

Our China Mission: A Child's Experiences

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Adapted from her memoir, *Growing Up in China*

My parents were one of five couples - John & Lillie Benson, Nels & Minnie Benson, Gustaf & Ida Carlberg, John & Selma Lindell, David & Lily Vikner - who married right after the men graduated from Augustana Seminary in 1914 and were commissioned by the Augustana Synod for missionary work in China. They crossed the Pacific with a couple older Augustana missionaries - Sister Ingeborg Nystul and Dr. Carl Friberg, they landed in Shanghai on September 23, and headed for the Augustana field in Honan, an impoverished inland province known as the Appalachia of China.

At the latitude of southern Oklahoma, Honan was so hot in the summer and missionaries were so isolated there that they were expected to seek three months' rejuvenation in Kikungshan, an interdenominational mountain resort developed by pioneer Lutheran missionaries on the southern edge of Honan. While the five couples were there for an initial year of language training under direction of Dr. A. W. Edwins, founder of the Augustana mission, I was born in the Trued house on Kikungshan in May, 1815. The next month we moved into a new house that dad built for our summer use just below Trued's on the way down to tennis courts and the building site of an American School for us missionary kids.

Sons Were More Important. In China, the births of my brothers, David Luther in 1916 and Carl Filip in 1920, were far more significant than mine, because they were sons. To honor the especially auspicious occasion of the first son's birth, Chinese men held a feast and brought gifts to dad. In accordance with custom, dad reciprocated with a party for the men. Women, including the mother of the new son, were ignored, except to prepare and serve the food! Such devaluation irritated

my mother. Once she wrote home, “David is invited out for dinner today. Last week he had two invitations. In China everything is for the men. A woman is usually forgotten or not considered.”

Our House. At first we lived in a small Chinese house with a single window and door. Dismal and cramped, it lacked sanitary facilities, heat, screens and space enough to partition for privacy. Mother disliked its brick-embedded dirt floor, ceiling of bamboo mats that provided racetracks for rats, and lack of sunlight. To her, it as “almost like a cellar.” For her two little ones, she felt it was “as though they were in a prison.”

Our first American-style house in Kiahsien was built in 1919 in a new compound on land that had once been used as a Chinese cemetery. Before building began, all remains had to be disinterred and moved. This was a delicate task, because the remains had to be shielded from the view of spirits above by digging under cover of tents!

Birthday Ritual. On January 28, 1921, we celebrated mother’s 37th birthday with an early-morning ritual that our family observed throughout my childhood, a candlelight procession to mother’s bedside, singing “Happy Birthday” and presenting our gifts. We said grace and shared breakfast while watching her open her presents. Years later, I continued this ritual with our children.

Robbers and Famine. A weak Chinese national government exerted less and less control over robber bands that looted and vandalized unprotected villages and farms. Travel became dangerous. Even soldiers assigned to protect walled cities were so often unpaid that they sometimes joined robber bands or pillaged to survive. Then the harvest of 1920 failed, and a great famine spread over central China in the winter of 1920-21. When missionaries were asked to help distribute American food relief, dad postponed our first furlough to the United States and mother used the delay to help David and me improve our English before meeting relatives in the States. In May she wrote home, “The children know English quite well now, almost as well as Chinese.”

Amah. Amahs were important members of our families in China for housekeeping and child care. Usually they were widows who obtained status and a place in life in missionary families, but ours

was an unhappily married mother. Amah fed us, cleaned us, and baby-sat us. We loved her, but we recognized the difference between her and mother. In my high chair, when I would push the edge of the table with my feet and tip backward, my parents warned me not to rock back too far and fall, but I did, and it hurt. My solution was to order amah to stand beside me and make sure that I didn't fall again!

Because of Chinese favoritism toward boys, an amah was sometimes a hindrance rather than a help. One day mother came home to find little David having a good time in the fireplace and covered with ashes. Amah watched rather than restrain him, because he was the privileged eldest son!

Amah moved with us each summer to our house on Kikungshan, where she had a room with her own entry. She and other amahs gathered daily at a summer resort playground with us kids in tow. This was their prime opportunity to chatter and compare tasks and families, but they were loyal to their families. They defended their charges in scrapes between children. They walked us wherever we went, they saw that we never went barefoot, and they watched us closely for infections like hookworm and fleas.

Coolies. In our very poor province, an inexhaustible supply of poor men earned their living as coolies, carrying the burdens of wealthy Chinese and foreigners. One coolie could carry two loads balanced at the end of a pole. More often, four coolies worked as a team, coordinated by rhythmic chanting or singing that hummed in the background of our daily life. Coolie chants and a five-tone music scale were the sounds of our China.

Rude sedan chairs borne by coolies were our mountain taxis. They were especially important in mountainous areas, because we had to climb three miles on a crude mountain road to get to Kikungshan from the Sintien railroad station, and to reach Kuling in the 1930s, we had to ascend four miles of steep paths, including a stretch memorable for its 1,000 stone steps.

Home Schooling. We were home-schooled through second grade. Mother put David and me to work at our table and guided our learning several hours a day. When she was interrupted to advise a

servant or see a visitor, David was prone to sneak outdoors. Disgusting, I thought. But I was not an angel myself. I loved to tease him. He would get very upset and Mom would scold me. But teasing was irresistible precisely because he responded so lustily.

Boarding. We took it for granted that we would begin boarding school at age eight. In fall 1923, therefore, mother stayed at our house on Kikungshan long enough to enroll me at our American School (ASK). To ease the transition, my folks had arranged for me to room with Eleanor Trued. I was awed by her status as a sixth grader.

Boarding school provided us a good social education as well as sound academics. We learned especially to take others into consideration through good manners, like waiting to eat until all were served and remaining at the table until all were finished. At meals, we were assigned to new tables of eight each Sunday morning. Because we recognized every napkin ring, we enjoyed discovering who would be our new table mates and our supervising teacher or high school student for the week.

In advance of our birthdays, Mrs. Lindell let us choose what type of cake we preferred - angel food, chocolate, white, or other. On the birthday, the cake, with candles burning, was brought in at the end of supper, and everyone sang "Happy Birthday." The honoree cut the cake, guided by markings, for distribution to those present. Pieces left over - sometimes one, sometimes ten - were the honoree's to take back to the dorm for a private party or simply to gorge himself. For a while, some traded their dessert for a more desired future dessert, but Mrs. Lindell put an end to that when a student collected all his IOUs at once with eight pieces of blueberry pie!

Emotional Security. Sometimes, during our free time, I felt lonesome and depressed, but I persuaded myself that I would rather be at school playing games and enjoying dorm life with friends than be at Kiahsien with bratty brothers as my only playmates. Leaving family for boarding school so young and hearing frequently about robbers and armies did not upset me, not that I was oblivious to threats, but I had a solid sense of security from immersion in a culture in which everybody - my parents, amah, teachers, schoolmates and their missionary families - everybody agreed that God

watched over us and took care of us.

Our missionary families were bonded by faith more closely than most relatives are bonded by blood. These bonds were reinforced enormously by the fact that we all spent our summers playing and praying together and sharing events like Saturday night songfests, interdenominational Sunday services, Fourth of July celebrations, picnics in mountain valleys, swims in mountain pools, and tennis on the courts below our home that we could watch from our cool eastside porch while sipping juice with friends.

Missionary women, whether single or mothers, needed summers at Kikungshan. After long months at isolated stations, often alone, often working as well as managing their households, frequently hearing scary rumors of bandits, but without telephones to talk it over with husbands or friends, they needed refreshing summers to avoid estrangement from their own culture, to exchange native garments for American dresses, jewelry, and wedding rings, and to renew their sense of worth and security.

Leaders. Rev. Palmer Anderson was our principal, school pastor, and teacher in Bible and general science. He was a very dedicated, likable man. We referred to him as Andy, but not to his face. We loved his clowning when he joined us in games, his pleasant tenor singing, and his ability to play almost any instrument.

He had problems with a few parents who disapproved of any “worldly frivolity” and would not allow their children to participate in some activities, especially rhythmic games like “Skip to my Lou.” Fortunately, because constant enforcement of such taboos would have been impossible, most of us followed our family rules. Because we did not live with our parents and struggle with parental authority through adolescence, we probably aimed any rebellious tendencies at Andy, especially our boys, who would say, very unfairly I thought, “It’s not the school we dislike, it’s the principal of the thing.”

After Mrs. John (Selma) Lindell lost her husband to typhus early in 1930, she became the ideal

matron and key support person for us and for ASK. A mother, a nurse, and an unflappable person, she was well-organized, kept exact accounts for each pupil, directed support activities firmly and fairly, and managed native workers in fluent Chinese.

Teachers. I did not have some of ASK's dedicated teachers in either elementary or high school, so I missed intensive contact with some. However, I enjoyed several classes under Miss Gilbertson, who spent more years at ASK than any other staff member.

I had Mary Lee Nelson in grade school and high school and had a part in a humorous play she directed. She was the first of our teachers who had grown up in China and attended ASK and was one of our favorites. We were sorry to see her go when she left, but we were pleased that her replacement the next fall was another former ASK student with whom we sensed a special kinship, Lillian Landahl. Esther Anderson was an excellent counselor as well as an enjoyable teacher, while Alice K. Anderson arrived with naive expectations of missionary children. Since she knew no Chinese, she was easily victimized. Once the boys in her class called out the open window in Chinese to a passing duck tender, inviting him to come in to show his ducks. When the ducks came waddling down the hallway into her classroom, she was aghast! The boys, of course, feigned surprise! To her credit, Alice K. learned Chinese and served many years as a missionary in Hong Kong.

Flight. Twice when I was a high school freshman, ASK had to flee from warring communist and nationalist armies. To the staff, evacuation must have been a nightmare, but for us kids it was a lark to pack, hike three miles down to the railroad station, wait for a train, and ride ten hours to Hankow.

When we reached there, we were welcomed at our church's Lutheran Missions Home and Agency in the city business district. There we made do for our small high school classes in the lobby nook, the ends of hallways, and teachers' rooms. Because the elevator was off limits to us, we got plenty exercise walking to and from our rooms on the third and sixth floors. Boys on the third floor

liked to hang out of their windows to harass people walking on the sidewalk below, especially a bald-headed employee on whom they dropped a paper bag water bomb!

When we walked the streets, a Chinese audience materialized to note everything we did. No angry words or catcalls, only curiosity. We were an act! And since we had no fears and knew how to haggle like Chinese for rides and goods, we got along fine.

Kuling. In summer 1931 it was not safe to return to Kikungshan, so our missionaries rented homes at a distant missionary resort in Lushan mountains far south of Hankow. A British missionary had established the resort to escape summer heat, naming it “Kuling,” a Chinese-looking form of English “cooling.” It was much farther than Kikungshan from our mission field, but even more beautiful!

That fall, ASK could return neither to Kikungshan nor to the Hankow area, which was engulfed by a great flood. Fortunately, the Redcroft Hotel on Kuling would close in October. Because it had been a British school with a full set of buildings and fields, it was a perfect place for ASK and a wonderful location for my last two years in China.

One advantage of Kuling was the existence of another school like ours, the Kuling American School (KAS). We could not share social activities, because ASK was much more conservative, but we could for the first time compete regularly in athletics - tennis, track, baseball, basketball, and soccer games between boys’ teams, and tennis, basketball, and volleyball between girls’ teams. We usually won!

Christmas Travel. To get home for Christmas took David, Filip, and me five days from Kuling compared with two from Kikungshan. On the first day, coolies carried us in sedan chairs down the rugged four-mile mountain path to the Yangtze plain and a truck took us across the plain to overnight accommodations at Socony Oil Company quarters at the river. On the second day and night, a river boat took us to Hankow, where we stayed overnight at our Mission Home, did our Christmas

shopping, and boarded the train north for a night and day ride to Hsuchang, where we stayed overnight with the Colbergs before a fifth day's travel by cart to our parents' station in Yuhsien.

Because the overland road to the railhead at Hsuchang was impassable to carts when we started our trip back, we had to hire donkeys. I was smiling when we mounted in the morning, but after riding 30 miles, I couldn't sit painlessly at the Colberg's that night, nor on the train the next day, nor at ASK for a week!

Leisure. When not in classes or extracurricular activities, we found it easy to keep occupied. We had no tv, radios, or vehicles, not even a bicycle, cart, or wagon on Kuling, but we found joy in a wealth of activities, especially swimming in the community pool. Sometimes, when we hiked in the mountains and valleys, grade schoolers trailed us, trying to follow without being observed, lurking behind trees, bushes, huge rocks, and houses. It was exciting for them and not unenjoyable for us!

In early spring we looked in brooks for frog eggs that we could put in jars to hatch and raise polliwogs in our rooms. However, when the polliwogs became cute little frogs, they were a real problem until they escaped or died.

Another favorite activity was silkworm breeding. Olaf Skinsnes was our expert. He incubated the pinhead eggs attached to bits of paper inside his underwear! When he inspected their progress, he caused unwelcome distractions for his teachers.

After the eggs hatched into tiny, dark brown worms, we put them in a shoebox and supplied them with fresh, dry mulberry leaves, which they nibbled at the edges day and night. As they grew they ate more leaves, until we had to fill their shoebox with fresh leaves daily. They continued to eat voraciously and grew until we had to provide more space and more leaves in a small dresser drawer, then in a large dresser drawer. Mrs. Lindell and the cleaning staff were not happy with this!

When the worms stopped feeding and sought a twig on which to start spinning, our boys would get a worm to eject its strand onto a flat cardboard or a jar cover. As the worm sought a twig to start a cocoon around itself, it trailed its silk back, forth, and around the surface until it yielded all of it and

became a naked, dormant chrysalis. This seemed cruel to me, but the boys acquired attractive silk disks.

Photos from the China Mission

Photo #1



Missionaries studied language under the Rev. Dr. A. W. Edwins, who founded Augustana's China mission, and a Chinese scholar. Three Augustana missionaries and their wives are included in the photo, the Carlbergs, Lindorfs, and Vikners.

Left to Right: Seated: Mrs. Carlberg, Mrs. Vikner with baby Ruth, her amah, Mrs. Lindorf. Standing: Dr. Edwins, Rev. Spira, Rev. Gustaf Carlberg, Dr. O.W. Lindorf, the cook, Rev. David Vikner, and the Chinese tutor.

Photo #2



Four Augustana Synod missionary mothers had babies in 1915.
Left to Right: Mrs. Vikner with Ruth, Mrs. Friberg with Bertil,
Mrs. Lindell with Paul, and Mrs. Lindbeck with John.

Photo #3



Missionaries employed coolies to carry baggage, toddlers, and those unable to hike rugged terrain, like the three miles of mountain paths to and from Kikungshan and six miles to and from Kuling.

Photo #4



American School Kikungshan.
Classroom building above right, dormitory left

Photo #5



Missionaries invited British businessmen to their Fourth of July celebration.
Note both countries' flags.

Photo #6



A scene in downtown Hankow during the 1931 flood
that forced ASK to find facilities on Kuling.

Photo #7



Three “missionary kids” – Ruth Vikner, David Vikner, and Paul Lindell – rode donkeys 30 miles overland to a railroad station en route back to ASK after Christmas with their parents in Yuhsien.