

# PREACHERS AND THEIR PASTIMES

(By Cyril Wheaton.)

## REV. W. O. NORTH—OPAL GOUGER.

The sun was warm, but a nip in the air made quick movement necessary.

I passed through the Urrbrae property, and sighted the home of my friend the Rev. W. O. North.

Mr. North's car stood on a gravel drive beside the house, but Mr. North was not in sight.

I turned around a garden bed and made for the front door.

A deep, heart-felt groan came up out of the bowels of the earth, "Where did I put that dope?"

I hurried back to the car and looked underneath it; Mr. North was reclining gracefully on the ground.

"Where did I put that dope, Wheaton?" he asked with agonised entreaty as he caught sight of my anxious face.

"This is the day, isn't it?" I asked in reply.

"Yes, I'm just greasing the car. Where did I put that dope?"



In reply Mr. North almost hurled me bodily through the wind-screen with a decisive application of the brakes.

"What the— Oh," I said, interrupting myself as I caught sight of the motor cycle and side-car, with its uniformed occupants lurking on a side-track.

We drove past with bone-white faces. I endeavoured with trembling fingers to raise my hat, but the traffic police only glared malignantly.

"Are they following us?" asked Mr. North.

"Yes," I replied after examining our wake.

"There's no doubt they keep down a lot of this furious driving," remarked Mr. North.

"Fine body of men," I agreed.

"Are they still following us?"

"No," I replied, craning my neck. "They've turned down towards Happy Valley. As you say, they keep down a lot—." My words were drowned in the roar of the rapidly accelerating engines.

"What about breaking off towards the sea on one of these side-roads?" asked Mr. North.

"Unanimous," I returned.

The sea was very soon just under our feet. We looked out over its enormous circle from the cliffs at Blanche Point.

"There is the future to consider," I intoned, solemnly.

"Here! What's that?" asked Mr. North anxiously. "Is that a flat tyre?"

I dismounted and made an examination. "All trim," I reported. "Its the stony track."

"I remember once travelling with another car near Kingoonya," remarked my friend.

"Very fine suburb," I said generously.

The only hope now was to cut the beading off one of the chewed-up tyres and use it as an all-round gaiter in the other chewed-up tyre. The driver asked us to get on to the fields, and to send a search party next day if he didn't turn up that night. Greatly to our surprise the car wobbled in very late, and just as it pulled up the tyre banged off finally.

"What did you think of Coober Pedy?" I asked.



VIEW FROM DUGOUT.

"Suburb!" exploded Mr. North. "It's away out on the East-West line. In the never-never."

"I must have been thinking of Glenunga," I apologised.

"We were both making for Coober Pedy," continued Mr. North. "The driver of the other car thought the bumping of his car was due to the gibbers on the track, but found he had been running on a flat tyre and had cut the tyre and tube almost to pieces. He managed to get into Kingoonya on a sad looking spare, but could get noth-

"Oh I knew Coober Pedy all right. I'd been there before. I can't think of any better holiday than a week or two on the opal fields."

"One moment," I said firmly, drawing out a huge wad of notepaper and my presentation gold pencil.

"Have you gouged for opal?" "I've scratched around and enjoyed it immensely."

"Stop the car," I commanded, and went on. "A man with the wierdest hobby on earth, and absolutely at my mercy!"



THE DUGOUT IN WHICH THE FIRST SERVICE WAS HELD.

I pushed the fugitive tin out of its ambush, and the job was soon done. "Shall I open the gate?" I asked. "That back tire wants some air," was the reply.

We both moved towards that back wheel. By means of walking the wrong way around the car I managed to arrive a little later than my friend.

"Here!" I said, "let me —."

"No, huh! No huh! I'll huh fix the huh thing," replied Mr. North.

"This is the life," I said five minutes later as we bowled along a fine asphalted road.

"Where shall we go Wheaton?"

"Go north, North," I answered inanely.

Mr. North, cut to the heart, deliberately turned the car south.

It was a dignified and well-deserved rebuke, but my chauffeur soon softened under the influence of the wine-like air.

"Watch her take Tapley's," he said proudly.

We overtook and passed seven cars, and raced up the reduced grade near the summit in great contentment, and with all our differences composed.

"Let her out," I recommended.

"Hard to beat," I ventured.

"I love the sea," returned Mr. North, "but I like to be on a palm-fringed, coral strand, with the waves surging and pounding on the reef, and the long line of tumbling, spouting, snow-white foam relieving the deep blue of the tropic sea."

"Jolly eloquent," I replied.

Mr. North touched a button, the engine hummed, we dashed into a creek and climbed a limestone ridge, and very soon were running thrillingly along a precipitous cliff towards the famous Sellick's Hill speed beach.

"Thrills!" said Mr. North in reply to a question. "We had thrills enough one day. We were motoring back from the Jenolan Caves to Katoomba. It had been a hot day with strong, hot winds fanning the bush fires into fury. The whole country-side seemed to be ablaze. Suddenly a man stood in the road way and stopped us. He said that the bush was ablaze on both sides of the road. But we went on. It was a grand but awful sight. Everything was ablaze—trees, fences, telegraph poles. Some of the poles had fallen and the wires were across the road. Others were standing on a live coal that didn't look thicker than a man's wrist. We were afraid that they might fall on us. And as we rushed through showers of sparks swept over the car and under it and through it, so that we had to shield our faces."

"Did you get through?" I asked intelligently.

"Well, naturally. Here I am to tell the tale. The fire was soon a thing of the past."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked.

"I don't see any fires about at present."

ing there to help him. Next day we started out to do the 200 miles to Coober Pedy."

"I've heard of Coober Pedy," I said resolutely.

"We started out next day with a motor truck for company."

"I've got it," I interrupted. "Professor Wood Jones has a chapter on Coober Pedy in a book of essays he published."

"The groggy car went first," continued Mr. North patiently, "followed by the truck. We brought up the rear.

Mr. North gazed around wildly, but there was no help for him in earth or air or sea. I carefully adjusted my presentation pencil and spread out sheaves of note paper.

"If Professor Wood Jones is to be trusted, opal gouging is one of the most romantic occupations imaginable," I began.

"You have to sit with the gougers round the camp fire and get them in reminiscent mood to know the romance of opal gouging."

"Continue," I said encouragingly.



"THE FLAT."—TYPICAL VIEW OF OPAL FIELDS.

After a while we noticed that the two vehicles ahead were travelling at a furious pace, so we speeded up to find out the cause. The driver of the truck had seen the tube bulging out of the back tyre of the car ahead and had signalled wildly to the driver to stop. The driver thought the signal was to go faster, so he opened out the throttle! The wilder the signals from the truck the faster sped the car in front. The explosion was magnificent. We arrived in time to hear part of the argument.

"Many of them can tell you wonderful stories of finding and missing fortunes by a few inches. One man was pointed out to me as one of three who got £9,000 from one claim. He went to town with his £3,000, and in six months was back again, penniless. Silly coon! Yes! But I heard this: When that silly coon was in an hotel in the East End of Adelaide a man said to him that the doctor had ordered his wife and child away for a change, but he hadn't the money to send them.

The silly coon pulled out a one hundred pound note and thrust it into the hand of the man and said, 'Here, take this and send them away for a change.' I think the One above will mark that £100 to the 'coon's' account in the book of His remembrance."

"Did you knock out a few thousands?" I queried.

"Everyone has the same chance," replied Mr. North tactfully. "You may be on the bread line this morning; this evening you may have a small fortune. They tell of two railway men who decided to spend part of their long leave on the field 'just for the fun of it.' They struck £2,200 worth of opal!"

"Did you—"

"I talked with a gouger one day who said, 'I got £1,500 out of that hole.' I met another who got £1,500 18 inches below the surface."

"Personal experiences are always—"

"'You never know when your luck's in' is the common optimism of the fields. One man sank a shaft for 20 feet. Going down one day he dislodged some earth two feet below the surface. Coming up he noticed some traces, and gouging in a little way, he came on a lovely pocket."

"Do they dig about anywhere?"

"The whole place is honeycombed. Acres and acres have been turned up. One man called 'The Whistler' sank a hole 10 feet deep then abandoned it. Another man thought he'd make the hole a little deeper, and three feet lower he found opal worth £1,600."

"Let's get out of the car and have a look around," I suggested.

"There is one claim at Coober Pedy that is always referred to as 'The Big Joint,'" continued Mr. North. "£30,000 worth of opal was taken from it."

"Yes! Would you have done that, Mr. Editor?"

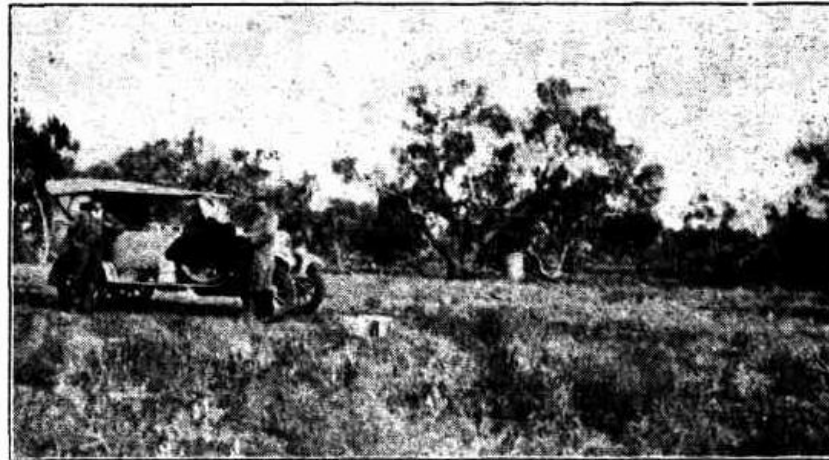
"Undoubtedly," I said firmly.

"I notice you have two gold pencils," remarked my friend, irrelevantly pointing to my vest pocket.

"Yes, I'm very proud of them. I received this one as a presentation from the Institute Committee at Gum Flat, and this other one—"

"Did you build a new hall or something?" asked Mr. North.

"Oh no, just for long service. I did two terms. Nearly 18 months altogether. This other one I won in a cricket competition."



BRUMBY CREEK, BETWEEN KINGOONYA AND COOBER PEDY.

"Batting or Bowling?"

"I really won it in a competition at a cricket social for guessing the names of hidden rivers. I got 7 out of 25. The schoolmaster was second with three."

"Which one will you give to me?" asked Mr. North.

"What! Hand one of these hard-

to have confused ideas on things like that. Suppose I unearthed a nugget of gold in that hill over there; why, I'd share it with you—fifty-fifty."

"The hill or the nugget?"

"Both," I replied unhesitatingly.

"That hill reminds me of Post Office Hill at Coober Pedy," remarked Mr. North. "Very much the same shape."

"Is that so? What sort of a place is Coober Pedy?" I asked.

"I shall never forget my first sight of the opal city. Miles before we got there I was eagerly watching for the first roof top. But there was not a

order, he leaves his farm in the middle north, and seeks the warm climate of the interior. He is paying the price of the Great War."

"Good man! I know I'd like that chap. I hope Coober Pedy will give him lungs like leather bellows. Are the outback men as fine as they are painted?"

"Ha!" said Mr. North with a gust of enthusiasm.

"That's right. Out with it," I urged.

"Tom O'Leary," said Mr. North.

"Well, Tom O'Leary," I replied.

"He was a man of medium height, and lean of frame, tanned by sun and wind almost to the colour of his eyes. He had taken up a hundred square miles of salt bush. He wanted water on it and week in and week out, all alone in the great solitudes, he put down a bore by hand. It was down 150 feet when I last saw him. Then there was 'Osmiridium Jack'."

"We now take up the case of the metalliferous John," I announced.

"He had visited 32 European cities, and could describe them all."

"Had he ever been to Moonta?" I asked.

"There was 'Black Alf,' who had sailed all the seas, and who could never pass a red-headed policeman without wanting to fight him."

"That's common enough. I have a second cousin—"

"'Outback Jack,'" interrupted Mr. North, "fought through the Boer War and the Great War, and carried the scars of it all with a smile. Then there was 'Big Ben,' who always talked in an undertone, and who could give you name, owner and boundaries of almost every station between Port Augusta and Darwin and between Cairns and

"£30,000," I murmured reverently, and went down on all fours and rummaged in the earth. I secured a specimen of limestone and two small fragments of a glass bottle.

"Another of the gougers, 'Bert' was the only name I heard given to him, found a floater."

"Stick to opal gouging," I urged. "I can get plenty of fish stories from Cowley and Richmond."

"A floater, Mr. Editor, is a piece of opal lying on the surface. A few inches from the floater he found opal valued at £400. One day I was speaking to a gouger who was one of a party of four. They didn't work well together, so the other three told the gouger he had better go on his own. He sank a hole on another claim to the 12 foot level and wrote to his brother to join him. The first day his brother was there the gouger said, 'Now, you go down and try your hand.' He struck £1,200 worth that day."

It seems to be a great game for amateurs," I said. "Did you—"

"That story isn't finished, Mr. Editor. The gouger went to his erstwhile mates. 'Have you struck it, mates?' 'No, have you.' 'Yes.' 'Expect you — have. You are always striking it.' 'Come over and see.' They went and looked at it. 'It's all right lads,' said the gouger. 'We share and share alike.'"

"There doesn't seem to be anything but limestone around here. I think we'd better move off," I proposed.

Mr. North reversed, ran the front wheels to within  $\frac{1}{16}$  of an inch of the precipice, reversed again, and so turned the car upon its tracks.

"That was a fine piece of practical socialism wasn't it?" he asked.

"You mean sharing the opal?"

won trophies over to a man without a shadow of a claim—?"

"You said you'd share £1,200 worth of opal."

"Can't you see the fallacy in that?" I asked, "the two cases are not alike. Totally different principles. Now, take opal for example. Put it this way. Say you have a piece of opal. Very well.



COOBER PEDY WATER SUPPLY—500,000 GALLONS.

No, say I have a piece of opal. That'll make it clearer."

"That'll suit me then," said Mr. North. "I want to have it clear."

"Very well," I replied, "Say I have a piece of opal. Now look at it like this. As a matter of fact I haven't any opal but for the sake of argument, say I have. Now, how did Emerson put it in 1858? I can't give you the exact words, but the two things are on different planes. See my point?"

"Did you say you hadn't any opal?"

"That's what I said."

"I see! I see!" said Mr. North.

"Good," I replied, thankfully. "I'm glad I've cleared that up. It's terrible

no school, no policeman—."

"No traffic police!" I exclaimed.

"Very little traffic, and no police at all."

"Heaven on earth," I murmured.

"There's no doctor or clergyman and no telephone or wireless in that city 600 miles north-west of Adelaide. And yet, though it is so isolated the men

Perth."

We had now run out on to the forehead of Tapley's Hill on the return journey, and the evening was falling. The lights of Adelaide were beginning to leap out all over the plain.

"Just one other point," I said. "I believe you took the first religious service ever held at Coober Pedy?"

"Yes, some of them said to me one day, 'I say, Padre, what about a service on Sunday night? We've never had one on the fields.' Into our dug-out 20 men were crowded and sat on our bunks and on petrol cases, and he it said to their honour, they never showed lack of patience with me."

"Did you find that they were instinctively religious men?" I asked.

"No, they are not religious as most of us understand the term. They are rough and ready men used to facing odds. And yet, who can say how near they live to God? One day I was talking to a gouger who lived alone in his dug-out. This is what he said to me, 'I used to get dreadfully lonely all on my own. I wanted a mate. At night I would lie on my bunk and long for someone to talk to. One night I couldn't sleep. I lay and tossed till I could bear it no longer, and I got up and knelt beside my bunk in the dark, and—I found my Mate.'"

"We've had a good yarn, Mr. North. Thank you very much. Let her out. Step on it."

The needle on the speedometer crept around.

"We must get home," the needle touched 35, "to our wives and families." The needle moved to 38. "And our dinners will be waiting."

The needle oscillated violently, and then raced round resolutely to 45.