

THREE REMARKABLE BAKERS

by Libbie Nolan



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

"And in the first half of the 20th century three children of Francis and Lydia Baker distinguished themselves in the fields of nursing, teaching, and humanitarianism. All grew up on a 158-acre farm two miles southwest of Eagle Village." That's how the Waukesha Freeman reporter Ivan Kaste two decades ago, began his story of the remarkable Bakers: John Earl, Alice and Aurel Baker Pardee.

All three, with their sister Lena, attended Whitewater Normal School long before it became part of the University system. All three plied their professions overseas.

John Earl Baker will always be known as the American who battled disaster in China. His sister Alice was the educator, Aurel, the nurse. It was probably Alice's death in 1974 that prompted Ivan to research the Bakers and write John Earl's story.

In my lifetime Alice and Aurel were my dear friends...who lived among their family heirlooms in the old Baker home at the end of a long driveway behind St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Eagle. Melon beetles from Alice's garden went into our son Tim's insect collection. Son Pat and I savored Aurel's groundcherry preserves.

A lifelong educator, brown-eyed Alice had a wry sense of humor. Perhaps her most memorable classes were those she taught in Kuling, China, in the 1930s. However, her teaching of American missionaries' and businessmen's children ended when the encroaching Japanese threatened the Americans' activities, and Alice sailed home with the rest of the faculty. American boys and girls were Alice's focus after that, although her interest in China continued through the activities of her brother. In later years, Alice turned to the typewriter, joined the Waukesha Writers Workshop, wrote a history of her old home church, the Eagle Methodist Episcopal, and she wrote a series about pioneer art for Landmark among her many researched and crisply written stories. In this issue appears an updated story she wrote for the Waukesha *Freeman* on the fate of the famous Eagle Diamond.

Aurel's early nursing career began with a BANG! literally, when she was sent overseas as a Red Cross nurse in World War I. As a field hospital nurse, she tended wounded Russian soldiers at Kiev, one of her wartime experiences. She told me of her ride on the rattely old Trans-Siberian railroad to its eastern terminal at Vladivostok. Back in the States after the war, Aurel tended folks on the home front as Waukesha County's health nurse. Aurel's nursing fingers also brought piano music to the Eagle Methodist Sunday School classes. Aurel married Harold Pardee.

"But it was their brother John Earl Baker, who became the most well known...particularly for his work to stem the flow of the bleeding heart of China," Ivan wrote. *"In the peak of his career in the 1920s and 30s, Baker directed the feeding of millions of victims of famine and invasion when he directed the American Red Cross operations in China,"* wrote Ivan who had researched the illustrious John Earl Baker's career.

Ivan found that Earl (as his family called him) had taught the boys and girls at Sussex and at the Janesville School for the Blind before earning his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at the University of Wisconsin, where he was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa Fraternity.

It was while teaching a transportation course at the University of Michigan that he met a professor newly returned from China. John Earl was intrigued by China.

In the same year (1915) that his sister Aurel was nursing in Europe, John Earl headed west to become the consulting statistician for the Chinese railways.

Five years later, the Chinese loaned him to the American Red Cross to deliver food to the famine stricken in the inland Hunan Province. At the same time, he put 100,000 people to work building an 850-mile road to reach the province, thus, helping people work for their food instead of getting it on the dole.

Baker had reported that it was the lack of roads that had caused the famine. In spite of his efforts, 12 million Chinese died in the 1928-29 famine. But Baker's methods for handling disasters have become the pattern for other countries.

In the 1930s, John Earl's sister Alice was teaching in Kuling, and the Sino-Japanese War was in the process of leaving some 30 million Chinese without food, clothing, or shelter. That's when John Earl Baker, the American, became known as the "Samaritan of Shanghai." That is when, as International Director of the American Red Cross in China, he tried to rescue some 160 million Chinese suffering from the ravages of war. He was named

Chief Executive of the Chinese International Famine Commission, and had to contend with recurring bouts of famine.

During World War II, he was named Inspector General of the Burma Road: the road needed to bring supplies into China. According to Red Cross records, it was Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, himself, who asked for Baker to build the Burma Road. During that war (1943), Baker returned to the States to acquaint American soldiers with the nature of the Chinese and Japanese peoples.

"In 1945, President Harry Truman named Baker to head the Joint Rural Reconstruction Commission to develop irrigation and flood control in southwest China until the Communists took over in 1949," Ivan Kaste reported.

Back in the states again in 1953, Baker was honored by the University of Wisconsin with a Doctor of Laws degree. In his long and amazing career, he managed to squeeze in time to write two books, *Explaining China*, and *Outlines in General Accounting*.

John Earl Baker married Waukeshan Willie K. Smith in a Thomasville, Georgia, ceremony; and they had three children, Frances, Barbara and John Earl, Jr., who was born in Peking. He retired to Mill Valley, California, and died in 1957 at the age of 76. His funeral was held in his old childhood Eagle Methodist Church and he was laid to rest in the Little Prairie Cemetery south of the Walworth County line where his sisters would eventually lie.

Alice and Aurel, who were justly proud of their brother, told me that Earl was also a friend of the noted attorney Clarence Darrow of Scopes Trial fame. In the 1960s, I took a Chinese engineering friend to visit Alice and Aurel, and it was amazing how many people Tony Yang recognized on old snapshots their brother had sent back to them from China so long ago.

And the Chinese have not forgotten the American who rescued so many millions of starving, homeless people. There is a bridge spanning the Yellow River near its bend in Shensi Province called the J. E. Baker Bridge.

PHOTO, OPPOSITE PAGE
A BAKER FAMILY PORTRAIT
Photo Courtesy of Roxanne Walsh/ Mabel Finney

