

Historical Raiffeisen Road

An Achievement to Serve Generations

March 23rd, 1984, will be recorded as a significant date in the history of the Westerwald region: It was on that day that the road from Hamm via Weyerbusch to Neuwied was officially named after its builder, Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, social reformer and founder of cooperatives.

The "Historical Raiffeisen Road" is doubly entitled to bear this name. F.W. Raiffeisen had it built, and it is along this road that we come across the most important stations of his life and work.

Who was F.W. Raiffeisen?

Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen was born to the farmer and mayor Gottfried Friedrich Raiffeisen on March 30th, 1818, at Hamm an der Sieg. After leaving school, he entered upon a military career but in 1843, an eye disease forced him to resign from military service. He went into the public service, and, after a short period of training, became district mayor in Weyerbusch/Westerwald, and later in Flammersfeld and in Heddesdorf near Neuwied.

Due to his increasingly deteriorating eyesight, he went into retirement in 1865 at the early age of 47 years. Until his death on March 11th, 1888, he devoted himself with great energy to spreading the idea of co-operative societies and extending the co-operative organisation.

Road construction as an emergency measure

In 1845, F. W. Raiffeisen came to Weyerbusch as a young mayor. In the very same year, he built a new school there which was followed by another two new school buildings in neighbouring parishes of his district. During the starvation winter of 1846/47, F.W. Raiffeisen devised emergency measures to supply bread, work and, thus, an income to the poor. Amongst those measures was the construction of roads and lanes which, at that time, was still done by statute labour.

The Westerwald region was then hardly opened-up. There existed the old main road between Cologne and Frankfurt which touched Weyerbusch but there was no adequate connection with the Rhine river, this great traffic artery. It was F. W. Raiffeisen who had a modern road built to cover this stretch of ca. 40 km (ca. 22 m), leading from Weyerbusch through Flammersfeld and Rengsdorf to Heddesdorf near Neuwied.

Emergence of co-operative societies

During this same period in Weyerbusch, he developed his idea of co-operative societies. He supplied flour, had bread baked and distributed to the very poorest. As an instrument for this purpose, he established an “aid society” in 1847. This was the first pre-co-operative society founded by a young mayor.

In 1848, F. W. Raiffeisen came to Flammersfeld, the second station in his career. In his capacity as mayor, he continued to sponsor road building and, in 1849, he founded the second forerunner of today’s co-operatives, the “Flammersfeld Aid Society for the Support of Poor Farmers”. He tried to encourage the idea of savings deposits, thinking that the money thus collected could then be lent out to poor farmers for the purchase of livestock and farm utensils.

Self-help instead of external assistance

Both societies enjoyed great initial success but proved non-viable in the long run since they were largely based on the principle of benevolent assistance from outsiders. F. W. Raiffeisen realised this and concluded that these societies would survive only on a basis of self-help within a fixed structure.

In Heddesdorf, the third station in his career as mayor, he managed to take the decisive step: A benevolent society grew into the first Raiffeisen co-operative. The Heddesdorf “Thrift and Loan Society” was founded in 1864. It was the prototype of rural credit societies which have remained almost unchanged up to date.

In Heddesdorf, F. W. Raiffeisen brought both his co-operative activity and his road-building to a conclusion, and it was there that he died.

The ideas that F.W. Raiffeisen, as mayor in the Westerwald region, developed over 120 years ago are still valid and effective today. They became the basis for a strong and efficient co-operative organisation, and that not only in Germany. In almost 100 countries on all continents, 330.000 co-operatives following Raiffeisen’s ideas exist nowadays. Their membership of 150 million people practice the principle of help through self-help.