



MEASURE OF GREATNESS

By Charles R. Phillips

The trumpets of fame are sometimes reluctant to speak long in honor of those instrumental in civilization building.

But John Earl Baker's mother knew that he was destined for greatness when he was born on his father's farm near Eagle that August 23, 1880 morning. For on his head were two crowns, which the grannies said meant the ruling of two kingdoms.

John Earl Baker, a bright and mischievous boy whose teachers placed him grades ahead for his age, entered Whitewater Normal School at 15. After stints of teaching at Sussex and the Janesville School of the Blind, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, majoring in Political Economy.

Two summers working for the state railroad commission whctted his interest in railroad work. Securing a position with the Interstate Rate Commission, he entered George Washington University for further training, obtaining a master's degree in railroading.

Willie Katherine Smith, Thomasville, Georgia, whom he met at Waukesha, became his bride December 30, 1908. Two daughters and a son enhanced the marriage's happiness.

Taking part in a railroad strike as a witness for the strikers, Baker caught the attention of several prominent people with his eloquence. One of these was the general manager of the Southern Pacific Railroad, who eventually gave him a job on his line.

Five and a half years later, the railroader was offered a professorship at the University of Michigan. It was 1917 when Baker went to Peking to help organize railroads.

France, Germany and England owned the hodgepodge of railroads crisscrossing China. Troubles immediately assailed the railroader, including a bout with typhus, Chinese insolvency, the needling attitude of the Japanese government which spread anti-American propaganda, and the constant quarreling of Chinese warlords made Baker's job extremely difficult. Besides these hardships, his salary wasn't paid for months.

Because of Japanese fear of railroads strengthening China, they stooped to all sorts of tricks to bother Baker. For instance, one of their tools was sent to his office to heckle him about railroad work. Previously-Baker's desk had been rifled, so his temper was near the boiling point. Seizing the would-be thug by the collar, Baker tossed him out.

During the great famine in 1919, caused by a drought in three provinces, the American ambassador, Charles R. Crane, requested Baker's services for the American Red Cross. The railroad man became director of relief.

His natural ability to organize caused Baker to institute such rules as making relief self-supporting, not a dole. Except in extreme conditions, work was required for food. With the \$500,000 placed at China's disposal, wells were dug and roads were built. Baker sometimes worked 20 hours a day.

His report on China famine relief reads like a novel. This is a quote from it:

"Within a period of ten months the American Red Cross has brought succor to over 900,000 people in four provinces. It has employed 160,000 workmen in nine different jobs and at the peak of its operation, 95,000 men. It has constructed 850 miles of highway through mountains and over plains, dug nearly 3,700 wells and planted 40,000 trees."

Space doesn't allow us to relate the many facets of the work that gained Baker the Chinese decorations *Bountiful Harvest*, second and third class, plus the award seldom given to foreigners, *The Order of the Brilliant Jade*. He also received an honorary degree from the University of Wisconsin.

Included in his China labors were two other railroad organizing positions, the Boxer indemnity board, another Red Cross Job, director of flood relief, and Director of the China International Famine Relief. During World War II, he oriented American soldiers in the nature of Japanese and Chinese people. Besides all this, he found time to write two books — *Explaining China* and *Outlines of General Accounting*.

Returning to China after the war, Baker served in the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Commission. In 1948 President Truman appointed him to the Joint Commission of Rural Reconstruction in China. It has been said that if the reduction in land rental he instituted had been practiced fifty years earlier, there would be fewer communists in China today.

A stroke claimed the great organizer's life July 22, 1957 soon after his retirement at age 72.

There is a bridge in Shensi province southwest of the big bend in the Yellow River near Sian. Built by workers during the great famine of 1929, it was named Baker Bridge. Those who remember him, both in China and the United States, like to think it a monument, a dedication to a life that gave its all to its task.