



Offbeat Oregon History

Oregonian saved whole nations from starving to death

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

On the last day of July, 1914, former Oregonian Herbert Clark Hoover was on top of the world. From his plush office in the financial district in London, he kept a watchful eye on mining investments all over the world. His net worth was climbing past \$4 million — not bad for a lad who'd set out into the world two decades before with \$40 in his pocket.

And some critical investments in Russia were about to pay off big. When they did, he'd use the cash to buy the Sacramento Union newspaper, move back to his beloved Northern California home, and settle into a quiet, pleasant life as a newspaper magnate.

Then, as he recalls in his memoirs, "the diplomatic lightning started to flash from capitol to capitol" in old Europe, and within half a week the First World War was under way — and all Hoover's plans lay in ruins about his feet.

The Russian investment suddenly looked like a dead duck. His other mines, most of them in the British colonial empire, were shutting down one by one as all available workers rushed off to war.

Cash flow almost stopped, and Hoover's net worth plummeted. But that wasn't the real problem. Hoover was still young, just 40 years old. He could wait five or ten years to make his move. He'd already waited 20; what was a few more? No, the real problem was not financial; it was moral.

Hoover had long since given up on the gold mining business. Staying ahead of the swindlers with their salted mines and tiresome con games was just too much work. The vast majority of his holdings now were in mining operations for boring gray stuff — zinc, lead, coal, iron and tin — exactly the materials that were now in huge demand by the world's hungry war machines.

And Hoover was still a Quaker. Not the most devout one you would ever meet, but a Quaker nonetheless, a founding member of the Friends Monthly Meeting in Salem, Oregon — which remained his home church until his death. No Quaker could countenance building a fortune out of mining lead for bullets, iron for shell casings, coal for battleships.

Luckily for Hoover's conscience — and luckily for hundreds of millions of hungry Belgians, northern French, Poles, Eastern Europeans and Russians over the following 40 years — he wouldn't have to.

"I did not realize it at the moment, but on August 3, 1914, my career was over forever," Hoover wrote in his memoirs. "I was on the slippery road of public life."

It started with a project to organize a clearinghouse for getting

stranded American tourists, caught abroad in the outbreak of hostilities, safely on their way home. He proved so successful in this that a delegation of concerned citizens from Belgium came to him a month or so later to propose that he take command of an international organization to import food into German-occupied Belgium.

The problem for Belgium was, the British had set up a blockade around Germany so that no food or supplies could get in. Belgium, a conquered British ally, was technically the Germans' responsibility to feed; but the Germans were taking the position that unless the British let them import food for Belgium, any ensuing starvation was on them. The Brits' response to that was, in effect, "Sure, if we let food in for the Belgians you'll just requisition it. You should have thought of this before you invaded."

And so the stalemate dragged on while Belgium slowly starved.

The plan Hoover worked out with the delegation involved the U.S. Embassy owning the food right up until the point where it was served to a Belgian. It would therefore not be subject to requisition or embargo.

It required some careful thought.

"I was not bothered over administrative matters such as the purchase and overseas shipment of large quantities of materials," he wrote in his memoirs. "Any engineer could do that. But there were other phases for which there was no former human experience to turn to for guidance. It would require that we find the major food supply for a whole nation; raise the money to pay for it; get it past navies at sea and occupying armies on land; set up an agency for distribution of supplies for everybody justly; and see that the (Germans) took none of it. It was not 'relief' in any known sense."

After three days of thinking and planning, Hoover made the decision — and, divesting himself of his mining interests, poured himself into the challenge of engineering and executing a plan to feed an entire nation, while stymieing the best efforts of militarists in Britain and Germany, who hoped to turn starvation in Belgium into a military advantage.

When the U.S. entered the war, President Woodrow Wilson named Hoover food administrator for the U.S. And after the war, Hoover became the head of the American Relief Administration and oversaw a program that kept another several hundred million from starving in Eastern Europe — and postrevolutionary Russia, a country run by the Bolsheviks, whom Hoover detested.

All of this turned Hoover into an American hero. Throughout the 1920s, he was possibly the most admired American citizen, both at home and around the world. That popularity, of course, carried him straight to the top, and in 1929 he was sworn in as President of the United States ... and then the Great Depression broke out.

Just four years after he took office, of course, he was probably the most hated American citizen. The fact that Herbert Hoover, the man who essentially invented modern industrialized hunger relief, became associated with hunger and want in Depression-ravaged Americans' minds is proof that history has a dark and ironic sense of humor.

The shadow cast by Hoover's failed presidency still haunts his legacy to this day. He is the president most often called upon for disparaging comparisons with sitting leaders — both George W. Bush and Barack Obama were compared with him by their opponents.

Perhaps that's why, other than the Hoover-Minthorn House in Newberg, his time in Oregon is barely noticeable. His home in Salem is a private residence, and has been remodeled so that it no longer resembles what it looked like in 1890; its current occupants may not even realize they are living in a former President's boyhood home. His office at the Oregon Land Company is now part of the building that houses the Union Gospel Mission. The Salem meetinghouse of the Society of Friends (Quakers), where he remained a member until his death, has passed into the hands of a new congregation from a different denomination. All that remains is some graffiti which he reportedly carved on a brick wall at the building that's now Boone's Treasury.

In Shedd, though, if you visit the historic Boston Flouring Mills — now a state park — and take the guided tour, they'll show you a color photocopy of a very old document. It's a bill of sale dated 1891, facilitated by the Oregon Land Company; and one of the witnesses signed his name "Bert Hoover."

That was in 1891. Twenty years later the mill was running 24 hours a day grinding flour for Hoover's American Relief Administration, which was using it to save several hundred million Volga Russians from starving to death ... and chances are, no one working at the mill had any idea.

An aging Hoover was called out of retirement after the Second World War ended, when President Harry Truman asked for his help in coordinating food relief to war-torn Europe. Hoover didn't have to be asked twice. For several years after the war's end, Hoover's organization was the primary source of calories for hundreds of millions of Eastern Europeans.

How many of them would have starved to death without Hoover's help? We'll never know. But Hoover himself, looking back on his life while writing his memoirs, estimated his total tally of lives saved at 1.4 billion. That's roughly five times more deaths prevented than Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Mao Zedong caused, combined.

Whatever his reputation from the presidential years, Herbert Hoover was a man whom Oregon should be very proud to claim as a native stepson.



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Likes pet column

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With Love To All ~ Dick

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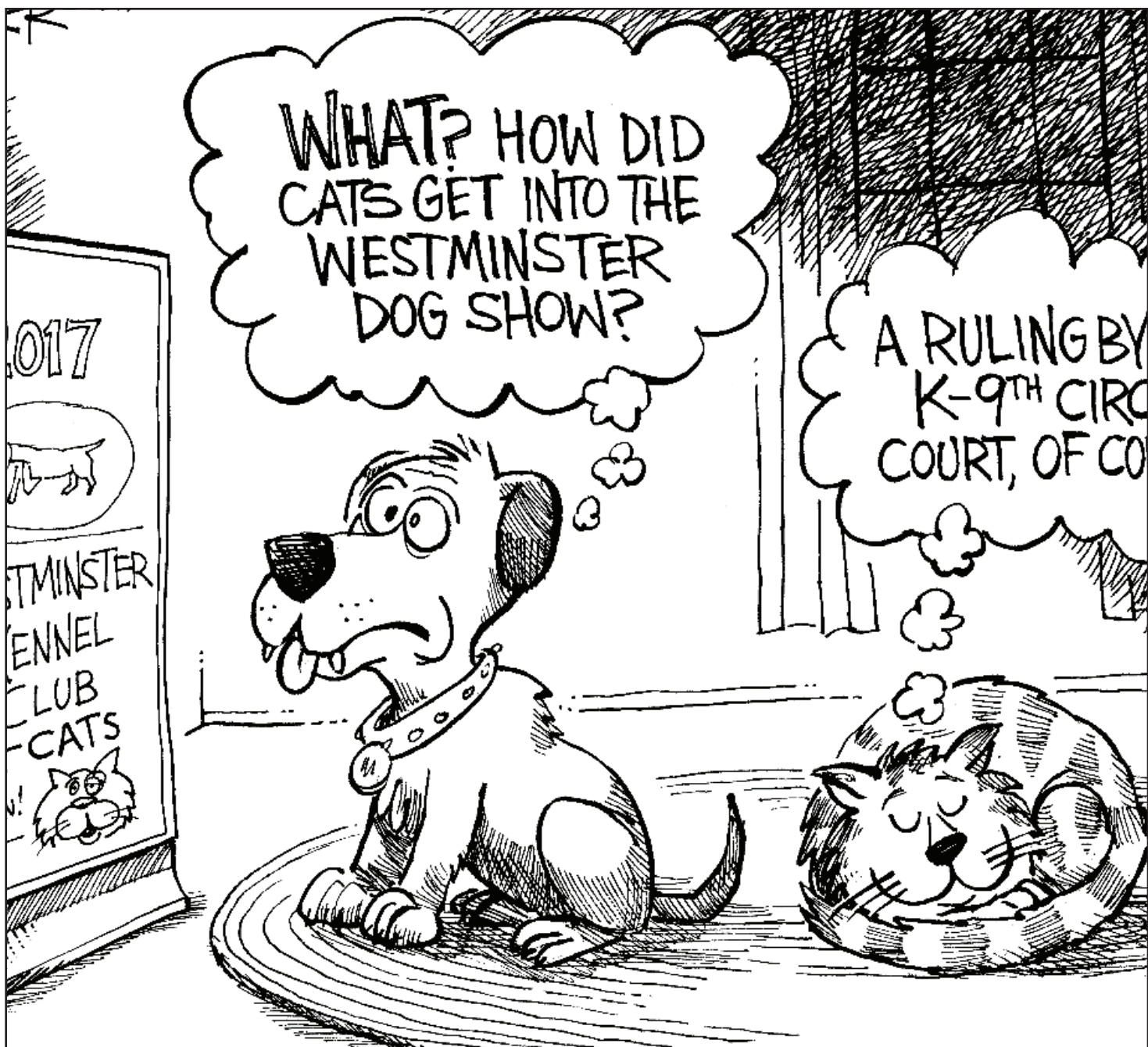
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