



Love of fellowman led Doctor Blaber from Brooklyn to a village in China.

Pioneer Lay Missioner

Long before the term "lay missioner" was coined, Dr. Harry P. Blaber volunteered five years of his life, to work in Maryknoll's China missions. His decision to turn five years into a lifetime was ended by Japanese invasion. Now friends in Brooklyn plan a memorial to this pioneer.

By Edward J. Quigley

HE WAS a young doctor, just finished his internship. He had come up to Maryknoll headquarters from New York City for only one purpose. He said: "I make you a present of the next five years of my life. You can do what you want with me during that time."

The young man was Doctor Harry P. Blaber, the first American doctor to work in the Maryknoll missions.

Doctor Blaber once wrote: "I've had the notion to be a doctor in the missions since I was three feet high. Tried to shake myself out of it but it wouldn't shake!"

The education and dedication Doctor Blaber had, was nurtured by the Franciscan Brothers. He studied at Saint Francis Preparatory School and College in Brooklyn. He was scholarly. He represented the college with honor in intercollegiate athletics. To his classmates, he was understanding, sympathetic, helpful.

Doctor Blaber graduated from the Long Island College of Medicine in 1928, and interned in Brooklyn Hospital. The physician then gave the first fruits of his medical career to Maryknoll. He became a lay missioner at a time when the term was unknown.

Arriving in China in 1930, Doctor Blaber set up his first facilities in the mountain area of Tungon, Kwangtung Province. He worked under primitive conditions—a sterilizer constructed from an old trunk, insulated with rags, newspapers, and chicken feathers; steam shot from a kettle through a still of old kerosene tins; a gasoline drum set in a huge water jug served as an incubator for cultures.

After three years, Doctor Blaber was transferred to the more metropolitan atmosphere of Toishan. Here he started the Sacred Heart Hospital, which began as one room and grew into a three-doctor, thirty-five-bed modern hospital. Local Chinese doctors resented the coming of the American. They spread rumors that the foreigner's real desire was to make money.

Doctor Blaber soon proved them wrong. Eighty per cent of his patients were charity, the rest paid the equivalent of seven American cents. In the first six months his out-patient clinic provided treatments for 9,250 patients.

He won the hearts of the people by diving off a river steamer to rescue a

drowning man. The story was soon spread over the countryside.

"The American has a good heart," murmured the people when they heard.

Not long after arriving in Toishan, Doctor Blaber received a visit from Father Joseph Sweeney. The tall Maryknoller from New Britain, Connecticut, told the young lay missioner of how he had discovered people afflicted with leprosy living in a graveyard as outcasts. They grubbed for food as best they might during the day, and returned at night to their hovels. Father Sweeney had bought a piece of land in nearby Sunwui. He had built some mat sheds and taken the afflicted people there to live. He had been trying to care for them himself but he needed help. Would Doctor Blaber assist him?

Doctor Blaber did help Father Sweeney and aided in the development of a modern colony, Gate of Heaven.



Doctor Blaber wed Constance White and took her with him to China.

which was composed of comfortable brick buildings which housed up to five hundred patients.

"When our patients first come to us," Doctor Blaber wrote, "they are covered with sores. Our first job is to clear up other diseases — intestinal parasites, tuberculosis, syphilis. Only then can we start treatment for their leprosy.

"I think our patients are the happiest people in the world. Once, that is, they are over the shock of their disease. The disgrace in China is so serious that no one will marry a sufferer's sister, brother or child. The knowledge, not new to us, that leprosy is not hereditary, and even not highly contagious, hasn't penetrated China yet.

"But once that agony of ostracism is passed, the victim is really happier than most people. Our patients are always laughing. Cynically, I guess you can say they're happy because they have nothing more to lose. The world with its social and economic struggle is closed to them. I think that constitutes happiness all by itself."

In 1935 Doctor Blaber completed his agreed five years. He returned to the United States, but not to remain there. He married Constance White, a nurse at Brooklyn Hospital, to whom he had been engaged. They spent their honeymoon studying leprosy treatment at Carville, Louisiana, and Molokai. Then they went to China to spend their lives there.

Then came World War II and the invasion by the Japanese. The Blabers, with a baby daughter, were forced to return to the United States. The hospital was left to Chinese whom Doctor Blaber had trained. The people whom he had served called him the

"Doctor of a Thousand Cures." He had won their esteem and their hearts.

Back in the United States, Doctor Blaber set up practice in his native Brooklyn and soon won the affection of new patients. A leader in the medical profession, he was elected president of his local medical society. He served as attending surgeon in four Brooklyn hospitals. But always China was never far from his thoughts.

"We lived through some mighty tough days in China," he recalled to friends. "Days when we tried to run a hospital with only a bottle of mercurochrome and a roll of homemade bandages. But they were satisfying days."

Early this year, Doctor Blaber died at the age of fifty-six. Ordinarily the story would end there. But Doctor Blaber's work is not finished.

The medical alumni of Saint Francis College want to perpetuate his memory and the sacrifice he was prepared to make of his life. It was decided to establish a Doctor Blaber Memorial. A committee has been formed to raise \$30,000 to build a physiology laboratory at the college's new science center.

In its appeal for funds, the committee wrote: "We at Saint Francis believe the memory and ideals of our loyal son should be immortalized because:

"He displayed, both as a student and as an alumnus, the essence of the Franciscan concern for his fellow men.

"He was a pioneer in the medical-mission field and, as such, will be an example to an increasing number of Saint Francis men to serve their country and their God.

"He was a dedicated, charitable, and professional-minded physician who would inspire students to consider medicine as a career of service." ■■

By Pat Logan

Doctor of a thousand cures

Dr. Blaber, Maryknoll's pioneer lay missionary, organized a hospital in China in the 1930s

I've had the notion to be a doctor on the missions since I was three feet high," Harry P. Blaber told surprised and delighted Maryknollers when, in 1930, he offered five years to the missions. The physician from Brooklyn, N.Y., was accepted and sent to Kongmoon, China, to become Maryknoll's pioneer lay missionary.

Quite a contrast to 1982 when, out of 3,000 inquiries, Maryknoll selected 23 lay missionaries who had completed lengthy applications, personal interviews and psychological testing before they began four months of intensive training in theology, scripture, social justice and evangelization techniques.

In Kongmoon, in 1931, Dr. Blaber studied language with Father Otto Rauschenbach, who found him a "capable, commonsense, energetic man." He also opened the Tung On dispensary in a small

house that he partitioned into consultation room, clinic, surgery, pharmacy, laboratory and six-bed ward. His patients, who soon began to call him "the doctor of a thousand cures," lined up in the street at the rate of over 50 per day. One of them with an ear infection, a 15-year-old named Kei Shaang, stayed to become his first nurse.

"He began to organize the hospital with a sufficiency of nothing, save trust in Providence and confidence in Blaber," Bishop James E. Walsh reported in *The Field Afar*. Dr. Blaber had reason for confidence. A grandfather and three uncles were physicians, and his mother was a chemist. Harry graduated from St. Francis College in Brooklyn and in 1928 from Long Island College of Medicine. He interned at Brooklyn Hospital.

When Maryknoll built Sacred Heart Hospital in Toi Shaan, Dr. Blaber hauled a junked operating table from Canton and lighted the surgery with two electric bulbs plus nurse-held flashlights. The sterilizer was a Montgomery Ward fire-



Dr. Harry Blaber, Maryknoll's first lay missionary, worked in China with Maryknollers, Father Joseph Sweeney (far left) and Brother Bernard Petley (right).

less cooker. Instruments were new.

Harry was innovative with people, too. Starting with a staff of three farmhands, he gathered and trained nurses, a pharmacist and a budding bacteriologist. With the hospital equipped and the staff professional, patients could be charged fees—about two cents a visit.

In the meantime, Maryknollers had located three groups of destitute victims of Hansen's Disease and Dr. Blaber began to spend his Sundays helping them. This work eventually expanded into the 500-bed Gate of Heaven Leper Colony.

In 1935, as agreed, Dr. Blaber went home to Brooklyn, where he met and married Constance White, a nurse. They spent their honeymoon studying leprosy treatment at Molokai, Hawaii, and returned to Kongmoon in 1936. Two years later, however, war forced them to return to the U.S.

"We lived through some mighty tough days in China," Harry recalled shortly before his death in 1961. "We tried to run a hospital with Mercurochrome and homemade bandages—but they were satisfying days." □