

How does one man help
feed 40,000 children in Africa?
Meet Richard Chapin

positive
people

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

God's Gardener

BY ALINE NEWMAN, TURIN, NEW YORK

THIRTY-ONE YEARS LATER Richard Chapin can't erase the parched Senegalese village from his mind. It reminds him of Oklahoma, in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Dried-up land, weather-beaten people, plants withered on the vine.

"My hosts brought me to a school for boys," recalls the 87-year-old horticulturalist and irrigation specialist from, of all places, Watertown, New York. "The youngsters were so skinny, they couldn't fill out their clothes. I asked, 'Are those kids sick?' 'No,' I was told. 'They're just hungry.' It's one thing to hear about the devastation that prolonged drought brings.

But to actually *see* it..."

Chapin's hosts were volunteers from Catholic Relief Services. Chapin had devised an inexpensive, easy-to-install irrigation system that almost anyone could set up. He'd always been deeply religious, but had never figured out a way to combine his business with his faith. Catholic Relief volunteers offered him that chance. Villages throughout central Africa stay bone-dry for months on end and irrigation is difficult. Chapin was confident his system would make better use of the meager water supply during droughts and dry seasons.

He went right to work

that day, raising a 50-gallon metal drum atop a six-foot-high wooden platform, connecting the drum to a main hose line and the main hose line to 10 parallel drip lines. Each drip line had small perforations 12 inches apart. He and the volunteers planted vegetable seedlings—tomatoes, peppers, cabbage—in line with the perforations. Then they walked to the town well. They lugged buckets of water, until the drum was filled. Then they uncapped the drum. The villagers watched as the dirt encircling the seedlings turned a dark, damp brown.

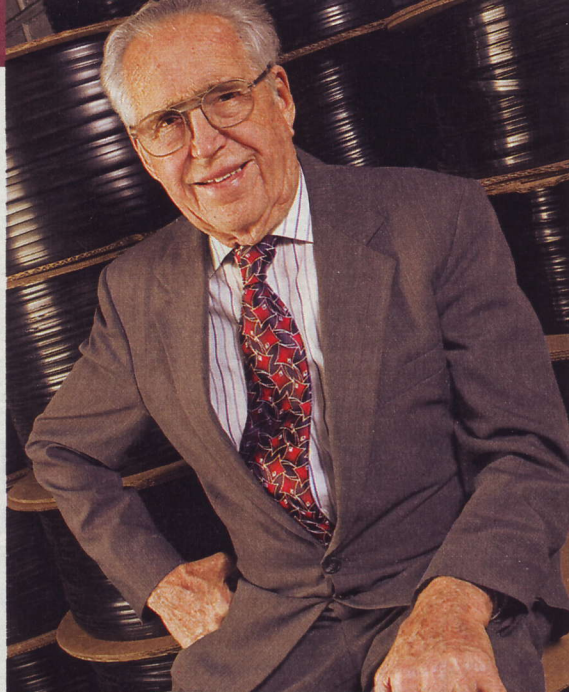
It sounds so simple. But it took Chapin years to perfect a system of filters and

flow guaranteeing each plant along the drip lines an equal share of water, and that no water was wasted. The crops flourished. Four months later the villagers harvested them. Once-hungry people were feeding themselves.

Chapin returned home to his commercial irrigation business. But he couldn't stop thinking about the millions of third-world people going hungry. "I'd never really been sure why the Lord put me on this earth. But looking at those kids, I knew what I was meant to do."

Chapin spent so much of his free time working to perfect his simple irrigation system, he built a workshop onto his house. He planted a vegetable garden and enclosed it in transparent polyethylene to simulate drought conditions. He nicknamed his lab "Little Africa." "I'd heard from volunteers in Senegal that while my irrigation system worked, many people found it impractical," Chapin said. In third-world regions women do most of the gardening. A 50-gallon metal drum was too heavy for most to lift.

He tinkered for almost a year until he found a solution: a highly efficient system using new hosing and increased water pressure.



WELL-DONE Richard, mixing his business with his faith

He called it the Bucket Kit. Cheap to produce, all it requires is a 10-gallon plastic drum, a three-foot-high stand, a main hose line and drip lines. "Ten gallons is the equivalent of ten water jugs you buy at the market. Almost any woman can carry that much in a day."

Chapin returned to Africa in 1975, where he introduced the system in Upper Volta, now known as Burkina Faso. By 1980, while in Kenya, he'd perfected it. "We tried it at another school where the kids weren't eating. We donated thousands

of the kits, taught the kids how to use them and they taught their parents."

In 1996 Chapin established his own nonprofit foundation, Chapin Third World Projects, which promotes and distributes the kits. This summer he plans to return to Africa for the fourth time. "I'm going to Malawi. We'll work there as God's gardeners. Our goal is to plant and harvest enough vegetables to feed forty thousand children a day."

Not bad for a guy from Watertown, New York, who's pushing 90. ■

DOUGLAS LLOYD