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Remembering Herbert Hoover

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February is the month we celebrate the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. In 1879, the federal government declared February 22, Washington's birthday, a federal holiday. That changed in 1971 with the Uniform Monday Holiday Act which moved it to the third Monday in February. A more recent unofficial change is calling Washington's birthday Presidents Day to honor all presidents who have served.

Herbert Hoover is Iowa's only President and the first to be born west of the Mississippi River. Federal holidays exist to allow us to reflect on the "mystic chords of memory" that unite us as a nation. What we value and hold precious in life is contained in the stories we tell. But we must tell them effectively and frequently to leave an indelible mark on our collective memory.

The story of Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover can be found at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch. The way in which the story is told is integral to the memories our visitors make during their visit. Our methods of storytelling need to adjust with current technology and expectations. It has been 30 years since our last renovation.

Opening on Hoover's 88th birthday, August 10, 1962, the former president along with his good friend Harry Truman, dedicated the fourth presidential library and museum operated by the National Archives. The original museum had display cases reflecting the many awards conferred upon Hoover over his long life. Absent was any mention of his family, his childhood or the Great Depression.

The focus was on the library processing his huge archive of public and private papers for researchers. Eventually, the National Archives realized that it had an audience beyond researchers who produced historical writings. A larger audience of historical consumers were interested in the stories presented in the museum exhibits.

In the 1970s, a chronological narrative of Hoover's life appeared in the museum galleries. A vast improvement over what existed, the museum galleries offered a barebones story. It took the inspired leadership of Richard Norton Smith to create the moving narrative that currently is reflected in the museum. Costing more than \$5 million dollars, the 1992 renovation used the most advanced technology at that time: cathode-ray tube television monitors showing historic film footage with audio tracks creating a memorable visitor experience.



As the library and museum director I'm often asked, "What has changed in the past thirty years that requires millions of dollars in a new museum renovation?" History is the study of change over time, and nothing remains unchanged. Historical research has provided many more insights into Herbert Hoover, Lou Henry Hoover, and their times. Different generations of scholars ask different questions from previous generations of scholars often drawing different conclusions.

A deeper appreciation of both Herbert and Lou is reflected in the numerous books and articles that have been written and are currently being written. Using these new findings better inform the museum visitor of the most recent scholarship while providing a richer narrative and visitor experience.

Technology has made enormous advances since 1992 and can be harnessed to tell stories more effectively. After thirty years, it is time to reexamine the museum galleries, employing the latest scholarship and technology. This would allow us to tell the stories of Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover and their times with greater impact for new and more diverse audiences.

Meaningful change is always good. We succeed if we can create a more memorable visitor experience. The goals and vision of the renovation project may be viewed at www.TimelessValuesCampaign.org. Our goal would be to have visitors leave pondering what they saw and uttering to themselves "I never knew that."

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Photos:

- Dr. Thomas Schwartz, Director, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum
- Herbert C. Hoover, 31st U.S. President
- Presidents Truman and Hoover tour the Hoover Presidential Library on opening day in 1962.
