

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
An Iowa woman managed the White House

Secrets of the White House Are Revealed

“Mrs. Jaffray evidently believes it is entirely proper to bring the public into the very bed rooms of the presidents.” The *Oakland Tribune* ran a review of a newly published book written by Elizabeth Jaffray in 1926. *Secrets of the White House* was based on her life as head housekeeper for four presidents.

Elizabeth Jaffray lived in Davenport, Iowa, with her husband in the early 1900s; but when Mr. Jaffray died, her situation changed. “I found that with the death of my husband I had to earn my own living,” she said.

Moving to New York City, Elizabeth took a job managing a household with several servants. Late in 1908 she got a call from an exclusive employment agency asking her to report to their offices for an interview. The manager refused to tell her anything over the phone, but she did reveal she had “something of importance” to discuss.

“I think I have the most unusual position in America for you,” the employment agency manager said to Elizabeth at the start of the mysterious interview. “Whether it comes through or not you must promise absolute secrecy about it,” she continued.

“It is to take over the full management of the White House for President-elect Taft and Mrs. Taft,” the employment manager explained.

The position paid \$1,000 per year, and Elizabeth agreed to try the position for three months. It was to be the beginning of a 17-year career at the White House for the Iowa woman. During that time she worked for President Taft, Wilson, Harding and Coolidge.

By the time Elizabeth retired and wrote her book she had plenty to tell about her experiences. "I have known four presidents and five first ladies as intimately as one knows members of one's own family," Elizabeth said. And she had definite opinions about each of the presidents. Taft was the "best-natured," Wilson was the "kindest," Harding the "best-dressed," and Coolidge saved the most money.

Elizabeth explained that during the Taft administration the president was paid a salary of \$75,000 per year, but he was responsible for providing the food for state dinners from his salary. It was Elizabeth's duty to shop for the best grocery bargains in Washington, DC. She bought butter by the tub, potatoes by the barrel, fruit and vegetables by the crate.

Coolidge once questioned Elizabeth's purchase of six hams for one dinner. She insisted that 60 guests would require six hams. "It seems an awful lot of ham to me," the president replied.

Elizabeth recalled President Harding was a big eater and liked his Scotch and soda. She was dismayed that he insisted on having toothpicks available for his use at dinners. "As far as I know it was the first time toothpicks had ever graced the White House table," Elizabeth said.

And Elizabeth revealed to the nation that when Wilson married his second wife after the death of his first, the twin beds used by the first Mrs. Wilson (and the Tafts) had been removed and replaced by the "great Lincoln bed," which had been used by the Theodore Roosevelts. President Wilson and the second Mrs. Wilson slept in a double bed.

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Sources

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