

Union Bridge farm family was part of Heifer Project – December 24, 2023

In this season of giving, Carroll Countians can point with pride to the extraordinary contribution made by a Union Bridge farm family to the Heifer Project, a World War II humanitarian relief effort. Roger and Olive Roop devoted their lives from 1945 to 1948 to sending heifers from their farm to starving families in Poland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and other European countries devastated by the war.

The Heifer Project (also known as Heifer Relief) started slowly in 1942 as part of the Brethren Service Committee, the outreach arm of the Church of the Brethren. Brethren farmers and churches around the U.S. began gathering heifers to send wherever people suffered from hunger. With World War II raging across the Atlantic, the first heifers were shipped to Puerto Rico. By 1945, however, victory in Europe seemed imminent, so the Heifer Project and the newly-formed United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) partnered to transport pregnant heifers across the Atlantic as a donation to farmers in war-torn Europe. The understanding was that the first female calf born to each heifer would be given to another needy family — passing on the gift. Between 1945 and 1947 the two organizations shipped heifers as well as horses, mules, and bulls to Europe and even to China on American ships.

It was their upbringing in the peace-loving Church of the Brethren and deep concern for the suffering caused by World War II that convinced Roger and Olive Roop to offer a portion of their farm to the Heifer Project and the Brethren Service Committee as a collection point for heifers. The couple initially set aside 15 acres of their 130-acre farm outside Union Bridge to house the animals before shipment. Their commitment to the humanitarian effort had barely begun when the first truck loaded with heifers arrived at their farm on July 31, 1945. One month before, however, a boatload of livestock gathered by the Heifer Project/UNRRA partners had left Baltimore bound for farms in Greece, so the wheels were already in motion for the many shipments to come.

The Roops' involvement in the relief effort grew so rapidly that they soon sold their own herd of cows, rented their entire farm to the Heifer Project, and Roger became the farm manager. No one person or family could handle the receipt and shipment of so many animals which also needed to be fed, inspected, immunized, and even dehorned in some instances. The paperwork alone was immense.

Each heifer had been bred before reaching the Roop farm, but it also needed to pass strict health regulations before departure. Dr. George Zinkham, a veteran of World War I and Union Bridge neighbor of the Roops, offered veterinary care and loyal farm hands provided the dependable day-to-day assistance Roger needed. Olive fed those on the farm plus everyone delivering animals by train or truck. Anyone needing a place to sleep could also count on her.

Cattle cars took the heifers via the Western Maryland Railroad from Union Bridge to the harbor in Baltimore. There they were loaded onto World War II Victory or Liberty ships refitted to hold the animals along with the feed, straw, water, and everything else necessary for a trip of

unknown length depending upon the destination and the weather. Although the Roops were only responsible for sending heifers, the hundreds of animals in each shipment often included horses and mules brought from other locations.

Once the animals were aboard, they were under the care of “seagoing cowboys” – men willing to look after the animals around the clock for pay of \$150 per trip. Eventually over 7,000 men between the ages of 16 and 72 served as seagoing cowboys on the combined UNRRA/Heifer Project shipments. Some were motivated by an opportunity to turn their Brethren faith into action; some were anxious for adventure; some needed a summer job. While many of the cowboys knew how to handle animals, others had no experience at all, but learned on the job. Roger badly wanted to make the journey along with some of his heifers, but Olive was expecting a child and he was needed on the farm.

After caring for their animals on the crossing, which might be smooth or stormy, the seagoing cowboys got time ashore at their destination and a first-hand look at what five years of war had done before sailing home. For all of them it was an eye-opening experience, one which often changed the course of their lives.

By the time the UNRRA/Heifer Project partnership ended in 1947, it had delivered over 300,000 cattle and draft animals around the world from ports like Baltimore, New Orleans and elsewhere.

Roger and Olive Roop continued their involvement with the Heifer Project after the partnership dissolved until Roger contracted undulant fever in 1948 and they could no longer participate. Their three years of dedication between 1945 until 1948 ensured that 3,600 heifers reached starving families across Europe and the gift of each heifer was passed along – the project’s goal. Roger remembered with pride that during those years only 17 heifers had died in their care.

The Heifer Project has grown into today’s Heifer International, a huge organization which continues the same humanitarian work around the globe that first inspired Roger and Olive Roop in the summer of 1945. Donations to Heifer International help families in a multitude of different ways on almost every continent.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County

Image 1: Courtesy of Pat Roop Hollinger Caption: A grateful delegation from Poland visited Union Bridge, Maryland, in the mid-1940s. Roger Roop, in flat cap, stands in the rear.

Image 2: Courtesy of Pat Roop Hollinger Caption: Roger and Olive Roop with daughters Pat and Shirley on their farm near Union Bridge in the 1940s.

Image 3: Courtesy of Pat Roop Hollinger Caption: Roger Roop, center, with Ted Albaugh, left, and Wayne Keltner, right. They were two of his dedicated farm hands during the “Heifer Project Days” in the 1940s.