

“Iowa Peace Heroes - Helping Victims of War” Excerpt from *The Goldfinch*, September 1991

Helping Victims of War

When World War I began in August 1914, Herbert Hoover, the only Iowa-born President of the United States, was living in London with his wife, Lou Henry, and two sons, Allan and Herbert, Jr. At age 40, Hoover had worked as a mining engineer in 12 countries, and had become a self-made millionaire. More important, Hoover was known as a man who could solve problems to get things done.

The American ambassador to England asked for Hoover’s help when war broke out. Hoover worked to feed and clothe the 120,000 Americans stranded in Europe and even helped them to get back home. After that, Hoover agreed to establish and direct the Commission for the Relief of Belgium (CRB), to help Belgians caught up in the battle. Over the next four years, Hoover and his associates provided \$1 billion in “relief”----five million tons of food and 55 million pounds of clothing, fabric, buttons, thread and sewing needles----to about 10 million children and pregnant women in Belgium and Northern France.

The CRB raised and spent \$25 million dollars a month, using 40 ships and 500 canal boats to get large quantities of food to starving people. Hoover himself crossed the North Sea 40 times during the war to persuade both British and German officials to allow the relief for Belgium to continue. By the end of the war, 33 BRB ships had been lost to mines and submarine torpedoes, despite being promised free passage.

When the United States entered the war, President Woodrow Wilson asked Hoover to organize an American campaign to save food to feed both soldiers and starving people. Americans began to proclaim that “Food Will Win the War,” and agreed to eat foods as unusual as whale steaks and parsnip cutlets. Children gave up candy, and began chewing sugarless gum. Monday became “Meatless Mondays,” so people didn’t eat meat. Wednesdays became “Wheatless Wednesdays,” so people didn’t eat bread. Making do without one food group or another one day a week was not a great sacrifice, but it did make a difference in the war effort.

The war ended in November of 1918, but not Hoover’s famine relief work. He continued to feed people in 21 different nations over the next five years. His “European Children’s Fund” fed six million children during those years. Hoover even persuaded President Warren Harding to spend \$20 million to feed the Soviet Union, where famine and disease threatened 15 million citizens. After the war, Hoover was praised for having helped to feed and clothe more than 200 million victims of war and revolution. It was work he would continue many years later.