

I FLEW WITH THE

FLYING DOCTOR

says Staff Writer JOHN WEAVER

I HAVE just completed a tour of one of the most unusual medical practices in the world with one of the most remarkable doctors.

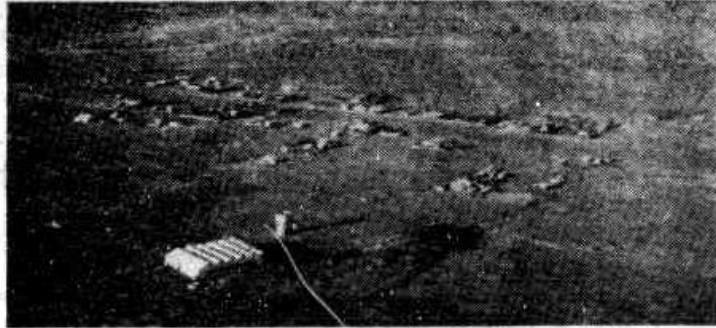
This practice covers an area of 200,000 square miles. It stretches from Ceduna on the West Coast of South Australia for 350 miles to Oodnadatta in the north, east for 100 miles to Wudinna and west as far as Forrest, 352 miles away in Western Australia.

A man-size practice. Yet it is covered by a petite 27-year-old brunette, Dr. Merna Mueller, one of the few women flying doctors in Australia.

This daughter of an NSW Lutheran pastor studied for her degree at Adelaide University, worked at Royal Adelaide Hospital for a year, and then went to Ceduna four years ago to work with the Bush Church Aid Society's Flying Medical Service.

I travelled with her on the monthly visit to Evelyn Downs, a sprawling sheep station some 300 miles north-east of Ceduna, on to Oodnadatta for the night, then south to the Coober Pedy opal mines, where men still live in caves, and home to Ceduna.

We travelled in the society's De Havilland Dragon, piloted by veteran Allan Chadwick and his pupil, Mac Job. Dr. Mueller was accompanied by Sister Florence Dowling, who has more than 22 years' nursing experience in the outback.



PART OF THE PRACTICE

A railway siding, an aerodrome, a cluster of houses, and a hotel—this is Oodnadatta.



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UBLES

The professor of physics, now Emeritus Professor, Sir Kerr Grant, had made an electric clock which kept time to the fraction of a second and of which he was very proud.

Students being what they are, one found his way into the laboratory and advanced the clock by a minute. The next day the professor asked

Emergency call

Just before we were due to take off, doctor received a telephone call from the small town of Penong, 45 miles west, the last town of any size this side of the Great West road.

It was an emergency call from Sister L. Loane. A station hand had fallen from his horse and badly needed attention. It was a case typical of many such emergency calls received by the service.

We took off and headed over the sleepy town of Ceduna, over the pearly opalescent green of Murat Bay shimmering in the

the culprit to come and see him.

Bill Gibbs went in fear and trembling, and the professor said, "I thought it was you". The affair finished happily, but sternly, with a homily on the importance of not interfering with scientific instruments.

Mining

It was the beginning of a long association between the two men in which Bill Gibbs says Sir Kerr Grant has been a great help.

They had a launt together in 1929 to find the famous Karoonda meteorite.

Another point of contact is Sir Kerr Grant's belonging to the council of the School of Mines which plays a big part in management training here with its course for young executives.

Mining was the only thing that was booming when young Gibbs left university, and he had to go to Wiluna in WA to find work.

He joined GM-H in 1934, and with money saved as a miner underground he went overseas after getting a year's leave.

In charge

Soon after his return to GM-H he was in charge of the tool room.

In 1939 he was CO of field engineering units in SA having been associated with militia engineers since 1928.

He was called up when war broke out and applied for the AIF. Before any units were raised in SA, he was ordered by the Army to hand over command and return to GM-H to take charge of tool and ordnance production.

With the tooling up of the Holden car in 1948 came the problem of expanding employment.

And that was when Allan George Gibbs was appointed personnel manager.

morning sunlight. On we flew across a pink gypsum lake, on over Charra Station.

Below us the yellow stock tracks criss-crossed in every direction, looking like a huge spider web where they met at the water tanks. To the south a golden haze of sand blown up by the wind hung over the coast.

At Penong, while Dr. Mueller attended to the injured stockman, the two pilots spread their maps out on the laundry table in the hospital. They reset their course and drew thin lines on their maps from Penong to Evelyn Downs, using a broom handle as a ruler.

Motorised stockmen

After half an hour's stay we were off again.

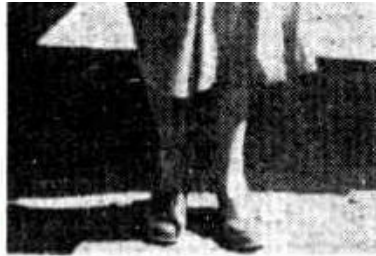
Dr. Mueller had kicked off her shoes and was intently studying an article in the latest issue of Nursing Mirror. Sister Dowling was reading the Medical Journal. Both looked as if they might be sitting in their lounges at home reading a novel instead of flying over South Australia's colorful, sprawling outback.

Suddenly the plane rocked and swayed as we hit air pockets caused by the barren hills of the Stuart Range.

At Evelyn Downs we landed on the graded strip of hard, stony ground and were met by the wife of one of the station hands. She drove us to the simple, concrete homestead. Outside it was hot and dusty, but inside the house was cool.

While the pilots had lunch, Dr. Mueller saw Lorraine Holt, seven-year-old daughter of Dick Holt, owner of this 650 square mile property on which about 4,000 merino sheep run.

Lorraine had been complaining of stomach aches, but it was nothing serious.



DOCTOR AND PATIENT

Dr. Merna Muller, one of Australia's few women flying doctors, beside the plane that takes her on her rounds.

Paddy Brown, of Coober Pedy, waits to see the doctor with his daughter, Georgine perched on his back.

I had hoped to see some tall, bow-legged stockmen astride sweating horses, but instead I saw two men, wearing crash helmets disappear across the strip on a motor bike. These were the stockmen. They did at least wear high heel riding boots.

After lunch we were driven back to the plane about a mile from the homestead, and soon we were on our way to Oodnadatta, some 50 miles away.

Coober Pedy

"Oodna" consists of about 18 houses, an aerodrome, railway siding for the Ghan and, of course, a pub. It has no mayor, the two policemen look after all the business matters of the town's local administration.

Instead of a mayor and council Oodna has a local community club which arranges sports and entertainments for the 85 or so inhabitants.

While I wandered round the town, Dr. Mueller and sister were busy seeing patients. Many had come to town

from stations as far as 150 miles away.

They saw doctor at the Australian Inland Mission hospital run by two pretty nurses, Beth Pearson and Beth Forrest. There were about 15 patients, and both doctor and sister worked far into the night.

We left next morning for Coober Pedy coal fields. From the air Coober Pedy set on a squat plateau in the Stuart Range, looks like a shell-cratered battle field. Dark mounds are seen in the sides of the low cluster of hills.

These are the homes or dugouts of the inhabitants.

Doctor consulted in one of the few buildings above ground, a small tin shed near the store.

Small bands of aboriginals mixed with weather-beaten opal miners as they waited their turn to see doctor. Most of the lubras carried small children on their backs.

One silver-whiskered old chap stood there patiently with his daughter on his back. He was Paddy Brown.

"I'm between 80 and 90 years old," he told me when I inquired his age.

A local opal miner hastened to assure me that Paddy was only about 50 years old.

On the way back to Ceduna we passed over a herd of brumbies that, frightened by the noise of the plane in the outback silence, galloped across the red ground ahead of a cloud of dust.

Quite a practice

Dr. Mueller did not even look up from the Bible she was reading.

We reached Ceduna aerodrome late that afternoon. We had travelled over 750 miles on a "routine visit" to see outback patients.

While the pilots and I refuelled the aircraft Dr. Mueller and Sister drove back to the Ceduna Hospital. I heard later they had been called out of bed to see a patient 20 miles away at about 11 that night.

And so it goes on. Next week she would have to go to Cook, 220 miles west in the heart of the ridged, red-clay wastes of the Nullabor Plain, returning through Coorabie and Penong.

It's quite a practice for any doctor.