

# China's Friend in Need—John E. Baker

Humanitarian Americans Have Poured In Billions of Dollars, Much of It Through Wisconsin Man Who Tackled 'Biggest Job in World'

"A PROFOUND friendship has always existed between the Chinese people and the American people," it was stated a few years ago by a Chinese Communist emissary at a United Nations session. He was speaking with more tact than literal accuracy, because friendship has been severely strained by both nations. Old China treated Americans and other "foreign devils" with contempt and cruelty, and young China has invaded Korea and scourged American benefactors. Americans, on their part, have lynched many a Chinese settler on this side and have restricted immigration drastically.

Nevertheless, of all nations in the world, America has been the best friend China ever had. A century ago China was assisted by a Marshall plan of the United States. Humphrey Marshall was the hero in that case—he was a commissioner sent over by the United States to prevent China's being gobbled up by Russia and England, and his mission succeeded.

The recent death of Dr. John Earl Baker, a notable native of Waukesha county, is a pungent reminder of how good a friend we have been to China. Baker was one of the last Americans to have fought the good fight for the Chinese people. It is no exaggeration to say that millions of Chinese would not now be alive except for his efforts.

## American Ship to China in 1784

Americans and Chinese have been dealing with each other, most of the time to mutual advantage, ever since the infancy of this republic. In 1784, when the Revolutionary war had scarcely been won and before Gen. Washington was elected president, the SS. Empress of China became the first American ship to enter Canton harbor. Canton was the only Chinese port open to foreigners, and the Americans were determined to crack the trade monopoly of the English sponsored East India Co. They succeeded, too. After a 15 month voyage of 26,000 miles, the Empress returned to New York with a cargo of tea, silk and chinaware that netted its owners a 25% profit—\$30,000.

"American and Chinese merchants got along well from the very first," says historian Foster Rhea Dulles.



John E. Baker

sionaries arrived to bring religion, medicine, schools, food and clothing. Such assistance afforded an impressive contrast with the three wars that Britain and France waged against China in the 19th century.

The Europeans demanded, and obtained, more ports, more territory to trade in, lower customs and the right to peddle opium. The United States maintained firm neutrality in these conflicts, but it cannot be denied that we got a share of the booty from the prostrate empire.

America always insisted on Chinese independence, however. Anson Burlingame, who was accepted as our first minister to Peking by the punch drunk "Son of Heaven" in the 1860's, became a stout champion of the Chinese. He pleaded that the world respect Chinese integrity, but Russia and Japan kept nibbling away at the empire's territory. Secretary of State John Hay, at the turn of the century, repeated that plea and announced the "open door" policy—that is, equal trading rights and respect for Chinese territory. Japan solemnly agreed to all such principles before seizing Korea and Manchuria and starting a full scale war to subdue the rest of the huge country.

## Fed Millions of Victims

Throughout its last century of agony and struggle, China never had a more helpful and faithful friend than the late John Earl Baker. His was called "the biggest job in the world" when he was at the peak of his career in the 1920's and 1930's, feeding millions of victims of famine and invasion. He was born 76 years ago on a farm at Eagle, Wis., 40 miles southwest of Milwaukee. He worked his way through Whitewater normal school, taught country schools for three years and saved enough money to go to Madison for his bachelor and

master degrees in economics. He was a reporter for The Milwaukee Journal until he realized that statistics and economics were his basic interest. He did statistical work for governmental bureaus, a labor union and railroads. In 1916 he was sent to China by a syndicate of capitalists who had financed Chinese railroads and were wondering why the profits weren't coming in.

## Authority on Chinese Railroads

In the next few years Baker became the world's foremost authority on Chinese railroads. In 1920 he undertook his first large charity operation. Drought, crop failure, famine—the age old pattern—was retraced. Americans, generous as always, donated the necessary food. But how to get it to the inland sufferers who couldn't travel to rivers and rail lines?

"Give Baker the job," the Chinese and American rail executives agreed.

"I'll bring them food; but they'll have to work for it," Baker replied. He conscripted thousands of workers and laid out rail lines, roads and paths through the stricken provinces. A million lives were saved.

In 1926 he decided to quit China—the wars of the bandit chieftains had made railroading a complete misery—but he changed his mind in 1928, when famine, worse than ever, prevailed. He returned to China, took the food to the end of the rail lines and commandeered troops to protect it from the thieving gangs. Again he undertook the back breaking job of pushing forward new lines, roads and paths. Twelve million persons died in the famine of 1928-'29. The number would have been much greater without Baker.

Time and again he sought to quit China and to return to Wisconsin, but the perennial disasters of the people always brought him back. In 1936 the

University of Wisconsin gave him an honorary doctorate.

The early part of World War II found him as inspector general of the Burma road, speeding the vast flow of essential supplies. Then he took an army assignment to teach officers about China and how to get along with the people. At the end of the war he was back at his old job of Chinese relief. President Truman named him chief American member of the international rural reconstruction board for China. The group was formed from China to Formosa by the Communist invasion.

The great philanthropist spent his last years at Mill Valley, in central California. He lies today in Walworth county, a few miles from his birthplace.

Baker's service to China has been the most dramatic, but the entire amount of material aid granted by Americans is enormous, almost incalculable. For more than a century American churches, philanthropists and ordinary citizens have contributed food, clothing, missions, hospitals, schools and military assistance that must be worth billions of dollars. The Rockefeller family alone granted \$45,000,000 to its China medical board between 1914 and 1945. In the early 1940's, when Chinese fortunes were more than ordinarily dismal, the United States made a "loan"—with no strings attached—of a half billion dollars.

Our aid to China is in the grand old American tradition of aiding sufferers wherever they may be. Scores of nations throughout the world have been assisted in times of trouble. American private citizens contribute about a half billion each year to foreign people. This means that the average American family, after meeting its own rent and grocery and fuel and tax bills, manages to dig up \$15 to help foreign people who need it more.

WALTER MONFRIED.