



# The woman behind the man behind Heifer Project

by Peggy Reiff Miller

**H**eifer International has lifted millions of people out of poverty since its first shipment July 14, 1944. This 75th anniversary year is a fitting time to pay tribute to Dan West, the man who started it all. But digging into his histo-

ry, one soon realizes that his wife, Lucy, deserves a good share of the credit, too.

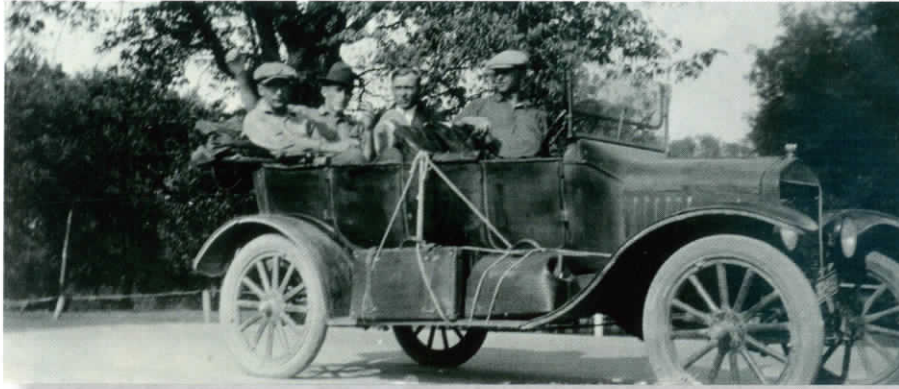
## Peace and bachelorhood

Dan grew up on a farm in Pleasant Hill, Ohio, at the turn of the 20th century, son of a pacifist, itinerant Brethren

preacher. He was a carefree lad, interested in travel, music, and education. After high school, Dan wanted to attend a course at Bethany Bible School, but money was scarce.

"My family felt ready to get me a horse and buggy for dates with girls,"





Dan said years later in a paper on his goals. "I had to choose between that and going to Bethany." He chose Bethany for a term, and later graduated with an A.B. degree from Manchester College in 1917. "On campus Dan acquired a reputation as a deep thinker, a good conversationalist, and a most eligible bachelor," says biographer Glee Yoder.

When drafted into the US Army the next year, Dan, leaning toward conscientious objection, had to decide how far he could cooperate. After he was assigned to the infantry, he confounded his superiors by offering to go to Fort Leavenworth prison. They assigned him instead to the Quartermaster Corps in South Carolina, where his work supported the troops sent overseas.

"There I did not kill anybody," Dan told a Brethren Volunteer Service training unit years later, "but I felt a part of a killing machine. That still hurts my conscience." He left the army with a new lifetime goal: to do as much for peace as a soldier does for war.

Dan spent the next decade serving as a teacher and high school administrator in southwestern Ohio. With his passion for youth and commitment to the church, he taught

Sunday school, as well. Against the will of the district elders, he organized the first district youth cabinet for Southern Ohio and advocated for the starting of a district youth camp at Sugar Grove.

Dan's strong intellect, his passion for peace, and his gifts for leadership gained him recognition beyond Southern Ohio. He became one of "The Four Horsemen," along with Chauncey Shamberger, Alvin Brightbill, and Perry Rohrer. During the summers of 1927-1930, this dynamic team traveled across the country providing leadership for Brethren camps.

At the end of each summer, the four leaders evaluated each other's performance, says Yoder. After the

summer of 1929, the group told Dan that his "interest in people might not be as much in the person as in the functioning of his or her brain." To this 36-year-old bachelor the team also said, "You've formed the habit of allowing some of the most beautiful and intellectual women all over the country to think you're in love with them. But you don't think of them as lovers, but as minds. It's time," they counseled him, "to target in on some lovely person whose mind is good and who also has a heart."

The next summer, Dan moved to Elgin, Ill., to become director of Young People's Work for the denomination. A year and a half later, a "charming and attractive" woman joined the Elgin staff in the Missionary Education Department. In Lucille Sherck, 12 years his junior, Dan found that "lovely person whose mind is good and who also has a heart."

### **The charm of the impossible**

Lucille Sherck grew up with six brothers and two sisters on a farm near Middlebury, Ind., determined to rise above the rural, insular expectations of her community. "At age 16," says





**"DAD WAS A VERY IMPOSING CHARACTER WITH A BIG HEART," SAYS STEVE (SON OF DAN AND LUCY). "MOM SAW THIS AND SIMPLY PUT HER SEAT BELT ON FOR A GREAT BIG WORLD JOURNEY."**

daughter Jan West Schrock, "her uncle Glen Kindy asked her what she wanted to do." Lucy's answer: "I'd like to be a teacher." Her uncle helped her realize that dream, paying for her college education.

Her father, however, "disowned her when she went to college," says son Steve West. "She was determined to work through that and began teaching at the age of 19. Teaching school was overwhelming and exciting for her." Lucy taught all eight grades in a one-room schoolhouse with 36 students—an experience that no doubt primed the management skills she would later need.

Lucy was active in the church and crossed paths with Dan West at times. One such time, when Lucy was making a speech at Union Center Church of the Brethren in Indiana, "something very personal and spiritual awakened between them," Yoder says. The speech, "The Charm of the Impossible," had evidently charmed Dan West.

When Lucy arrived in Elgin and Dan began to pay her favor, some of the women cautioned, "Be careful. You'll get hurt." But she went into their engagement with her eyes open, Yoder says, knowing that Dan would be gone much of the time. "She felt the cost was not too great when compared to other young men whose goals were less important and less enduring."

"Dad was a very imposing character with a big heart," says Steve. "Mom saw this and simply put her seat belt on for a great big world journey."

### **Dan and Lucy team up**

The couple married in October 1932. From that point on, Dan and Lucy were a team, making decisions together. This included the decision in

1937 for Dan to go to Spain to assist the Quakers in a relief program during the Spanish Civil War.

Dan wrote to executive M. R. Zigler, "After Lucy and I went over the main points of the Spanish question again, we decided that I should accept the recommendation of the Committee on Spain. And so I am planning to go." This mutual decision would leave Lucy at home with two small children, ages 3 and 1.

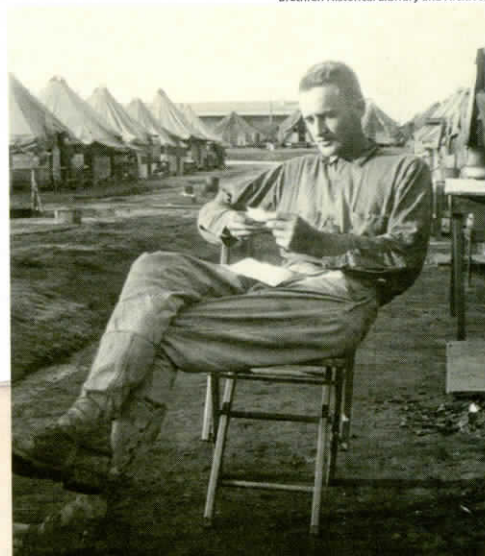
"It is not my preference so much as my duty, as I see it," Dan wrote to the Brethren representative of the Committee on Spain. "This much absence from home is a heavy sacrifice, and I do not believe it can rightly continue too long." This struggle between commitment to family and commitment to calling

accompanied Dan all through his life.

After working three and a half months on the Franco side of the war, Dan sought permission from Lucy to extend his visit to Loyalist Spain, where he had heard of great suffering. Even while lying sick in bed, Lucy agreed.

His 10-day sojourn in Loyalist Spain led to creation of the Heifer Project. At

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### **Which cross?**

by Dan West

Dear Lord, my cross is heavy. The weight of it  
With other things is bending down my head  
My knees are weak.... My back and arms are sore.  
Do I have to carry it anymore?  
Couldn't I just worship yours instead?

(1967)



# SERVICIO INTERNACIONAL DE LOS AMIGOS CUÁQUEROS

(FRIENDS SERVICE COUNCIL)

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TELÉFONO 77973

VALENCIA:  
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LONDRES

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On the Train  
Barcelona - Valencia.  
January 18, 1938.

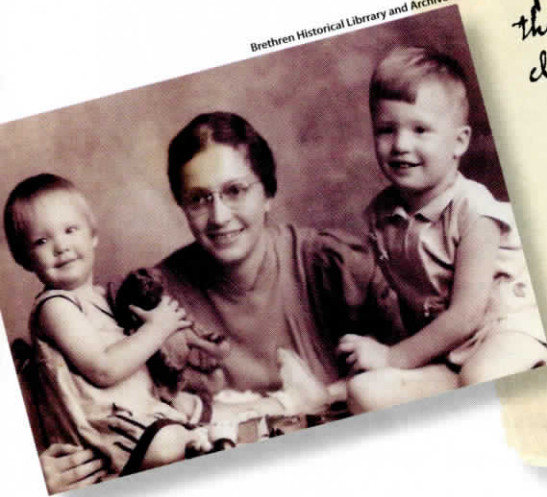
My Lucy,

This is the end of a meaningful day. The bright sun shine, almost like May back home, is most welcome. The stars last night, and tonight, shine intensely against the dark sky, even with the moonlight. This city is big - 1,000,000, modern and beautiful - wide smooth streets and fine houses except in the slums; and if there were no war one might spend a delightful time here, amid palms and oranges, big roses, and such.

But I have had a heavy meal of suffering - enough for me day. In the seminary where formerly Catholic priests were trained, live 2500 refugees, in a moderate sized room, 100 in a long large room, some trying to keep up family life but many going to pieces in every way. For 3 or 4 months this has been used, and considering everything, it is fairly clean - my nose wasn't seriously offended.

The building with several stories and three inner courts is very beautiful. The money and labor, and perhaps hope, put into visible form might be justified if the priests who came thru their training had really been helpful to the problem of people. It is four centuries since Loyola, and more than ten since Christianity had a strong foot-hold here. That is long enough. A church with a chance like that can be indicted for not doing its duty. And I can understand the fury of those who want to be rid of it.

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a children's hospital in Murcia, Dan observed babies and tubercular children dying from a lack of milk. He determined then and there to work on a plan of sending cows to Spain, a plan even Lucy called "an impossible dream."

With Dan's persistence, his plan for "Cattle for Europe" was adopted by the Northern Indiana District Men's Work at their April 12, 1942, meeting. The Brethren Service Committee adopted it

as a national program in January 1943, naming it "The Heifer Project."

Dan West became recording secretary of the Heifer Project Committee, and maintained this role as a volunteer for decades while carrying on his responsibilities in peace education and leadership training for the denomination. These responsibilities took him away from home much of the year, leaving the

running of their small farm and their family of five to Lucy.

"Mom had what she called spizzerintum," says Steve. "I learned to know this as fire in the belly." Lucy returned to teaching in 1950, and "she became a powerful and kind teacher of many children."

When Dan retired from the Church of the Brethren staff in 1959, Lucy took a year off work. Together, with 16-year-



\* No water for washing clothes in the seminary. I don't know if it is clean or not. I was surprised to see some of the clothes that are clean.

The only place incense arises now is in the kitchen. and that is the steam from the hot soup. The soup looks good - chick peas and rice, but it would not make a satisfactory meal. 220 lb of chickpeas and 165 lb of rice go into soup for 2500 people - that is 2 1/2 oz of the mixed food per person - and each one gets about 30 grams (two ordinary slices) of dark bread; that is all for their noon meal, and only the children <sup>there</sup> get anything in the morning. For supper they have beans and another chunk of bread. And I guess there is little else that any one gets. One mother was sitting on a bed with 12-15 oranges around her - they must have a bit of money. \* I suppose the menu varies a bit, but not much.

As we were leaving the upstairs open corridor - lovely stone pillars and rounded arches - I noticed a pile of bones lying near the wall. It looked like as though some one had had several chickens. I asked <sup>our</sup> guide <sup>(an official)</sup> about it. "No," he said. They were the bones of cats - and they were picked clean. When any of the folks can catch a cat, they have a bit more to eat.

The whole thing nearly took my appetite for lunch. At the end of a simple ~~meal~~ <sup>meal</sup>, not too much but several times what these poor people had at the Seminary Refuge, I couldn't eat my orange. I wanted to find two hungry children, divide it, give each <sup>one</sup> half, and hold them in my arms for another picture. But he couldn't well arrange it. And so I ~~gave~~ asked Norma Jacob to give it to a mother of 7 children - one is 3 months old - who came to the house for some food tonight. She gave it to one of the children (2-3 years old) who came along. I feel much better than if I had eaten it.

Dearie, I am grateful that we are able to feed our children all they need. It makes me humble, too. If you still make copies of my letters to send out over there, will you send one to Jim Erlauch. Maybe he will want to give to help the children on letterhead. Please send to Alfred Jacob several booklets on child feeding and ~~some~~ <sup>some</sup> necessary <sup>please</sup> <sup>pay</sup> and ask U.S.A. Dept of Agriculture to send direct. - Yours - Dan.

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old Steve, they made a 10-month trip around the world to witness firsthand Heifer Project's work overseas.

In the couple's personal correspondence, one finds an incredible love story—a story filled with Dan's yearning to be home while at the same time fulfilling his commitment to his work, and a story filled with Lucy's yearning for Dan to be home while at the same time

supporting and enabling his calling.

In the video *Dan West: Peacemaker*, the late communications professor Paul Keller says, "Lucy West was a model of graciousness, and generosity, and patience and tolerance, and was, heaven knows, a marvelous support for him. Without her, and the way she ran the home and the family, I don't think he could have done it."

Teacher, wife, church woman,

mother, farm manager, and confidante. Lucy West was all these and more. She was Dan West's partner in the creation and development of Heifer Project—a role to be celebrated in this 75th anniversary year. 

Peggy Reiff Miller is a writer and historian living in Englewood, Ohio. Author of *The Seagoing Cowboy* (Brethren Press), she is working on a book about the first decade of Heifer Project.