An Old Farming Custom

By J. E. McKee
Sanitary Engineering Specialist, Medical Affairs and Public Welfare Branch, HICOG

The city of Darmstadt is said to have been named after a small brook, the Darmbach, which originally flowed through the town. When translated into English, Darmbach means “intestine brook,” and it was so called because of the manner in which it turned and folded back on itself as it meandered through the meadows. Ironic it is, therefore, that the city which had been given an unsavory name is now ill-famed as a center of “intestinal” parasites, particularly ascaris worms.

Prior to 1947, worms had been accepted by the population of the city of Darmstadt as “a part of life.” Almost everyone seemed to have them at one time or another, and before the last war the physicians and pharmacists did a thriving business prescribing and dispensing anthelmintics, or worm medicines.

Relatively few deaths, to be sure, were directly attributed to intestinal worms, but it is not known to what extent other diseases were brought on, or complicated, by ascariasis. Because the intestinal colics caused by worms were of relatively short duration, the infected population had learned to suffer and bear them.

At the end of World War II, however, anthelmintics became very scarce and appeals were made to US Military Government for the necessary drugs. These appeals led to an investigation by Dr. Paul L. Burlingame and others of the 4th Medical Laboratory of the US Army, which revealed that, in all of the county of Darmstadt, 84 percent of the children and 70 percent of the adults had ascaris worms. In the village of Griesheim, 99 percent of the children and 100 percent of the adults were infected. American troops, dependents and occupation personnel were also known to have become infected.

That the county of Darmstadt should be so badly plagued by intestinal parasites can be attributed only to the fact that, through ignorance and a misguided sense of economy, a basic principle of sanitation had been violated.

Darmstadt’s sewage is drained through a system of open canals and spread over the cultivated fields of nearby Griesheim. Right, main canal and gate for diverting sewage.
WHAT, IF ANYTHING, can the Office of the US High Commissioner do to alleviate the "diet of worms" at Darmstadt, and what should be the American policy? The simplest procedure is one that was suggested by a local citizen who said, "Why don't you just order the people to stop putting sewage and human wastes on vegetables or crops?" Actually, this can be done by the high commissioner as a measure necessary to protect the health and safety of US occupation personnel, inasmuch as they are now permitted to purchase from the indigenous economy.

This policy might be the wisest in the long run, but it would require the immediate construction of a complete (biological) sewage treatment plant at Darmstadt since no other means of waste disposal is available. The cost of construction of such a plant would be a tremendous financial burden on the city.

A less abrupt procedure calls for American assistance in the program already being undertaken by German public health and engineering officials. This assistance can be monetary, in the form of ERP funds, and it can be technical, in the form of sanitary-engineering and public health advice to the local officials. The use of ERP money for sewage treatment works has not been contemplated in Germany, but in this area such funds are essential for recovery of the human machines upon which industrial progress must depend.

That technical advice must also come from Americans is demonstrated by the fact that Dr. Burlingame’s survey was required to bring the problem to light and to start improvements. In the field of sanitation, German engineers and scientists are 20 to 30 years behind their American counterparts, and hence American technical advice is urgently needed if ERP funds are to be expended wisely. The plans which have already been prepared for the proposed treatment works should be carefully checked by American sanitary engineers to assure that all pathogenic organism will be destroyed. As an added safeguard, the treated sewage must never be used on vegetables that are eaten raw.

The amelioration of the insanitary disposal of sewage at and near Darmstadt is a task that will require reorientation and education, coupled with the guiding hands of American public-health and sanitary-engineering personnel. If and when it can be accomplished, it will be a tribute to mutual German-American understanding in achieving a goal of mutual benefit.

Hunting in Vineyards Banned

Hunting in Hessian vineyards or areas adjacent to vineyards has been prohibited. The new prohibition is the result of reports of several hunting accidents. Grape harvesters, David Rosendale, acting Field Operations Division chief, OLC Hesse, pointed out, usually bend low and are not readily visible to small game hunters. Mr. Rosendale stated that violations of the new prohibition would lead to corrective and punitive measures.