

## Ride ‘em, seagoing cowboy!

### A 1940s Brethren/UNRRA partnership touched countless lives

by Peggy Reiff Miller

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**My grandfather was a seagoing cowboy, but I never heard his story.** When a move to Indiana put me in the middle of “cowboy” country where Heifers for Relief was born, I seized the opportunity to find out what his trip may have been like.

Heifers for Relief (today’s Heifer International) was created in response to Dan West’s idea in 1938 of “not a cup, but a cow” (see December 2004 *Messenger*). Sending cows, rather than powdered milk, to people devastated by war would enable them to feed themselves.

The Brethren Service Committee (BSC) began serious consideration of West’s idea in December 1941, with the appointment of an exploration committee. Working together with a committee from Brethren Men’s Work of Northern Indiana, BSC voted in June 1942, the “approval of the European Cattle project in principle . . . for a Brotherhood project.” By January 1943, a plan for “The Heifer Project” was in place.

Farmers and churches all over the country began donating heifers to their local committees. With World War II still raging, however, shipping cattle across the ocean was impossible. The first Heifers for Relief shipment, therefore, was made to Puerto Rico in July, 1944\*. When victory in Europe was imminent, BSC executive M.R. Zigler pondered the question of how to get the Brethren heifers to Europe.

Another plan birthed about the same time was Zigler’s answer. Representatives of 44 nations met in November 1943 at the White House in Washington, DC. They signed a document creating the first international relief agency in world history, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration— UNRRA for short (not to be confused with the United Nations). By March 1945, UNRRA was able to make its first cargo shipment of relief supplies.

Zigler contacted UNRRA officials. “They reported they were not shipping live gifts,” Zigler said. But when the Near East Foundation needed bulls to establish a breeding program in Greece, UNRRA contacted Zigler. He in turn contacted Ben Bushong, a farmer active in the Pennsylvania Guernsey Breeders Association, who, according to Zigler, “was always available for church work beyond the usual.” Bushong arranged with UNRRA the first shipment of “Heifers” for Relief to Europe—six bulls to Greece.

It was 60 years ago this month, on May 14, 1945, that the *M.S. Boolongena* sailed from St. John’s in Canada to Athens, Greece, with Bushong and six Brethren bulls on board. The seeds of a BSC/UNRRA partnership were planted. Soon thereafter, Zigler got a phone call from UNRRA. “Where are your cows?” they wanted to know. “We have seven boats.” They also needed people to take care of the cattle.

Zigler made some calls to set the wheels in motion for obtaining heifers and men willing to make the trip. At the June 3, 1945, meeting of the Heifer Project Committee, Zigler drafted Bushong to go to Washington to work out details with UNRRA. “From

that hour,” Zigler said, “Ben Bushong was responsible for the Heifer Project.”

On June 24, 1945, 26 cattle attendants left New Orleans for Greece on the *S.S. F. J. Luckenbach* with 588 UNRRA horses aboard. Another 26 cattle attendants left Baltimore for Greece two days later on the *S.S. Virginian* with 722 UNRRA horses, heifers, and bulls. The “seagoing cowboy” program was born.

Bushong worked out an agreement with UNRRA: BSC would supply the cattle attendants UNRRA needed for the more than 200,000 animals they planned to send to Europe, and UNRRA would ship Brethren heifers free of charge. An office for the recruiting of cowboys was set up at the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Maryland. Ads were placed in newspapers and magazines. Word was spread through the churches, camps, colleges, and Annual Conference for the need of men ages 16 to 60 to take cattle to Europe. By the time UNRRA was disbanded in 1947, over 6,500 men from many denominations and all walks of life had served as seagoing cowboys.

Prospective cattle attendants who had applied to the BSC office received a telegram or phone call telling them when and where to report, often with very short notice. Les Messamer, then of Minburn, Iowa, recalls that he had to get ready to leave for New Orleans in just five hours. “My mother even washed, dried, and packed some clothes that were needed.”

To be able to work legally on a merchant ship, the cowboys had to join the Merchant Marines. Coast Guard officials soon began to recognize the Brethren by their request to “affirm” rather than “swear” their seaman’s oaths. On their return, the cowboys received one cent per month for their Merchant Marine service and \$150 per trip from UNRRA, their real “employer.”

The experience of one cowboy compared to the next is as varied as his type of ship, port of departure, destination, cargo, the time of year, the weather, and the make-up of the cowboy crew and the ship’s crew. Ships left from cities like Baltimore, Houston, New York, New Orleans, and Newport News. Destinations included Poland (about 40 percent of shipments), Belgium, Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia (via Trieste, Italy), Czechoslovakia (via Bremen, Germany), China, and France—where the first UNRRA transport of Brethren heifers went in September 1945.

Most of the UNRRA vessels were converted Liberty or Victory ships that had been mass produced as supply ships during the war. The Liberty ship, smaller and slower, carried 300 to 400 animals and a cattle crew of about 16 cowboys. The Victories carried 700 to 800 animals with a cattle crew of about 30. Trips could take anywhere from four weeks to three months or more. At the peak of shipments in 1946, UNRRA had 72 livestock ships in action.

Life aboard ship was full of drama, complete with humor and danger. Most cowboys found the food plentiful and good—when they weren’t seasick, that is. Marvin Miller of Sebring, Fla., confessed to having “fed the fish” 13 times. “One minute you’re afraid you’re gonna die, and the next minute, you’re afraid you’re not!” he said.

Lucky was the cowboy whose system adapted to the sea without sickness. And lucky was the cowboy tending horses who didn’t get bitten. One unsuspecting cowboy found himself dangling from his overalls straps and tossed down the aisle by his charge.

Danger lurked everywhere. The *William S. Halsted* had no more than pulled out of port in Baltimore in a dense fog when it collided with a fuel tanker and the hay on the top deck caught on fire. Bob Ebey, of North Manchester, Ind., reports, “Cowboys grabbed

the water hoses for watering their animals and had the fire out before the ship's crew could get to it."

"The storms were particularly frightening, when you see water higher than a two-story house coming at you!" remembers Carl Shultz, of New Port Richey, Fla., also on the *Halsted*. Wayne Lawson, of Milford, Ind., tells of a two-day storm on one of his trips. "When we came up on deck, the horses and stalls were gone! Some horses were still hanging over the edge and we had to cut them off."

Many cowboys saw mines in the water. Walt Gingrich, of Palmyra, Pa., tells of his ship receiving orders to stop as it was sailing up the Adriatic Sea to Trieste. A military ship passed them and began shooting its guns when it was a mile or so beyond them. "After a while, somewhere way up ahead of it, there was a terrible explosion," Gingrich said. "We discovered they were firing at a mine to blow it up." An earlier ship wasn't so lucky. Bushong wrote that it "had gone to the bottom of the harbor of Trieste, having hit a mine, crew saved, cargo lost."

Young boys fresh off the farm were exposed to the seamier side of life on these trips. Cowboys were tempted by the black market prevalent in their port cities; some were propositioned by young boys for their sisters, desperate to put food on the family table; and none could escape the spicy language of the salty seamen on ship or their drunken, womanizing behavior off ship.

Many cowboy crews, however, served as an example to the seamen. Some crew members accepted invitations to join the cowboys for a worship service on board. Many a captain was struck by the decency of the cowboys. Ross Noffsinger, supervisor of a trip, told his family how the captain had said, "On the sea, the captain is the law. I have a gun and I won't hesitate to use it!" Upon completion of the voyage, however, the captain admitted to Noffsinger, "If ever there was a trip when a gun was unnecessary, it was this one."

Shore leave was a window to the world for the cowboys. Side trips to Paris, the Parthenon and Acropolis, Pompeii, or Venice were exciting. Seeing annihilated cities or exploring battlefields in Poland covered with corpses still unburied a year after the war was sobering. Witnessing the poverty and low value placed on human life in places like Shanghai was heart-wrenching.

Many a cowboy's life was changed by the experience. For some, it was simply an adventure that whetted the appetite for travel. For others, witnessing firsthand the carnal destruction of war made them lifelong advocates for nonviolence, peace, and justice. For some, it was a reinforcement of their beliefs; for others, a shaking up of their beliefs. At any rate, the cowboys returned home telling what they had seen. Their stories were a boon for the promotion of Heifer Project. When UNRRA was disbanded in 1947, the momentum was in place for Heifer Project to continue on its own.

It is hard to assess the impact of the BSC/UNRRA partnership. The number of animals delivered—some 300,000 overall, including over 4,000 Brethren cattle—was a drop in the bucket compared to the need.

But Mennonite cowboy Ron Graber relates an encounter of recent years with a Polish professional, who recognized a souvenir Graber had in his house as having come from Poland. Graber told the man about his trip delivering horses to Gdansk in August 1946. The man told Graber that he had accompanied his father to the dock at Gdansk to receive a horse just about that same time. "That horse meant the difference between life and

death for our family that winter,” Graber was told.

It is impossible to know the number of lives saved by those who volunteered to be seagoing cowboys. An upcoming gathering in New Windsor, Md., will honor them (see sidebar)\*\*. If there is a cowboy in your congregation, tell them “thanks”—and maybe add a “Yee-haw!”

\* corrected from original which said May, 1944

\*\* sidebar not included here. “Passing on the Gift” Conference was held at the Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Md., August 13, 2005.

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