

## **A Family's Tradition of Giving**

In the early 20th Century, community leader Mary Hobbins put her full support behind a fledgling Red Cross chapter in Madison, Wisconsin, beginning a family legacy of service that continues today.

by Mary Etta Boesl, American Red Cross

Thursday, May 27, 2010 — J. B. "Ben" Hobbins is a member of the American Red Cross Badger Chapter (Madison, Wisconsin) Philanthropy Committee which oversees chapter fundraising.

Serving the Madison community as a Red Cross volunteer is in Ben Hobbins' blood. Generations of Hobbins have been helping the Badger Chapter for more than a century.

## **Establishing a Local Red Cross**

The first Hobbins to serve as an American Red Cross volunteer was Mary, Ben's great, great grandmother.

After raising eight children Mary Hobbins, a Madison native and a trained nurse, began addressing health-related needs in her community. She led a fund drive to the legislature and the city council, raising \$16,000 to build Madison's first hospital, Madison General Hospital, now Meriter Hospital.

According to family history, Mary Hobbins also became interested in establishing a local Red Cross chapter to deliver disaster, nutrition, nursing, first aid and other services to the Madison community.

Mary's interest coincided with a time of resurgence for the American Red Cross. In 1905 Congress issued a new American Red Cross charter, calling for the creation of state and territorial societies "with as little delay as possible." At the time the Red Cross had 18 chapters, all clustered in the northeast.

Responding to the national call, a group of Madison civic leaders that included Mary Hobbins founded the Badger Chapter of the American Red Cross in 1909. It was the first Red Cross chapter in the Midwest.

Dr. J. C. Elsom, the University of Wisconsin's first basketball coach, was elected Badger Chapter chairman and served in that position until he joined the medical service during the war.

When Dr. Elsom left for war service, Mary Hobbins stepped up to the plate. Already chapter vice chairman, she volunteered to serve full-time as the chapter's executive director.

Leading a Red Cross chapter during World War I was a tough assignment. In Madison, and across the nation, Americans turned to the Red Cross as a way to become involved in the war effort.

Nationally the American Red Cross jumped from 107 chapters in 1914 to 3,864 in 1918. Membership rose from 17,000 to 20 million adults over the same four years, plus 11 million school children who were members of the Junior Red Cross.

Under temporary leadership of a War Council, the Red Cross introduced several community-based war-related services. Millions of volunteers knit caps and gloves for troops and civilians in war-torn countries, produced packages of surgical bandages, served refreshments to members of the military at home and overseas and provided transportation support to military hospitals and camps.

In Madison, volunteer executive director Mary Hobbins managed the same kind of growth in membership and in responsibilities. An article in *The Capital Times* chronicling the service of the Hobbins family notes that during World War I the Badger Chapter “became the abrupt magnet for thousands of men, women and children.”

The same article talks about the challenges Mrs. Hobbins faced at the chapter: financing; supplies; organization; training. Hobbins even embarked on an educational campaign, introducing citizens to Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross such as neutrality and humanity in a time of war.

As Badger Chapter executive director Mary Hobbins was responsible for 52 Red Cross branch offices, in addition to the headquarters office in Madison. Mary’s work caught on in the Hobbins family—other family members quickly became Red Cross volunteers.

### **Generations of Red Cross Volunteers**

Grace Hobbins Modie, Mary’s daughter, also volunteered at the Badger Chapter. During World War I she managed hundreds of Red Cross Production Corps units organized by her mother in those 52 branch offices.

From 1916 forward the Production Corps was the most popular choice of Red Cross volunteers. Grace Hobbins Modie found herself responsible for thousands of Madison-area Production Corps volunteers producing mounds of hand-knitted socks and miles of rolled bandages.

Mary Hobbins’ teenage grandson, William Suhr Hobbins, volunteered as her chauffeur, in his words, driving his grandma “all over the country.” As an adult William Suhr Hobbins continued supporting the Red Cross. He was a member of the Badger chapter board of directors for six years, the maximum time allowed. William also headed the 1953 chapter fund campaign and raised the greatest sum since World War II.

John Suhr Hobbins, William’s brother and a one-time candidate for mayor of Madison, was also a Red Cross volunteer throughout his life.

John and William were playmates with Red Cross chapter founder Elsom’s son; as children the boys saw funds being raised for the San Francisco earthquake and received first aid training from Dr. Elsom personally.

John and William Hobbins did one more very important thing in support of the Badger Chapter—they passed on the legacy of volunteering to their children.

Edmund R. Hobbins, William's son and the fourth generation of Hobbins to volunteer with the Badger chapter, also served as a member of the Red Cross board of directors. He became chairman of the nominating committee during the chapter's centennial year, 2009.

John Perham Hobbins, John Suhr Hobbins' son and Edmund's cousin, provided considerable financial support to the Badger Chapter. In the chapter's centennial year alone, he donated more than \$50,000.

John Hobbins, in kind, passed on the legacy of service to his son, Ben.

### **Looking to the Future**

One of Ben's favorite Red Cross stories is that he and the current executive director of the Badger chapter, Tom Mooney, grew up together. Ben says it is curious how things sometimes work.

"I think it is very moving somehow...and more than coincidental about Tom Mooney, the current executive director of the Badger chapter, having been a neighbor and childhood friend," Ben says. "Here we are, following this tangent to my great, great grandmother who served as the chapter's first executive director one hundred years ago. There is something to this."

Ben tells about getting a call one day from Tom, asking him to join the chapter and help them with fundraising, making him the fifth generation of Hobbins to serve the Badger Chapter.

When Ben Hobbins talks about the American Red Cross, he is thinking forward to the next generation of Hobbins volunteers—his daughters, Ashley-Anne (14) and Savanna-Marie (12). Ashley-Anne wants to be a nurse, just like great, great, great grandmother Mary Hobbins. Savanna-Marie wants to be a doctor.

Ben says there is a long line of doctors and nurses in the Hobbins family. His sister Jeanie Hobbins Towne, a former nurse with an Army MASH unit who achieved the rank of captain, is a great mentor. In addition to inspiring Ashley-Anne, Jeanie Towne's daughter, Alicia, is attending Marquette University in the ROTC program to become a nurse. Ben is quick to explain that every healthcare professional in the Hobbins family has supported the Badger Chapter of the American Red Cross.

Ben Hobbins is proud of what his great, great grandma did to bring American Red Cross services to the Madison area. He's proud of what other members of the Hobbins family have done for the past century to help fulfill the Red Cross mission.

"I am especially proud," Ben says, "that I have the opportunity, as a Hobbins descendent, to continue to help the American Red Cross and to pass along this legacy of service to my own little daughters."

### **Reminiscences**

The Hobbins family has contributed to American life in countless ways. An ancestor, General Michael Jackson, was General George Washington's right hand man during the Revolutionary War.

During the Civil War General Jackson's grandson, Joseph Hobbins, was a surgeon in charge of hospitalized soldiers at Camp Randall in Madison and also oversaw the care of Confederate soldiers in that Camp. Following the Civil War Joseph Hobbins sought to establish the University of Wisconsin's first medical college. He was among the group of Madison's first Alders. In retirement, Joseph Hobbins was founder and president of the Wisconsin State Horticultural and Madison Horticulture Societies, as well as founder and president of the Madison Literary Club.

Another ancestor, John J. Suhr, founded Madison's American Exchange Bank in 1871, originally to provide banking to the large and underserved German population in the area. For 110 years the bank has served thousands, including architect Frank Lloyd Wright who maintained his accounts at the American Exchange Bank.

A list of Hobbins contributions to the Madison community continues to today.

Ben Hobbins, himself a successful inventor and entrepreneur, led a campaign to restore the local economy and fish to Lake Delton days after it was decimated by flooding. Ben also founded the American and Wisconsin Youth Entrepreneurs Networks which link private and public entrepreneurial resources into a network for youth, educators and administrators.

Ben's service has extended beyond the borders of the United States. When living in Europe he founded the ESSEC Millennium Foundation at ESSEC International Business School, one of France's Top elite private business schools and usually in the Top 10 globally. The project has raised very substantial endowments in its first 10 years from more than 25,000 ESSEC alumni.

Ben was also very active with the American Chamber of Commerce in France; Chamber members employ over 3 million French citizens, a number exceeded only by the French Government. In the small world category, now President Nicolas Sarkozy married Ben and his French wife in Neuilly-Sur-Seine in 1993 when Sarkozy was Mayor of that town. Sarkozy's aging mother lived across the hall from Hobbins, who took care of her from time to time. The families remain good friends.

Like the American Red Cross, the history of the Hobbins family intertwines with the history of the United States. It is fitting that over the decades the American Red Cross and the Hobbins family have connected at so many points, joined together to support the citizens of Madison and Dane County.

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About the American Red Cross:

The American Red Cross shelters, feeds and provides emotional support to victims of disasters; supplies nearly half of the nation's blood; teaches lifesaving skills; provides international humanitarian aid; and supports military members and their families. The Red Cross is a charitable organization — not a government agency — and depends on volunteers and the generosity of the American public to perform its mission. For more information, please visit [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) or join our blog at <http://blog.redcross.org>.