Jennifer Gray Kyle (1859-1913)

Late in his life, President Herbert Hoover (1874-1964) said the best advice he had ever been given came from Salem Sunday school teacher Jennifer Gray.

Gray was born in 1859 in Iowa. At age six, she moved with her family to Salem, where her father George W. Gray became a merchant and capitalist. He owned the Gray and Sons Oil Works and a hardware store and was the town's mayor. He and his sons built several buildings in downtown Salem. Jennifer Gray attended Willamette University, dabbled in photography, and participated in social and musical activities. At the time she met Hoover, she was a Sunday school teacher and organist at the First Presbyterian Church.

Hoover met Gray when he was fifteen and working at his uncle John Minthorn's development office in downtown Salem. "Miss Gray's extracurricular occupation was advising…the young working boys in Salem," he later remembered. Gray reportedly asked Hoover if he was interested in books. When he said he had been reading the *Bible*, the encyclopedia, a few novels demonizing alcohol, and the morning newspaper, Gray suggested he expand his options.

She took Hoover to a lending library and borrowed a copy of *Ivanhoe* for him. A few days later, after he had finished the book and returned it, she borrowed *David Copperfield*. More books followed, and Hoover came to understand that "while textbooks are necessary to learning, it was those other books which stimulated imagination and a better understanding of life. They made the whole world a home. They broadened my scope and made me feel a part of the mighty stream of humanity."

Gray invited Hoover to attend a Sunday school class she taught, where he met Burt Brown Barker, who would become a historian of early Oregon. During class, no matter the announced topic, Gray told the boys they would never be happy if all they did was work for money. She often added that to succeed in life, the boys would have to do it themselves.

In 1894, at her parents' insistence, Gray married James M. Kyle, the nephew of a well-to-do Salem businessman. The couple had two children, George and Hugh. The marriage was not a happy one, however—Kyle stole income from Gray's residential and farming properties and assaulted her—and she obtained a divorce in 1904.

Gray continued to raise her sons and manage her properties. In November 1913, just after she stepped off a streetcar near her Salem home, a meat company truck struck her. She died later that evening. President Hoover did not hear about Gray's marriage and the cause of Gray's death until after he had written a 1959 *Reader's Digest* article thanking her for the advice she had given him when he was a boy.

Written by Kyle Jansson

Further Reading:

Jansson, Kyle. "Herbert Hoover: His Salem Years." *Historic Marion* 38.1 (spring 2000), 1-3.

Wert, Hal Elliott. *Hoover the Fishing President: Portrait of the Private Man and His Life Outdoors.* Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 2005.

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