

The Impossible Dream:

How the Heifer Project Came to Be

by Peggy Reiff Miller

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A Mennonite seagoing cowboy once asked me, “What was there about the Heifer Project that kept it going? How did it become such a success story? Why didn’t it just die out?”

After several years of research on the beginnings of the Heifer Project (now Heifer International) and the seagoing cowboys, I offer this response.

The Idea

The Heifer Project began with a simple, but dynamic idea: to send “a cow, not a cup” of milk to people in need. As Northern Indiana churchman Dan West told it in September 1945, “The idea came out of a conversation in Murcia, Spain, in January 1938.” Sent to Spain by the Church of the Brethren during the Spanish Civil War, West assisted Quakers and Mennonites in providing relief supplies to victims on both sides of the conflict.

Small bottles of reconstituted powdered milk from Holland were given to the babies on the approved list. “A baby which did not gain in weight was taken off the list to die,” West said. “The milk supply was too small and too uncertain and the food value of the gift from overseas always ended there. Why not bring cows over also so that more children are fed and the people are able to help themselves? The grass grows there, too, when it rains.”

West noted that officials in the US Department of Agriculture thought it “a practicable idea,” with one expert urging, “Don’t send overseas any cows giving milk. The trip will be too hard on them. Better ship heifers a few months before they come fresh; you get two animals there that way.” Thus heifers instead of cows. The added requirement that a recipient of a heifer give her first female offspring to another family in need – thereby “passing on the gift” – became the true genius of the Heifer Project.

A simple idea, but not a simple undertaking. The obstacles to raising heifers, getting them to collection points in good health and in just the right state of pregnancy, and acquiring and financing shipping during wartime made it an overwhelming proposition – especially for a denomination as small as the Church of the Brethren.

That’s probably why it took a good four years from the conception of West’s idea in early 1938 until June 1942 for the first Heifer Project Committee to be formed by the Brethren Men’s Work of Northern Indiana. Six months later, the Brethren Service Committee adopted a denomination-wide Heifer Project plan. The idealists had finally won out over the realists, who had called it an “impossible dream.”

Leadership

The second element of Heifer Project's success was leadership. As Brethren historian Don Durnbaugh has suggested in his book *Pragmatic Prophet*, three Brethren mavericks formed a tripod of strength on which the Heifer Project was built:

- Dan West, of course, was the visionary, the idea man, the dreamer;
- M. R. Zigler, executive of the Brethren Service Committee, was the great salesman and promoter, the P.R. man, the CEO with connections;
- Benjamin Bushong, executive of the Heifer Project, was the able administrator, the nuts-and-bolts man, the man able to accomplish the unaccomplishable.

Three distinct personalities, all of them mavericks – “movers and shakers” who would rather ask forgiveness than permission – these were the kind of people it took to get such an obstacle-laden idea into fruition.

Grassroots Support

Tireless and persistent, West shared and discussed his idea wherever people would listen: with a group of farmers under a silver maple tree at the George Weybright farm, around tables in church basements, in the halls of the US Department of Agriculture. One drop at a time, the wave was created for a groundswell of activity.

People stepped forward to volunteer time, resources, and talents. The newly created Brethren Service Committee first gave ear to the idea in December 1941. Oral history has it that when the first Heifer Project Committee was named in Northern Indiana the next spring, Virgil Mock stepped forward and offered the first calf, named “Faith.” O.W. Stine offered his farm and feed and his teenage son, Claire, to care for her and served as vice chairman of the Committee, with Leland S. Brubaker as chairman.

By design, the movement was grassroots in nature, with local committees doing the work. From Indiana, interest spread to Ohio and then all across the country. Farmers began raising heifers while World War II was still raging and before any means of shipping was available.

The Brethren Service Committee sought a Civilian Public Service (CPS) worker to serve as administrator for the Heifer Project. The position was approved by the US Selective Service, and Marvin Senger stepped into the job in the summer of 1943. Based in Nappanee, Indiana, he oversaw the collection at the Nappanee Stockyards of the first heifers to be shipped and their transport to Mobile, Alabama. A young Ohio churchman, Wayne Hostetler, volunteered to tend the heifers on board ship. Sixty-five years ago, on July 14, 1944, the Heifer Project became a reality when this first group of heifers departed from Mobile for Puerto Rico.

After shipping to Europe became possible in 1945, Roger Roop volunteered a portion of his farm in Union Bridge, Maryland, for a collection point to prepare heifers for shipping from the nearby port of Baltimore. In the meantime, Marvin Senger had been reassigned by CPS. Bushong then stepped into the role of the first salaried executive of the Heifer Project, and the base moved to the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Maryland.

Many others, too numerous to name, gave generously to the project: through contributing endless hours in committee meetings, raising heifers, transporting heifers across the country, and raising the money to pay for it all. The life lines of countless volunteers wove their way through the fertile soil of a simple-but-dynamic idea to form solid ground upon which the Heifer Project would grow.

Ecumenical Support

A Heifer Project news release noted in May 1944, “As . . . information gets around we soon found other churches and organizations inquiring about this project. We welcomed their cooperation. . . . As one man said, ‘this is religion right down to earth where you can milk it.’ ”

Such a practical project appealed to a broad spectrum of church and civic organizations. In fact, the Brethren Service Committee intended for the program to be ecumenical from the very start. When the Heifer Project plan was approved by the Brethren Service Committee in January 1943, it stated, “It is understood that people of other churches in the community may be invited to join this movement.”

By July, the Heifer Project Committee voted to maintain contact with the Friends, Mennonites, Methodists, United Brethren, Lutherans, Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Catholics. In September, the Fellowship of Reconciliation was the first group to formally endorse the Project and was invited to send a representative to attend the Heifer Project Committee meetings. The committee approved a policy to “attempt fullest cooperation with every group in the project and avoid domination.” Other groups joined over time, giving the Heifer Project a strength far beyond what a small denomination like the Church of the Brethren could have had on its own.

The ‘Seagoing Cowboys’

With the end of the war on the European front in May 1945, shipping to Europe became possible. The Heifer Project had plenty of heifers ready, but no ships. Another organization created by 44 nations in November* 1943 – the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) – had ships, but no cattle tenders for their planned shipments of livestock. UNRRA knew the Brethren had successfully shipped heifers to Puerto Rico. With most available manpower either in the military service or the defense industry, UNRRA believed the mostly rural denomination of the Church of the Brethren could supply enough men with farm deferments to get the program going.

Zigler and Bushong brokered the agreement with UNRRA that the Brethren Service Committee would provide UNRRA with all of the cattle attendants for what became 360 trips, and that in return UNRRA would ship the Brethren heifers free of charge.

From June 24, 1945, into the early months of 1947, over 7,000 men and boys from all over the United States and Canada traveled the oceans tending horses, heifers, and mules, with occasional chicks, sheep, and rabbits. Dubbed “seagoing cowboys,” these men were some of the first civilians to get into Europe after the war.

Once in port and their work done, they took in the sights. In Poland and Germany, especially, they walked streets littered with the remains of bombed buildings, smelling the stench of still-smoldering bodies beneath the rubble. They stepped over unburied bodies on battlefields, witnessed people emerging from shelter in the rubble, and listened to accounts of atrocities told by the survivors. The cowboys came home telling stories of war devastation and people in desperate need to their churches, schools, friends, and newspapers. Their testimony fueled the support for many relief programs and helped Heifer Project survive a critical juncture in its early life.

UNRRA disbanded at the end of 1946, with some projects carrying into 1947. After two short years of partnership – with 4,000 Brethren heifers having been sent to France, Belgium, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Italy, Greece, China, and Ethiopia – the Heifer Project found itself once again without ships. They could easily at that point have blessed what they had done and

terminated the program. But the momentum created by the stories of the seagoing cowboys fueling strong grassroots support would not let the program die.

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The Heifer Project lived through more critical junctures in the years that followed. Many more people deserve recognition for the roles they played in its first decade, including John D. Metzler Sr. in Nappanee and New Windsor; and Eldon Burke, John Eberly, and Thurl Metzger in Europe. In 1951, Metzger became executive director and led the Heifer Project through its incorporation in 1953. His leadership over the next two decades helped shape Heifer Project Inc. into one of the most effective development organizations in the world.

In his September 1945 account, Dan West wrote, “The movement is basically a religious one in purpose. It is one expression of a deep desire to save the bodies, minds, and souls of the needy children and mothers anywhere in this groping world, a service to ‘the least of these’ – in the Master’s name.” This firm faith foundation carried the Heifer Project through its shaky beginning decade and into the decades that followed.

Independent of the Church of the Brethren since its incorporation in 1953, the Heifer Project has evolved into today’s award-winning Heifer International, a massive, model development organization that transforms individuals and communities all around the world one animal at a time. And it all started with a simple, dynamic idea that came to fruition with the shipment of that first load of heifers to Puerto Rico on July 14, 1944, through the untiring work of countless dedicated people.

Happy 65th Anniversary, Heifer International – and many more!

*the original article stated December 1943 as the beginning of UNRRA in error

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Sidebar #1: Definitions

heifer (HEF-urh) n. – a young cow that has not borne a calf (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*);

n. – a cow not yet (Dan West)

project (PRAH-jekt) n. – an organized undertaking (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*)

Heifer Project (HEF-urh PRAH-jekt) n. – an organized undertaking to send donated heifers to people in need, conceived by Dan West in January 1938, begun by the Northern Indiana Brethren Mens’ Work in April 1942, brought to fruition with first shipment to Puerto Rico in July 1944.

Sidebar #2: First Shipment: 1944

June 7 Eighteen heifers were collected at Nappanee (Ind.) Stockyards: 15 Guernseys, 2 Jerseys, 1 Milking Shorthorn.

June 12 Marvin Senger and heifers left Nappanee on train. Stopped twice for water.

June 16 Marvin and heifers arrived in Mobile, Ala.

- June 16** Heifer #1328 birthed bull calf. Heifer #1328 got sick and was left behind at Brethren farm of Mr. Petcher to recuperate. Senger reported calf went on to Puerto Rico, but records are not clear on this.
- June 26** Wayne Hostetler of Orrville, Ohio, arrived in Mobile at his own expense to accompany heifers to Puerto Rico.
- June 26** Intended ship *Liberty Glo* was switched for War Department purposes, causing delay.
- July 1** New ship *William D. Bloxham* arrived for loading. Fuel tank leak caused further delay.
- July 6** Hostetler joined ship's crew as a seaman with cattleman rating and salary of 1¢ per month.
- July 13** Seventeen heifers were loaded onto *William D. Bloxham* and housed in sheds behind officers' quarters.
- July 14** *William D. Bloxham* left Mobile at 2:30 a.m. Several days later, the ship joined a convoy of eight merchant ships and four escort ships at Guantanamo. En route, Heifer #1 (Faith) gave birth to a heifer calf, Heifer #1314 gave birth to a bull calf, Heifer #1326 died after premature birth of dead calf.
- July 22** *William D. Bloxham* arrived in San Juan, Puerto Rico, at 5:00 a.m. Sixteen heifers and two (possibly three) calves were unloaded by 5:30 p.m. and distributed to needy families in four counties by the Farm Security Administration.
- August 21** Hostetler reported: "The receivers are proud of the heifers. 'Faith' is close to ocean front, in a suburban 'colony.' She has plenty of pasture, shelter and a barrel for feed. Her heifer calf was kept in a one-room house with the family and carried out at feeding time."

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