

## **AMERICA'S RESPONSE TO THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE; NEAR EAST RELIEF**

“America We Thank You: An Armenian Tribute to Near East Relief,” is an initiative of the Armenian National Committee of America – Western Region, which pays tribute to the outpouring of generosity by the American people from the onset of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923) and for 15 consecutive years, and highlights the efforts of Near East Relief (NER) in rescuing and providing humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who were victims of the Genocide.

The global response to the genocide of Armenians was sparked by a cablegram sent by U.S. Ambassador to Constantinople Henry Morgenthau to the Secretary of State in Washington DC on September 6, 1915, stating, “Destruction of the Armenian Race in Turkey is progressing rapidly” and suggesting that Cleveland H. Dodge, Charles Crane, John R. Mott, Stephen Wise, and others form a committee to raise funds and provide means to save some of the Armenians who had survived.

Upon receiving Ambassador Morgenthau’s urgent plea for assistance, President Woodrow Wilson called upon his advisor Cleveland H. Dodge to form the “American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief” (ACASR), specifically to help Armenians and other Christian minorities who were being forcibly deported from their homes and starved or killed in a systematic premeditated campaign of genocide launched under cover of World War I by the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire. On September 16, 1915, under the leadership of James L. Barton and Cleveland H. Dodge, the ACASR was officially launched in New York. In order to facilitate the best possible response to the crisis, the Committee was granted unprecedented access to all U.S. government files and communications describing the religious, social and physical conditions of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, specifically the native Armenian population.

Over a period of 15 years from 1915 to 1930, the NER (renamed as such upon the Committee’s incorporation by Congress), mobilized the entire American nation, and indeed the world, into a well-organized and well-funded relief effort which successfully saved over 132,000 Armenian orphans and one million refugees half a world away. Despite its initial fundraising goal of \$100,000 which was later raised to \$30 million, the NER ultimately raised \$117 million, the equivalent of \$2.7 billion in today's dollars! NER built over 400 orphanages, food and clothing distribution centers, medical clinics and hospitals, and vocational training schools throughout the Near East to house and care for the survivors. More than 1,000 American volunteers left their comfortable lives to travel across ocean and land to dedicate themselves to the relief effort.

The American-led campaign soon became an international objective, with 50 countries taking part in the relief efforts, as well as business, church, agricultural, commercial, fraternal, labor, educational, youth, and women’s associations. It secured over 133 national endorsements from prominent organizations around the globe in observance of international “Golden Rule Sunday,” representing more than 73 million people who donated food, money, and clothing for the Armenian orphans and refugees.

Truly, all segments of American society were mobilized into action. While government officials and even Congress called upon the American people to heed the call of NER, Armenian orphans were sponsored by famous American families, including Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, Mrs. Oliver Harriman (widow of President Warren Harding), and Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt (American women's suffrage leader). Celebrities such as child actor Jackie Coogan (later known as Uncle Fester of *The Addams Family*) toured across the U.S. and Europe on a "Children's Crusade," enlisting the help of The Scouts of Los Angeles and other children's organizations, and raising more than \$1 million in clothing, food, and other contributions. American religious, labor, and other organizations led collection efforts for NER. Offices and donation centers were opened in all 48 American states.

The breadth and depth of all those who participated in NER's call to action is near impossible to fully recount as every American citizen regardless of gender, race, creed, or age was fervently rallied across every city and state in America.

The below activity, however, is an attempt to present some of the scope and successes of the critical ecumenical participation that was facilitated by houses of worship, clergy, and parishioners. This information has been mainly gathered from NER's official publication, *The New Near East* which boasted an average readership of over 100,000 persons a month and through press clippings from various local and state newspapers across America.

### **Presbyterian**

The minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), in 1918-1920, referred to increasing destitution among 3,000,000 of Armenians, Syrians and other Christian races of Western Asia. Such minutes also document resolutions requesting that all Presbyterian pastors make a strong plea on behalf of the suffering Christians in the Near East and urging their followers to give liberally to the relief fund. Lastly, the General Assembly of PCUSA endorsed NER for its great service to stricken Armenia.

- Under the leadership of Dr. Sherman L. Divine, chairman of Northwestern USA for NER, the Northwestern USA acted as foster parents to 6,750 orphan children of Near East, mainly Armenian, by providing the cost of feeding and clothing these children at \$60 per child a year. Under this impressive mercy effort West Washington provided for 2,500 orphans, East Washington and North Idaho for 1,250 orphans, South Idaho for 834 orphans, Utah for 1,250 orphans, Montana for 834 orphans and Alaska for 83 orphans. Dr. Divine's own congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Spokane cared for 50 orphans by providing \$60 a year for each orphan to be taken care of at NER orphanages.
- Alaska helped NER by raising funds for food and shelter of 83 orphan babies of the Bible land year after year. The total raised for caring of these children was \$5,000 per year. The appeal for funds was headed by Rev. David Waggoner of Juneau in 1920. The following year, E. A. Potter of Spokane, Northwest Secretary of NER voiced the desperate need for help of the 120,000 orphans in its facilities and 300,000 additional starving, half-naked orphans waiting outside the orphanages doors to get in. Per an article published in the *Pullman Herald* in December 1921, NER appealed to Alaska again to "mother" these babies who nobody else cared for. The article stated: "Eighty three orphan babies of the Bible

land have, figuratively, been left on Alaska's doorsteps, with a note from NER saying: Please feed them Alaska, lest they die."

### **Congregational**

- It was thanks in large part to the work of the Rev. Dr Lincoln L. Wirt, an American Congregational minister and the international commissioner of the NER that the relief efforts took on an international dimension. While visiting Australia in 1922, Wirt stated that his aim was to "form a chain of mercy from one end of the world to the other"—and his mission was a great success. By 1923, Wirt had helped to establish Armenian relief committees in Hawaii, Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines, Cuba, and New Zealand.
- After embarking from San Francisco aboard the Golden Gate in January 1922, Lincoln Wirt's first port of call was Waikiki, Hawaii, where he was warmly received at a reception held in his honor at the royal palace. At the event, an Armenian relief committee was formed with the American governor, Sanford B. Dole, as its chairman and the wife of the well-known missionary Dr. William D. Westervelt as its secretary. Under their guidance, Wirt was sent to every town on each island appealing for aid on behalf of the suffering Armenians. Wirt noted that "in every community committees were set up and a thorough canvass for funds inaugurated."
- During Christmas celebration churches of different denominations in Vermont joined together in raising funds for NER. Such an event was held on Sunday December 26, 1920, in Middlebury, Vermont, when the Sunday school of Memorial Baptist Church, joined the pageant at the Congregational Church for the benefit of Near East Relief.
- One example of congregational churches helping NER was First Congregational Church of Oak Park, Illinois raising \$4,000 for NER.

### **Methodist**

- October 29, 1922 was declared Near East Day for the churches of Lawrence, Kansas. Pastors of the city told of the condition of Smyrna and the need for money to keep millions of starving people from being wiped out by poverty. The Near East Relief film, "Alice in Hungerland" was screened at the Methodist Church. "Alice in Hungerland" was filmed in Armenia and helped to raise awareness among local residents about the plight and suffering of the Armenians, particularly the rescued orphan children who were in dire need of clothing, food and shelter.
- In Ardmore, Oklahoma, churches sponsored the care of many Near East orphans. Mr. Selvidge chaired the work done in Ardmore where the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church as well as many other church organization and some individuals committed to funding \$5 per month for each orphan they sponsored.

### **Episcopal**

- Alabama organized a group of volunteer speakers to raise awareness about the plight of people in Near East and raise money. One of the most successful fundraising was by Dr. Oscar deWolf Randolph, Rector of St. Mary's-on-the Highlands Episcopal Church of Birmingham, one of the ten volunteer speakers, who in six meetings raised \$5,341.
- In Maine, Children participated in raising funds for Near East Relief. For example, four children of Bishop Lawrence of the Episcopal Church contributed a five dollar gold piece and forty-eight cents in pennies, their summer savings.
- The Synod of the province of New England of the Episcopal Church met in Burlington, Vermont on October 26-27, 1920, and adopted a resolution which expressed confidence in the integrity and efficiency of Near East Relief and pledged support for the work being done by NER. The resolution described the situation in Asia Minor and the persecution of the Christian people by Turks. It further reminded their constituents of the dire need which existed among Armenians and other races of the Near East urging them to give NER their full support.

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### **First Church of Christ**

- In Ohio, Rev. B.R Johnson of the First Church of Christ headed the Near East Relief Drive for the East Liverpool district in 1920. Each 250 persons in the community were asked to contribute \$60, which would support one orphan for one year. The campaign was waged largely through churches, fraternal organizations and schools. A quota of \$7,200 was established and funds derived from the campaign were forwarded to Near East Relief's headquarters of Ohio in Cleveland for transfer to proper authorities in Asia Minor. The Evening Review of East Liverpool, Ohio stated in its October 6, 1920 issue: "The money will used in extending material assistance to the starving people of Armenia and Asia Minor, the victims of Turkish aggression and cruelty."

### **Church of Latter Day Saints**

- In 1920 the President of the Church of the Latter Day Saints, Herbert J. Grant, made a pledge of \$34,500 on behalf of the church at a meeting held at the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, after listening to an inspiring address by Dr. Loyal Lincoln Wirt.

- Per *St Johns Herald* in 1920, the state of Arizona was asked to provide funding to feed, clothe, and educate 1,000 orphans of the NER at cost of \$15 per month for each child. Gilbert E. Greer of L.D.S. Church of St. Johns Ward acted as the Chairman of the committee receiving donations. Mite boxes were placed in all the stores to collect nickel and dimes to help the fundraising effort and newspapers made appeals to Arizona citizens to “adopt”, figuratively, 1,000 orphans explaining that Armenia is the oldest Christian nation and that centuries of cruel persecution by Turks has not destroyed Armenian’s faith.

### **Pope Pius XI**

- *The Sunday State Journal* published in Lincoln, Nebraska ran an article about Pope Pius XI blessing the work of NER and appropriating five hundred and fifty thousand Lire for the relief of Smyrna victims.

### **Churches, Sunday schools and organizations united**

- The pastors of various churches in Atlanta, officers of the Atlanta Sunday schools, the Federation of Women’s Clubs, the parent-teacher associations, the Boy Scouts, and the Girl Scouts, among others, all diligently and religiously contributed to the work of the NER. Twenty five Atlanta school buildings were donated for Bundle Day by the Board of Education, as places for assembling relief bundles for the starving Armenians.
- In 1922 Portland’s Community Chest allocated \$33,000 to NER. The majority of churches in Oregon welcomed NER speakers and while small churches give few dollars to NER there were a number of big donations. Following a list of donations by some of the Oregon churches: First Methodist Church of Salem - \$1,700; Hood River Community Church- \$2,100; East Side Baptist Church- \$5,300; First Presbyterian Church of Portland-\$6,000.
- Sunday schools in Oregon gave more than \$10,000 during 1923 to NER. The First Christian Sunday School gave \$1,000 of this amount. This Sunday school raised \$700 to \$1,300 every Christmas from 1919-1923. Although they needed fund for their own building, they stated: “We cannot build our Church at the cost of lives of little children in the Near East.”
- 29,176 Armenian orphans were supported by Pennsylvania. Churches, Sunday schools, women organizations, fraternal organizations as well as public and private schools all contributed to the effort of supporting orphans quotas allocated to the state. George E. Silloway, Secretary of NER in state of Pa., designed and issued Orphan Adoption Coupon book to be sold everywhere in order to raise fund for the orphans.
- At the Indiana State Sunday School Convention in 1923, an automobile in a gigantic street pageant of Sunday school workers carried three Armenian women, victims of the deportation marches along with Armenian children who had been rescued by NER efforts. The children carried a banner that read, “We thank the American Sunday schools for aiding the orphans of Bible Lands.” (NNE Sept 1923)