



Histories Intertwined

Interview by Jason Woods, *World Ark* editor and photos courtesy of Peggy Reiff Miller and the Heifer International archives



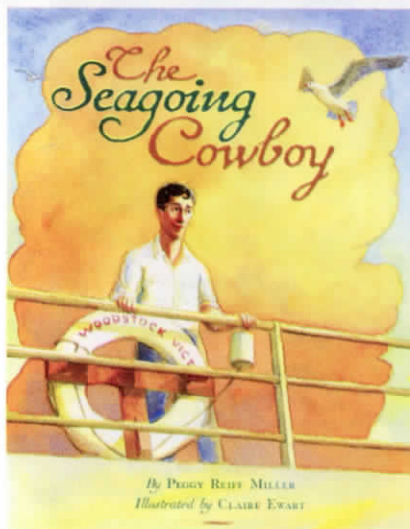
Seventy-five years ago, farmer and Church of the Brethren member Dan West started Heifers for Relief, the organization that evolved into Heifer Project and is now called Heifer International. After his volunteer service in the Spanish Civil War, West returned determined to create a lasting solution to the rampant hunger he saw among refugees. His plan: instead of giving a cup of milk, donate a cow.

Writer and historian Peggy Reiff Miller can't remember a time when she didn't know about Heifer. When she was a child and West was in his 60s, the two were members of the Church of the Brethren in congregations in Illinois and Indiana respectively. Miller remembers West's involvement as a leader in regional youth events.

"[Heifer] was always a part of our knowledge," Miller said. "We just grew up with it."

Later in life, Miller discovered that her grandfather served as a seagoing cowboy, one of a group of men and a few women who volunteered to tend to the livestock shipped from the United States to other countries by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and then Heifer Project after World War II.

In 2002, Miller began interviewing men who served as seagoing cowboys as a way to find out what her grandfather's trip would have been like, and that work snowballed into more interviews, research and writing about the cowboys and Heifer. In 2016, she published a children's book titled *The Seagoing Cowboy*. As we celebrate our 75th anniversary, Miller shares her thoughts about the seagoing cowboys as well as Heifer's early years and evolution over time.





Heifer founder Dan West (left; pictured with wife and children on the right)



WORLD ARK: When did you first hear about Heifer?

PEGGY REIFF MILLER:

When I was a child. [Laughs]. I mean, I grew up in the Church of the Brethren. It was always a part of our knowledge. We just grew up with it.

Of course, Dan West was a huge leader in the church. Had an incredible interest in youth, and he was a leader at some of the regional youth events I attended. So there was always that knowledge.

And my roommate in college was the daughter of Heifer's executive at the time, Thurl Metzger. It's just something that's always been a part of me.

What was Dan West like?

For a teenager, when he was in his late 60s, very intimidating. I didn't really know him well, so

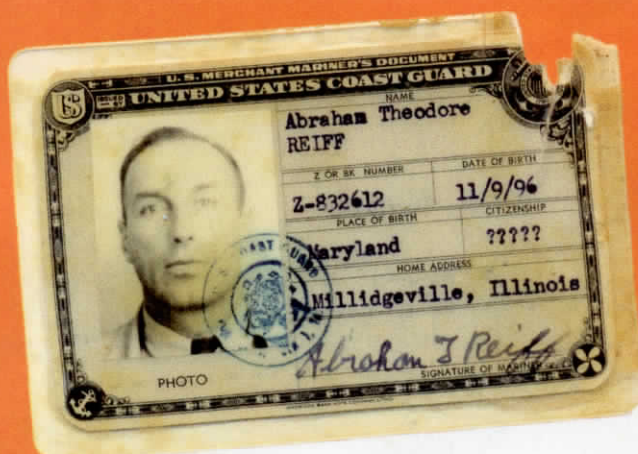
I can't say a lot. But just a very majestic, tall, stately person who carried a very serious demeanor.

When did you find out your grandfather was a seagoing cowboy?

I didn't know until after he died, actually. He died around 1969. Some years after that, I don't even remember when, my father gave me an envelope of Grandpa's pictures from his trip. I knew there were some Polish dolls in Grandpa's attic that we played with when I was a kid. And he had a cane, a wooden, carved cane from Poland. So those pictures really put it all together for me. Because at that time, I knew about seagoing cowboys and was kind of curious about the history. So that's really what got me started in digging into it, trying to find out what Grandpa's experience was like.

And I was interested in writing for children at the same time. So I decided I wanted to write a novel for young adults, and I thought, "What a great topic. A seagoing cowboy going to Poland." So then I started interviewing men who I knew had been cowboys. And one cowboy led to another and another, and, you know, the history just draws you in. And I realized that you couldn't tell the seagoing cowboys story without also telling the Heifer Project story. Because the two histories are intertwined.

You know, at first, they were separate. The seagoing cowboys were a program under the Brethren Service Committee to provide the cattle attendants that UNRRA needed—the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. UNRRA isn't the same as today's U.N., it was kind of a precursor.



Abraham Reiff, Peggy Reiff Miller's grandfather, served as a seagoing cowboy. Pictured: his Merchant Marine card (top left), seagoing cowboy card file (right) and a signed photo from his 1946 UNRRA trip to Poland.



4945 Abraham Theodore Reiff Age 11523
 Name Abraham T. Reiff
 Address Milledgeville, Illinois
 Church Affiliation Brethren Tel. Green 1302
 Injections for: smallpox ☐ typhoid ☐ typhus ☐ tetanus ☐
 Remarks First of Sept.
Likely will come East to visit and contact us

Report	S.S.	Report	S.S.
<u>Pierre Victory</u>	<u>9/30/46</u>	<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>
<u>Newport News</u>	<u>Poland</u>	<u>Amt. due for trip</u>	<u>Amt. due for trip</u>
<u>Less: advance</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>Less: advance</u>	<u>50</u>
<u>travel</u>	<u>1750</u>	<u>Amount paid</u>	<u>Amount paid</u>
<u>Amount paid</u>	<u>1750</u>	<u>Ck. No.</u>	<u>Date</u>
<u>Ck. No. 4440</u>	<u>Date 10/22/46</u>	<u>Ck. No.</u>	<u>Date</u>

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Heifer Project leadership had been trying to convince UNRRA to ship some of the Heifer Project animals. Because this was after World War II when shipping wasn't available, except through the military and organizations like UNRRA.

The seagoing cowboy program was under the Brethren Service Committee to begin with. And Heifer Project was under the Brethren Service Committee. They were parallel. And UNRRA had about 12 of their 360 shipments carrying Heifer Project animals. Then when UNRRA disbanded after just two years of service, Heifer Project continued, and then the

seagoing cowboy program was directly under the Heifer Project.

That's interesting that you knew about the seagoing cowboys before you knew you had a family member who was one.

We never talked about it. And we kids didn't know to ask. That's been one of the really interesting things about my work. There are a lot of families that have been in that situation, that discovered. And they've been really grateful for knowing more about what their relative did through my work. That's been one of the biggest motivators for me in continuing for 17 years.

What's the most surprising thing you've found digging into the history of the seagoing cowboys?

That's a hard question. There's no one specific thing, but overall, for me, I think it was the power of the internet to make connections. Because I started my website in 2008, which was kind of fairly early on in terms of websites and blogs and so forth. And I had no idea when I started that website what was in store for me. And since then, it's just been one surprise after another. Because as I posted more and more material, I began to get requests from people for information. You know, from families of seagoing cowboys, from students, from



Hope the cow was delivered to Poland with 334 other heifers via the S. S. William S. Halsted in 1946.



Cornelius Queling was one of many German Heifer recipients in 1950. Miller met him in Nierswalde, Germany, in September 2013.



Finding the Stanislaw Debert family, which received a heifer from the Heifer Project and a horse from UNRRA in late 1945, was the highlight of Miller's research trip to Poland in October 2013.

elementary school through graduate students who were writing papers, Heifer International staff, when they would get inquiries from families of seagoing cowboys and needed information, they would contact me. And it would work the other way, too, when people were sharing information for me. And the biggest surprises were the international connections. Because that led to trips to Poland and Germany and Finland for me.

In Poland, it was an architectural history graduate student who contacted me for permission to use photos in an article that she was writing. We developed an email relationship, and using materials

that I had found in Heifer's archives about the shipments to Poland, one of her friends was able to track down one of the recipients of a heifer in 1945. That was in 2013, and he was just turning 90 at the time. And I had just an amazing interview with him.

And then another request came from a museum in Germany that led to an exhibition about the Heifer Project deliveries after World War II to the German-speaking people from Silesia and the seagoing cowboys that delivered the heifers to them. That was one of those Heifer trips through UNRRA.

This German museum is about Silesia. It's called the

Upper Silesian Museum. So I was able to go over, and I fed them information for the exhibit, and I was able to go over and see it.

And then the most recent surprise was contact from Japan public television that led to the piece that was in the Holiday issue of the *World Ark*. You know, I never know where the requests are going to come from. It's just ... that's been the biggest surprise of all, I think. Seventeen years ago, when I started this, I would never have dreamed that I'd have all these international connections related to the work that I was doing.

All because of my grandfather's packet of photos.



Dan West stood by the conviction to do as much for peace as a soldier does for war.



A color slide of Faith, the first heifer donated, with the donor, Virgil Mock (left), and the boy who raised her, Claire Stine (right).

One of the cattlemen



Wilbur Stump, the first seagoing cowboy Peggy Reiff Miller interviewed, tending to a heifer on the Zona Gale.



Children from the Vila Skaut orphanage in Konstancin, Poland, stand by four seagoing cowboys and Hope, a cow donated by the Heifer Project, on Christmas Day 1946.



Do you have any favorite stories that you found?

I do. Story-wise, I think one that stands out — well, there would be three. The first, Heifer founder Dan West's story of his experience serving within the military as a conscientious objector in World War I. And that led him to the conviction that he wanted to do in his life as much for peace as a soldier does for war. And that was a large part of his motivation in starting the Heifer Project and many of the other things that he ended up doing. So that's probably my favorite of all stories.

Other favorites would be seagoing cowboy stories about the impact that their trip had on their lives. For some of them, these younger cowboys, for some of them, they changed their college major when they came home. To social work, or they went into the ministry. And many of them became peace activists. My favorite story of all with that is Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, who was a seagoing cowboy, and he tells about his experience in his book *Just As I Am*. And it's an incredible story about how seeing the destruction over there in Poland made him have the conviction that there could never be another war, and he became a peace activist. And it tells more about that in his book, too. It's just an amazing story, a 16-year-old who secretly wanted to be a part of the war but was too young and ended up being a peace activist.

What are some of your favorite Heifer historical photos?

There are three basically. One is a color slide that I found in Heifer's archives that I had no idea existed

of Faith, the first heifer, and her donor, Virgil Mock, and the teenage boy who raised her, Claire Stine. That's one of my favorites.

Another is the heifer Hope that was given to the Konstancin Orphanage outside of Warsaw, Poland. It's a picture taken on Christmas Day 1946 that shows Hope, who had only been there maybe not more than a week, and children from the orphanage and four of the seagoing cowboys from that trip who stayed behind in Poland to do kind of a tour for the Brethren Service Committee. So they were able to visit this orphanage and that's the heifer that I kind of modeled my picture book on. That's a favorite one.

And then one of seagoing cowboy Wilbur Stump, taken with him and the heifer he was tending on the Zona Gail on his trip to France. Wilbur was one of the first seagoing cowboys that I interviewed. So that's always been kind of special one for me.

In your view, how has Heifer changed over the years? How is it similar or different than the organization that started in 1944?

Well, it started out simply as a relief organization, just to provide relief to people who had been hurt in the war. And then it evolved into development, where the training aspect was added. Then, as the development aspect continued with the introduction of the 12 Cornerstones, Heifer evolved into community building. I mean, the transformation that takes place in communities through those 12 Cornerstones is just amazing. The stories that Heifer has told.

It's moved the next step now in terms of the marketing angle. Using cooperatives and marketing to ensure that there's sustainability for these communities that take on the Heifer project model. So it's an amazing development in terms of the purposes and the outcomes.

And then, I think another change, originally it was a Christian organization. It was started by the Church of the Brethren, within a couple of years, it became ecumenical, which was the goal from the start on the part of the Brethren Service Committee. The gifts of animals that were given were given in the name of Christ, not to proselytize but simply to be a form of service given in the love of Christ. And that was very important to Dan West all through the years.

But when Heifer incorporated in 1953, the tie with the Brethren Service Committee was broken. Broken sounds like a negative term, I didn't mean it that way because the Brethren Service Committee was very supportive of incorporation. Heifer was still faith-based at that point, but as the years progressed and board members were added for their expertise and not just simply because of their denominational connections, the church connection gradually fell away, and Heifer is no longer a faith-based organization.

Another change that I've seen is the personal connection between donor and recipient. In the early years, that personal connection was there. Either directly, from donor to recipient, or through the denomination, who had a connection that set up the recipients and overseas relationship through



Members of the Schulz family stand next to the cow they received in Lubeck, Germany, in 1956. In 1945, the Russian military forced the family to flee their native Poland.



The Labatzki family children with a cow donated from the Heifer Project in Friedrichskoog, March 1956.



An East Prussian settler with the heifer that was donated to his family from the Heifer Project.

a denominational agency or whatever. But there was more of a personal connection. And that was especially strong during years of the German shipments. There was a decade in the 1950s when Heifer made shipments to the German-speaking displaced people from Eastern European countries who were sent back according to the Potsdam Agreement, sent back to Germany at the end of World War II. So there were like 10-12 million of these displaced persons that Germany had to resettle. And many of those had come from farm

backgrounds. Heifer's shipments were mostly to help those displaced farmers. And the Brethren Service Committee had an office building they built in Kassel, which they called Brethrenhaus. And there was a Heifer Project office as part of that. They encouraged recipients to write thank you letters to the donors. So there were a lot of international relationships between these families that developed, and some of those still hold today. There's an incredible two boxes full of material in the archives that contain these thank you letters.

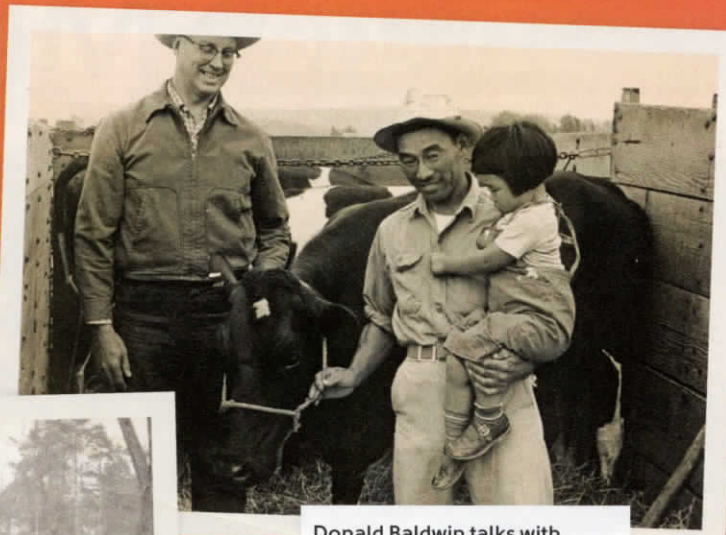
But as Heifer grew and the program expanded, it wasn't possible to keep up that donor-to-recipient relationship.

So what are you working on now, and what's next?

Well, I've been working on and hope that this year I can really focus on a book about the first decade of the Heifer Project. I spent the two past springs, three months in 2017, two months in 2018, at the Heifer Ranch to kind of sequester myself. I took all the minutes from the Heifer Project and Brethren Service



Seagoing cowboy Richard Tobias delivered twin calves on this trip to Germany in September 1956. The mother heifer was donated by his church.



Donald Baldwin talks with Japanese-American farmer Dale Sakuma in Burlington, Washington. Sakuma donated a heifer to be sent to project participants in Japan.



Two heifers arrive at the Vila Skaut orphanage in Konstancin, Poland.

Committee meetings up through incorporation in 1953. And I put all of those actions in a timeline. That gives me a framework to work with now. That's my goal for this year, is to hopefully get a first draft written. It's a big undertaking.

What are the most interesting points on the timeline you're working from?

Well, those first years were really fascinating in terms of the number of people that were involved. I mean, it was very much a volunteer organization at the beginning. And

to watch that evolution of going into staffing and the committee. It was all volunteer work on the committees. And the dedication of the people. And the difficulties that they ran into. I mean, there were a number of times, just in that 10-year period, where they talked about, "Can we go on? Should we close?" When UNRRA disbanded, that was a critical point because their free shipping was gone. Because their agreement was that the Brethren Service Committee would recruit UNRRA seagoing cowboys, and in return, UNRRA would ship Heifer

Project animals free of charge. So with that free shipping gone, that was a critical point where there was discussion about, you know, should we just bless what we have done and wrap it up?

But there was so much commitment, I mean the stories that the seagoing cowboys brought home about the tremendous need in Europe helped fan the flames. And the people who had already donated so many hours just wanted it to keep going. It's an amazing story of commitment and dedication and trials. ■