

WK. FREEMAN
4-27-74

Eagle man battled disaster in China

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A remarkable family grew up in Eagle Town in the closing years of the 19th century.

And in the first half of the 20th, the three children of Francis and Lydia Baker distinguished themselves in nursing, teaching and humanitarianism.

All grew up on a 158-acre farm about two miles southwest of Eagle Village.

Aurel Baker, later Mrs. Harold Pardee, was a Red Cross nurse in World War I. For a time she treated wounded Russian soldiers in a field hospital at Kiev. And in 1920 she became a Waukesha County public health nurse.

Sister Alice, a lifelong educator, taught the children of American businessmen and missionaries for two years at a school in Kuling, China. Continued aggression by the Japanese in 1937 prompted the American faculty to return home. Miss Baker died two weeks ago at a nursing home.

But it was their brother, John Earl Baker, who became the most well known figure among the trio, particularly for his work trying to stem the flow of "the bleeding heart of China."

At the peak of his career in the 1920s and 1930s, Baker directed the feeding of millions of victims of famine and invasion when he directed American Red Cross operations in China.

Genealogy records in the Waukesha County Historical Museum show that John Earl Baker was born Aug. 23, 1880, in Eagle Town.

Baker taught school in Sussex and at the Janesville School for the Blind. And afterward he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in economics at the University of Wisconsin, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

In 1908, he married Willie K. Smith, a Waukesha woman, in a ceremony at Thomasville, Ga. They had two daughters, Frances and Barbara, and a son, John Earl Jr., who was born in Peking.

While teaching a course in transportation at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Baker met another professor who had been to China. Although his friend said he wasn't returning to China, Baker himself became intrigued with the country.

He left for China in 1915 to take the job of consulting statistician for the Chinese railways.

In 1920, the Chinese government "loaned" Baker to the American Red Cross to deliver food inland to famine-stricken Honan Province. He put 160,000 persons to work on public works projects — to earn food instead of taking it on the dole.

According to Red Cross records, under Baker's direction, the farmers built 850 miles of roads to reach the famished population inland.

It was Baker's report later to the Red Cross that said the lack of adequate roads and transport largely was responsible for the famine.

In later famine relief efforts, Baker had to contend with roving Chinese

bandits and had to commandeer boats and trains to move food supplies.

Twelve million persons reportedly died in the 1928-29 famine, but without Baker that number would have been much larger. Many of Baker's "measures and methods have been almost universally adopted in relief following great disasters . . ." a Red Cross report said.

The Sino-Japanese war in the 1930s left an estimated 20 million persons facing famine and homelessness. Baker became known as the "Samaritan of Shanghai."

As director of International Red Cross activities, he attempted to find food, clothing and shelter for some 160 million persons who were affected by the war. Eventually he was named chief executive of the China International Famine Relief Commission.

Baker tried many times to leave China forever, but recurring disasters always brought him back.

At the age of 58, during World War II, he became inspector general of the Burma Road, a lifeline supply route to China.

According to the Red Cross, Baker was the personal choice of China's Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek for the Burma Road job.

Back in the U.S. in 1943, Baker was assigned to Army camps in the South, where he helped acquaint soldiers with the nature of the Chinese and Japanese peoples.

In 1945, President Truman named him to



John Earl Baker

head the Joint Rural Reconstruction Commission to develop rural irrigation and flood control in southwest China, a job he held until the Communists took over China in 1949.

Baker returned to the U.S. in 1953 and the University of Wisconsin honored him with a doctor of laws degree.

Despite his other activities, he found time to author two books, "Explaining China" and "Outlines of General Accounting."

After he retired, Baker moved to Mill Valley, Calif., where he suffered a stroke and died in July, 1957. He was 76. His body was brought back to Waukesha County, for the funeral at Eagle Methodist Church. And he is buried in

Little Prairie Cemetery, overlooking Highway 67, just south of the Walworth County line.

Baker's sisters, Aurel Pardee, 87, and Alice, 91, lived in Eagle until last November. Both then moved to the Sauk County Nursing Home in Reedsburg, Wis.

Alice Baker died there two weeks ago. Her body also was brought back to the Little Prairie Cemetery for burial.

As for John Earl Baker, the Chinese did not forget the man who worked so hard to help the starving millions.

In Shensi Province, southwest of the big bend in the Yellow River, workers who built the bridge at this point named it the J. E. Baker Bridge.