

THE BRIDGE

Copyright ©2004 George A. Platz
All Rights Reserved

It's easy to take bridges for granted. Of course we notice the great bridges: the Golden Gate, the Mackinac, the Brooklyn, and the like. Some of us are more aware than we would like to be of the slightly lesser bridges crossing the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Columbia and similar sizeable rivers, our palms sweating as we drive up the ramps. But for every Golden Gate there are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of small insignificant bridges that we are seldom conscious of, spanning countless smaller rivers, creeks, gullies, ravines, ditches, railroads, highways, and even other bridges.

For the first time in 1982 I began to acquire an appreciation for these myriad unnoticed structures that give us the geographical mobility we crave. In the previous year I had purchased an eighty acre farm in southwestern Michigan that is traversed by two major ravines. The eighty acres comprise a rectangle of land half a mile long by a quarter of a mile wide. The ravines both run more or less east to west, across the width of the farm, one near the very north end of the property (which I have cleverly named the North Ravine) and the other about two-thirds of the way down to the south end (the South Ravine). (A third ravine runs along the west property line from the south end of the property to the point where it joins the South Ravine.) The farm also contains about fifty acres of woods, cornfields, and a farmhouse and a barn, which are located at the southeast corner of the property.

An unknown prior owner of the farm had made it possible to cross the South Ravine at its easternmost and shallowest point by building a roadway down into the ravine and inserting a culvert under the roadway at the bottom for the water to flow through. This roadway gives farm machinery access to the acreage between the ravines. There was,

however, no similar means to cross the North Ravine and consequently the north end of the property remained an old, deep woods. It was not difficult to walk through the North Ravine at some points, but I wanted to be able to drive through on my little Yanmar tractor, so I could haul firewood and other forest products back to the house.

In the fall of 1981, shortly after buying the farm, I had the good fortune to meet Lawrence Gridley. Lawrence had retired several years earlier and was doing some part time work removing items from my barn that belonged to the former owner. He had a ready, almost constant, smile, a pleasant country drawl, and a grizzled face that testified to many years spent out-of-doors. I was surprised by the amount Lawrence knew about my farm. I was even more surprised when Lawrence told me how he had come about the knowledge. He had lived on this very farm, in this very farmhouse, from childhood until he had acquired a home of his own. His father had died in the house, at the age of eighty five, less than ten years ago.

Lawrence told me about the spring near the south edge of the South Ravine from whence he had carried water back to the house in the days before the well was drilled. He told me how his father had grazed cows in pasture on the west side of the farm that was now a woods full of fifty-foot-high trees. He told me about how the farmhouse had been remodeled and added on to over the years by his father, who was a carpenter as well as a farmer. And he offered to give me a guided tour of the fields and the woods some day when we both had a few hours to wander around the place.

Several weeks later my wife Andrea and I took Lawrence up on his offer. Again we were treated to a wealth of interesting information as we walked over the entire farm--about the coke ovens that were located even before Lawrence's time on the land that is now a state park to the west of my farm (Lawrence showed how one could still find bits of charcoal in the ground), about how to find a spring (of which there were a number on the farm), about Lawrence's family and others who used to live in the area, and countless other matters.

While we were walking in the bottom of the North Ravine--it is more than two

hundred fifty feet wide in most places and at least twenty feet below the level of the surrounding terrain--I expressed my interest in developing a way to get my tractor through it. Lawrence had a lot of helpful advice. First of all, he cautioned, I must be careful to study the soil where I planned to put my trail. Some areas in the bottom of the ravine would support a tractor, but in others the ground was so marshy that a tractor, even a small tractor like mine, would easily sink far enough to get stuck. This was true even on the sides of the ravine in some places, where underground water seeped through.

Second, assuming I was planning simply to ford the small stream that flowed through the ravine, I must pick a place to do so where the stream had a gravel bottom. There were many such places in the area where we were looking, and Lawrence pointed them out. In only a few, however, were the banks sufficiently shallow for me to consider driving into the stream. Even there I would have to do some minor excavation to make a manageable slope.

Thirdly, I should be aware of the fact that although the stream now was only a few feet wide and less than a foot deep, in the spring when the snow was melting a rainstorm could fill the whole bottom of the ravine with rushing water. I found this hard to believe and looked at Lawrence carefully. He wasn't putting me on. I should, therefore, not assume that any trail I put in would be at all permanent.

Finally, Lawrence wondered if I had noticed the trail that was already there. He had driven through with a tractor and brushcutter several years ago to put in a snowmobile trail for the former owner. I hadn't seen it before, but it was not difficult to find if you knew it was there. The brush had grown back but was clearly lower than elsewhere. The trail wound circuitously through the bottom of the ravine to avoid both the marshy ground and having to cross the meandering stream more than once. Unfortunately, however, at the point where it crossed the stream there was a steep bank almost three feet high on one side. Lawrence confessed that he had difficulty negotiating the bank with a full-sized tractor. My Yanmar would never make it. I would have to find an alternate route or do a lot of excavating.

Over the winter I considered further the problem of putting a trail through the North

Ravine. The more I thought about trying to drive my tractor through the stream the less I liked it. I didn't want to get involved in digging out the bank where Lawrence's trail crossed; I didn't want to build the whole new trail that would be required to use a shallower crossing; and I didn't like the idea of getting my tractor wheels all wet. Furthermore, there was something expedient and inelegant about just driving through the stream. I wanted a permanent and elegant solution.

At the time I bought the farm the previous summer my brother Rick was visiting and we spent several days as amateur surveyors locating the property line on the west side of the property, where it adjoins the forested state park. In accomplishing that task we had crossed back and forth through both the South and North Ravines several times, and Rick had idly speculated as to how he would like to build a bridge across them. Assuming he meant some kind of bridge across the whole two hundred to three hundred foot width, I had ignored him as politely as I could. Perhaps, however, Rick would be interested in working on a more manageable project, such as a twenty foot bridge in the bottom of the ravine. I telephoned him.

Rick is a laid-back ex-Midwesterner who practices just enough law in the redwood country of far northern California to pay his modest bills, leaving plenty of time for doing the things he wants to do. He wanted to build a bridge. Having no wife or family at the moment, he would be happy to come out and help me, but he hoped I wasn't crazy enough to think he would do it in the middle of the winter. After some negotiation, we decided to attempt the project the following June.

The delay gave me time to become more familiar with the North Ravine area. In February I walked through it and the rest of my woods with a consultant forester, who pointed out to my great delight the large number of mature sugar maple trees in and around the North Ravine. In March and April I undertook my first feeble efforts to produce maple syrup, an exhilarating and frustrating experience which I have described elsewhere. These efforts did, however, give me considerable exposure to the North Ravine. Among other

things, I named the principal topographical features. The most convenient maples were located around a little finger of land sticking out into the North Ravine from its south side, adjacent to the beginning of Lawrence Gridley's trail. I named it Pointe George. The flat area down in the ravine where the trail crossed the stream I called Andrea's Landing, after my wife, because I liked the way the words sounded. The stream itself I decided, after considerable thought, to call Rick's Creek (pronounced, of course, "Crick"). I mentally reserved the right to change the name, however, if my brother was unable to give me the help I needed.

In May I made a few preparations for the forthcoming project. As soon as the ground had dried out enough, I attempted to drive my tractor down along Lawrence's trail. It handled the job easily, although climbing back up out of the ravine on the tractor the first time was a little unsettling. I decided definitely then to use as much of the trail as possible. It occurred to me, though, knowing my brother's independence of mind, that he might want to debate the location of the bridge. I devised a plan to circumvent that. Rick has from time to time, like other ex-Midwestern Californians, been moderately interested in Buddhist learning, especially Zen (he sometimes refers to his faith as Zen Methodist). Just a few miles from the farm, on the Red Arrow Highway, there is a little shop with a lawn full of inexpensive concrete statuary. They happened to have a statue of a fat, grinning Buddha. I bought it, carried it to the North Ravine, and deposited it next to Rick's Creek where the trail crossed. It looked for all the world like an ancient ruin. I hoped my brother would take it as a propitious sign and agree that was the spot for the bridge. I also decided to name the spot where I placed the Buddha, which was in the center of a U-shaped curve in Rick's Creek, the Buddha Promontory.

June finally arrived. Rick did not come directly to Chicago but instead met us in St. Louis, where we were visiting Andrea's parents. While there, we went to see the Japanese garden at the Missouri Botanical Gardens. Rick has long admired Japanese gardens and has urged me to take the time to do the same. They're okay, but unlike Rick I prefer to hurry

through them, rather than lingering over each malformed bush. In this instance, however, we both studied the bridges carefully, trying to pick up a little engineering for our forthcoming project.

While driving from St. Louis to Chicago Rick and I laughingly searched the roadside for the box turtles we remembered spotting, and vainly imploring our parents to let us pick up, on our annual summer journeys to a grandmother's house in southern Missouri when we were children. We didn't find any; perhaps the modern expressways have driven them away. Rick expressed the hope that this failure was not an omen as to our forthcoming bridge-building efforts.

We stopped in Chicago and spent the night at our house in the suburbs, then went to the farm the following morning. Almost as soon as he could get his boots on Rick wanted to go out and survey the location for the bridge. We hiked to the North Ravine and, barely able to suppress my smile, I waved my hand generally in the direction of Andrea's Landing and the Buddha Promontory, suggesting that it might be good to start looking in that area for a place to cross. I am sure Rick saw the Buddha almost immediately, but he didn't let on. He was going to make me direct him right to it, and of course I eventually did.

"Well, what's this?" Rick said, picking the Buddha up.

"Gee, I don't know. How could that possibly have got here?" I couldn't keep from smiling now. "Maybe it's an artifact from an ancient civilization."

"Maybe." Rick put the Buddha back down and continued his examination of the terrain.

"Do you think it's some kind of sign? About where to put the bridge?"

Rick looked at the Buddha again, then at the little stream. "Nah. Somebody must have just dropped it here." Now even he was smiling. "I guess this is where you want the bridge, huh?" he finally said. I nodded, and the decision was made. My ploy had worked, though not in exactly the way I thought it would.

We had walked out to the North Ravine on the east side of the cornfield and decided

to walk back on the west side. I pointed out to Rick a place on the edge of the field where one could go a few feet through thick bushes and be in a cathedral-like woods where towering trees left a permanent dusk. On some later visit I wanted him to help me start a new trail here through the woods. As we continued along the edge of the field an oddly familiar object caught my eye in the deep grass ahead. I couldn't believe that I saw what I thought I did and hurried forward. Sure enough, it was a box turtle, just exactly like the ones we used to find in the road on the way to Missouri. I had never seen any kind of turtle on the farm before.

“I swear to you,” I said, “that I didn't plant this thing here.”

“I believe you. This is indeed a propitious sign.”

We took the turtle back to the house with us and put it in a box on the front porch. (We later released it, fittingly, on the Buddha Promontory.) Whatever the turtle might have been a sign of, it was not harmony. Although the decision as to where to put the bridge had come easily, the decision as to how to build it did not. Rick firmly maintained that the bridge should be built of “natural” materials from the farm. I wanted to use treated lumber from the Three Oaks Lumber Company. Clearly, treated lumber was better. It was already cut, thus saving us countless hours trying to cut and shape our own, and it was guaranteed to last thirty years. Rick's only rejoinder was that using lumber yard materials was not right when we had fifty acres of our own woods.

In the end we compromised, sort of. We would start out with native materials but would switch over to pre-cut lumber if time became a problem. Our first job, then, was to find some logs to use for the main supports of the bridge. I recalled noticing a recent windfall that had occurred down in the North Ravine less than a hundred yards from where the bridge was to go. A big yellow poplar had blown down, taking a large black cherry and a good-sized ash with it. (My visit with the consulting forester had made me conscious now of tree varieties.) We went to investigate the site.

The downed cherry was too crooked to use for anything but firewood, but the poplar

and the ash had long sections of relatively straight trunk. The poplar was the biggest, so we would want to use it for the end supports on either bank. If we made these five feet long each, there would be enough poplar left for a sixteen foot span about fifteen inches in diameter. There was also enough ash to make another sixteen foot span averaging a foot in thickness. We went back and measured at the crossing. Sixteen feet ought to just make it. We could use the downed trees if we could get the pieces moved where we wanted them.

When we had examined the terrain over which the logs would have to be transported, I tried to get Rick to reconsider the lumber yard alternative. Not only was the hundred yards between the logs and the bridge filled with saplings and small trees, but the ground underneath was suspiciously soft. I didn't want to attempt hauling anything over it with my tractor. Rick was undaunted. On the south side of the ravine near the point where the trees had fallen there was a narrow gully leading back up to the cornfield that wasn't quite as steep as the sides of the ravine elsewhere. "We'll just haul the logs up out of the ravine here and then bring them back down the trail into the ravine to the crossing," he announced.

I estimated that the sixteen-foot poplar log would weigh about eight hundred pounds, and the ash log about five hundred pounds. I pointed out that my fifteen horsepower tractor couldn't possibly make it up the gulley pulling one of them, especially where the gulley made a sharp curve. Rick looked the situation over. "You're right," he said, "but your tractor doesn't have to pull both itself and a log out of the ravine. We'll run your tractor on level ground up in the cornfield and use a rope so that the only thing being pulled up the slope is the log."

That made some sense. "But how do we pull the log around the curve in the gulley with a rope?"

"No problem. We just find a good strong pulley."

It sounded simple, but it wasn't. We set off the next morning for the hardware store in Three Oaks to buy a rope and a pulley that could handle an eight hundred pound log, expecting to be back in half an hour. We returned to the farm in the middle of the afternoon,

having tried every store we could think of in Three Oaks, Buchanan, Berrien Springs, Benton Harbor, Bridgman, and most places in between. The rope had been no problem, but the pulley we needed couldn't be found.

Rick was dejected and, I think, about ready to go to the lumber yard. He persuaded me to make one last trip to the barn to see if there was any old machinery there that we could make our pulley out of. I went along to humor him. We started poking around in the side of the barn that still holds the accumulated junk left by former owners. After we had been there for a while Rick reached into a pile of old boards and rusted metal to examine what looked like a heavy metal rod about three feet long with a double hook on the end. He pulled it out of the pile. On the other end of the rod was a large metal pulley wheel. He foraged some more in the pile and brought out three more just like it

. "I don't believe this," I said. "It's exactly what we need, but what is it and what's it doing here?"

"Who knows? Perhaps a provident spirit left it, knowing what we would need."

I subsequently learned that it wasn't a provident spirit at all but the former owner of the property, who ran the local butcher shop in Three Oaks. The long metal pulleys were made to hang animal carcasses on while he cut them up. They work just fine for hauling logs too, as we were about to find out.

The rest of that afternoon we spent out in the North Ravine measuring and cutting our logs with my chainsaw. We concluded that trying to pull the logs up out of the ravine while they were resting on the soft earth might be difficult even with the rope and pulley, so we also cut some branches into three foot lengths to use as rollers under the logs. We then came back to the farmhouse and visited my next door neighbor, Jack, to see if he might have a length of chain or two we could borrow; we figured that chain tied to the end of the rope might give a better grip on the logs. Jack is the kind of guy who can fix anything mechanical and always seems to have the tools to do it. He had the chain and was glad to loan it to us. Jack had grown up on a farm, doing all the countless jobs that farmers must do, and he

seemed to find amusement in watching us city types trying to do for fun what any self-respecting country boy would consider a downright chore.

The next morning we went out to move the logs, starting with the biggest one first (if we couldn't get that one out, we might as well forget about the others). We levered it up, wrapped the chain around the thicker end, and set the end on a roller; then we tied the chain to the rope and ran the rope up the gulley to the bend. At the bend we tied the rod of the pulley to a sturdy tree, threaded the rope through the pulley wheel, and then ran the rope up the rest of the gulley to the back hitch of the tractor, which was sitting between the edge of the ravine and the cornfield.

Rick laid some more rollers in the ravine while I warmed up the tractor's little diesel engine. When he was finished Rick gave me the thumb's up sign (the little diesel was too loud for me to hear him), and I put the tractor in its lowest gear range with the four wheel drive engaged. The tractor moved forward, the rope tightened, and the pulley stood out taut on the tree. The tractor kept going, and I saw Rick jerking on the rope, apparently to guide the log onto the rollers. He gave me the thumbs up again. The log was moving up out of the ravine.

Notwithstanding a few unforeseen problems, our system worked. We had to stop and back up the tractor and retie the rope to it to keep from bogging down in the muddy part of the cornfield. We had to lever the forward end of the log up several times to keep it on the rollers. And of course we had to release the pulley and retie the rope to the chain when the log came to the bend in the gulley. But after a full morning of hard work we got all four logs--the two sixteen foot spans and the two five foot end pieces--out onto level ground. We were immensely proud of ourselves. Moving eighteen hundred pounds of logs about seventy five feet in four hours might not seem like much to a lumberjack, but to us it was an enormous accomplishment.

We decided to do some further work on the logs where they lay before taking them back down to the site of the bridge. The weather was warming and bringing out the

mosquitos in the woods, especially in the ravine. First we stripped the logs of their bark with the curved end of a crowbar. It slid off fairly easily; the trees hadn't been down long enough to die and dry out. (In fact, because they had been blown over, the trees had been severed only at the root level, and some roots were still intact.) Next we had to notch the ends to create flat surfaces where the spanning logs would connect to the end logs. It turned out that both the spanning logs were moderately arched, and we marked them for notching so that the arch would be on top when the logs were in place. We then cut halfway through each log about a foot from each end with a chainsaw and hammered a chisel in from the end of the log to the cut, thereby splitting off a piece to create the notch. Unfortunately, the wood didn't want to split on a perfectly flat plane, so we had to spend quite a bit more time with the chisel shaping the notches the way we wanted them.

Finally, we had to drill holes in the notched ends of the logs where we intended to insert threaded rod to hold the logs together. I considered this perhaps the trickiest part of the project. We had no power for an electric drill, so the holes had to be bored by hand with a brace and bit. And we had no instruments to guarantee that the holes in the spanning logs would match up properly with the holes in the end logs. I let Rick handle this job. He measured to find the center of each notch, then rolled each log into the position we wanted it to have when the bridge was done and started drilling as perpendicular a hole as he could. I provided a modicum of assistance by walking in a circle around him as he drilled, telling him when it looked like the bit was straying from the vertical.

The drilling was a tedious job and Rick didn't finish it until the next morning. Then it was finally time to take the logs down to the site of the bridge. We chained one end of each log to the back of the tractor, on top of an old rusted drawbar that was held between the two arms of the three-point hitch. (In another stroke of luck, we had found the used drawbar at a local tractor dealer, who charged us ten dollars for it; a new one would have cost close to fifty.) The other end of each log just dragged on the ground. As unlikely as it sounds, the method worked perfectly. We took all four logs down the trail to Rick's Creek in a few

minutes, scouring long ruts in the ground behind us.

The next task wasn't so easy. We had to get one of the five foot long end logs, weighing two hundred fifty pounds, entirely across the stream, and we had to put one end of each of the two spanning logs in position on it. There was no reasonable way to get the tractor on the other side to pull the logs across (after all, that was why we were building the bridge in the first place). So again we turned to the rope and the pulley. We anchored the pulley firmly to a big sugar maple on the far side of the creek, threaded the rope through it, and brought both ends back to where we had dropped the logs. We attached one end of the rope to the log that had to go to the other side and the other end to the tractor. We levered the log up to put some of our rollers under it and put more rollers in front of it. Then we drove the tractor back away from the creek, and the log moved toward the creek slick as a whistle. Everything was fine until it toppled into the water. Although the creek was only a few feet wide at the time and no more than six inches deep, the front end of the log wanted to plow into the bottom, rather than rising nicely up to the other bank. Because this was a small log weighing only two hundred fifty pounds or so, we managed to lever and wrestle it into a position so that the tractor could continue to pull it, and we finally got it to the other side and rolled it into position on top of some concrete patio blocks we had placed there. But how were we going to solve this problem with the longer and heavier spanning logs?

We concluded hopefully that, because the spanning logs were longer, their center of gravity was such that when they finally tipped down their ends would hit on the other bank, rather than in the water. We hooked the first spanning log to the rope going through the pulley, put rollers under it, and fired up the tractor. Again the log moved slowly and steadily toward the far bank until it too fell forward. As we hoped, the end landed on the other bank, but it was still well below the place where it was to rest, and it quickly became apparent that we couldn't muscle this log into position. As we sat and rested and tried to figure out what to do, Rick had an idea.

“You must have a jack in your car, don't you?” he asked.

“Sure.” My Honda had a nice compact little jack with a handle that turned, rather than going up and down.

“That’s what we can use to raise the end of the log.”

“But when we start to pull the rope again, it’ll fall right off.”

“We can do something about that. Trust me.”

I went back to the farmhouse and got the jack. By the time I returned with it and lunch, I saw that Rick had collected some patio blocks and boards and placed them on the bank near the end of the log we were working on. Now I could see what his plan was. We put a board under the jack to give it a firm footing and then slowly jacked up the end of the log. Every six inches or so we would shove the concrete patio blocks or pieces of wood under the end so that the log wasn’t resting solely on the jack. When we finally had it high enough there was enough support to permit us to resume pulling it into place with the rope and pulley. It was a time-consuming effort, but it worked.

We weren’t able to get the end of the spanning log to drop exactly where we wanted it on the end log, but by using the jack again and a long two by four as a lever we finally got it into position at both ends. Now came the crucial test. Would the threaded rod slip into the holes Rick had drilled? Rick inserted a rod into one end of the top log and slowly twisted it. It went easily through that log, then caught as it hit the bottom log. Rick looked at me apprehensively and jiggled the rod. After a moment it found the hole in the bottom log, went in and slipped cleanly through into the gap we had thoughtfully left in the blocks on which the bottom log sat. We couldn’t believe it had been so easy. Rick placed washers and nuts on each end of the threaded rod and tightened them, then turned to the other end of the spanning log. The next rod went into place there with just as little effort. “Why is it,” I asked, “that the parts we expect to be hard turn out to be easy and the parts we expect to be easy turn out to be hard?”

“Maybe,” Rick answered, “we prepare more carefully for what we think will be hard. Perhaps there are no hard parts and easy parts, but only adequate and inadequate

preparation.” This sounded like some Zen mumbo-jumbo to me, but I didn’t say so.

It was now mid-afternoon, and we were determined to get the other spanning log in place before we quit for the day. This time Rick had a plan to avoid all the jacking we had to do on the first span. He was going to build out of some heavy branches lying nearby a frame that would rest in the creek and support the log when it started to topple, thus preventing it from plowing into the side of the bank before it got as far across the creek as we wanted it. I complained that building the frame would take more time than jacking the log up, but Rick was not to be deterred. As he nailed his branches together into a big tripod, I watched sullenly and silently. After about forty five minutes I asked him how much longer he was going to take.

“Oh, hell, let’s try it the way I’ve got it,” Rick said huffily. He stopped his search for more branches to add as supports and set his wobbly rig up in the creek. Again we set up the pulley and started the tractor. Again the log moved smoothly on its rollers out over the creek, this time with the end suspended on the crude tripod. And again, when the mid-point of the log passed the edge of the near bank, the end out over the creek crashed down into the opposite bank, this time smashing the tripod apart in the process.

Instead of feeling smug and vindicated, I suddenly felt very guilty. The support frame had almost held the log, and probably with a few additional braces it would have done so. It was my impatience that had caused it to fail. I apologized. Rick didn’t say anything but got the jack and the blocks, and we began working silently to jack the end of the log up to where we could continue to move it.

We finally got the second spanning log in position. Again the threaded rod went into the drilled holes with no serious problem, and Rick tightened down the nuts. Our bridge frame was complete, and it was as solid and sturdy as it could be. Any remaining irritation about the capsized tripod evaporated in our exultation. We had, we agreed, broken the back of this project. And none too soon, for it was well past the dinner hour and nearing the end of a long June day.

That evening Rick and I discussed how we would finish the bridge. Rick readily concluded that it was now time to go to the lumber yard. Flat boards would be greatly preferable for the bridge decking, and we really did not have the tools necessary to cut flat boards from the timber on the farm. Nor did we have the time, for Rick's return flight to California was a week away now, and we had other projects to start before he left. So the next morning found us at the Three Oaks Lumber Company. After some debate, we bought a dozen sixteen-foot Wolmanized two by sixes, to be delivered that afternoon. We also picked up some miscellaneous pieces of other lumber, several boxes of nails, shims, brushes, and a gallon of Pentane to treat the logs we had already installed.

While waiting for the lumber to be delivered, we returned to the bridge site and began applying the Pentane. We were in good spirits, and our conversation turned to the names we had been placing on the various topographical features of the farm.

"You know," I said, "we really need to figure out what to call this bridge."

"No problem," Rick replied. "We'll call it the Buddha Bridge. It crosses over to the Buddha Promontory."

I wasn't exactly thrilled about that name. It's all right for a California quasi-hippie to call his bridge a "Buddha Bridge", but not for a conservative La Salle Street lawyer to do so. And my conservative lawyer friends would be more understanding than my God-fearing country neighbors. They probably already suspected my strange city ways.

"I'd like something a little more personal," I said. "After all, Buddha probably has lots of bridges named after him. How about the 'Platz Memorial Bridge'?"

"What are we memorializing?"

That was a fair question, and it started me thinking. The purchase of the farm had been made possible by the modest inheritance Rick and I received after the deaths of our parents. Why not dedicate the bridge to them? The idea made me feel good, and I put it to Rick.

He grinned. "I really like that," he said. "And I think Dad would like it too." Our

father had been an engineer, and undoubtedly our enjoyment of this project had something to do with his influence on us.

“How about the Mr. and Mrs. George A. Platz Memorial Bridge?”

“That sounds like you and Andrea.” Rick was right. Both my father and I were named George.

“I’ve got it,” I said. “It’ll be the ‘Dickey S. and George A. Platz, Jr., Memorial Bridge.’”

“Would you consider the ‘Dickey S. and George A. Platz, Jr. Memorial Buddha Bridge?’”

Reluctantly, but ultimately with little reservation, I agreed. The bridge had its name, and our parents had a memorial that was perhaps as good as any other we could give them.

After the lumber was delivered that afternoon we began cutting it into five foot four inch pieces for the bridge decking. We had not finished by evening, so Rick had to complete the work by himself the next day, as it was necessary for me to go into the office. When I returned to the farm Rick informed me that he had completed cutting all the pieces and had in fact started nailing them in place on the bridge. I looked forward to seeing how they looked.

We got up early the following morning and went out to the bridge. Rick had, as usual, done a splendid job. The decking was regular and even and gave the bridge a nicely finished look. Rick had also managed to shim the decking in such a way as to make the arch of the spanning logs match, so that the final product had the attractive curved look of the drum bridges we had seen in the Japanese Garden in St. Louis. It must have taken him forever to get the shimming just right; I was glad I hadn’t been there to undermine the work with my impatience. A couple of features about the decking, however, I didn’t understand.

“Why do some of the pieces of decking stick out beyond the others?” I asked.

“That’s to attach the railing supports,” Rick explained.

Of course. I had totally overlooked the need for railings. But this didn’t explain

everything.

“Why do you have three of the boards protruding all together in the middle of the bridge, and only on one side?” I inquired further.

“Oh,” Rick grinned. “That’s where the Buddha statue goes.” He walked over to the bank, picked up the concrete Buddha from where it had been sitting on the Buddha Promontory, and placed it on its little platform on the side of the bridge. “Your neighbors won’t object to that, will they?”

“Does it make any difference if they do?”

Rick looked down admiringly at the statue. “Nope. That Buddha was made to go right there.”

We finished the decking and then tackled the bridge railings, which we didn’t complete until the next day. The bridge was now adequate for foot traffic but still lacked a ramp at the Buddha Promontory end and some fill at the Andrea’s Landing end to enable vehicles to cross. Because of other pressing work we had to finish before Rick left, I would have to do those myself at some later time. But we considered the main project to be completed.

“When are we going to dedicate the bridge?” Rick asked.

“How about right now?” I said. We both walked out onto the bridge. I raised my right hand. “I hereby dedicate this bridge.”

“Very fitting,” Rick said.

“I wish Mom and Dad could see this now.”

“Perhaps they can,” Rick said.

We started on a different project the next day, and Rick returned to California the following week. Over the summer I completed the approaches to the bridge so that it can be used by my tractor and by the ATV I bought later that year. I also drove some old metal fence posts and some earth anchors into the ground and attached them to the bridge to hold it in place. (This turned out to be very important. One evening in early March 1984 Rick

happened to be working in the sugarhouse that we subsequently built on Pointe George overlooking the bridge, when a terrifically heavy thunderstorm struck. In the brief illumination of lightning flashes Rick saw the heavy rainfall, combined with the melting snow, send Rick's Creek rushing over its banks and fill the bottom part of the entire North Ravine with water. The next day when we inspected we found debris from the rushing water caught on the head of the Buddha statue, which is ordinarily a good five feet above the level of Rick's Creek. Yet the bridge hadn't moved an inch.)

While I was putting the finishing touches on the bridge approaches, I happened to walk over to where we had cut the logs for the bridge. I looked for the remains of the downed trees we had used and was surprised that I couldn't locate the base of the yellow poplar. I was sure we had left a horizontal stump that was a good five feet long. Then I noticed a yellow poplar stump sticking straight up into the air. At first I didn't understand what had happened, but on examination it was apparent that the stump of that tree and the huge ball of dirt and roots that had been pulled out of the ground had righted itself. It now looked for all the world like we had cut a standing tree, rather than a windfall. I have no idea what caused that to happen, but I am fairly certain that Rick would say it was a propitious sign.

The Dickey S. and George A. Platz, Jr. Memorial Buddha Bridge has now become central to our use of the farm, opening up the virgin woods on the north side of the North Ravine, which is the prettiest part of the property. The bridge is indispensable to our maple syrup making operations, because the trees we tap are located on both sides of the North Ravine near the bridge, as is most of the downed timber that we cut up for firewood for the evaporator. Yet like the hundreds or thousands of other bridges we use each year in our peripatetic lifestyle, the D.S.&G.A.P.Jr.M.B. Bridge has begun to be taken for granted. We seldom remember the arguments, the labors, and the exultation which attended its construction, as we use it to go about our new projects. If asked, Rick would probably make some Zen-influenced comment on the building of bridges and the mastery of life's

challenges, but I probably wouldn't pay much attention. I'd rather get started on another bridge.