapidan were kept as peaceful and restful as possible for her husband by asking guests to discuss neither government nor politics.

Between weekends, the First Lady was a familiar figure on the Washington bridal paths, where she rode like a veteran horsewoman. A striking figure, sitting easily in an English saddle on a handsome grey horse, she frequently appeared along the paths in Rock Creek Park.

Events of the depression weighed heavily on Lou Hoover and she planned to keep all entertaining as simple as possible. She sponsored Paderewski's benefit concerts to aid Americans who were hungry and in distress, and called upon the Scouts and the 4-H Clubs to take part in the national efforts toward recovery.

Every week, from all over the country, Lou Hoover received letters from parents asking help to keep their children in school. The main difficulty, according to the letters, was that the children



lacked proper clothes and that there was no money with which to buy necessary books. The First Lady asked the cooperation of the National Congress of Parents and Teachers and answered every letter received. Often she advised the writer to apply to the local PTA for help.

Lou Henry Hoover continued to be recognized in academic circles, as her seventh honorary degree was awarded on May 14, 1932, by the College of Wooster at Wooster, Ohio. The degree of Doctor of Letters and Humanities was given in recognition of her work in social service. She was especially delighted because her great-grandfather, William Henry, was one of the three men who had helped lay out the town. The college ceremony coincided with the 125th anniversary celebration of the founding of the town of Wooster.

During the depression years, Lou Henry read with dismay the newspaper accounts of hunger marches and a serious riot of unemployed persons in Dearborn, Michigan, and how the farmers in Iowa and the Middle West had organized to prevent mortgage owners from profiting by foreclosure. Then she began to see ragged members of the so-called Bonus Expeditionary Force on the streets of Washington and heard that they were building a shanty town on Anacostia Flats outside the city. These thousands of unemployed veterans demanded immediate bonus payments. White House functions were full of discussions of



this situation as the President held conferences with leaders of the great public works programs and industries to try to increase employment. Lou Hoover heard her husband plead that industry strain every effort to create new employment by undertaking new construction and improvements, and to put human well-being first and profits last.

She was relieved when Congress appropriated funds for transportation and about half of the Bonus Expeditionary Force left Washington and went home. But she was increasingly distressed by the organized smear campaign against her husband and his leadership during the spring and summer. In spite of this, the Republican Convention nominated him for re-election.

In the days following the nomination ceremonies, Lou was acutely aware of the "Smear Hoover" campaign and the many untrue statements being published about the President, but while seething inwardly she continued to go about her daily round of duties with her usual outward calm. She demonstrated remarkable stamina as she stood beside her husband through the economic earthquake of the great depression and saw him go down to defeat in the presidential election of 1932.