

# Personalities

ALICE BAKER

By Charles R. Phillips

To Alice Baker, retired teacher living at Eagle, history has a little different meaning than it does to the rest of us. She saw modern history in the throes of its birth in China while teaching high school courses in English and biology in a mission school in Kuling, China.

"Here's a story which explains a lot about old China," commented the spry, grey haired woman. "There was a Chinese lady who inherited a goodly sum with which she was to see that the lights of a certain city were to remain lighted. As has been the custom of people having anything to do with the government in China for centuries, she took half of the money for herself and turned the rest over to the mayor of the city. He took his half and gave the rest to the street commissioner. The street commissioner appropriated his half and turned the much shrunken remainder over to the lamp lighter who went out and lit the lamps. Graft? To the American mind, yes. To the Chinese, custom."

Miss Baker went to China in August of 1936. Her teaching career had been temporarily interrupted by her mother's sickness and the depression. While waiting for an opportunity to begin teaching again, she decided to obtain her master's degree. After receiving it, she learned of an opening in the mission school at Kuling. As her brother, John, was an employee of the Red Cross in the country, it wasn't too difficult to persuade herself to take the position.

"I taught the children of missionaries, diplomats, and the higher classes of the Chinese, the ex-teacher related. "Kuling is a city located in Kiangsi province in southeastern China. It is mountainous country and very beautiful. It was then a haven for idealists, writers and poets. It was also a hotbed of communist intrigue.

"Most of the Chinese I came in contact with were cultured, pleasant and intelligent, however. Because of the higher class of people in the area in which I was teaching, I saw very little suffering or famine. Once when we went 800 miles up the colorful Yangste river gorge on a summer excursion, I was amazed at the prosperous appearing homes and people along the river."

According to Miss Baker, the Japanese took China an inch at a time during the Sino-Japanese war. She said they gave the mission school very little trouble the first year she was there. She could look out her window, though, and see Japanese soldiers drilling.

It was in the fall of 1937 that the Japanese drove through China, conquering and placing under martial law many cities and villages, that missionaries and other foreigners began having serious difficulties. Often many were slain before they could flee from the advancing armies.

"It was near Christmas of 1937 that the head of the Mission decided, after hearing some of the horror stories, that it was foolish to stay any longer. Besides endangering the lives of the students and faculty, there was the fear of having the mission's food supply cut off.

"But, as Chiang Kai-Shek, the great Chinese leader, told officials at the time, the real danger to the country's future lay in the rapid growth of the communist party," she went on. "My brother, who was a communications engineer in China for some years before he began work for the Red Cross, agreed whole-heartedly with him. He told how university students would be just scraping by in rags and little to eat. Overnight they would become prosperous-well dressed and well fed. He discovered later that Russians were infiltrating the schools and poisoning the minds of the students.

"I remember the trouble we had on the International train as we were being evacuated to Hong Kong. We were certain one man with us was a Russian. We suspected it at the school because he would be as ragged and unwashed as the Chinese workers during the week. But when he was invited to dinner Sunday evening at the school, he would come dressed in a tuxedo. The manner in which he would help the Chinese police interrogate the people on the train caused us to suspect him all the more. That was a trip of fear, anyway, as the train would stop frequently during the night so the trainmen could inspect the track for communist placed hand grenades.

"Those two years were the most interesting of my life," she went on. "It was an education to see the Oriental mind at work with new political ideas and diplomatic relations with other countries during times of stress.

"All these were almost incomprehensible to my American mind: the cupidity of both Chinese and Japanese officials; the deadly intrigue of the communists; capsizing of boats overloaded with Japanese soldiers; the pinch of famine in the face of mother and child.

"Though I wouldn't have missed my experiences for the world, one of the happiest moments of my life was the docking of our ship at Victoria, B. C., in that spring of 1938."