

AIM QUESTION: How did the Quakers respond to the Great Irish Famine?

TEACHER BACKGROUND: In the fall of 1846, when the British government's response to famine relief proved inadequate, the Irish Quakers (Society of Friends) organized the Central Relief Committee to sell a quart of nutritious soup and a small half-loaf of bread. The soup cost one penny a quart; a penny and a half bought soup and bread. Friends of the poor bought soup tickets and distributed them to those who needed soup tickets. Later, most of their soup was given free.

While the Catholic Church administered the most famine aid in terms of dollar amount, the Irish Quakers (Society of Friends) have received the most praise for their famine relief efforts. The Irish government issued a stamp honoring the Quakers during the Famine commemoration year. The Irish Quakers compensated for their relatively small numbers with their energy, their compassion, their skills are organizing and their even-handed distribution of aid at a time when some religious groups tried to build their congregations by exploiting the hungry.

In 1852, the Quakers published a review of their activities in a publication, *Transactions*, which includes an outline of the work of the principal relief organizations; sections are included on the following pages. In addition to the organizations involved in relief, consideration should also be given to the thousands of individuals around the world who supported them with their contributions. Tribute should also be paid to the many thousands, perhaps millions, in Ireland who, in one way or another, assisted their neighbors in distress

ACTIVITIES:

1. One of the first soup shops to open was the Cork Society of Friends' Soup Shop. Look at the engraving of the soup shop below. The vats were heated by steam which was piped in through the window from another building. Describe what you see. The Quakers were especially concerned with cleanliness. What are they doing to keep their kitchen clean?
2. How is your local soup kitchen organized? Compare the Quaker soup kitchen. What food is served? Where is it prepared? How is the food preparation organized? What kind of equipment heats the food? What about cleanliness? What steps do the organizers take to keep the kitchen and serving areas clean? Who supports the soup kitchen? Draw, diagram or photograph your local soup kitchen.
3. When working among the poor during the famine, Asenath Nicholson noticed their praise for the Quakers. "Not belonging to that society, my opportunity of testing the true feelings of the poor was a good one, and when in a school or a soup-shop the

question was put -- " Who feeds you?" or "Who sends you these clothes?" The answer was "The good Quakers, lady, and it's they that have the religion entirely" (Nicholson 179). What did Nicholson's informants mean when they said, "They have the religion entirely? 2. One of the strengths of the Quaker relief efforts was their ability to organize a relief system. (Most of the prominent members of the Quaker's Central Relief Committee were successful businessmen.) What kinds of questions did the Dublin-based Central Relief Committee have to consider when planning programs of relief for the far south and west? How did they assess the needs of the community? What questions did they have to answer about how to implement a relief program in a remote area?

4. With a group of classmates, decide how you would organize a soup kitchen for your community. Who will do the work? What kind of food will be distributed? Where will it be distributed? When will it be distributed? How will it be distributed? Who will be eligible to receive your food?

Later in the spring of 1847, after the Quakers had established their soup kitchens, the government hired Alexis Benoit Soyer, the French chef at the Reform Club in London, to set up a model soup kitchen in Dublin.

**ACTIVITY SHEET A) A Boy's Memory:
Dublin During the Great Irish Famine**

Alfred Webb (1834-1908) was a Dublin Quaker whose family was involved in famine relief. They were also ardent abolitionists. Webb's father was one of the men who subscribed to the fund to buy Frederick Douglass's freedom; his closest American friend was William Lloyd Garrison. Webb did not write this account of his memories of Dublin during the famine; however, from what he wrote in his *Memoir* we can construct what Webb might have said about the times.

Source: Richard S. Harrison's Richard Davis Webb: Dublin Quaker Printer (1805-72), and from Asenath Nicholson's Annals of the Famine in Ireland,

My name is Alfred Webb. I was born in Dublin in 1834. My father was the printer Richard Davis Webb; my mother Hannah Waring Webb was from County Waterford. We lived in the center of Dublin, around the corner from Trinity College, at 176 Great Brunswick Street. We were Quakers. My father had many American friends and he shared in their work to end slavery in America. Americans like James and Lucretia Mott, founders of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Liberator, stayed with us when they visited Dublin.

I was eleven years old when the famine began in September, 1845. At first the government acted to buy extra food, but when the government changed in the 1846, and they were not willing to take action to help the poor. the potato crop failed again in 1846, and people were starving. Joseph Bewley called a meeting of the Dublin Quakers to talk about what could be done to feed those who were hungry. From their experience with abolitionism, they knew about how to organize a campaign. This time it was a campaign to provide food for those who were hungry, so they started the Central Relief Committee. My father's company Webb and Chapman gave the first contribution to the CRC.

The CRC decided that the best thing to do was to open a soup kitchen in the center of Dublin. They set up big vats to serve a nutritious soup for which the poor paid one penny for one quart. The poor really didn't pay for the soup. People bought soup tickets and gave them to the poor, or they left tickets with volunteers at the soup kitchen to give to the poor.

Sometimes, I went with my mother and my aunt to the soup kitchen and helped distribute tickets. The soup kitchen was open at seven in the morning and at mid-day. The room was warm with the heat from the vats, heat piped in from a steam engine next door. There was a smell of fresh bread and a sweet smell of simmering

soup. The Quaker ladies in white caps and aprons and with white sleeves pulled on over the sleeves of their dresses to keep the food clean worked quietly distributing soup to the line of thin, sad and ragged people who waited silently. They spoke softly to the people telling them not to lose hope. I sometimes went with my mother and my aunt to help distribute the soup tickets.

My father's friend Asenath Nicholson, an American who had come to work among the poor, stayed with us during the spring of 1847. She had her own soup kitchen across the river, and she used to go into the houses of the poor to cook for them. Sometimes she brought my brother and me along to help her carry her baskets. She always said that she could not help everyone, but that she could help some. Mrs. Nicholson closed her soup kitchen in the summer of 1847, and went out to the west where conditions were worse. That was the same time that our Quaker soup kitchen was slowing down and the government was beginning to take more responsibility for providing for the poor.

Questions

- 1- The Webb story gives you some idea about how the Quakers organized their soup kitchen. What details of the story were vivid to you? What words did Webb use to make that 1847 soup kitchen vivid?
- 2- Write your own account of your work in your local soup kitchen. Make your reader know what it is like to work there. What details will help you reader see, smell, hear, taste and feel the atmosphere?

ACTIVITY SHEET B) Indian Corn

In 1846, Charles Edward Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and the architect of British famine policy determined that there would be a single purchase of American Indian corn and that it be stored in army depots and sold to the poor. Sir Randolph Routh was the Commissary General and had the responsibility to distribute the imported Indian corn. Routh begged Trevelyan for additional corn purchases to see the poor through the summer until the next potato crop was ready for harvest. Trevelyan refused, and by the end of June, 1846, the corn was almost gone. This anecdote about the Coast Guard boat Eliza describes an attempt by Sir James Dombrain to get around Trevelyan's policy.

Source: Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger(p. 85)

Word Bank: cutter- a type of boat; implored- begged; Commissariat- army depot in charge of storing and distributing food; emaciated- skinny

"The revenue cutter Eliza, making a visit of inspection, on June 22, to the Killeries, a wild district of mountain and deep ocean inlets in the far west, was implored for food by a boat-load of skeletons. The Commissariat officer at Westport, supply center for the Killeries, had been instructed to send no more meal to the region because the depot [at Westport] was becoming empty.

One man, stated the officer in command, was lying on the bottom of the boat, unable to stand and already half dead, the others with emaciated faces and prominent, staring eyeballs, were evidently in an advanced state of starvation. The officer reported to Sir James Dombrain, Inspector-General of the Coast Guard Service, who had served on relief during the famine of 1839, and Sir James Dombrain, "very inconveniently," wrote Routh, "interfered." He "prevailed" on an officer at the Westport depot to issue meal, which he gave away free; he also "prevailed" on the captain of the government steamship Rhadamanthus, to take 100 tons of meal, intended for Westport, to the Coast Guard Station at the Killeries. "The Coast Guard with all their zeal and activity are too lavish," wrote Routh to Trevelyan.

1. Routh begged Trevelyan to purchase additional Indian meal. Why did Routh complain to Trevelyan about Dombrain's actions?
2. Find out more about Irish famine relief policy. Use that information and Woodham-Smith's text in a letter that you will compose from Dombrain to Trevelyan. Defend your action in giving meal to the starving and diverting the shipment of meal to the Killeries. As a Poor Law Commission, make some suggestions about relief to the poor. For example, do you agree with Routh's plea for additional meal?

ACTIVITY SHEET C) SOUP

<u>Soyer Soup</u>	<u>Quaker Soup</u>

1. In your opinion, which of these recipes would make a healthier soup? Explain.
2. Can you reduce the numbers and make a sample batch of each? Keep track of your expenses. Which batch was more expensive to make? Conduct a taste test with a sample group and see what your subjects say about flavor, taste (sweet, salty, spicy), texture. Which do people prefer?
3. During the Great Irish Famine people wrote ballads about Soyer Soup. One ballad describes how the steam was so strong that a poor Irishman fell into the soup vat and was boiled shoes and all. The Irish poet James Clarence Mangan wrote of Soyer Soup:
 "Then I saw drones
 And all the elite
 And a kitchen rose near me as by a spell
 But neither of bones
 Nor of juicy meat
 Could I ever the faintest perfume smell.
 A greasy slime
 The water appears
 As Soyer, the great enchanter, knows;"

Questions

- 1- Based on this poem, what is the poet's attitude toward Soyer Soup? What evidence do you have to support your position?
- 2- The "drones" are the poor. The elite are the rich. In your opinion, why would the wealthy go to a soup kitchen?
- 3- In your opinion, why does the poet call Soyer "an enchanter"?

4. The American famine relief worker Asenath Nicholson wrote about Soyer Soup in a critical but comic way that is called a satire.

“Every minutia cannot be given, either of the getting up or the recipe itself, but the sum and substance was simply this -- that a French cook from London was sent to Dublin with a recipe of his own concocting, made out of drippings, whether of shinbones of ox-tails was not specified but this dripping was to be so savory, and withal so nourishing, that with a trifling sum Paddy could be fed, and fed too so that he could dig drains, cut turf and spade gardens.”

Questions

1- What is Nicholson’s view of Soyer Soup? What evidence supports your opinion?

2- In another part of her account of the famine in Ireland, Nicholson talks about the old, moldy flour that the government issued to make bread for school children. Some years ago here in America, catsup was designated a vegetable in our federally-funded school lunch program. Do you think just any thing is good enough for the poor?

Write a response that talks about Soyer Soup and use other examples too.