



NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Jerry Fleagle, IOM, CAE
Executive Director
Office: 319-643-5327
JFleagle@HooverPF.org

Belgian Ambassador Visits Hoover Presidential Library-Museum

WEST BRANCH, IOWA – May 5, 2017 – Belgian Ambassador, Dirk Wouters, visited the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum and toured the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site today in West Branch as part of an extended trip to Iowa and eastern Illinois. The excursion began in the Quad Cities, as Patrick Van Nevel, honorary consul of the Kingdom of Belgium invited the Ambassador to the region to get acquainted with area businesses interested in doing business in Belgium. Van Nevel is a frequent speaker at the National Historic Site and arranged the afternoon tour of the Hoover Campus.

“Every time I have a Belgian dignitary come to our region, I have always insisted on including a visit to West Branch in the itinerary,” said Van Nevel. Travelling with the ambassador are Piet Morisse, Flanders Trade Commissioner and Gilles Philippart De Foy, Wallonia Trade Commissioner, both based in Chicago.

The Ambassador was greeted at the Presidential Library by library director, Thomas Schwartz, Hoover National Historic Site superintendent, Peter Swisher, Robert Downer, Hoover Presidential Foundation board of trustees president and Foundation executive director, Jerry Fleagle. “We’re excited to share the Hoover Campus with Ambassador Wouters,” Fleagle said.

Herbert Hoover played an important role in Belgium’s history. In the early 1900’s, Belgium imported about 80% of their nation’s food supply. That supply was cut off in 1912 when Germany invaded the country at the beginning of World War I. Herbert Hoover developed and led the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), which was responsible for feeding and saving millions in Belgium and France from starvation during the war. Hoover would set aside his lucrative mining career, taking on relief efforts in 53 countries over the next 50 years, earning him the moniker, the Great Humanitarian.

During his visit, Ambassador Wouters toured the Library-Museum’s permanent exhibit, spending extended time at the Belgian flour sack exhibit. During the war, the CRB shipped 5.7 million tons of food to Belgium. The flour was packaged in cotton bags by American mills. The movement of these bags in Belgium was monitored by the CRB since cotton could be used in the manufacture of German ammunition. To prevent the empty sacks from being used in weaponry, the empty flour sacks were distributed to professional schools, sewing workrooms, convents, and artists.

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The flour sacks were made into clothing, accessories, pillows, bags, and other functional items. Some chose to embroider over the mill logo and the brand name of flour, others created original designs on the sacks and then embroidered, painted, or stenciled on the fabric. Some were given as gifts of gratitude to members of the CRB. Herbert Hoover was given several hundred of these decorated flour sacks as gifts. The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum has one of the largest collections of World War I flour sacks in the world.

“Thank you so much for telling such a rich story in such a short time,” Ambassador Wouters said of his exhibit tour. “And for commemorating Hoover (and Belgium) in World War I. There are too many forgotten wars.”

Yesterday, the ambassador made a public presentation at the Galvin Center of Fine Arts at St. Ambrose University on the topic: *Transatlantic and EU-US Relations: Do we really want to question this historic partnership?* Prior to his stop in West Branch, he made a presentation at the Quad Cities Chamber Executive Club on the topic: *Belgium as a gateway to the European Union - Transatlantic Relations in an age of doubt.* After a two-hour visit at the Hoover Campus, the group continued on to a meeting in Coralville.

Dirk Wouters was appointed Ambassador of the Kingdom of Belgium to the United States of America in Washington D.C. in September 2016. He is responsible for the direction and work of the Embassy and its Consulates, including bilateral political and economic relations, and visa and consular services.

The group also visited Hoover’s birthplace cottage and gravesite on the National Historic Site grounds.

About the Foundation

The Hoover Presidential Foundation is a private nonprofit organization for the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum and Hoover National Historic Site in West Branch, Iowa. The Foundation fosters the collection, interpretation and preservation of historical resources relating to the life, ideas and values of Herbert Hoover, 31st President of the United States.

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Photos:

Library: (L to R) Library director, Thomas Schwartz, Ambassador Wouters and Patrick Van Nevel study a floor map indicating 53 countries where Hoover conducted food relief efforts during his lifetime.

BPCottage: Hoover National Historic Site ranger Cormac Broeg (center), tells the story behind Hoover’s birthplace cottage to Patrick Van Nevel (L), and Ambassador Wouters (R).

Gravesite: Ambassador Wouters pays his respects at the gravesite of Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover.
