



# Our Adventures in

*by* John A. Bennett, M.D., FACOG

---

As a child, whenever I heard about Outer Mongolia, I had the same feeling that the farthest reaches of the Universe bring today. If we had been observed after opening our calls to serve there, the tears that poured forth would have been easily misunderstood. We both experienced a profound spiritual experience. The Holy Ghost filled us with love for a people we had never met. That love persists today upon our return and with it a sense that we are linked eternally to these hardy people.

*Continued on page 30*

# Outer Mongolia

*by Carolyn Romney Bennett*

---

Our mission to Mongolia will surely be one of the most extraordinary times of my life, and I almost missed it! John and I had always planned to go on a mission when we were older and our children were grown. But when he felt that it was time, I was not ready to sell our home of twenty years (it was too big to leave unattended for two years) and I worried that our family would never survive without us. I am so grateful for the example of Sarah's support of Lehi, for it gave me courage to support a righteous husband.

*Continued on page 33*

Except for three years as undergraduates at the University of Utah (1954-1957), Carolyn and I have lived away from the center stakes of Zion throughout our lives. Each step has been dictated by fasting and prayer. I grew up in New York City and Carolyn in Las Cruces, New Mexico. After medical school (Cornell 1961) and post graduate work (medicine, then OB-GYN), we spent three-and-a-half years in West Berlin, Germany. I told people those were the safest years of our lives as we had the entire Russian Army protecting us rather than the Viet Cong shooting at us! Settling in Albuquerque established us in our beloved Southwest with its great open vistas and multicultural experiences.

By 1994 I had experienced every permutation of OB-GYN practice known to man culminating in a full-time faculty appointment. All of these were worthwhile, but the encroachments on my idealism by political correctness, social agendas, HMO's, and the sense of being a daily target as an OB-GYN hit hard. It was time for a change.

Our good friend, Vern Payne, wanted us to accompany him to the Canary Islands as mission physician couple at the recommendation of Howard Francis, MD, who preceded him as president. I put on my missionary application the words "intrepid", "as long as needed", and "where the Lord wants us to be." We soon learned that it would not be a tropical island for 18 months but "Asia Area/Mongolia" for 2 years. I was amused by the enclosure stating we were under the Asia Area, headquartered in Hong Kong, so we would need short sleeves shirts only. (It helps to read articles in *National Geographic*.)

Mongolia, the former "Outer Mongolia," and more recently the Mongolia Soviet Socialist Republic, began to come out of isolation with the collapse of the Soviet Empire (USSR) around 1990. Tens of thousands of Russians left at that time. They left behind many stripped military bases and a crumbling infrastructure including abandoned prefabricated concrete apartment buildings. The strategic importance of Mongolia lies in its site as a huge buffer state between China to the south and Russia (Siberia) to the north. After the era of Mongolia conquests, China was in control from 1644 to 1911. The Russian Revolution led quickly to domination by the Soviet communists by 1924. The times of isolation began then. The predominant religion, "Yellow Hat" (Tibetan) Buddhism, was severely repressed. During the horrible Soviet purges of the 1930's a similar event occurred in Mongolia. Tens of thousands of men, including almost all identified lamas (Mongolian "lam") were exterminated. (As many lams were family people, it would seem comparable to losing the entire Priesthood of the Church in a country.)

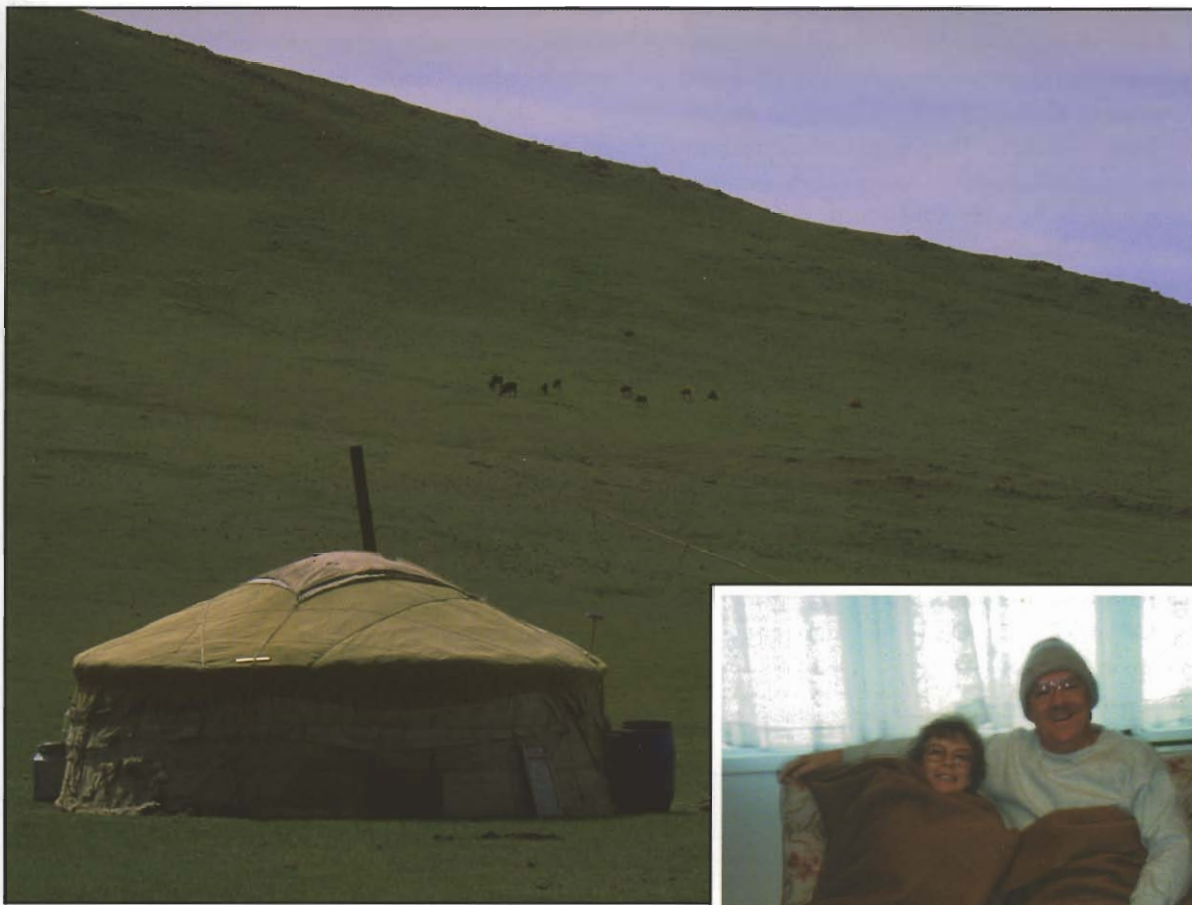
The vacuum left by the abrupt Soviet departure led to

great hopes for "freedom". The new unicameral Parliament elected in 1992 consisted of 70 Communists (Mongolian National Revolutionary Party) and six others. All espoused freedom. Contacts with the West were increased and many nations and organizations sent representatives and help. It was this milieu that led to invitations being extended to the first LDS teachers. Initially, only couples were sent. They represented many disciplines, including accounting and medicine. Everyone who serves in Mongolia teaches in some way- usually English in a university, technical school, or secondary school setting. I taught OB-GYN at a major teaching hospital but also taught English classes at the Mongolian Technical University.

A "service" or "teaching" mission creates rather unique simultaneous problems and opportunities. Because all of us have the desire to bring converts unto Christ, sometimes each of us has to be reminded that we are guests of the host country for its particular reasons. This means that school lesson preparation has to be emphasized, particularly to the young missionaries who want to be "full-time" just like their friends in other countries. The reality is each of us had two full time callings: secular teacher and spiritual teacher. Our days were long and full. As indigenous missionaries (usually women) have been called, they have been able to be more traditional full-time missionaries. The first four Mongolian elders called to served in Mongolia had to be reassigned elsewhere as missionary service in country would have led to immediate conscription into the Army.

One benefit of the former Soviet system was comprehensive public education. This means that one is teaching a literate population fluent in their native language and often Russian as well. After World War II the decision was made to replace the vertical traditional script with Mongolian phonetically represented in Cyrillic. This recent familiarity with a western style horizontal language has been tremendously helpful in learning English. Many of the members have been able to study the gospel in Russian. The Old and New Testaments, especially the latter, are available in a variety of translations into Mongolian. Several members have studied other languages such as English, Japanese, Chinese, German, French, and Korean. The Mongolian members who have studied or are studying at Brigham Young University - Hawaii, Utah Valley State College, and other school are adding to their English abilities.

The Church in Mongolia is already being affected by returned missionaries. The first two Mongolian missionaries left in July 1995. Sisters Batchimeg and Soyelmaa served in Utah. Their post-mission activities are typical of the current young Mongolian experience. Batchimeg is studying at UVSC (three RM Mongolia roommates) and Soyelmaa is one of a growing number of those pro-



While Elder and Sister Bennett enjoyed the luxury of a poorly heated apartment (*right*), most native Mongols live in white, portable tent structures called “ger” (*above*).

---

viding leadership at home. Those returning home have served in the US, Russia, Scotland, and Korea.

Mongolia is a totally landlocked nation lying mostly on a high plain not unlike our New Mexico. There are two major mountain ranges and the famous Gobi Desert. The populations of about 2.5 million Eurasian people, primarily from the Khalkh tribe, are spread over a country about the size of the western United States (or about three times as large as France). One-fourth live in about the capital city of Ulaanbaatar ("Red Hero"). Even in "UB" almost half the population live in the round tent structures called "ger". Farther west it is called a "yurt" in turkic languages. A ger is designed to be taken down and moved by a nomadic people tied to the need to pasture their herds and flocks. Even today this is true of Mongolians. In the urban setting a ger is inexpensive but seldom moved. It requires the use of central water stations and outhouses. The potential for epidemics is high.

The ger always faces south which is the reference direction for Mongolians. The words for "west" and "right" (similarly east and left) have the same root. This leads to uncomfortable confusion for the foreigner until understood. As one stands in the doorway facing out (south) the woman's side with its kitchen hutch is to the left and the man's side is to the right. The ger is insulated with felt, covered with canvas and has no windows. The floor may be dirt, especially in the countryside, but may be wood (in sections for ease of moving) covered with felt pads and/or rugs. Cooking takes place in the center of the ger. Traditionally this was an open brazier with dung as the fuel but now is often a stove with a pipe through the formerly open roof to reduce heat loss. Around the sides are beds and dressers of an oriental style. If there is a Buddhist shrine it will be in the side directly opposite the door. (We now have a ger in our backyard.)

Mongolians love photographs, so pictures abound. One spends a great deal of time looking at albums that are quickly produced. The visiting member of the Church is at a distinct disadvantage at first because the two most commonly offered beverages are hot milk tea or fermented mare's milk. As we become known, the beverages served are hot water or hot fruit-flavored punch. Mongolians are very hospitable, even to the traveler who is a stranger.

The hunger for knowledge of the outside world is high

among our students. They have proven a fertile ground for teaching of the Savior and the restored gospel. They want to know about Christianity. Many have commented that we are the only Christians who don't "bad-mouth" others. As our greatest number of contacts are among the student-age population, the Church in Mongolia has developed a distinctly feminine youthful flavor, but family teaching is emphasized.

The initial work was in Ulaanbaatar, but this has expanded now mainly to cities and towns north and south along the Irkutsk-Beijing leg of the Trans-Siberian railway. This provides reliable year-round transportation. There are branches in distant places like Hovd and the ancient capital of Harhorin (Karakorum) which are harder to reach. There are now six branches in UB (the second was formed just three years ago). Under the direction of then Asia Area President John Carmack, the Mongolia District was formed in 1996 with President Enkhtuvshin presiding. Before that, Enkhtuvshin had been the first Mongolian Branch President after serving as my counselor.

**As our greatest number of contacts are among the student-age population, the Church in Mongolia has developed a distinctly feminine youthful flavor, but family teaching is emphasized.**

From the arrival of Elder Beesley is September 1992 through the administration of Elder Charles Hardy and the formation of the Mongolia Ulaanbaatar Mission under its first President, Richard E. Cook (now of the Second Quorum of Seventy), in the spring of 1995, the desire for our own church building has been great. I served as President Cook's counselor and spent large amounts of time looking for and at buildings that might possibly be available

or meet our needs. Finally the happy fulfillment of this desire has become a reality under the stewardship of President Gary Cox. The faithfulness of President and Sister (Joyce) Cox is inspiring. They served a full 18 month mission in Mongolia, were home about 8 months, then returned as the second mission president for a new three year call (to 1999). It is a privilege to count the many couples, young elders and sisters, and Mongolians as friends and fellow servants.

---

*John A. Bennett, MD, FACOG, is a retired obstetrics-gynecology specialist from Albuquerque, New Mexico. He previously served on the board of Collegium Aesculapium.*

Blessings from our stake president that our family would be watched over by the Lord, and blessings in the Senior Missionary Training Center again that our families would be protected as we served a mission, and all the Lord's promises recorded in scripture to support those who followed His commandments, cast out fear, and we flew off to Mongolia.

For two years I was able to share everything that I have learned and was able to help others who needed and appreciated all I could do. Charity and love became mine as I served and learned from people who are searching for freedom and values and wanted to know all about democracy and Christianity and righteousness.

When the Soviet Union's global ambitions collapsed in 1990 and they pulled their armies back home, Mongolia issued scrip to every citizen to bid on buildings and property which had previously been the communist state's. A *National Geographic* article had made me think about the long struggle Mongolia and other countries seeking "democracy" were going to face. I could help, I thought. And through our mission, I could. I found myself in classrooms teaching English to University students who asked questions like, "Tell us about freedom of religion." I answered, "In America we are free to be Christians or Buddhist or Hindus or nothing at all. You all had to be Buddhist when China ruled you, and some of you were not happy. When Russia was here, all of you had to be atheists and some of you were not happy. Now you have freedom of religion so each of you can find happiness as you each choose how to live your lives. Your democracy will not continue if you lose this freedom." Those students, the future of Mongolia, listened and nodded. I was able to tell all of my classes about the importance of honesty. I was able to show that keeping the Word of Wisdom is possible and explain why it is good, to people who were really curious. I was able to talk to the Church members about agency and chastity, and families and gratitude and joy. And they helped me understand the difficulty of living such precepts when doing so might have cost them their lives. "Mrs. Bennett," a University vice-president explained, "when Russia was here, if one knew the right person at the right time, one survived. One could not ever offend another by refusing anything

they asked for." (Honesty was never a possibility in such a system.) I grew in my appreciation and love of family and church and country back home. I grew to understand how truly blessed we all are in America with the restored gospel to guide us. And I learned that with the gospel, all people can be similarly blessed.

Away from family and friends, my love for them grew even more. Grandchildren proudly bore their testimonies

about their grandparents in Mongolia (one grandson said that he knew that Jesus Christ lives in Mongolia!) Two grandchildren were baptized while we were baptizing new members that same age and older. Our youngest son Richard was sealed to his bride in the Salt Lake temple as my parents stood in for us, and we joined them at the reception by long distance phone. John's brother, Stephen, died and we had to send love and sympathy over the phone as we cried on the other side of the world from the family. But the Lord was with our loved ones, and

everything that we could have done, and more, was done. I know that He watched over them, and provided for them in ways that were better than we could have if we had been there. I was almost afraid to come home and resume our stewardship here.

Joy will always be present as we remember the wonderful people we met: members who have served missions around the world; brothers and sisters who sacrifice to lead the Church, and who valiantly live their religion and whose righteousness will be the salvation of their country.

I know that the Lord will give us all that we are willing to accept, and I am grateful that my husband was willing to pursue our mission call, and that we were the recipients of love and joy unmeasured.

---

*Carolyn Romney Bennett is the wife of John A. Bennett, M.D. She served with her husband in Mongolia.*

**"Now you have freedom of religion, so each of you can find happiness as you each choose how to live your lives," I told our students. "Your democracy will not continue if you lose this freedom." Those students, the future of Mongolia, nodded and listened.**