John Elder and James O. Arroll arrived in Yerevan, Armenia in January 1918 to open a YMCA center, which they did on February 11. They had not anticipated being stranded as the only Americans left in the country’s capital city with all communication to the outside world cut off when the frontline faltered. World War I was still raging at the time and Allied forces were in retreat on this front. The November 11 Armistice that ended the global conflict was many months away, crucial months during which the very existence of the Armenian people hung in the balance. By the time they left Yerevan in August 1919, John Elder and James O. Arroll had become responsible for the entire operation set up by U.S.-based charities that had earlier sent emergency aid and volunteer workers to Armenia. As John Elder wrote on January 16, 1919: “One year in Yerevan and what a year it has been. Had anyone told me a year ago that in addition to running a YMCA, I would be in charge of factories employing 7,500 people, orphanages with 350 children and a 120 bed hospital, I would have thought them crazy.”

This exhibit reconstructs the story of the near superhuman efforts undertaken by John Elder and James O. Arroll to rescue Armenians from the many perils they faced during the 1918-1920 independent Republic of Armenia. The exhibit relies upon John Elder’s own words from his published journal, along with original records that he personally saved from the time of his service, and the photographs that he made and captioned. Elder and Arroll arrived as two enthusiastic young men dedicated to the purpose of sustaining morale among soldiers enduring long campaigns and treacherous conditions as the Great War kept grinding on, year after year, without end. They departed as two celebrated heroes who stood by the Armenian people at the fateful hour. John Elder wrote on May 26, 1918, as Ottoman Turkish forces advanced to the outskirts of Yerevan: “You never can tell what may happen. Just as the end seems at hand the pendulum swings the other way...After a two-day battle at Sardarabad, the Turks have been completely routed.” With the decisive battle won, two days later, on May 28, 1918, Armenia declared independence.

The only Americans in Yerevan at the time, Elder and Arroll witnessed momentous events and the unfolding of a heart-wrenching humanitarian disaster as the ravages of war were revealed once the fighting stopped. A year elapsed before a new crew of relief workers reached Armenia to lighten the burden they shouldered. In the meantime, their efforts and accomplishments had become legend among admiring Armenians and fellow Americans at home.
On October 24, 1914, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson addressed the Young Men's Christian Association's Celebration in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Great War in Europe had broken out three months earlier. While the United States would not enter the fray for another three years, the global conflict was in the back of his mind when he said: “I believe in the Young Men’s Christian Association because I believe in the progress of moral ideas in the world; and I do not know that I am sure of anything else.”

By 1914, John Elder, a student at Washington & Jefferson College in eastern Pennsylvania, was already involved with the YMCA and the associated Student Volunteer Movement. Wilson’s own father, a Presbyterian minister, had attended the very same school. The president began his speech noting that “by long association with the men who have worked for this organization I can say that it has enlisted my deep affection.” He aimed to inspire his audience by exhorting: “Be militant! Be an organization that is going to do things!”

His concluding remarks already gave expression to the ideals that would guide his policies in war and peace: “But no man can look at the past of the history of this world without seeing a vision of the future of the history of this world; and when you think of the accumulated moral forces that have made one age better than another age in the progress of mankind, then you can open your eyes to the vision. You can see that age by age, though with a blind struggle in the dust of the road, though often mistaking the path and losing its way in the mire, mankind is yet—sometimes with bloody hands and bended knees—nevertheless struggling step after step up the slow stages to the day when he shall live in the full light which shines upon the uplands, where all the light that illumines mankind shines direct from the face of God.”

The War Council in 1918 consisted of (seated from left) Assistant Secretary of War Benedict Crowell, Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo, President Woodrow Wilson, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Chairman of the War Industries Board Bernard Baruch; (standing from left) Food Administrator (and future president) Herbert Hoover, Chairman of the United States Shipping Board Edward N. Hurley, Chairman of the War Trade Board Vance McCormick, and Fuel Administrator Harry A. Garfield.
The Russian Government gave a bread ration for a while, but it was the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief that organized permanent and really efficient relief in this congested district. It sent there Mr. Richard Hill, late in 1915, and soon after Dr. Samuel Wilson from Persia; both were American missionaries. Dr. F. W. MacCallum of the Constantinople Mission and Mr. George F. Gracey of Ourfa went there early in 1916 and were joined some months later by Dr. George C. Raynolds and Rev. and Mrs. Ernest A. Yarrow, formerly of the Van Mission, who had left Bitlis for their furlough in May 1915.

The Americans immediately began to organize industrial relief. Crude wool and cotton were brought and cleansed, carded, spun, woven and made into garments and blankets by refugees, for refugees. Refugees made spinning-wheels, handlooms, sandals and, later, farm implements. Every dollar of relief money was thus made to do the work of two. Every individual employed supported a family averaging five or six members. The aged, infirm and helpless were given money and needy widows with children to support were given a small sum monthly for each child. Children were taught trades; a small hospital was opened and a daily clinic held by Dr. Kennedy, who had been sent out by the Lord Mayor of London’s Committee for Armenian Relief. Another Englishman who worked with the American Committee most efficiently was Mr. Thomas Dann Heald of Bristol, while Mr. Backhouse and Mr. Catchpool of the Lord Mayor’s Committee cooperated with it in friendly and effective fashion. In 1917 Messrs. Compton, Elmer, Partridge, James, White, Williams, Mrs. White, Mrs. Compton and Miss Orvis were sent from America to assist in the work which had reached proportions beyond the strength of those who had originally organized it. Had not their Armenian superintendents been men trained in the mission work of Van—educated, capable, trustworthy men, filled with the spirit of service and cooperation, the task of the Americans would have been an almost impossible one.

Russia’s separate peace with Germany spelled catastrophe to the relief work. The American consul at Tiflis, Mr. F. Willoughby Smith, sent the American workers away. Wrote Mr. Yarrow later:

“...The following argument put forth by the consul, I think appealed to us all and it was on this ground that we decided to leave. It seemed most likely that the Germans had designs on the Caucasus and if they sent even a small force from Odessa there was nothing to oppose them. Then our being with the Armenians would do them more damage than good. We would immediately be interned, our equipment confiscated and probably the activity of the Committee be entirely stopped. On the other hand, if we should withdraw and leave the work of the Committee in the hands of the local Armenian committees the Germans might allow them to continue. And the consul assured us that he could arrange for the transfer of funds through the Swedish consul or some other neutral agency. I think it was harder for us to come away than it would have been to stay, but we tried to weigh the question calmly and logically and I still believe we decided wisely. The situation was entirely different from the one we faced in Van three years before. We were warned then of what was to happen and with our eyes open we decided to stay and share the fate of the people with whom we had lived and worked for so many years, but now our position was entirely different. We were in a land foreign to ourselves and to the refugees to whom we were ministering. We had given them all our strength and intelligence, but new conditions over which we had no control made it impossible to help further; on the contrary, our presence with them might be a real element of danger to their security, and with heavy hearts but free consciences we left the work to which we had been giving the best that was in us.”

The party left Erivan March 19th (1918). The chance of getting anywhere with a whole skin seemed very uncertain; the train was searched at every stop by the Tartars [Azeris]: the stations were almost all destroyed and villages were burning all along the way.

Mr. James Arroll and Mr. John Elder, two young Americans, had been doing Y.M.C.A. work among the soldiers in the Caucasus for a short time. They secured consent from the district secretary to remain a while at least. Mr. Heald remained for a few days in Erivan to complete the transfer of the work to the Armenian Committees aided by Mr. McDowell of the Persian Branch of the Relief, then in British service, and Mr. Gracey who had become a captain in the British army. Mr. Heald left Tiflis on the last train allowed to pass by the Tartars. Mr. McDowell was ordered to Alexandropol and Captain Gracey to Tiflis. (He was afterward made prisoner by the Bolsheviks and not set free till late in the spring of 1919.) One of the two Y.M.C.A. men became very ill, the other cared for him; on his recovery they divided the relief work between them.

So the industrial relief at Erivan was never discontinued, the orphanages and hospital never closed, throughout all the changes that took place in that harassed region during the next few months.

From American missionary Grace Knapp’s account The Tragedy of Bitlis, 1919.
News comes today that Erzerum has fallen into Turkish hands. Capt. Gracey considers this very serious and disappointing...Consul Smith advises all Americans to leave at once, on a special train which may be the last. With considerable difficulty secured permission to stay for the present. Arroll staying also, and there are three members of the Gracey Mission. The next day the others all left, 24 in all. (Elder, March 14, 1918)

The fall of Sarakamish that might have created a panic, seems to have been the making of the country...We are getting into the relief work in earnest. There are about 13,000 homeless orphans on our lists, 500-10,000 spinning women in the clothes factories. Altogether I suppose we must be relieving 50,000 people a month. (Elder, April 15, 1918)
Word from McDowell that Kars is to be surrendered has brought me up to Alexandropol to dispose of our supplies before this place falls. Arrived in bitter cold at 3:00 A.M. The Station was a pathetic sight. Every inch on the inside was packed with refugees, floors, benches, window sills, with hundreds more on the platform outside. Went out in the morning to watch the refugees coming in. A heartbreaking sight. As far as the eye could reach up the valley towards Kars the valley swarmed with thousands of sheep, cows, horses and water buffaloes. All day long an endless stream poured through the city, some on horseback, some on oxen or oxcarts, many on foot. (Elder, April 30, 1918)
Has the end come at last? Official telegrams report that the Turks are bombarding Alexandropol. The Turks have cut the railroad on both sides of Alexandropol, which means we are cut off from funds. (Elder, May 16, 1918)

Alexandropol has fallen. The Turks demand the railroad to Julfa in order to transport their troops, and the Armenians are prepared to give it. All our stores in Alexandropol, reported lost. For a time we were worried about McDowell, but he turned up last night with the latest news. The Turks bombarded Alexandropol entirely without warning or ultimatum, and continued all one day. Bob spent a good part of his time in the trenches, and the soldiers say he fought heroically. He reports that the soldiers and civilians fought heroically but that most of the officers only fought each other in a mad scramble to get out of danger. In the evening, the city was stormed and captured. Bob walked most of the way to Karakalis on foot and came from there by car. (Elder, May 21, 1918)

As he [U.S. Consul F. Willoughby Smith in Tiflis] indicated there are still funds; that settled it for us. We are staying. (Elder, May 21, 1918)
I went around with Mr. Yarrow to see the relief work they are carrying on for the refugees. The method they employ is splendid. Instead of giving outright relief, they give employment to the older people, making the clothing which is given to the orphans. Starting with raw wool they wash it, card it, spin the thread, dye it and then weave the cloth. They employ many as carpenters and builders and use others as tailors making clothes. Orphan children are card indexed and given $1.00 per month allowance, and clothing sent from time to time in bundles, each containing one complete outfit. At present they are short of money. Went around to see the hall they have in mind for my work. It looks good. (Elder, January 17, 1918)

Well, you never can tell what may happen. Just as the end seems at hand the pendulum swings the other way and the terrible Turk is in full retreat... After a two day battle at Sardarabad, the Turks have been completely routed... It is great the way the people are rallying to the cause...News is that the soldiers are fighting valiantly and slowly pushing back the Turks toward Alexandropol. (Elder, May 26, 1918)

In the recaptured territory, the bodies of many slain are found, and we hear terrible stories of atrocities, ears and noses cut off and eyes gouged out. (Elder, May 26, 1918)

I had the thrill of attending the opening session of the Parliament of the Republic of Armenia. What an exciting time it was. A free and independent Armenia for the first time in 600 years or more! There was a great crowd present, and through an interpreter I gave an address of congratulations on the historic occasion. (Elder, August 11, 1918)

A telegram was read out saying the United States were sending relief supplies... Friday we attended the meeting of Parliament again and watched them pass unanimously and without debate the bill to loan us one million rubles for three months, the first bill they tell us that was ever passed that way. (Elder, November 9, 1918)
Fourgons are long covered wagons typically used to transport baggage or supplies.

Passed constant stream of refugees. Armenia is a nation on fourgons.* What in the world will they do or live on? (Elder, June 11, 1918)

*Fourgons are long covered wagons typically used to transport baggage or supplies.

From all sides we hear that people are starving to death...We’re flooded with requests every day, applicants for work stand all around the office, crying, kissing our hands, holding up the children for whom they have no bread – and we can do nothing. (Elder, June 1, 1918)

We learn that the American consul has left Tabriz also which is the worst yet, for that cuts off the last outlet for funds. (Elder, June 11, 1918)

Peace seems to be accepted fact, though no one trusts the Turks and all expect them to strike again whenever it suits them. (Elder, June 11, 1918)

We hear the Germans have reached Tiflis, have been enthusiastically welcomed by the Georgians and have recognized the State of Georgia as under their protection. We hear they have their officers in every station to the second from Alexandropol. (Elder, June 11, 1918)

This week, the relief work going at full strength again. The sale of New York drafts keeps up well. The Etchmiadzin work is re-opened, and we have a milk distributing station at Dilijan. We need to get work started at Novo Bayazid where we hear people are desperate. (Elder, June 30, 1918)

The Igdir road served as the principal highway for traveling north to Etchmiadzin and Yerevan. Because of its location just inside the Russian, and Armenian, border, it was the first destination for refugees fleeing Turkey. As the town changed hands during WWI, Armenians also fled Igdir in advance of the Ottoman armies. Today Igdir is located on the Turkish side of the nearby border and is no longer inhabited by Armenians.
The fall of Constantinople has sent the Turks rushing back to defend their homeland, and although they are burning, looting and killing on the way, Armenia is saved... But the Turks are slow to evacuate completely, and while they delay, tens of thousands of refugees camp in the bitter cold waiting the word that will permit them to go back home. For weeks I have not gone to work without hearing the heartbreaking sobs of children, grimy, half naked, freezing and starving by the wayside. The English Garden is a village of tents. One constantly sees a bare two wheeled cart draw up by one or the other of them, wan parents placing within it the still form of the one who was once the joy and pride of their hearts. There is no service and there are no mourners...Noisily the cart rattles away leaving behind a desolate benumbed couple to face the bitter weary hungry days ahead with aching hearts. More and more we are receiving patients in our hospital too weak to stand, so weak they merely fade out of life. And while the Turks grow fat on the wealth of the Arax valley, shipping westward tons of wheat, barley, rice and grapes, those who have sown them starve within sight of their rightful homes. (Elder, November 9, 1918)
In Kamarlu, we opened an orphanage at the request of the government for 100, but before we took over, the government had accepted 300...In my heart is a great ache that hurts all the way through and tears are always on my eyelids at the sight of the dirty, trembling, starved waifs wandering everywhere on the streets. Typhus is raging with deadly fury. One tenth of Erivan is stricken and the strains of the funeral march are heard daily, the chant of the priests and the sound of their passing footsteps hourly.

I went back with the refugees returning to Kamarlu...One saw the same hungry faces, the same shivering figures, the same burdens as before, but there was a difference. This time they were going home, and there was hope and joy where there had been only despair...Quietly they moved into their homes as twilight fell. Silently they filtered out into the side streets, each family finding the home that it had left so hastily months before, to rebuild the hearth fires so long dead under the invaders hands. They came back in hope. Surely their troubles were over, now they were home again. But they were speedily disenchanted. The district had been swept clean. The few remnants of food left by the Turks doubled and trebled in price the first week and was soon gone. In many a village nothing of the slightest value remained.

I shall never forget the utter desolation of Davalu. Furniture, doors, windows, everything of the slightest value had been stripped away, the gaunt abode ruins standing open to wind and rain. No wonder that immediately typhus started its deadly work. Famine has walked the streets, and thousands found in their old homes, their tombs. (Elder, January 5, 1919)
In the meantime, the war with Georgia had added one more load to the awful burden of misery. The Armenian government treasury was in Tiflis, and all of its funds were seized on the outbreak of hostilities. It has crippled all the efforts the Armenian government has been making to meet the appalling need. We now have five soup kitchens in the Kamarlu district and two in Igdir. At each point we have male nurses who give their time to the free distribution of medicines and the care of the sick. The degree of hunger is beyond description. One man was found dead with a piece of his leather sandal in his mouth from which he was trying to get nourishment. (Elder, January 5, 1919)

Dr. John H. T. Main [person in uniform walking in picture above], President of Grinnell College in Iowa, who served on the national board of the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACRNE), arrived in Armenia in March 1919 to assess conditions in the region. The graveyard in the border town of Igdir containing an entire section of freshly-dug graves, where Dr. Main is seen walking, was photographed by John Elder to document the high death toll in the refugee population.

I have photographs of graves that had been opened at night and corpses that had been dug out and the bones picked bare. (Elder, April 24, 1919)

Spreading famine throughout the land...Typhus continues to wreak terrible havoc. Scarcely a house in the city has escaped it, and in many - two, three and even five members have died. (Elder, February 11, 1919)

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I went in to see Dr. Sahakian, the head of the government orphanage. He was gloomy in the extreme. He has 2,000 orphans under his control and that day had given them the last bread in their storeroom. He said they had potatoes enough for one day, rice for three days, and then - nothing but starvation to offer. The thought of having to watch his 2,000 boys die of starvation was driving him nearly crazy. (Elder, February 11, 1919)
At Alexandropol, the misery beggars description. The Station platform and station are swarming with the half starved refugees, little more than walking skeletons. (Elder, February 11, 1919)

Jim Arroll is back from his trip to Persia where he was able to send cables to America to let the Committee know that the work was still going on and that we need money. Now that the British are in the Caucasus they are shipping in large supplies of wheat, and we are the distributors at this end. Gen. Beach is in charge of the operations. He will turn the wheat over to Jim in Tiflis, they will send it to us with Sikh guards to keep it from being stolen en route, and the Committee will distribute it in Armenia. Mr. Maynard has arrived, and then left for Tabriz to get funds, so I am alone again. The flour is already pouring in and will save tens of thousands of lives. It's about the happiest job I ever undertook. (Elder, February 23, 1919)

I have photographs of graves that had been opened at night and corpses that had been dug out and the bones picked bare. People just can’t believe that things like this happen, until they see it. In spite of all our letters and telegrams, Gen. Thomson, the British commander said: “Why, there can’t be people starving to death.” It was only when he came to Alexandropol and saw them actually lying dead and dying on the street that he really believed it. (Elder, April 24, 1919)
A few days ago, I went to Etchmiadzin. On the way, we passed the carcass of a horse by the roadside, so common that for miles one is not out of the smell of their decaying bodies. But in this case we saw three peasant women tearing off the flesh with their bare hands to prepare themselves a meal. We stopped for a moment at the cemetery to watch the grave diggers at work. They showed us that day’s grave, eighteen corpses piled in one huge grave, little more than skeletons, so thin that every bone seemed exposed. The day before the toll had been 30. And so it goes in every village and hamlet and city throughout Armenia. I don’t know how much of this a human being can stand, moaning children on the doorsteps, starving people dying on the street, famished mobs at the office door fighting for a place in the direct relief line. I’ve sympathized till my nerves are numb and there is nothing left but a dumb resentment against the whole awful situation. (Elder, March 2, 1919)

The past month has witnessed a cholera epidemic in Yerevan. For a time it was terrible. Every day going to work through the English Garden I have seen dead or dying refugees. Even on the main streets they would be seen at times dying unattended. We did what we could. Hired a doctor to devote full time to the refugees, put a squad of men to work in cleaning up the English Garden, bought individual drinking cups for employees and for a time closed the spinning shops entirely. We hired a squad of grave diggers to go around and gather up the corpses off the street and bury them. Now the worst is past, as the cooler weather has checked it. We heard of one priest who conducted 33 funerals in a single day, and at the last, himself dropped dead of the disease. (Elder, September 8, 1918)
I went to the Ministry of Refugees to talk about repaying the one million rubles we had borrowed from them. The Minister seemed very much surprised at suggesting such a thing. “Has any one asked you to return it?” he asked. When I said no one had, he said ‘Then forget about it. The money has been spent well, as we all know, and for our own people.’ So that is that. (Elder, July 27, 1919)

The typhus epidemic is taking a terrible toll and many of my best friends have gone. Among the refugees it has been a holocaust. (Elder, January 16, 1919)
Lieutenant-General George Francis Milne held the Allied command headquartered in Constantinople after the Armistice. The zone of his responsibility as chief of the British Army of the Black Sea included the Caucasus.

Then Wednesday, General Milne, commander of the British troops from Constantinople east paid us a visit. There was an elaborate parade, a long line of cars with an escort of cavalrymen each carrying the flag of one of the allied nations. I rode in the first car with the Commandant of the city and the Minister of Charities to outline the route of march. They visited many orphanages and went over our relief centers with greatest interest. (Elder, May 4, 1919)
We have been having some distinguished visitors. One was Mr. Howard Heinz, the head of the great Heinz Pickle factories, head of food conservation in Pennsylvania, and with him Mr. Smith, president of the American Bar Association. I took them down to Igdir and what they saw they will not forget in a hurry. We just went from house to house asking how many lived there and how many there had been when they first came back shortly before. Not a house had less than two dead, some had eight or ten. The Monday they visited our cloth factories and other industries where we now employ around 11,000 people. It was wonderful to me how Heinz sized up the situation, outlined the best methods for organization and pointed out the defects in the Caucasus work. (Elder, May 4, 1919)

Food is arriving in increasing quantities, and it is a thrill to see how the gaunt little orphans are beginning to fatten up; I could hardly had believed it, but actually when they first came to us they had forgotten how to smile. But as their health slowly comes back and color returns to their cheeks they begin to take an interest in life again and learn to laugh and play like normal kiddies. But for some reason, new swarms of waifs are appearing on the streets. We have opened a soup kitchen where 1,900 a day are being fed. The first day, fifteen of them died at the kitchen and there are about 100 sick lying around it now. We have put a squad of keepers on the job so that now the death rate is lower but their condition is pitiful in the extreme. Their clothing is nothing but filthy rags. (Elder, June 22, 1919)
Fred Tredwell Smith, who had done seven years of service as a missionary in Turkey as part of the Student Volunteer Movement, was a Harvard graduate who went on to become a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Later associated with the Columbia Teachers College, he worked with African-American and Jewish groups toward the improvement of race relations in the United States. He spent 20 months touring 15 countries in Europe and Asia before returning to America in September 1919. He reported his experiences to Rear Admiral Mark Bristol, U.S. High Commissioner in Constantinople, who forwarded the following report to the Department of State on September 20, 1919, which subsequently Assistant Secretary of State William Phllips presented to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in subcommittee hearings:

"Fred Tredwell Smith of the American Persian Relief Commission passed through here yesterday after varied experiences in Erivan and Nakhichevan and Tabriz and Urumia. When about August 25th he crossed the Tartar [Azeri] line via Nakhichevan to Tabriz [in Persia] for the second time the atmosphere was completely changed, and a Britisher’s life was no longer safe because the British had no troops, and Americans were also in danger. The Tartars [Azeris] opened battle on the Armenians in Nakhichevan July 20th and after a three-day battle drove out the British along with the American relief workers and began a massacre of Armenian men, women and children, estimates of the victims varying between 6,000 and 12,000. Smith had the testimony of the Americans that when they crossed the bridge at Julfa into Persia the [Arax] river was full of mutilated and headless corpses. On Smith’s return along this river in Russia, corpses still were seen along the river banks. At the present time Halilbey,* formerly in command of the Turks on the eastern front, now in command of the Tartars, is bringing Osmali [Ottoman] Turks over the narrow gauge railroad from Bayazid via Maka in order to attack Erivan."

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*Halil Bey, also known as Halil Kut, was a general in the Ottoman Army during WWI. Halil, along with his nephew, Ismail Enver, the Ottoman Minister of War, were the officials primarily responsible for the implementation in Western Armenia of the genocidal policies of the Young Turk regime, effectively wiping out the Armenian population of those historic districts. He publicly claimed to have overseen the slaughter of 300,000 Armenians. With the Armistice, he relocated to Azerbaijan and rallied local forces in order to continue implementing the Young Turk program for the complete eradication of the Armenian people.
Here’s a pretty war romance.

The other day Miss Mary Kifer of Billings was married to Marchese Dugli Albizzi, an Italian nobleman whom she met in Armenia while she was in that land as a nurse. The wedding was celebrated in a New York church, and the girl who was Miss Kifer, instead of returning to Billings and resuming her duties as a teacher in the public schools, will go to Italy and live all her days in a castle.

The story of the romance has been received here from the following in the New York World:

“Mary Kifer is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William A. Kifer of Sioux City, Iowa. Through her college career she was prominent in social and dramatic activities at the University of Iowa. After her graduation in 1913 she entered dramatic work at Northwestern university, in Evanston, Ill., with the idea that she would be a playwright and possibly an actress. Having begun a livelihood, she took a position as teacher of election and English in the high school at Billings. She left there to enter the Vasa training camp for nurses, all other applicants being side-tracked for war service. She entered in New Jersey during the ‘flu epidemic, then served in Lowell house in that city until she was sent overseas two years ago with a party of workers for the near-east relief.

“The city of Erevan, capital of the Armenian republic, Miss Kifer was made director of four orphanages in which were 4,000 children. She also had supervision over the distribution of clothing to Armenians and Turks in that district.

Romance on Skis

“The young American first met her nobleman at a skating party on the snow-clad hills outside Erevan. Miss Kifer had been too busy in following the dinner party given by the hostess in the next smallest house. In the city of titled visitor on a December night in 1918, but later they met at what will always be to them a very memorable and historic place.

“Mary Kifer had pride herself on the way she could skate, but she never showed it again, except at a tournament she once attended, she had never seen anything to compare with the experiences of the Marchese Albizzi. Besides, he is six feet two inches tall and good looking.

“Although the girl from Iowa had never been so much as suggested to existence of the gallant young officer until she was invited to meet him at that party, Lieutenant Albizzi often had seen her, and she was the only American in Erevan he desired very much to know.

“Then it happened that they had much in common to talk about. While she was taking care of half-starved and diseased refugees, he, as a member of the Italian military commission in the Caucasus, had been fighting under the rights of the oppressed little republic.

A War Hero

“Lieutenant Albizzi has a brilliant war record. Three times he was awarded the Italian medal for valor, twice the Italian military cross, and once the cross of Yugoslavia. Once on the field he was promoted for gallant and conspicuous service as a member of the Italian military commission in the Caucasus, and has been offered the rights of the oppresed little republic.

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Gertrude Pearson of Chicago spent 14 months in Armenia as a member of the field staff of the American Committee for Relief in the Near East.

When we arrived in the early spring of 1919, we found that Erivan, a city of normally 40,000, had become a moving population of over 100,000. We found several hundred refugees with scanty clothing, and those in rags, huddled together in one room, alive with vermin and covered with open sores and skin diseases, gradually freezing and starving to death. On the streets you would have thought you were moving about amongst living skeletons.

When we first arrived and before we had been able to get settled in the personnel house, we were forced to use our back porch as a dining room. At each meal the porch was surrounded with creatures, pitifully holding out their arms or leaning on a long stick, crying in their agony, "Mother, Mother! Bread! Bread! Most of them were too weak to say more.

The people had been living on grass and herbs, anything that they could get hold of. In our hospitals many people were brought to us who were unconscious (they were principally children) and whom we discovered had been feeding on the poppies in the fields. They were completely doped.

Each morning the dead wagon, as it was called, a little two wheeled cart, went thru the streets and about the town picking up the bodies, dead since the day before.

For a long time, we could find nothing which would accommodate more than 100 to 150 children and finally, when we did find one large school building holding six hundred, we were delighted. Before we knew it, we had 28 orphanages and three hospitals on our hands with 6,000 children to clothe and feed. It is estimated that in the whole of Armenia the organization was taking care of 110,000 children.

Gertrude Pearson, January 12, 1921

A landlocked country, in 1918 Armenia depended on a single lifeline, the railroad that connected Yerevan with the rest of Russia. Much of the relief supplies, as well as the American volunteers arrived over the same rail line. A single line ran north from Yerevan, through Etchmiadzin and Alexandropol/Gyumri, to the hub in Tiflis/Tbilisi, Georgia. The main line continued north to Russia, while a spur to the Black Sea port of Batumi connected the region to international shipping lanes. Elder and Arroll traveled over this line several times to oversee the delivery of critical supplies.
We had a fine break and a bit of rest the week end of the 4th of July. Most of the workers went up to Lake Sevan Friday morning, the rest of us coming up Saturday afternoon... [We] crossed out on the lake to an island monastery half a mile or so from the shore. It is an ideal place for a rest. The Monastery is located on a good sized rocky island in crystal clear Lake Sevan, which is about 6,000 feet above sea level and very cold. From the island cliffs, one can look down into the deep clear water and see large schools of beautiful lake trout, the Ishkan, or Prince, as they are called. It fairly burned me up to see those beautiful fish just waiting around to be caught and to have not even a bent pin to offer them.

There are several church buildings there, the oldest supposedly dating from the tenth century. There are many fascinating legends which the monks related to us about these churches.

So, with romantic legends, good swimming, fine fishing (if I only had some tackle) and delightful company, we had the finest one day vacation the heart could wish, my first day off in 18 months. (Elder, July 14, 1919)
This week I went up to Novo Bayazid for a last inspection. It is up in the mountains on the shore of Lake Sevan so it was a great relief from the heat to get up there. The reception they gave us was something I shall long remember. We had thought it very nice when at Darachichak we walked up a flower strewn walk and steps to our orphanage there, but that was nothing to our reception at Novo Bayazid. About five miles from the city we saw a squad of cavalry on the road ahead. With bared sabers they stood at attention along each side of the road as we drove up, and our local manager Mr. Arsen Khachigian, informed us that we had been welcomed by the Commandant of the city and his personal cavalry troop. We stopped the car and he rode up to welcome us in the name of the city and to express his appreciation for the work of the Committee during the previous year. From there on, the cavalry escorted us until about two miles from the city we came upon the orphans, over five hundred of them with flags in their hands and their arms filled with flowers...The kiddies cheered us, filled the car with flowers, and escorted us into town...It was hard saying good-bye to people you have known and worked with for so long as I have out here, especially to ones who have worked so faithfully as has Mr. Arsen. I had to swallow pretty hard as the car wound up out of the city to the echoes of the kiddies' cheers, many of whom would not be cheering today if God had not sent me here to help them. (Elder, July 27, 1919)

We have opened an orphanage at Novo Bayazid with definite instructions to our man to accept no more than 150 orphans. He wires back he has taken in 300 and has no food for them. Nor do we. (Elder, January 5, 1919)
At last I really have my release. About two weeks ago I sent in my third resignation, pointing out that there are now 64 American workers in the Caucasus, and naming a half a dozen persons who might take my place. Saturday I received the telegraphic answer I had asked for: “Released with regret.” A Mr. Spoer is coming to take my place, an older man reported to be very energetic and conscientious, so I am busy getting ready to go home.

Every one is going out of his way to overwhelm me with appreciation. I have a trunk full of farewell gifts; The Government has given me a lovely silver cup and a fine letter of thanks, and every one has been wonderful, letters of appreciation, embroidery work, silver work, pictures and all sorts of parting gifts have rained in.

A few mornings ago, as we finished breakfast we heard the sound of singing on the street outside, and went out to see two long lines of girl orphans, looking lovely in their new white dresses, singing a serenade. They called me down, and escorted me toward the English Garden, or Park. On the way, we were joined by thousands of other orphan children lined up along the way, singing and cheering. At the garden there were farewell speeches and more cheers as the orphans said good-bye. I was certainly proud of my populous family.

The government has now turned over to us all of their orphanages, so that I am now head of a family with 13,000 children; scattered throughout Armenia.

On May Day, the workers gave Jim and me a party that we shall not soon forget. It was held in the YMCA club which had been decorated beyond recognition for the occasion. There were about 70 invited guests including the leading workers, most of the cabinet ministers, Archbishop Khoren [Muratbekian, later Catholics] of the Armenian Church, newspaper men and all the local American, French and British communities. There were the sort of flowery speeches that make one wish what they said were really true, but what we prize most are the silver souvenir cups they gave us. They are lovely examples of the Van silver works including a picture of Woodrow Wilson, the American and Armenian flags in gold and silver, and an inscription that reads: “1918. In memorial of May 24th. Erivan, capital of the Armenian Republic. In those terrible days, two young Americans J. Elder and J. O. Arroll, members of the YMCA volunteered their lives willingly for the unfortunate nation of Armenia.” On the silver saucers accompanying the cups were pictures of the three great Armenian cathedrals, Etchmiadzin, Varag and Akhtamar. (Elder, May 4, 1919)

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(Elder, July 27, 1919)
postscript

With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Armenia's independence in 1991, the YMCA returned to Yerevan. In a repeat of history, Armenians were living in circumstances very similar to the time when John Elder and James O. Arroll were in Armenia during the first republic. Once again Armenia was blockaded by Turkey and Azerbaijan and a severe earthquake in December of 1988 had devastated the north of the country. In marked contrast to the anxious months when Elder and Arroll tackled the challenges they faced alone and with limited resources, on this occasion, numerous U.S.-based charities reached out to the newly-independent state to assist in its economic recovery and support social stability. American and international relief workers showed great creativity and determination to fulfill their missions and ease the suffering, and with the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the United States and Armenia, the American government generously sent aid and hundreds of specialists to encourage Armenia’s transition and enlistment among the nations of the free world. The programs to assist reconstruction in the earthquake-stricken zone, supplying heating fuel to relieve severe shortages during the first winters after independence, or financing the successful demining of the border regions of the Artsakh Republic contributed mightily to easing the mountain of challenges faced by Armenians.

In his 2017 year-end message, U.S. Ambassador to Armenia Richard M. Mills, Jr. marked the conclusion of a year-long celebration of America’s 25 years of partnership and friendship with an independent and sovereign Republic of Armenia by noting “the strong partnership between our two countries and the significant accomplishments we’ve achieved together.” A list of the milestones in bilateral relations included: over $1.1 billion to improve the lives of the Armenian people, supporting their efforts and friendship with an independent and sovereign Republic of Armenia by noting “the strong partnership between our two countries and the significant accomplishments we’ve achieved together.” A list of the milestones in bilateral relations included: over $1.1 billion to improve the lives of the Armenian people, supporting their efforts and friendship with an independent and sovereign Republic of Armenia by noting “the strong partnership between our two countries and the significant accomplishments we’ve achieved together.”

The exhibit AMERICAN RELIEF IN THE FIRST REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA 1918-1920 is a project of the Armenian National Institute, Armenian Genocide Museum of America, and Armenian Assembly of America, Washington, DC.

Dedication: To American relief workers who continue to volunteer in Armenia to this day. ©2018 Armenian National Institute

Research and presentation: Rouben Paul Adalian; project design: Joseph Piatt; exhibit graphic design: Aline Maksoudian

From the outbreak of the war in 1914 to the Communist Revolution in 1917, Russia was on the Allied side…The Russian authorities raised no obstacles to the Armenian, Assyrian, Nestorian, and Persian refugees who flooded their southern provinces. The Russian Government furnished emergency rations and army doctors in the fight against starvation, destitution, and epidemics among the refugees. However, these aids were far from adequate, and the American Consul in Tiflis, F. Willoughby Smith, appealed to the Near East Committee for help. Within a month, some $40,000 was en route, a prelude to far greater funds…some Americans from their institutions in Turkey and Persia accompanied the refugees from their countries, and later, additional American staff was sent from the United States. A local volunteer committee of Americans was formed, with Samuel G. Wilson, previously in Persia, as chairman, and Consul Smith as treasurer. They joined a British relief committee which had been created under the chairmanship of Lord Bryce. In return for monthly rations from the committee, some 130,000 Armenian refugees were set to work repairing irrigation ditches and rebuilding roads and sanitary systems. Factories were set up and some 2,500 refugee women were employed – at spinning cloth both for relief use and for public sale. Families were resettled in rural areas and provided with seed and animals; they soon became self-supporting. More than 15,000 orphans were apprenticed to refugees in 450 villages under a subsidy arrangement.

With the Communist Revolution in November, 1917, the Russian Government aid ceased. Medical supplies were unobtainable, and epidemics of typhus and relapsing fever raged among the refugees. However, the White Russian armies to the north provided a shield against the Communists, but the Germans and Turks began invasions from the south, and the American workers had to be temporarily evacuated. To prevent total break in the relief efforts, supplies and funds were left with local committees, while thousands of orphans continued to be cared for under the supervision of John Elder, a Young Men’s Christian Association worker who had been unable to leave because of illness. Elder and a companion who had remained to nurse him obtained funds for their effort by selling drafts on the Near East Committee in New York to local merchants. Although unknown to the Committee at the time, this device was approved by it ex post facto and the drafts honored.