A Bridge For Dieburg

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FOR A LONG TIME the farmers of the small village of Harreshausen, inhabited by approximately 600 and located not far from the Bavarian border in the northeastern corner of Dieburg county in Hesse, had had reason to contemplate how unpleasant can be the quirks of fate. The older ones among them still remember a far better, happier time. That was many, many years ago, when their meadows were the best in the vicinity and had the most succulent grass.

But all this was long before those days when the little Gersprenz river, which flows past the village on its way to the Main river, was directed into a new bed which unfortunately was much deeper and caused the soil to dry out. Meadows withered and fields were parched for water; the soil virtually cried for what it once had in abundance. The former thriving cattle-breeding industry had to give way to a more comprehensive agriculture which, of course, required an extensive irrigation system.

Later the Gersprenz river once more became a stumbling block for the Harreshausen farmers. When the government’s agricultural consolidation program was carried out, the farmers found their fields on both sides of the river, which had only two bridges. One was in the village and the other far away at the outskirts of the district. Thus a farmer, to reach his property on the other side of the river, had to make a detour of one and one-half miles with his horse and carriage at least once a day.

TIME IS MONEY — and even more so in farming. A new bridge had to be built, if possible midway between the other two. But how could this wish be realized, when the village’s finances were just sufficient to provide for its absolutely necessary expenditures — when the village council could not approve a new bridge because there was not even enough money for the many much more important problems that had to be solved?

Years passed and nothing changed the situation of the farmers. Not until one day last summer when a farmer by the name of Heinrich Funk had a brilliant idea, one for which his fellow farmers still pat him on the back.

What was Mr. Funk’s idea? What had made him abandon his reserve and do something that others perhaps could have done too?

Mr. Funk is a shrewd, cool calculator. He considered everything very carefully. First of all, he knew, the district had a resident officer who was known for his eagerness to cooperate with worthwhile projects. Then, there were several American troop units stationed in the nearest larger town, whose officers would surely be just as willing to help, Mr. Funk mused.

FIRST MR. FUNK HAD a talk with Harreshausen’s Mayor Hartmann, who is also quick to do everything possible to realize a project he finds to be good. The
mayor wrote a long letter to the Dieburg resident officer, Edwin C. Pancoast, giving a full account of the farmers' situation. 'Help us—we hope for your understanding and your readiness to give us a hand.'

Mr. Pancoast made both and immediately went to see Col. Leon Albin, commanding officer of an engineers unit. Colonel Albin did not say much, but his okay was all that was needed. A young lieutenant, Leroy Henderson, sat down and worked out a plan for the new bridge, 52½ feet long and 13 feet wide, with a capacity of five tons.

In the meantime, the Harreshausen mayor conferred with the village council and reached full agreement: the bridge must be built. The village would provide timber and nails, and with the help of American engineer troops the long-wanted bridge would be built.

Some time passed before the construction could be started. The timber had to be cut, transported to a sawmill, and then transported back to the construction site. In a matter of weeks everything was ready, and one day everywhere in the village one could hear: "The troops will arrive tomorrow." They came—Colonel Albin's engineers—Company C, 547th Engineer Combat Battalion, Darmstadt—under Lt. Leon Wilburn. They all worked hard under the brilliant sun of a bright and hot September day, one of the nicest days of the year, joining the bridge piece by piece, driving the long nails into the thick wood with their heavy hammers.

Before afternoon of the next day, the bridge was completed. In honor of the Negro American engineers, the happy farmers named it "Ebony Bridge."

There may be a lot of things which seem to disturb German-American relations today. The farmers of Harreshausen, however, will not be too much interested in them. They know from actual experience that one can count upon the good will of the American civil administration and the United States Army, if the need for help arises.

They have learned that with even as brief and little a word as "Okay" not only are good ideas recognized, but even bridges can be built—bridges between individuals and nations that are a visible sign on the path to understanding, just like the little Ebony Bridge across the Gersprenz near Harreshausen, somewhere in Hesse.

The GIs in turn were unanimous in their evaluation of the bridge-building project as a good job, from every angle. First of all, they welcomed the opportunity to get some practical experience in this type of work and, secondly, they were impressed with the importance of their contribution to the remote farming community. Said one: "It makes you feel pretty good, doing something like this. Boy, these people are so pleased, you'd think we'd given 'em a million dollars."

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Pictures at right tell story of building of Dieburg county bridge which grateful farmers in the area have named "Ebony Bridge" in honor of the American engineers who built it. Top, Lt. Wilburn displays plans to Mr. Pancoast at spot chosen for bridge. Photos, center, show GIs hard at work with audience of children. Below, farmer drives across completed bridge.

(Photos by Schroeder)