

Bridges to Prosperity

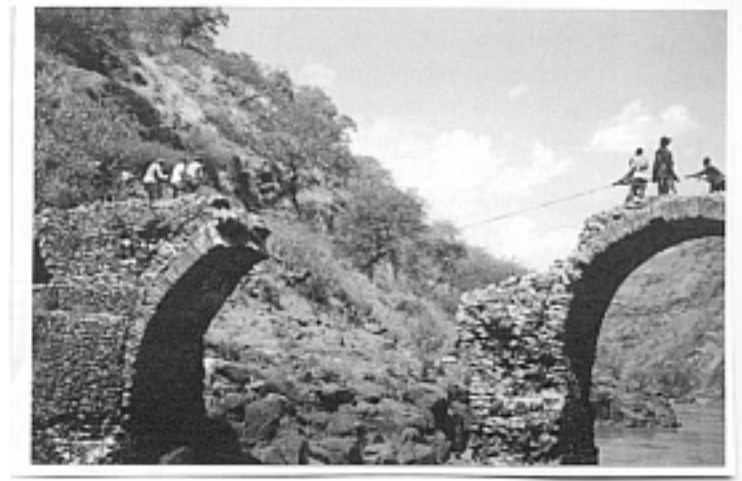
Gloucester resident Ken Frantz builds bridges, and hope,
in Ethiopia

Story by Terri Haynie

When does a thought become an idea? At what moment does the vision simmering just behind your eyes boil into a mission-something that begs completion, its simplicity startling? Ask Ken Frantz. He can tell you all about missions and how they start, how his leapt out at him from between the pages of the December 2000 issue of *National Geographic* magazine. On an ordinary day in March of this year, while waiting at a dealership for repair work to be finished on his truck, Ken's life changed when he flipped the magazine open to a picture of desperation and courage: chains of men on opposing sides of the ruined Second Portuguese Bridge in Ethiopia holding the taut ends of a rope. Dangling from that rope, legs, hands and feet clinging, a man enduring the only way of crossing the chasm, completely at the mercy of the human chains who labored to move him, inch by inch, from one side to the other. Ken's mission, at that moment, became rebuilding the bridge.

That same day while driving from the dealership to the home he shares with his wife and two sons on Cuba Island in Gloucester County, Ken's mission crossed the threshold to a larger concept-that of creating an organization to build bridges in many countries. Ken is a naturally curious student of life and human nature, an adventurer, a humanitarian. He has been in the construction industry for over thirty years and has volunteered countless hours for over twenty charitable organizations, from the Friendship Force International to the PTA.

Born in Seattle, Washington, Ken was raised in an atmosphere alive with intellectualism and the arts-his father was a Boeing engineer, his mother a poet and glass artist. He and his four brothers grew up with one foot always in a boat, where sailing was a family passion. After completing his post-graduate degree in 1974, he went to work for a construction company on the Alaska Pipeline as a crisis manager. Several years later he moved to San Francisco where he built a very successful construction company and began a family. But when it was time for his children to start school, he and his wife Cheri, a native of Newport News, Virginia, decided it might be a good time to leave the fast pace of Silicon Valley. They began looking for a more traditional, slower-paced community in which to raise their children. They chose Gloucester County because it was close to Cheri's family and had a distinct nautical flavor. "I was very attracted to the water, to the Chesapeake Bay," says Ken of the area. "It's a lot like Seattle with its connection to the water." In 1989, they purchased Cuba Island, a small island in Gloucester County on the York River, and in 1992, moved into their newly-built house. But quite some time before the house came a much more important structure. To get from the mainland to the island, Ken had to build a bridge. He has always had a special love of bridges. Not surprisingly, instead of seeing roadblocks, Ken sees ways around, through-and across.



The Second Portuguese Bridge, also called Broken Bridge, is over 400 years old and is only one of four bridges that span the Blue Nile. Pictured here is the current method of crossing.

The first contact Ken made for the Ethiopian project was with the Second Ambassador to the US, Minister Brook Hailu of Ethiopia, who was extremely supportive. "I didn't expect him to be so trusting of my intentions," said Ken. "I was very surprised at his knowledge of the bridge and its history." As he learned later, the Second Portuguese Bridge (called the "Broken Bridge" by natives) that spans the Blue Nile is listed as one of Ethiopia's top ten archeological wonders.

Built by descendants of the Portuguese, it is 400 years old and boasts still-majestic Roman-style arches. Only three other bridges cross the Blue Nile, one of four rivers that flowed out of Eden. Spirits and gods inhabit its mystic waters-Jinn, evil and shape-shifting, and King Gihon, to whom sacrifices are made. It is the last major river of the world to be mapped and explored. "Everyone in Ethiopia knows the history of the bridge explains Ken, who had only a rudimentary knowledge of Ethiopia before he became immersed in its people and culture. It symbolizes the strong independence of the country and the struggle that Ethiopia has fought for 1,600 years". That struggle is one of being an independent country free of colonial influences. The bridge was partially destroyed-broken by Ethiopian patriots in 1937 to fend off Mussolini's advance in World War II. It has been rebuilt at least twenty times, always with wood. Every time the river waters would flood, the wood repair would wash away. Since the communist regime in 1990, the bridge has not been repaired. There is no wood-the country has been almost completely deforested." With the support of Minister Brook Hailu, Ken began the task of creating a non-profit organization. The approach he took was grassroots. He sent a letter to all of his family and friends, located across the United States and Europe. "Kind of like your whole address book," he laughs. He followed up on a person-to-person basis, asking people to help with specific tasks. "The response was extremely supportive. Everyone wanted to help." By April, he had applied for 501(C)3 status for the organization. Their mission statement: "By combining western ingenuity, indigenous manpower, and the generosity of its contributors, we build bridges worldwide in areas lacking the resources to do so. We design and construct light duty bridges to cross geographical barriers like rivers/gorges/mountains, thereby allowing people in isolated villages access to markets for their goods. We believe improved access to markets brings about more trade, and more trade improves economic prosperity. We endeavor to complete our mission with cost effectiveness, competence, reliability, sensitivity, and good will. We are "Bridges to Prosperity."

The fledgling organization began making plans for a survey to take place in early June. Ken did his homework thoroughly. Though he had expected the government to be more difficult to deal with, it was not." We used a unique approach on getting government approval. First, it was federal support that came through the Ethiopian Embassy and from the Minister of Tourism in Ethiopia. That allowed us to gain our visas into the country and carry letters of introduction. "Once they had those items, they changed their strategy. "Instead of going from the top down, we decided we would go from the bottom up." They planned to approach the respected elders of villages on both sides of the Blue Nile to seek their permission and blessing, knowing that they, the "Ferenjis" (foreigners) would need the total acceptance of the people they were attempting to help.

The first impression you get when stepping off the plane in Ethiopia is huge cultural shock, Calcutta-style," explains Ken. "Children with atrophied limbs dragging themselves across the ground begging for money, that kind of thing." Upon arrival, the organization members met up with the logistics firm, "Wonz-Dar Expeditions," that Ken had hired two months previously; the twenty-five member expedition left in jeeps from Addis Ababa. After arrival in Mot'a the following day, they faced a daunting pedestrian journey of eighteen miles to the bridge site, packing their gear in by donkey. A mere four months after his encounter with the photo that moved him so forcefully, he arrived. "Amazement," is how Ken described his feelings." A picture can be powerful, but when you see something like that for the first time, it just takes your breath away. I was struck by how desolate the Nile Gorge was and how this bridge could have been built at this location 400 years ago. No one lives at the river because malaria resides there, as it does anywhere in that area below five thousand feet." There is no medicine to treat it, so the native Amhara people live at higher elevations. There are no houses, no sign of people. Crossing the bridge is double jeopardy-those determined to get to the other side face the risk of death either by disease or a horrific freefall into the Blue Nile gorge. In fact, the expedition party soon learned that twenty to thirty people die each year making the crossing.

Which raises the question of *why* people are compelled to cross. As with many dilemmas, it boils down to economics. Quite simply, goods bring more money on the both sides of the river. Everything from grain to live animals is levitated from one side to the other via an ancient one hundred-foot rope, a thick accumulation of strands interspersed with at least twenty knots, the result of years of breakage and repair. In the middle of the rope, a single loop is strung. The person crossing puts the loop under his or her arms, tension is placed on the rope by the two teams of men on either side, and the crosser jumps into the void of the gorge, praying to feel the violent saw of the rope catching, to know the descent has transformed from vertical plunge to horizontal crawl.

The need was even more stark, more desperate, than Ken could have imagined. The expedition party set up camp and tried to sleep, not really knowing what the morning would hold. Eerily, it held more than they



*Above: Ken Frantz, with tribal leaders.
Below: Brett Hargrave (Idaho),
Maurizio Melloni (Owner of Wond-Zar
Expeditions, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia),
Forrest Frantz (Washington), Ken Frantz*



had bargained for. During the night, the campers heard two terrible screams. Brett Hargrave, the EMT from the survey party, raced to the river where native members of the expedition told him that one of the porters had fallen into the river but was now all right. However, early morning revealed that the man had been swept away after slipping into twenty feet of churning water. He was never found. Ken's conjecture is that they were told a white lie to assuage their fears. (Following the death, the organization and Wond-Dar gave a generous amount of money to the man's family to take care of funeral expenses.) Later in the day, before the expedition had an opportunity to travel to any villages, a committee of sixteen elders appeared at the river. They had heard of the arrival of the Ferenjis and had made the long, arduous journey down rock-strewn mountainsides-no switchbacks-during the searing heat of the afternoon. The ages of the elders ranged from fifty to seventy-five. In the Amhara culture of short life spans and elemental living conditions, these men were ancient. The trek to meet the expedition was an amazing feat for them.

In an emotional introduction, Ken broke down in tears. The elders already knew that the expedition was there to talk about abridge, but first, Ken had to tell them of the tragedy. He expressed the urgent need to avoid similar accidents in the future. The elders were obviously touched. The meeting became more than bridge talk - it became a forum for the commonality of the human spirit, crossing cultural lines, easing suspicions, erasing differences. After Ken gave his presentation and showed pictures of his and his brother's (an expedition member) family, each elder stood and gave personal testimony about the bridge as well as the tragedy-King Gihon, the spirit of the river, obviously had a reason for taking the man. Ken gave gifts of tee-shirts, shampoo, and pocketknives to the elders. As for the bridge, the support was overwhelming.

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In this and subsequent meetings with over sixty elders in three different meetings on both sides of the Blue Nile, it was the same. At each meeting, Ken asked the elders to get word to the proper official in Bahir Dar that they were in support of a new bridge. And in this country of no telephones (there are a few telegraph lines along major highways), the elders were able to get word back to Bahir Dar, an eighteen-hour trip by donkey and jeep, before the expedition arrived there a few days later. According to Ken, "I think they must have sent couriers from their villages. At any rate, by the time we met with the Bahir Dar officials, the skids had already been overwhelmingly greased! The officials knew the entire story of our trip to the river in detail." The bottom-up approach proved a stunning success.

The natives of this part of Ethiopia, where the Blue Nile flows on its treacherous journey through canyon-like gorges and thunderous, mist-obscured waterfalls, are the Amhara Highlanders. They are an ancient race said to have descended from the 12th tribe of Israel and practitioners of a mystical combination of Orthodox Christianity and superstition; they stand to gain nothing less than a reconnection of the Amhara peoples on both sides of the river. It is estimated that by re-opening this two thousand-year-old route, trade will increase between the provinces of Gojjam and Gonder by \$22 million dollars a year. The grain surplus region of Gojjam will be connected with the grain deficit region of Gonder. Amazingly, between one and two thousand crossings are expected daily. In the words of one elder, "We will never forget what you have done to help us. We will pass this story down to our children a hundred years from now."

At this writing, the lightweight steel trusses for the Ethiopian bridge are being fabricated in Turin, Italy. The design will allow them to be carried by donkey to the site. Estimated completion for the bridge is March 2002. During actual construction at the river, a free medical clinic, including a doctor and nurse, will be available for villagers. Other active bridge projects are the Kamro Khola Bridge and Kavre River Bridges in Nepal. A bridge in Guatemala is in the survey stage, and a joint venture is being negotiated in Vietnam. *National Geographic* magazine has committed to an article following completion of the Ethiopian bridge. Already, this first project has been nominated for a humanitarian award though it is not yet complete. For more information about "Bridges to Prosperity," please visit their web site at www.bridgestoprosperty.org.