

The Orphan Train, A Man Named "Hoop," & Martin County

The "Orphan Train" movement from the late 1800s to the early 1900s was a result of concerned social-minded people in New York City that were appalled at the thousands of neglected and orphaned children roaming the streets. This movement became the forerunner of modern day foster care programs by organizing trains to transport many of these children to Midwest farm states in hopes of finding them permanent homes. Over the course of several decades thousands of children were relocated to the Midwest.

Martin County also became the home to a number of those children that rode the Orphan Train west from New York. One of those individuals was Fred "Hoop" Hoover, referred to as "*The Sentinel's* man of mystery whom everybody knew, but whom nobody knew." Mr. Hoover arrived in Martin County in the second group of orphans sent out by the Children's Aid Society. There were two delegations of orphans sent to Martin County totaling forty-seven children. Boys were in biggest demand as of a result of help being needed on the farms. The children in these two groups ranged in age from four to eighteen.

"Hoop" was one of twenty-six orphans from Brooklyn, New York, to arrive in Martin County. He never knew his real parents and never spoke of his early life in Brooklyn. Mr. Hoover's foster parents, Mr. & Mrs. Marion Hoover, finally adopted him when he was thirty-nine years old after having raised him from a young child.

Hoover was characterized as being dependable and a man of few words with a somewhat gruff exterior. However, he was quick to correct anyone providing erroneous facts regarding local history. He was also remembered as being the father of the rural fire truck. This was a result of the fact that when there were fires in the country, townspeople didn't want the fire truck leaving in the event of a fire happening in town. Consequently, as a member of the Fairmont Fire Department with a keen interest in fire prevention, he proposed the idea that farmers buy a fire truck and that the local fire department in turn operate it. That idea was well accepted and the concept quickly spread to other communities.

He was involved with a number of avocations during his lifetime. "Hoop" loved military life and served on the Mexican border in 1917. He served several terms with the local National Guard, was a patrolman on the Fairmont Police Force, and was also very active in the VFW.

"Hoop" was employed by the Sentinel as a janitor following World War I. While there, he also worked as an assistant pressman, helped with mailings, and did some carpentry work as well.

Regarding his personal life, "Hoop" never married and kept mainly to himself. His "home" was in the firemen's quarters in city hall.

Many of those children of the “Orphan Train” era overcame tremendous hardships to become quite successful people in society. Although he might be considered somewhat of a recluse today, history dictates that Fred Hoover was one of the “Orphan Train” success stories. All indications are that “Hoop” contributed to Martin County in a positive manner during his lifetime and was remembered as a well liked and well respected local citizen.

“Hoop” passed away in 1948 at the age of sixty-nine having a full military funeral and being buried, as he wished, in his U. S. Army uniform. What estate he had when he passed away was left to charities.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.



FRED L. HOOVER