

Confessions of a “Sea-going Cowboy”

By Robert H. (Bob) Leach

Being a “sea-going cowboy” during the summer of 1948 provided me experiences and benefits neither I nor Heifers for Relief/Heifer International expected. That was less than three years after World War II. American General Douglas MacArthur was in charge of the occupation, and Japan was closed to tourists.

Even now you may say it is almost a secret what Heifers for Relief, as Heifer International was known then, was accomplishing throughout war-torn East Asia. The war had ended in Europe some months earlier. Heifer Relief was underway there already. American and Christian attention were concentrated there, so it overshadowed Japan. This journal is an effort to help tell that story and to thank Heifer International for letting me be part of it and grow so much in my empathies.

Unexpectedly for me, however, the grand finale came as a surprise nearly five decades later.

To begin with it was a gray Sunday morning in June 1948 that the newly repainted *S.S. Contest* with me onboard quietly slipped out of San Francisco Bay under the Golden Gate Bridge, westbound into the Pacific. Our destination was Yokohama, Japan, near Tokyo, two weeks and 6,000 miles away.

In our mind’s eye, let’s look at the ship at sea, a C-2 cargo “reefer,” as it plows ahead. Between the bow of the ship and the superstructure rise two pairs of very tall hoisting cranes and another pair rises on the aft deck. The whole length of the hull and the four-story superstructure, rising in the middle, are painted mainly a gleaming white. The immense single funnel enclosing the smokestack and other vents is a bright medium blue with a big yellow-gold bear silhouette insignia on each side. The derricks, railings, and trim are the same yellow-gold. It is an imposing sight, a classy vessel, and my home for awhile. The ship plows through the bow spray at a speed of around 20 knots, which adds up to about 450 miles every 24 hours continuously day after day.

In all that summer a thousand high quality milk goats, provided by American Christians and churches, went to Japan, about 250 on each of four ships. With the shipments the year before, 2,000 goats were shipped.

The Japanese had requested that all goats be white, which is the Saanen breed. Why white? White seems to have some cultural significance there. For a student this might make an interesting school paper to write.

Some baffled people ask, “Why were milk goats instead of cows sent to Japan?” It’s because Japan is 85% mountainous, which is not suitable for cows, but goats thrive. Also, goats instead of cows because the average Japanese farm was crowded onto two or three acres that had to contain everything—small house, small out-buildings, crops, livestock, poultry, and all. At that time the average Japanese farm was 2.67 acres as compared to 155 acres in the U.S., and there were 5.3 million Japanese farmers.

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We four “sea-going cowboys” in our crew to tend the goats were George Ashenbrenner, who was a Covina, California, orange rancher; Dow Hoffman, George’s pastor and Methodist minister; Floyd Schmoe, a Quaker originally from Kansas and a strong and highly educated naturalist in Washington state with the federal parks service; and I, Bob Leach, of the Columbia, Missouri, First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and a university religious journalism student.

Once we were in Japan, I never knew where George and Dow went or what they did. Floyd spent the year with a volunteer crew he had organized back in the U.S. to build one hundred or so “Houses for Hiroshima.” Knowing Floyd’s heart, I’m confident it was more than one hundred. Many years later with impressive peace works to his credit, Floyd was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. While we lounged sometimes on bales of straw on deck, I learned a lot from my diverse shipboard companions.

More shiploads of various livestock and cargo planes full of chickens, ducks, rabbits, hatching eggs, and geese for renewable food resources were being rushed to other war-afflicted peoples also in places like Korea, China, and the Philippines during these early postwar years.

Our sea-going goat “ranch” occupied the whole main deck aft of the superstructure. Nearly weatherproof pens lined both the port and starboard sides and stern. The does (females) occupied the pens on both sides; the smelly bucks (males) were relegated to the stern. The level below the main deck stored all the bales of straw and hay, sacks of grain, buckets, pitchforks, scoop shovels, barn tools, etc. that we needed.

We “cowboys”/goat herders fed and watered 226 goats twice a day. We also milked 40-plus producing does. Being quite seasick the second and third days and having to stay in my bunk, I pitied the poor does that got sore from being milked by inexperienced hands. The ship captain required that every day all the milk had to be disposed of overboard because it hadn’t been pasteurized for drinking. Twice we cleaned the pens, once after the first week out around the International Dateline and again the day before the ship docked at Yokohama. One of the ship’s crew was an Ohio farm young fellow who delighted in helping do anything when he was not on duty.

For us the ocean, even for so long a time, was calm. Some days it was surprisingly glassy smooth except for the long swells rising and falling like rolling small hills and valleys. It’s the pitch and roll of a ship rocking through those swells that upset a person’s equilibrium for awhile, makes one feel woozy, and makes eating a risk. Be assured it doesn’t happen to all people. But it happened to me! Except for one eerie foggy day, weather was sunny and balmy, and the clear starry nights would entice an astronomer.

En route, three goats died of undetermined causes. Yet we arrived with one more than we left with. How could that be? The does were bred to give birth in Japan, but a few delivered early! We were entertained all the way by porpoises, flying fish, and “gooney birds,” actually albatrosses. What did the birds do at night? I only know what I did at night. I relaxed on deck and then went to bed.

Somewhere out in the middle of the Pacific around the International Dateline, where today instantly changes to the same time tomorrow if you are headed west, we passed a

red and grey ship headed east about two miles to our portside. There was no sign of recognition by either ship to the other. No doubt their radiomen were talking to each other, though.

Shipboard life in general was leisurely, congenial, and interesting for us “sea-going cowboys” even if it was not for the ship’s crew. Some of us, maybe all of us, wrote daily journals of what we were doing and thinking, read a book or magazine, took photos, explored the limited parts of the ship we were allowed to see, napped, and used the ship’s treasured automatic clothes washer and dryer.

For all meals we and the few passengers on such a ship, a Swedish Baptist missionary family, always cleaned up to be guests at the “Captain’s Table,” the nice dining room for the ship’s officers and guests. We also were welcome to get snacks anytime in the galley, the seaman’s word for kitchen. Camaraderie was easy-going.

Two nights before docking at Yokohama and still hundreds of miles at sea, our ship passed through a swarm of small Japanese fishing boats. They were invisible in the pitch dark except for the bobbing of every white location light at the top of each boat’s mast. It was like flying among so many lightning bugs.

Climaxing exactly two weeks at sea, the *S.S. Contest* docked sometime before dawn on Saturday. Only because I was a “sea-going cowboy” and on this particular voyage, some significant unexpected experiences began to happen. In the morning the American agent in Japan to take charge of receiving the herd of goats and directing their land transportation came to the ship. It startled me. I recognized him from pictures I had seen. He was Kenneth Hendricks, one of our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) missionaries, like his wife, Grace, also, whom I had read and heard about since junior high school days. After the war was over, they had returned to Japan as quickly as possible.

I was delighted to accept his invitation to go home with him for a few days on the campus of Sei Gakuin and Joshi Sei Gakuin boys and girls high schools. There were also missionaries Hallam and Helen Shorrock and Daisy Edgerton, and, coincidentally, Miss Genevieve Brown, head of our denominational Dept. of Missionary Education in Indianapolis.

I could never have imagined that seven years later I would meet, work with, and marry Miss Brown’s staff director of Adult Education, Muriel A. Watkins. Now she, too, is a persuasive Heifer International advocate. Such are the bonus benefits for me of being a Heifer “sea-going cowboy.” Here are more.

Taking along a picnic lunch on Sunday, Hal drove Miss Brown and me to a small Japanese church some miles out toward the outskirts (I think) of the city. Here bombings and fires had not been so destructive. However, evidence of refugees from the inner city still congested the area.

During the worship service both Miss Brown and I were asked to give brief greetings from our home congregations and comments about our lives and work as Christians. Of course, each of us would speak a bit, wait for it to be translated, and then continue on a

bit more. It was exhilarating to sing familiar hymns with the congregation in our own languages and yet understand each other perfectly.

After our roadside picnic lunch we drove on to a rural agricultural high school. It was not large but obviously very well managed and directed. It was a new concept to me, rather impressive, and in those early postwar years, certainly urgently needed. The school occupied a few refurbished, modestly-sized wood and glass buildings and several plots of land on a few acres to teach better ways to grow crops and to care for milk goats, chickens, and such.

When I was introduced to the director, Miss Michi Kawai, she asked where I was from. I said Columbia, Missouri, and started to explain where it is. She smilingly interjected that she knows where that is. She had gone to school at William Woods College, now William Woods University, of our denomination at Fulton, Missouri, just 25 miles east of my town. She had been to Columbia several times and recalled places and occasions. In Japan I felt an affinity to home. I was elated also to learn that she and her school here were expecting to receive some U.S. quality milk goats anytime now.

Three years after the end of World War II nearly everything I saw in that area of Japan was still devastation and rubble. Of course, Yokohama harbor was a graveyard of half-sunken ships. All along both sides of a main highway into Tokyo for many miles were continuous, twisted iron skeletons that had been factories and rusting heaps of metal debris that had been only bulldozed aside to clear the highway. Once it had been a huge, productive industrial area. No more!

Much of what follows is so I will remember why Heifers For Relief and I are here. I cannot describe all the devastation of the war around me or the immensity of it all that I did not see. Even where everything seemed rather normal and tranquil, it was actually deceptive consequences of war. What follows, then, also represents the tens of thousands of dead, dying, maimed, and traumatized people. What I write implies so much more than remains to be seen now. Now we are here to help the survivors survive. I must never forget or keep the story to myself.

When Mr Hendricks and I arrived in the reviving main downtown Tokyo business district, well-known as the Ginza, he indulged me awhile to discover a bit of Japanese culture, stores, and merchandise. All money was paper currency issued by the American occupation, so I purchased some gifts to take back home to my family.

In the Ginza streets were some refurbished, pre-war, dull black taxicabs. In desperate times almost anything can be improvised and adapted. The taxis were all powered somehow by luggage-sized charcoal burners mounted above the back bumpers. Conjecture, if you want, how many miles they got between refills of charcoal.

From the Ginza we rode a jam-packed, no seats, standing-room-only, speedy, inter-urban train out to the suburban campus of the mission schools and missionary residences. The mile after mile of utter devastation we passed through was sickening. Long ago everything usable to improvise to build anything had been scavenged. The absence of people was haunting.

It was only two and a half years earlier that the war came to a sudden and horrific end: On August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb had obliterated the city of Hiroshima; on August 8 the Soviet Union declared war on Japan; on August 9 the second atomic bomb obliterated Nagasaki; then quickly on August 14 Japan surrendered. The two and a half years since then were too short a time for very much rebuilding and normalcy to have begun. Devastation prevailed.

It was impossible to shake out of my mind and imagination the horror of the massive fire-bombing of Tokyo during the one night of March 9-10, 1945. I'll always remember that infamous date. It turned the metropolis into a monstrous firestorm inferno. There was no escape for the hundreds of thousands of panicked children, women, and men. Flammable buildings and houses exploded in flames that left almost no rubble. People were suffocated, cremated, boiled, or drowned. Consider it a holocaust! Mostly only the tall cylindrical chimneys of public bathhouses remained like cemetery monuments. That one night of fire-bombing killed more people than either the Hiroshima or the Nagasaki atomic bombs. (For more information on the fire-bombing, I recommend the book *To Torch the Enemy* by Martin Caidin, published by Ballantine Books, 1979.)

That night and the following days the conflagration burned right up to the edge of the mission property of the schools. Then the superheated wind shifted direction again and again. Everything around the campus was incinerated, but miraculously, not one mission building was burned. Three years later that was all that was to be seen intact as Mr. Hendricks and I walked the couple of blocks from the train stop toward the Christian compound.

Later in the day of our Sunday tour, I think it was, I tried my first Japanese-style bath. The bath room was just that—for a bath. A bather stands on a small floor that has a drain, then with a dipper dips into an oval wooden bathtub of hot water, wets the body all over, lathers up, and rinses off. Once clean, you step into the bathtub and ease yourself down to sit in the barely tolerable hot water to warm up and relax. I was forewarned to stay in only a few minutes or I would be too relaxed and weak to get out. I believe it. Equally important is that clean water is precious, frugally used, and kept as clean as possible for later bathers.

I slept two nights on a sofa in privacy in an alcove behind a pair of wide sliding doors. In the morning the missionaries, Genevieve Brown, and I all joined in a typical hearty American breakfast. It may have been to accommodate us two guests. Surely the scarce food in those times must have cost a small fortune.

On Monday I was driven around on a brief tour and again became appalled by the remnants of this part of Tokyo and the heroic but futile efforts of people to try to survive. We visited the persevering, small, struggling Kohokai Christian Hospital. There we also had lunch while sitting cross-legged or some other way on tatami straw mats around a low table, about as low as an American coffee table. We dined on a modified Japanese meal.

I remember vividly outside I had seen a boy about six, maybe, covered with old, oozing sores without medicine or bandages. My mind quickly switched attention from the friendly welcome at the hospital to the aching urgency of their medical ministry.

After a few days experiencing some of postwar Japan and of being with the missionaries who had returned there, I was driven by Mr. Hendricks back to the Yokohama U.S. military personnel port. It was also the military postal center "A.P.O. 500," as a huge red and white sign on the wharf roof announced. All mail from thousands of families and friends in the U.S. addressed to A.P.O. 500 came through there. The port had many offices, secretaries' desks, a large waiting room, and a big freight room.

At the port offices I arranged ship passage back to the States. I had the choice of a supply ship with limited capacity for passengers that would take six months to return to San Francisco, by way of Shanghai, Taiwan, Manila, Singapore, and Honolulu or on the army transport ship *U.S.A.T. General Omar Bundy*, not to be confused with General Omar Bradley. It was returning via only Inchon, South Korea, the port city for the capital of Seoul, then directly to San Francisco. (Inchon is on the northwest coast and only about 40 miles from North Korea.) I chose the latter schedule, although ever since then I sometimes wish I had chosen the other, more educational and adventurous one.

Inchon was three days sailing further westward from Yokohama. There we picked up some 400 troops and a dozen or so officers and their families who had completed their tours of duty in South Korea. Several times while at sea dozens of troops got rid of heavy excess clothing, boots, and other supplies from their duffle bags by throwing the stuff overboard.

Being a civilian on military travel orders, I was assigned to bunk with the unaccompanied officers and to dine with officers and their families. Laugh if you will, I was 19 years old with the priority of an army major. Every night as soon as it got dark, out on deck for everyone was a good Hollywood family movie such as the comedy classic "Mr. Belvedere" starring Clifton Webb.

On Sunday at dinner we were chatting about crossing the International Dateline overnight, and tomorrow would be Sunday again. A cute little five-year-old girl across the table turned and asked, "Daddy, do we have to go to Mass again tomorrow?"

I volunteered to be the ship chaplain's assistant, which was a learning experience and enjoyable to do. My assignment was to help prepare for worship services, to be his receptionist-secretary, to monitor news and announcements from the San Francisco shortwave radio broadcasts spoken at slow dictation speed to ships and islands. Then the ship's daily newssheet, the "Daily Spray" (which I named in a passengers' contest), had to be prepared with world and shipboard news, features, humor, announcements, and a daily quiz contest with a prize from the ship's commissary, and finally mimeograph a couple hundred or so copies.

It boggles the mind to think that only three months earlier I had been accepted to be a "sea-going cowboy," rode trains for two days and nights to San Francisco, helped haul one of several truckloads of goats from a Modesto, California, mountain ranch collection

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center to shipside, was medically double-checked, boarded the *S.S. Contest*, and settled in the ship's purser's quarters, which he had generously offered to share.

This, briefly, is the beginning of a unique Christian mission adventure far beyond my fondest expectations, planned or unplanned, made possible by Heifers For Relief/Heifer International. It all enforced my life ever since with Christian vision, appreciation, and service through Heifer.

Years later, as a husband and father, some of the best times of my life have been when our family—my wife Muriel, daughter Kirsten, son Corl, and I—were doing things for Heifer. We did programs, Sunday Schools, Vacation Bible Schools, church dinners, displays, church assemblies, etc. We wanted others also to enjoy and participate in some way in Heifer missions.

To begin with, originally about 1946, my father represented our denomination and the dairy goat industry on the Heifer For Relief board. That was even before it officially became interdenominational. The small office was in North Manchester, Indiana, with a staff of two: Thurl Metzger, the director; and a secretary. In the early 1950s, my dad made two month-long study trips for Heifer—one to Japan and one to specific Caribbean islands.

Then soon after the Korean War, my brother Kent served in the Korean Civil Assistance Command (KCAC) agricultural branch. There he helped receive and distribute livestock and small stock from Heifer and other sources. They were distributed from Cheju-do island in the south all the way into mountain valleys north of the “38th Parallel.” These valleys, although extending into North Korea, were accessible only from South Korea by reciprocal arrangement with the North.

My wife has planned and led many local and area gatherings and helped staff the exhibit at the annual statewide interdenominational “Festival of Sharing” that draws 3,000-4,000 people to the State Fair Exposition Center. Our daughter, Kirsten, graduated from Phillips University in 1978 and went to work with Heifer in Missouri and Colorado. Our son, Corl, thank goodness, had an instinct for finding overlooked and neglected things that needed doing and getting them done and for getting youth and children interested in Heifer.

Actually ten persons of my home congregation have served Heifer overseas or around the state and U.S. in various ways. The work of my father, one brother, and myself have already been described. My grandfather, a retired dentist, used a pasture and barn as a livestock collection center, as did Russell Shaw, a local insurance executive and cattleman.

Who can forget in 1955 when Perry Ewing, editor and publisher of *Sheep Breeder* magazine, became a rare “flying cowboy” tending a cargo plane load of 110 Rambouillet (ram-bow-lay) sheep to Ecuador.

More recently Jim and Grace Smith and Jerry and Eileen Storm worked at the Heifer ranch near Perryville, Arkansas.

To all this, add that our church allocates hundreds of dollars to Heifer each year and under the successive leadership of Jean Rossman, C. K. Hoenes, and Sally Robinson, the World Outreach Ministry has so far provided five world arks of livestock at \$5,000 per ark.

When I was returning to the U.S. on the last night at sea, sometime around 1:00 a.m., the *USAT Omar Bundy* entered and anchored in San Francisco Bay until morning. Hours earlier after darkness settled in and our ship was still maybe 75 or so miles out, everyone (hundreds of people) came out on deck as we approached. We could see the ever-brightening lighthouse beacon of the Farallon Islands about 30 miles ahead and another 30 miles before the Golden Gate Bridge. When we had passed the islands, we watched the glow over San Francisco get brighter and in time the growing rope of pearls that is the Golden Gate Bridge get longer, brighter, and higher. Remember that most people aboard had been away from home for two to three years. For a brief hushed moment, our ship was directly under the bridge that eclipsed the welcoming lights above. Suddenly the draped string of pearls reappeared behind us, and everyone joined in ecstatic, noisy cheers.

I was home again. This peace and reconciliation mission was fulfilled. Well, almost. I still wanted to take the Heifer message everywhere to all who would hear it.

All these experiences, varied as they are, are within the context and relevance of my being so fortunate to be a “sea-going cowboy” for Heifer For Relief/Heifer International. But, as I said earlier, it would be 37 years in the future before the real grand finale happened for me. In 1995 an American school teacher began teaching in Japan. Soon she began noticing white milk goats on farms. Some were larger and seemed healthier than others. With curiosity she wrote home, “Could these goats possibly be...?” Bill Beck of the Heifer International staff responded that “Yes, Kirsten, probably the goats you see are recent generations of those your father took to Japan 37 years ago.” With our whole family working with Heifer, this was for me completing the family mission circle—the grand finale of being a sea-going cowboy was not about me.

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