

JOHN EARL BAKER

Turned an Old World Into a New Frontier

*A Wisconsin school-teacher who turned
American wheat into Chinese roads*

By FRAZIER HUNT

IT WAS the summer of '32 and we were two days out of Hankow, bound down the broad, murderous Yangtze River.

It was still swift and dangerous. It had just finished killing 1,000,000 human beings. And it was rising again, and old men with fear in their hearts and awful memories of the floods of the year before, stood on the mud dikes and shook their heads.

Our freighter was not supposed to carry passengers, but we had missed the regular river steamer and it would have been four days before another boat shoved off from this Chinese Chicago—six hundred miles up the Yangtze from Shanghai. On shore the dead July heat was insufferable, but here on the broad bosom of the river there was breeze enough to bring some comfort and to drive away the mosquitoes.

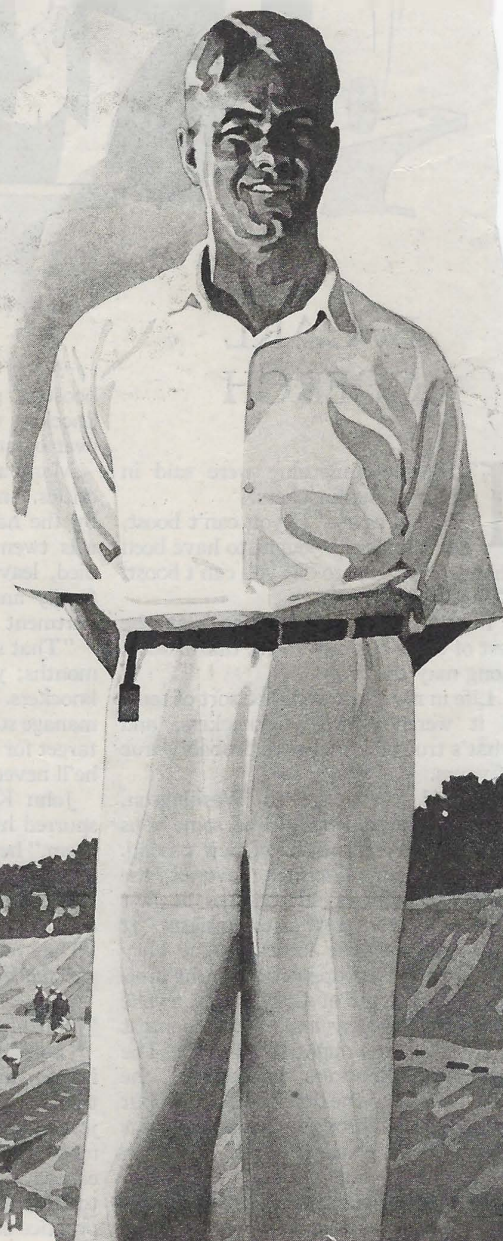
Z-zing! went a rifle bullet, fired by some playful bandit from the farther bank—and we hurriedly ducked behind the sheets of boiler plate bolted to the ship's railing.

It was all China—the eternal China, which neither flood nor famine, banditry nor civil war, corruption nor Japanese invasion, can keep from plodding on out of its mighty past.

And now twilight was settling down. Behind us to the west the sun sank in the swirling, brown current, and then a quarter way up into the eastern heavens a great full moon broke out. To our right the lights of a river town blinked and flickered faintly. Chinese river towns don't go in much for electric display.

Our boat swung toward the shore, the engines stopped, and we drifted with the current while a launch chugged up alongside. A white man swung up the ladder and dropped to the deck.

*Fighting flood and famine, Baker put
2,000,000 starving men to work building
dikes, and paid them in American wheat*





ILLUSTRATED BY
RONALD NORMAN McLEOD

Driven from their homes by the terrifying waters, parents were selling their children. "Buy 'em back with food!" Baker ordered

Here was the man who literally had saved millions of poor human beings from dying of hunger. And this was his river—this Yangtze and its tributaries. Along its treacherous banks he had put 2,000,000 starving men to work building dikes. He'd given them American wheat for their work—and this wheat had saved five times that 2,000,000 men.

Surplus wheat from the broad, rolling prairies of America! Wheat for starving Chinese millions! Wheat for work—and work that would repay China a hundredfold.

Wheat for roads! Roads down which thousands, and tens of thousands, of American cars could some day roll—American cars and trucks carrying American toothbrushes and machines, bathtubs and spring mattresses, electric refrigerators and canned goods. Wheat for roads, which in this very generation would open up a new market potentially three times greater than the entire market of North America.

And it was all in the dream of this man Baker—this new type of American pioneer. Here was your true American adventurer pushing the frontier westward across the blue waters of the Pacific to China, to inner Asia, and to the furthestmost ends of the world.

WHEN most of us think of pioneers we envisage lean men with shaggy beards, trudging alongside covered wagons, westward bound. They were of our grandfathers' day. But this new type of pioneer is just as romantic as those old settlers prodding their oxen toward the setting sun. In place of Indians they have Chinese bandits to fight, and instead of chills and fever they face cholera. But they are of the same restless breed, and eternally they push on, eager to find what lies just beyond the next range of hills.

Baker, the famine fighter—Baker, the road builder—is one of these. He's a man for a Walt Whitman to describe. He still has soil on the heels of his shoes, and yet he wears a Phi Beta Kappa key on his watch chain, and on his breast the highest decorations the Chinese government can give. He's a Wisconsin country boy who has made (Continued on page 104)

He was a big man, in a wrinkled white linen suit, and when he took off his sun helmet his iron-gray hair was ruffled and uncombed. There was an air of sureness and efficiency about him. Here, I was certain, was an "old China hand."

I met him on the narrow deck just after he'd flung his gear into a stuffy little cabin. Together we stepped to the rail and watched this swift, flowing river of destruction. In the soft moonlight its muddy, surging waters looked even more angry and dangerous.

"No one can really appreciate what these rivers of China can do until he's seen them in action," my companion said in a low tone. "But you'll never forget them after that."

"I've read a lot about the floods they've had here, but this is the closest I've come to one," I answered.

"THIS is nothing," he went on. "A real one is too awful to even think about."

I looked at my new friend. "I don't believe I got your name," I said, after a pause.

"Baker," he answered, very simply.

"Baker?" I repeated. "You're not John Earl Baker, by any chance—Baker, the famine fighter?"

He nodded his head and laughed. "Afraid I am," he replied.

I shook hands with him again. He was the one foreigner in all China I had been wanting most to meet.

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John Earl Baker Turned an Old World into a New Frontier

(Continued from page 59)

history—and yet remained a country boy. He's been described to me as “the greatest executive in the world”—and yet he's never forgotten how to work with his hands. When Chinese truckers were afraid to take a load of wheat through bandit country to starving children, he jumped into the driver's seat himself and got the wheat through. He's my idea of a real American.

But I'm getting ahead of my story; I'd better get him born before I make an international hero out of him.

Well, that historic event occurred fifty-two years ago on a farm near Eagle, Wis. He taught country school, worked his way through the University of Wisconsin, taught school again, and then took his Master's degree. Man and boy, he spent six years teaching school—but never stayed two years in the same place.

Once he'd satisfied his urge for teaching, he worked for three years with the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Census Bureau. He could see through figures—see to the human problems beyond them. He was a sort of human statistician.

The Southern Pacific Railroad needed just such a man, so in 1910 Baker migrated to the Pacific Coast with his wife and two daughters—a son was to be born later.

For six years he kept this railroad post, and then he heard the call of the Far Places. He followed the gods of adventure.

American financial and railroad equipment interests wanted a man they could trust appointed as Adviser to the Chinese Ministry of Communications. This was in 1916—nearly five years after the Chinese Republic had been established on the ruins of the old Manchu monarchy—when all China's railroads were to be reorganized.

He was thirty-six and a greenhorn about China when he arrived in Peiping. He didn't know a word of any of the dialects or anything about the customs, laws, or backgrounds of the country. But he did know a lot about railroads—and human beings. Here were sixteen separate lines of roads and 400,000,000 human beings. His job was to weld those widely separated organizations into a single cooperating system that would help pull the 400,000,000 Chinese out of the mire. That was a pretty fair order.

He had been in China four years when rumors of a devastating and widespread drought began to filter into the cities. This was in 1920. In place of waving fields of golden grain there was only brown, dead stubble burned by a scorching China sun. Already the poorest were beginning to starve.

With fall came reports of families living on the bark of trees, grass, roots, and even thistles. Then it was that trusted men went forth and saw with their own eyes. In isolated districts removed from railroads, children were dying like flies.

Committees were formed, money raised. An American group, knowing Baker and his genius for solving transportation prob-

lems, drafted him to take full charge of the almost impossible task of getting supplies into these isolated, starving districts. By boat, by cart, by wheelbarrow, even on coolies' backs, the precious grain began to flow into the stricken areas.

Then the American Red Cross rushed over their first \$500,000. They'd heard of Baker's work.

"Make him director of all our China relief," the big bosses back home ordered.

Baker took the job. There was some real money to be spent now. Maybe he could do three things with the money: feed starving mouths; build some permanent improvements that would help China; and preserve the self-respect of the hungry workmen.

"Food for work!" he announced. "Only in direst cases will there be outright charity. Build roads! Dig wells! Help China help herself!"

ONE of the worst famine districts in the great Shantung Province, with its population of 39,000,000—as many people as in all America west of the Mississippi—was chosen by Baker.

I had traveled over some of the stricken districts myself. And now as Baker, leaning over the rail of the old freighter, recited with unnecessary modesty this touching story, my mind flashed back a dozen years to a village in this same Shantung Province. There I saw human beings too weak from hunger to do more than crawl out of their huts into the sunshine.

Babies, whose bony bodies made their heads seem oversized, were held up for me to see.

"Take him!" they begged in low voices.

I knew first-hand, therefore, of the hundred and one almost insurmountable problems that Baker faced—transportation, graft ("squeeze," it's called in China), getting food to those most needy, securing rights of way for the highways, and then building them with food for pay.

And within ten months Baker had saved a million from death, had employed 160,000 workmen, constructed 3,700 permanent wells, planted 40,000 trees, and built 850 miles of highway—roads for American cars to bring in American civilization, sanitation, and comfort.

That was only a starter for this master famine fighter—just a little training.

With the worst of the famine over, Baker went back to his job of advising the Chinese Government on its railroad business. In the Washington Conference of 1922 he accompanied the Chinese delegation as one of its experts. He was known all over China now. He was trusted. He could get things done.

Six years later he felt that it was high time he came home and gave his children a chance to be educated in American schools. So Baker returned home. But those little gods of adventure were against his becoming a carpet-slipped home-body. Word had drifted out of China that the Four Horsemen were again galloping across the land—with Hunger in the lead.

In the New York office of Major O. D. Lively, director of the China Famine Relief, the first question asked was, "Where's Baker?"

He was located in California. That night a telegram flew across the continent: "Please meet me Palmer House Chicago next Thursday morning ten o'clock. Have

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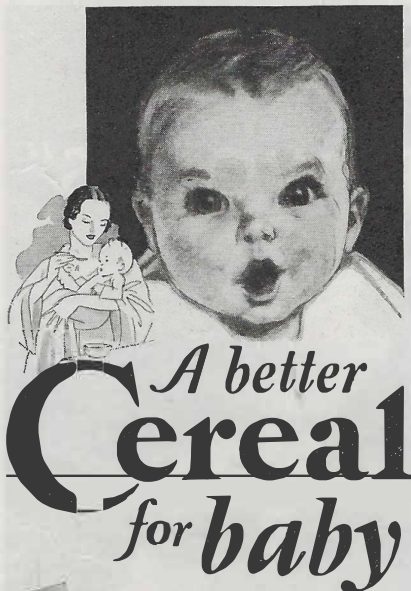
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He can tell you which of Gerber's eight strained vegetable products are most desirable for baby—and when baby is ready for vegetable feedings. He can also advise you regarding the frequency and quantities of feedings with Gerber's Strained Cereal. Ask for the Gerber Products by name. 15¢ at grocers and druggists.

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If your dealer cannot yet supply Gerber's Strained Cereal, send his name with 10¢ for mailing costs; and we will send you, as an introductory offer, one full-sized can of cereal for trial.

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most important matters concerning China to discuss with you.”

Baker was there—although he didn't want to be. He suspected what Major Lively wanted of him. And he didn't want to go back to China and work night and day, battling odds and fever and river pirates—and he also didn't want to hear again the heartbreaking sobs of children dying from hunger. But he went—this time as Secretary of the American Advisory Committee in China.

It takes more than mere words to describe this famine of '28 and '29 and '30. More than 12,000,000 human beings actually starved to death—more human beings than died as a result of the entire World War. In all history there had never been anything so appalling. Whole villages were exterminated. Cholera, typhus, cannibalism—disease and degradation, were turned loose over an area half as large as Europe.

BAKER poured his great heart and strong body into the work. Then the money gave out and Baker had to come home again. The Chinese Government appointed him Adviser to their Ministry of Railways, and again the indefatigable Major Lively interceded. He pleaded with the Chinese Government to assign Baker to the American Advisory Board in Peiping and “ordered” Baker to take the job.

From Honan Province, west of Peiping, scouts brought the terrifying reports that in these isolated districts no help of any kind had been given and that starvation was everywhere. The war lord there was Feng Yu-Hsiang, the so-called “Christian General.” Feng needed grain for his own troops. He held the railroad line that ran from Peiping. He wasn't interested in famines.

Baker bearded him in his den. “You must give me a freight train,” this intrepid American demanded, “and you must supply me with soldier guards and you must let me bring in unmolested as much wheat as I can.”

Feng grumbled, argued—and finally consented. Baker took five trainloads of wheat to the end of the railroad line. From there he transported the precious grain, in junks towed by man-power, 200 miles up the swift King River. And in the great, high wheelbarrows of the country he transported it another 200 miles over mountainous trails—and not a pound was lost.

He built roads, too—roads for handling wheat. From Sian in Shensi to Lanchow he turned the deep-rutted old Chinese trade route into a highway fit for American cars. It was all in the day's work. With the emergency over, he went back to his railroad job in Nanking.

Then in the spring of '31 the Yangtze went on its wild rampage—the Yangtze, the Han, the Hwai, and a score of tributaries, even the Grand Canal itself, and a hundred minor streams in seven big Chinese provinces. Normally a mile wide in the Hankow district, the Yangtze stretched out its watery arms for a hundred miles. Aviators flying over the center of this vast lake, 5,000 feet above its brown waters, could not see the banks on either side—only the tops of trees, bits of hilly ground, and the roofs of what had once been homes. Corpses by the hundreds went swirling downstream. On futile

stretches of mud dikes hungry, frightened, hopeless natives gathered.

Back from the terrifying water, stricken victims gathered by the tens of thousands. From bits of straw matting and bamboo poles they made their oval hovels—and stripped the trees for something to put into their empty stomachs.

Baker's main job was to direct transportation—to move the food up rivers, across mountains, through bandit country, past river pirates. Working one miracle after another, he succeeded in getting food into these isolated districts.

“They're selling their children back there,” a trusted inspector brought word to Baker.

“Buy 'em back with food!” Baker ordered.

It was true—parents were selling their children. Their baby girls were bringing the highest prices—25 cents in American money for each year of their age—a ten-year-old girl for \$2.50. Sing-song houses in Shanghai would get the prettiest; the next would go as domestic servants, and the homeliest as cotton factory workers.

There was haggling and bargaining: “Another sack of wheat for this pretty one,” a mother would shout. “Look, she is almost a woman now.”

They made the best bargains they could, the buyers for Baker. They bought hundreds of these starving children. They built camps for them. They fed them, scrubbed them, deloused them, inoculated them, clothed them. Then, when their parents could return to their villages, the boys and girls, now clean and fat and healthy, were given back to them.

Only a few days before, I had visited the last of these great camps.

It was being closed, and a half-dozen Chinese peasants had tramped miles across country to get their children. They could take care of them now. Their fields were planted, their adobe homes rebuilt, and the earth was again promising them life and food.

“You are all rich in your country, over there,” one sturdy farmer said to me, gesturing toward the east. “You are kind, too. You have fed my child here. Look how fat she is. It is well to be rich in grain and give it to hungry ones.”

He would not forget America—nor Baker, who had fed them.

BUT only in extreme cases did Baker and his colleagues give away food. Always it was “food for work!”

In the flooded country, work was needed on dikes rather than roads. So the orders went out, “Build dikes for food!”

In a few weeks surveys had been made, eighteen great flood districts mapped out, 150 engineers and 2,000 foremen employed, and soon 2,000,000 hungry men were rebuilding the broken dikes along the rich river valleys—and rebuilding their own broken lives.

Baker got the food up for them—while Major Lively and the others back in America furnished the food. It was arranged for the Chinese Government to purchase 15,000,000 bushels of Federal Farm Board surplus wheat on long-term notes. It took 66 ocean steamers to get this grain to the mouth of the Yangtze—then Baker's job began. By fair means and foul he got that wheat up to the 2,000,000 dike-builders and the 10,000,000 women

and children they were feeding. Part of it was carried on 31,560 Chinese junks—and that was a single item.

Great mat-covered camps were constructed, and here the laborers brought their families. Every night they drew their ration of grain—enough to feed themselves and their children.

And the dikes went up—dikes that would hold back the angry Yangtze on its wildest spring rampages and let rich China soil come alive again. . . .

THE moon was high above us when Baker had finished his story, that night of last July while we chugged down this mighty river of history. I had asked a hundred questions, and Baker had patiently answered them all.

This was my final one: "How many miles of dikes did that American wheat build?"

"About 1,400 miles of heavy dikes and 1,000 miles of smaller ones," he answered without hesitating. Then he sort of chuckled and added, "You know, we figured that we'd moved enough dirt to build a wall six feet high and six feet wide completely around the center of the earth."

"Great Scott! What a lot of dirt," I answered.

"Yes, and what a lot of food we handled," he went on slowly. "I estimated the other day that if all the wheat that America let us have had been turned into flour, and if we'd had enough butter and sugar and the other ingredients available and some way to fry it, we could have made a doughnut large enough for the moon to have passed through the hole in the center."

I scratched my head, looked up at that round old moon, and allowed that I never was very good at figures.

"And if the Farm Board will sell China another 15,000,000 bushels of wheat—and help out the American farmer that much—I'll build 10,000 miles of roads in China," he said solemnly. "We'd open up the bandit country and the Communist districts, and we'd give employment to hundreds of thousands of poor farmers and let prosperity into backward, closed China. And we'd open up undreamed of markets for American cars and cotton and steel and oil!"

Baker's right. Here on this great Asiatic continent must be developed the markets that will some day keep American factories humming and go a long way toward settling our ultimate unemployment problem. To our children and our children's children China will offer the greatest opportunity for their own advancement and for our trade development.

With incredible swiftness China emerges from her past. Living men have seen sweep before their eyes the whole fantastic panorama of the miracle of modern China: railroads built; customs and postal services established; great cities jump like mushrooms from obscure trading posts; millions awaken, rub their eyes, and demand the good things of the world—things that America has to sell.

It is a country for our pioneers. First must come the road-makers, the engineers, the builders, then the Yankee peddlers, the salesmen with their brief-cases, their machines and comforts. They, too, are pioneers—opening up new trails, new trade routes to civilization; carrying the torch to the last frontiers of the world.

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"I like your cheek!"



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when you shave in the morning
with small bubble lather!*

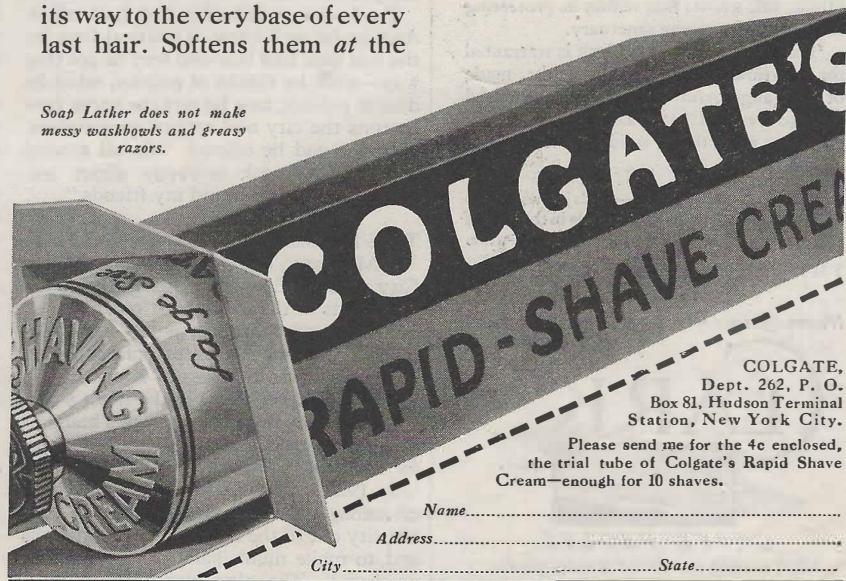
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