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Midwest China Oral History and Archives Collection

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NARRATIVE ABSTRACT

EARLY LIFE: accepted as medical missionaries by the Augustana Lutheran Mission Board, 1940.

CHINA EXPERIENCES: trip to Hsuchang; experience during famine of early 1940s; working conditions in Hsuchang; fleeing from the Japanese to Chungking; work in Kunming after the war; lessons learned from the China experience.

INTERVIEWER: Questions prepared by Jane Baker Koons. Because of speech difficulties, responses were in writing. Responses were received 3-15-78.

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NARRATIVE

Before entering college, I had decided on a career as a medical missionary to Africa, and that I would become a doctor in order to do this. Later my future wife Elvera Teed shared my ambitions. Of course, there were times when we faltered on that course, but always it was our objective.

When I had completed medical college, we applied to the Augustana Mission Board and were accepted to go to Africa as a medical missionary family. However in 1940, because of the dangers to shipping in the Atlantic ocean, we were refused passage as a family, and thus the road to Africa was closed to us. Our family at that time included our eldest daughter Erleen.

The Augustana Mission Board met with us in the summer of 1940. There was an opening in China, and as we could go to China as a family, we decided to go there. Dangers in a mission field are always present, so the unsettled conditions of China, due to war with Japan, did not deter us from going there. There were missionaries working there in both free and occupied China. We were granted passports, with visas for China. So we sailed on a Japanese vessel September 7, 1940.

We went to China via Japan on the ship Heian Maru. Some years ago, we had the experience in our living room of watching TV and seeing the Heian Maru, now a hulk on the ocean floor off one of the Pacific Islands, being explored

by deep sea divers. It was an eerie experience to watch.

Soon after our arrival at the College of Chinese Studies in Peking, where we were to spend a year in language study, we were advised by the American authorities that it was unsafe for us to remain there, and we were to return to the USA. We prayed concerning this matter, and we sought the advice of older and experienced missionaries. There were in Peking at that time, several Augustana missionaries who had come out from their field of work for a rest, and there were some older missionaries who had just arrived back from furlough in America.

We finally decided to accompany the older missionaries back to our field in Honan which was in free and unoccupied China. We received visas from Japanese authorities to travel to inland China. The trip by railroad, by cart and by boat took us a month. We traveled across the area that had been flooded when the Chinese had blown up the Yellow River dykes between Kaifeng and Chengchow, Honan. We could have made this trip from Peking to Hsuchang in less than two days when the railroad was intact. We traveled as far as possible overland and then took a boat for many days crossing the flooded land. Finally we finished our trip traveling overland on the level plain and were heartily welcomed in Hsuchang by the missionaries who were there.

We had traveled through a No Man's Land of a war. The area through which we went was controlled by Chinese guerrilla troops, but was infested with bandits. We thanked God for a safe arrival.

Hsuchang formerly was on the railroad from Peking to Hankow. The central part of this railroad had been torn up and the rails buried. This all was a part of the Chinese "Scorched earth policy." There had formerly also been good highways, but these had been dug into in criss-cross trenches and could no longer be traveled. Bridges on both the railroad and the highways had also been torn up.

We spent the first months of our stay in Hsuchang with Dr. and Mrs. John L. Benson and we shall always be grateful to this gracious couple. They had reared their family in China and their guidance those first months was deeply appreciated.

During our first month's stay in Hsuchang, we studied under private tutors. These tutors were for the most part students and teachers in our mission school, but we also had some teachers who were older Chinese scholars.

Our daughter was not yet of school age, but she learned the Chinese language more rapidly than her parents. Her teachers were the Chinese children with whom she played, and the servants who were always around. I was early in my missionary career, introduced to medical work, but carried no great responsibility.

When Dr. Arthur Colberg and Dr. Lillian Olson went home on furlough, we were stationed in Linju, Honan with some responsibility for the work at the Kiahsien Hospital where Sister Astrid Erling was stationed at that time. I was also in charge of the evangelistic work in Linju, but my limited language made it unable for me to do much. Therefore, the evangelistic work was carried on by Chinese pastors and evangelists, with the aid of foreign women. Because Chinese U.S. dollar exchange was unfavorable, and the money badly inflated, the evangelistic work became more and more independent at that time.

At Linju we lived with Miss Anna Olson for the first few months, and here Mrs. Carlson gave birth to our second daughter, Faith. She was the first of our babies to be delivered by her daddy. However, Daddy was deeply grateful for the advice and assistance given by Miss Anna Olson who was an experienced obstetrical nurse.

Miss Stella Carlson, who was in Peking when we arrived and traveled with us on the long journey from Peking to Hsuchang, was also in Linju for a time.

We had dry years during our stay in China and dry weather in China meant crop failure and this often led to famine. When the weather is dry, the grasshoppers also ate up the crops. In China grasshoppers came in clouds, just as the pioneers described them coming to Nebraska and Kansas a hundred years ago.

The people of China were poor because of the high price of war. Grain reserves were soon gone for these people and they simply starved. We were dependent on ox cart for transportation, and this was far too slow to bring in grain from the parts of the country where crops were good. People tried to flee, seeking a better land. They pushed wheel barrows across the parched fields, and children ranged through the fields seeking something left by the grasshoppers. Often we would see a child's garment on top of the load, indicating that the child had died had had been buried along the road, and only the empty garment was kept.

We did receive some relief funds from America, but with unfavorable exchange and inflation, this did not amount to much. We gave out what little relief funds we had, but no big relief projects could be started and the limited funds did not last long. Perhaps the best illustration of conditions was that at one time an American farmer would have to sell 80 bushels of wheat in America to buy one bushel in China. Inflation and war are terrible things.

When Dr. Viola Fischer and Sister Myrtle Anderson went home on furlough, we were moved back to Hsuchang to help with the well established hospital and nursing school there. Sister Astrid Erling was also working there at that time.

At Hsuchang we worked in a new, foreign-styled building which had been erected but not completely finished when the war started. The electric plant had previously been run

during evening hours. However now we could no longer use it as we could no longer afford to buy coal brought in from the mines to the West by donkey back.

The building was heated by home-made stoves with smoke pipes stuck out through the windows. For lights we used vegetable oil lamps. An oil lamp is simply a saucer of oil with a wick over the edge whose light gives less light than a candle, and does smoke. We had a few flashlights for emergency lighting. Candles were too expensive for daily use. The elevators were useless without electricity, so the patients were carried up and down the steps by Chinese helpers. We used sunlight to our best advantage. We did surgery during the middle of the day in winter, and in summer we started early in the morning before the sun heated the rooms.

The Chinese nurses were our main stay as they cared for all the nursing needs of the patients. They helped in the clinic. These nurses were always the interpreters for the foreigners. We knew some Chinese but the peasants still said that they could not understand us. The Chinese nurses would repeat our Chinese and the peasants would be satisfied. These nurses also knew a few English words which they used when they could. Most nurses were graduates of mission schools and had been trained in our hospital. Training these young people had been done well by those who had worked before us. Many of the nurses left the hospital eventually and

often they would set themselves up as village doctors. In this capacity they often served their village well. They knew enough to be clean and they practiced their limited capabilities well. In some areas, missionaries trained helpers to do simple surgery. They kept them around for six to eight years of training, and they knew their limitations.

We were short of anesthetic material. We had very little ether, a little more chloroform. We did have a good supply of procaine crystals. These procaine crystals were dissolved in sterile rain water and used for local anesthesia and for spinal anesthesia. (Rain water served as distilled water as it is naturally distilled.)

Other drugs had to be brought from Shanghai by smugglers. A few vaccines were made in West China, but generally drugs were expensive and very difficult to be obtained at all.

We had to limit our surgery to that which we could do. This included simple operations such as abscesses, amputations, hernias and bladder stones. Dr. Fischer had done some cataract surgery, but we were not trained for this operation. To my knowledge there were no mal-practice law courts in China, but we did try to avoid problem cases. The people usually honored our judgement.

Tuberculosis was a daily problem, and often we could do little for it. We even lost one of our nurses to that ancient disease. Kala-azar was a tropical disease that could be treated when we had the proper drugs. We had special

clinics for this disease.

The modern hospital in China was still different from that found in America. Often the way one does things is crude at best, but we did try to maintain the essential things and still get along with local customs and with the economics and shortages of the times in which we worked. The beds in a Chinese hospital usually were like the ones found in the homes of the people. They were made up of rough boards laid on saw horses. The mattresses were of straw in a simple ticking made to be filled with straw. The old straw was emptied out; the ticking was then washed and the bed boards and saw horses were placed in the sun to air. A clean bed assembly replaced the one that was being sunned. This process of sunning and airing was necessary to control the lice and bedbugs often left in the beds by former patients. Not all patients brought in lice, but lice are always present in war time, and bed bugs are endemic in China at all times.

For a time we operated on the basis of the price of wheat. Rates were set by the price of wheat and nurses and other helpers were paid according to the price of this basic grain. We even bought grain on the open market and stored it at the hospital. Ordinary helpers were paid their wages in wheat. A Chinese family could live a month on a bushel of wheat. The nurses were paid in money accor-

ding to the price of grain. Often the nurses would take their money and invest it in medicine and store it for sale when they needed some particular item.

We fed a lot of people at the hospital, so a part of the grain was used for that purpose. We had a one donkey-powered mill, where the donkey walked around in circles pulling the upper stone of the mill on the lower stationary mill stone. A platform around the mill caught the grain as it was ground and the miller transferred it to a sifter where a part of the bran was removed. This bran served as food for the donkey that did the grinding. It also served as food for the poorer people.

In the winter of 1943-44, we had a visit from the first secretary of the American Embassy. The secretary warned us that they had intelligence of a Japanese move to hook up the railroad through Hsuchang. We were warned that we should be prepared to move on advice or run the risk of internment by the Japanese. In the spring of 1944 the Embassy warning came. We moved the families to Hsingping in Shensi province, just west of Sian. At Hsingping we had the use of a former girls' school campus.

I came back to Hsuchang, Honan as it seemed that the work could continue, but we did make preparations to move the whole hospital to the mountains west of us as the Chinese workers had no intention of staying on in case of Japanese occupation.

The Japanese were reported to have crossed the river and captured Chengchow, 60 miles north of us, when we decided to move. We had bought a large team of oxen and a cart which we had ready to go. The local Chinese government commandeered 10 other carts for the move. It took us a day to pack up. When we left the hospital compound, we could hear the Japanese guns, and we heard reports that the army was three to five miles north of town. The party of foreigners that left the hospital compound consisted of Sister Astrid Erling, Dr. Catherine Simmons (a China Inland Mission worker on loan to us) and myself. With us was a large procession of Chinese.

We foreigners were on bicycles as we were to go to the China Inland Mission south of us, while the Chinese went across country to the southwest to Kiahsien. The China Inland Mission people, who were British, hesitated to leave us because of the illness of a baby of one of their missionaries. Consequently Sister Astrid and I joined the Chinese at Kiahsien where they rested over Sunday.

On Monday morning we again heard the Japanese guns and hurried on our way. We all assembled in a village in the mountains where the Chinese pastor gave us assistance. We were an international and ecumenical gathering place. All however had two things in common. First the love of Christ constrained us all, and secondly we were all at-

tempting to get out of the way of the Japanese army.

The English CIM family I wrote about had such a sad burden. They had buried the little one in the mission compound as he had died before they left. Imagine the sorrow of those parents at leaving the grave of a baby they loved as they fled from the Japanese.

Leaving the Chinese nurses and the hospital equipment in the mountains, Sister Astrid and I went on to Hsingping where our co-workers were staying. We walked and rode bicycles much of the 500 miles. We arrived tired and haggard. My wife says that I slept most of the first week, awakening only to eat. We were grateful for a safe refuge and a place of peace. Our place of refuge, however, was of short duration. We really had nothing to do in another mission's territory. But Sister Astrid and I did deliver our cook's wife of a baby there. They had accompanied us to Hsingping.

Again we held meetings and decided to move on. Some of the missionaries were due to return to the U.S.A. Our family was expecting our third child. We came to realize the significance of the Bible's warning to pray that your flight might not be when you are with child. (Matt. 24:19).

The embassy was still urging us on. So finally we packed up again and loaded our things onto a railroad freight car for the trip to Paochi. At Paochi some of the missionaries could stay on and work. The rest of us sold some of

our things and hired a bus to take us to Chungking, the war time capital of China.

At Chungking there were many many people, and there was no place for us to stay. Finally we were given rooms temporarily in a French Catholic Hospital and those who could get passage went to India.

Soon the remainder of the missionaries was offered a house in the Canadian Mission compound on the hills across the river. There was a large hospital at this place and a doctor's family was going back to Canada. They very kindly offered us this home. This blessing was gladly accepted.

Here at the Canadian Mission Hospital our oldest son Jon Paul was born. There was great rejoicing by the rest of the family when mother and baby returned home. However, Mother developed phlebitis after the delivery and the baby suffered severe heat rash. It was a long, miserable and humid summer for both of them.

The Canadians would have liked for me to join the hospital staff, but I had to get the family to India and off for the U.S.A. and then return to our own hospital in Honan.

In the fall of 1944 our family flew to India. Our son had his first airplane ride before he had ever ridden in an automobile. In India we were treated very kindly both at the Lutheran Mission in South India, and at the Methodist Mission Home in Bombay. An opportunity to join a

mission hospital staff was again offered, but I refused, feeling that I still had an obligation back in China. At that time, I was in contact with the OSS of the U.S. Army who would bring me back to Honan.

Getting the family off to the U.S.A. was most difficult, but after many false starts during the mild Indian winter, the family and Sister Astrid boarded a troop ship for a month's trip around Australia and to California. It was a very hard trip but praise the Lord, they arrived safely in Los Angeles in the spring of 1945.

After getting the family on the boat, I took the train across India to Calcutta. I was then flown back to Kunming, China. We were outfitted in Kunming and went on to Sian. From Sian a group of us were sent to West China or rather West Honan. I was a Technical Advisor to the Army. This time I was the language specialist.

We set up a clinic for the mountain folks and some of the former Hsuchang nurses came to work with me there. It was only part time, and it was different, but I was back again among the Honan people whom I had left a few months before. We had news from the mission field and we kept in touch with happenings back on the plains.

While living in the mountains, I forgot that I was in China. The water ran clear in the mountain streams and I drank it, forgetting the Chinese advice to always boil the water. The result was illness, but I soon recovered. I

don't think I ever again will forget that when in doubt always boil the water.

We had plans to move closer to the Japanese. At that time another officer and I walked out of West Honan and were taken back to Sian. When we arrived in Sian, the atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan and the war was over.

I was mustered out of the Army in Kunming. The Army then gave me a ride back to Hsuchang, Honan. We found the mission compound full of Japanese soldiers, many of whom were sick. All were now prisoners-of-war. The Japanese had rebuilt the railroads and had not damaged the mission compound. In fact, they had improved the mission property. The electric light plant was working, the hospital was steam heated. Even the elevators were working for the first time. Of course, it took time to get all the Japanese soldiers out of the compound, but they treated us very kindly while they were there. The hospital was emptied first and our nurses came back. We soon had things going again.

In the spring of 1946 Dr. Arthur Colberg returned from the U.S.A., other missionaries came, so I returned to the U.S.A. to rejoin my family again.

The autumn of 1947 found us again on our way to China. We went very well equipped, expecting to be of useful service for a long time. We had a light plant, X-ray, an ambulance, a telephone system and lots of personal supplies.

One thing we did make good use of was a handmill for grinding whole wheat cereal. Most of the stuff was not used or had to be sold or was lost.

When we got to China, we found that conditions were not as rosy as we had expected. After wrangling with the Chinese customs in Shanghai about the things we had brought with us, we went to Hankow up the Yangtze River.

From Hankow we took the train to Hsuchang. We had not been in Hsuchang long until the place was taken over by the Communists. The Communist armies left Hsuchang for a time and we were evacuated to Chengchow where we were to be picked up by the Lutheran plan St. Paul, a DC 3. Incidentally, the Chinese man who drove the truck that took us to Chengchow was the same man who had escorted us to Hsuchang seven years before.

We were flown to Hankow. The Communist armies returned to Hsuchang and we have never returned.

Pastor Anders Hanson and I flew from Hankow to Kunming. We found that we could work there as our language was understood, and there was work to do. We found a place in which to live, and soon we returned to Hankow and brought our families and others to Kunming. Later Pastor Hanson and I returned to Hankow to get the ambulance we had brought from the U.S.A.

Kunming is in southwestern China, but it has a delightful climate, being at an elevation of 6000 feet. It had

previously been connected with Hanoi, Vietnam by railroad, so the place showed a definite French influence from its past connections with French-Indo China.

We settled down and looked for places to work. A chapel was started and services held. For medical work we found an outlet in the opium camps where the government had placed a lot of opium addicts who were destitute. We also worked in the leprosy camp and we did some work in a village where there had been a malarial outbreak. The main thing was that there were people there who were suffering whom we could, by the Grace of God, help in their suffering. This was the purpose for which we had come to China.

True, there was little rehabilitation possibility left for these dregs of an old society, but who were we to judge who was to be served? We were there to serve and that was really the important thing.

Our old enemy inflation was soon to overtake us. We were living under a failing government again and inflation of the currency is one of the first signs of a failing government. The government had been bankrupt by years of war and unrest and now it was failing.

Gasoline for our ambulance we could buy in 55 gallon barrels. There were no filling stations in the entire city of Kunming. The U.S. pipe lines across the Himalayan Mountains used during the war, had been cut and rendered use-

less. What gasoline we used was brought over the mountains by truck. Gasoline cost us (depending on the exchange rate of the U.S. dollar) up to $1.50 per gallon. Then it often contained water. Many times we had to crawl under the ambulance and take off the sedimentation cup and empty the water before we could get the engine re-started.

Inflation was getting so bad that I could carry a million paper yuan in one pocket. We started using the Yunnan Provincial silver coins, but these were never legal tender. These were coins about the size of a half dollar which had been stored away for many years. There were also some deals made in pure gold, but we never had that much money.

In Kunming our youngest son Mark Luther was born. It was an old fashioned home delivery with his daddy again in charge. Things went better with Mrs. Carlson than it had with the first son in Chungking four years earlier. Again we were so thankful for God's abiding Grace.

We had a delightful winter in Kunming during 1948-49. One of the ladies had a radio to which we would often listen. We even heard of the bad winter weather in Nebraska and even about Operation Hay Lift.

In the spring of 1949 the Communists had taken over much of China, and the situation in Kunming became very tense. Our oldest daughter Erleen was in the American School in Hong Kong. This would be out in May, so we decided to leave before it was too late. Again we called on the Lutheran DC 3 plane St. Paul to take us to Hong Kong where

we could pick up our daughter at school and take her home with us to the U.S.A.

Since 1949 we have been in Newman Grove, Nebraska serving as the town's only doctor until a stroke stopped me in 1974. We again thank God for the years in China and for the years following.

You asked about the role of the medical missionary in China. I would say that the role of each missionary is a different role. I do, however, think that the real role of all medical missionaries is to relieve suffering and to teach his profession to the natives around him. What advantages these factors play in the proclamation of the Gospel is purely incidental. Yet the doctor or nurse plays an overall role in the general impression of the Gospel.

Our oldest son, an M.D., refers to our stay in China as an extended residency. The residency being the added training given a doctor after medical school. As such, the period spent in China was really a learning period. I went to China with only basic medical training. We all really learned much in those nine years we spent there.

One of the great truths we learned in China is that the Bible is really an oriental book and the Christian religion fits very well in China. A problem is that our Christianity is tainted with western ideas and European customs and culture so that when we present denominational Christianity,

we often find ourselves confused. No doubt we confused the Chinese also.

We also learned many lessons in basic economics and temperance. From the Chinese, we learned not to overeat; the value of exercise; not to overcook our food, especially vegetables; to eat basic foods such as whole coarsely ground grain and green vegetables.

We also learned how to economically use the sunlight; to dress in padded garments; that styles really don't matter; that Chinese women wore pant suits for centuries before they became the fashion in our land. We learned that energy can be used economically. In China one sees little that goes to waste. Someone simply picks up anything that is thrown away and puts it to a useful purpose. We learned that people can live without public utilities; that is, electricity and plumbing, to say nothing of gas and transportation.

But through it all we are not longing for China. We thank God for our native land America and pray that God, by His Grace, will preserve it to us and to our children.

We often wonder what might have happened if missions had been presented to China as an oriental religion, if missionaries had "gone Chinese" and abandoned themselves to becoming a true part of the Chinese culture.