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Lou Henry Hoover: Activist First Lady

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been an advocate of efficient farming and a pioneer in the field of "farm management," but the acute crisis in agriculture in the years after World War I began to change his thinking. While some reformers were advocating export dumping programs, and politicians such as Herbert Hoover were promoting the development of cooperatives (as ably chronicled by, respectively, Gilbert Fite and David Hamilton), Spillman embraced government controls. Spillman came to believe that solutions short of federal management were bound to fail. M. L. Wilson, as many agricultural historians have described, adopted Spillman's ideas and began pressing then-governor Franklin Roosevelt to adopt them, too. Spillman's ideas are still with us in the form of the federal farm program.

Carlson presents a balanced treatment of Spillman's life. One comes away impressed with Spillman as a man and as a conscientious government official. The only ingredient missing from Carlson's account is a better sense of the larger American narrative into which Spillman fits. Carlson might have taken into account the larger literature on the growth of the federal state by such recent scholars as Stephen Skowronek, Theda Skocpol, and Deborah Fitzgerald. In addition, Carlson could have considered how Spillman represented the rise of technocratic experts and scientists who believed that social problems could be solved if the state embraced their social engineering plans. Such faith in the scientific ideal is what James Scott (in *Seeing Like a State* [1998]) terms "high modernism." Even without this context, however, Carlson's book should be read by agricultural and economic historians.

Lou Henry Hoover: Activist First Lady, by Nancy Beck Young. Modern First Ladies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. xi, 238 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Lisa Ossian is an instructor at Des Moines Area Community College in Ankeny, Iowa. Her research and writing have focused on the Great Depression and the World War II homefront.

Lou Henry Hoover's deepest thoughts and emotions remained hidden from most historical documents and many of her family and friends. Yet, in a telling detail of her life, uncashed checks were found after her death hidden in a desk drawer, checks that many grateful recipients had written for educational loans, checks that Lou Hoover had never deposited because she considered the completed education and thankful gesture enough compensation.

Nancy Beck Young has written a detailed and thoughtful biography of Lou Henry Hoover's White House years from 1929 to 1933. Subtitled

her work *Activist First Lady*, Young draws primarily from Hoover's papers as well as memoirs, oral histories, Girl Scout records, and White House files to present an analytical biography rather than an emotional narrative. Readers must remember that Hoover seldom gave interviews except for causes, never offered quotes or opinions, kept no journal or diary, saved few letters, and always guarded her emotions. Thus, Young had a difficult task, but she completed it admirably. As biographer, she does not romanticize her subject but makes insightful critiques of Hoover's choices and lack of flexibility.

To set the stage for the White House years, her initial chapter, titled "From Tomboy to First Lady," is necessarily long at 43 pages. The following four chapters discuss Hoover's many social responsibilities in the traditional atmosphere of Washington, her private philanthropic responses to innumerable relief requests, her constant devotion to Girl Scouting activities, which increased even during the Great Depression, and the varied public responses of a very private First Lady. The final chapter, "Conservative Politics after the White House," examines the bitter disappointments that followed the Hoovers during the Roosevelt administration. The framing of the White House years (in the first and last chapters) composes a third of the volume as Young attempts to establish a strong prelude and explanatory conclusion, but to the reader Hoover's life unfortunately seems transformed from hopeful optimism to defensive pessimism.

The first chapter contains captivating photos of a young Lou as a Gibson-era girl fishing along an Iowa river, a sorority girl at Stanford University, a jaunty bride playfully posing for her family, and even an armaments inspector during the siege of Tientsin in 1900. That chapter of Hoover's life seemed truly her own—her wit, style, competence, and daring shine through. The years in the White House, despite her various activities, unfortunately seemed to trap her in a social role and an economic depression for which, despite all her earlier global experiences, she was ill prepared.

The second chapter begins with traditional Washington, an age-old mine field for each First Lady to navigate. What could Mrs. Hoover change or challenge? Hoover modernized the social calendar, blending political with social responsibilities. She offered some respite for her husband's depression-era troubles by establishing the presidential retreat of Camp Rapidan. The author also covers the June 1929 invitation of Jessie DePriest (wife of the only African American representative) to the White House. Hoover, despite preliminary strategizing, had broken the rigid color line at White House social events and was unprepared for the ugly backlash.

The next chapter examines Hoover's attempts to establish private philanthropy with communitarian values for numerous depression-era requests for aid. Hoover continued to merge Girl Scouting responsibilities with work as First Lady, even holding her press conferences as camp encounters, with reporters cross-legged on the floor. The third chapter on the White House years details Hoover's modernization of the East Wing and use of the media to advance projects.

Hoover chose to live her life through many roles besides First Lady: mother, philanthropist, geologist, outdoor advocate, clubwoman, academic translator, progressive, and conservative. At times her social causes and societal responsibilities seem quite traditional, which leads one to question the activist title. What did she risk or attempt to change? Often Hoover appears in this analysis as simply more active than activist, but Young offers her definition and reasoning for the thesis: "Lou Hoover became the first modern first lady with an activist agenda—an entity previously unseen in the East Wing. For Hoover, activism meant addressing the problems—large and small—she encountered in the world. This commitment to public works stemmed from her belief that she should use her talents and her means to improve society, and it shaped all aspects of her tenure as first lady" (52).

Young alludes several times to "the ruination of her public marriage," yet contrasts that with "a very strong matrimonial bond with Bert" (141). That complex relationship could have been explored in perhaps more depth within the biography to paint Lou Hoover with more human aspects, complete with frailties, of her personality and life.

Prairie Populist: The Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick, by Edward C. Blackorby. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies and the State Historical Society of North Dakota, 2001. x, 393 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$28.95 cloth.

Reviewer Steven R. Hoffbeck is professor of history at Minnesota State University Moorhead. He is the author of *Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota* (2005), and *The Haymakers: A Chronicle of Five Farm Families* (2000).

Edward C. Blackorby begins his biography of Usher Burdick by describing him as a "big man" in North Dakota history—a man who eventually weighed over 300 pounds. Burdick was indeed a big player in North Dakota history, and his career became entwined with prominent rural radicals of the 1930s. But Burdick's real power, paradoxically, faded when he became a congressman on the national stage.

Blackorby adeptly writes of how Burdick changed from a frontier roughneck into an able student. He tells the tale of a young man who

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