

No Hero's Welcome Greets Eagle Man Returning Home

(Ed. Note: This is the first of a series of three articles on John Earl Baker. The first two tell of his 40 years in China and the third of his views on China's fall and current position. He returned from Formosa in January.)

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Generally speaking, if you are instrumental in saving the life of but one fellow man, you become a hero. If you are an army general, instrumental in the deaths of thousands of the enemy, you likewise become a hero.

Nothing like the rousing tributes given such national figures as Gen. Douglas MacArthur or Gen. Dwight Eisenhower greeted John Earl Baker when he returned to his home town for a visit a few short weeks ago.

Yet the Eagle born and reared man was instrumental in saving the lives of not one person, but millions—enough to populate the entire city of Chicago.

Certainly there was rejoicing among neighbors and relatives in the vicinity of the Baker farm half way between Eagle and Little Prairie. 72 years ago come August 23.

The first born, Baker, was a son. It is doubtful that anyone would have believed that this boy would one day direct the building of a wall the size of the great wall of China.

Little Johnny's pals at the Ward school never dreamed that one day he would build the first 850 miles of road in China. Classmates at the Whitewater Normal school would have been equally surprised to learn that Baker would one day integrate the many railroads of China into one great system.

IN ALL LIKELIHOOD when he received his bachelor's degree at the University of Wisconsin, and again when he received his master's degree two years later in 1908 he was told by the graduation speaker that the world depended on men like him.

The speaker probably never realized that he was talking to a man who would someday be the savior of millions of starving Chinese.

To help pay his way through the university Baker worked summers. The summer of 1905 he was working for the state board of assessments in that Saratoga of the midwest, Waukesha.

He met "one of those uppity rebel girls" from Georgia. Miss Willie Smith of Thomasville, Ga., had come to the health resort with an ailing sister-in-law. For six weeks, Baker avoided Miss Smith.

"THEN WE BECAME engaged—a fine example of what perseverance will do," Baker recalls. For two and one half years they steadily "and frequently," corresponded. During the period Baker traveled to Thomasville once.

While there he learned that Thomasville, in the southwestern part of the state was a Yankee winter resort. "The people there recognized but two kinds of Yankees—the rich Yankees and the damn Yankees. I wasn't rich."

Shortly after he received his masters degree, on Dec. 30, 1908, the couple was married. The young bride never dreamed that her own three children would be born and educated in China and

that she would spend nearly 30 years of her married life there.

Her husband had taken an interstate commerce commission civil service exam and was working for that department. In fact, he was working with a distinguished professor, Henry C. Adams, of the University of Michigan.

IN 1910 ADAMS offered young Baker an assistant professorship at Michigan, but an offer from the Southern Pacific railroad looked better and Baker "went railroading."

Several years later Adams went to China as an advisor to the Chinese government on railroads. During the year he was gone, Baker agreed to initiate a course in railroading at the University of Michigan.

Upon his return, Adams was reluctant to continue with his work in China. The Chinese government then asked him to find a suitable substitute. As Baker tells it, "All of the suitable substitutes, older and wiser men, were too well set in their positions at that time to want to travel to China."

In 1916 Baker and "Miss Willie" packed their belongings and went to China ostensibly to write the first annual report of the railroads in China. The Chinese government persuaded Baker to stay on and help standardize accounts.

THERE WERE several reasons why the Chinese wanted the services of "a foreigner" according to Baker. One major reason was the Chinese reluctance for unpleasanties. When it came to an argument they would rather have seen a foreigner hurt someone's feelings than do it themselves.

Baker had plenty of arguments. When he arrived in China all of the railroads there had been built by different foreign capital. They were all operated according to procedure in the investors' homeland.

That was the second reason for wanting a man like Baker. Someone was needed to force integration and standardization of the foreign companies so that freight could be hauled non-stop throughout the system just as it is in the United States despite the many different railroad lines hauling freight and passengers.

THE FOREIGN countries resented this interference in their lines, and many Chinese resented the lack of an integrated system similar to the system they had witnessed in the United States. Baker was the buffer between the two.

In 1920 a bad drought which threatened four Chinese provinces gave Baker his first break. At the time he was working for the government railroad minister, "a young man anxious to make a name for himself."

"I advised him to lower the rates on food traveling by rail into the famine area and to raise it on food traveling out of the area." When the minister carried out the suggestion, Baker had another idea.

Although he doesn't lay claim to the distinction, Baker may have been the inspiration for the WPA in America during the depression. Back in 1920, years be-

fore the depression, it just seemed like a good common sense Yankee ingenuity.

BAKER SUGGESTED that relief money appropriated by the Chinese government be used to buy food and that the food be issued in double rations to persons helping to build roadbeds for branch lines of the railroad.

"The relief money will go further that way than if you just give it away," Baker told the Chinese railroad minister. Shortly after this system was initiated American reporters swarmed the minister to learn the details of the system.

Because of difficulties with the Chinese and English language barriers the minister referred the reporters to Baker for a full explanation. "The result was that my name was plastered all over articles which hit the United States," Baker recalls.

"It turned out to be a real break for me," he quickly adds. "The Red Cross saw the article just at a time when they were planning to devote a half million dollars for relief," he remembers.

THEY ASKED BAKER to handle the funds for them using the same plan, but to build roads. After much discussion the Chinese government released Baker so that he could spend half of his time directing railroad building for the government and half road building for the Red Cross.

The Red Cross soon doubled their money. The Standard Oil company contributed to relief and many others offered money for this work. Before long the fund totaled a million and a quarter dollars in United States currency at the 1920 value.

With this money Baker saw the first 850 miles of motor roads built in the four drought affected provinces. These roads later were used by the Japanese army and still later by the Communists.

They grew into 85,000 miles of roads. As Baker recalls, "One war lord made effective use of the original roads I built in defending his province."

OTHER WAR LORDS quickly realized their value and built roads up to the border of, but not across, their provinces. Later Gen. Chiang Kai-Shek consolidated the roads by building little connecting strips across the borders.

Throughout this period the Bakers were living in Peking, far from Eagle or Thomasville. In 1926, 10 years after they left the United States, the Chinese paymaster "got behind." The Bakers returned home for a vacation.