

Chronicle (Adelaide, SA : 1895 - 1954), Thursday 8 December 1932, page 82

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WHERE OPALS GLEAM Yuletide at Coober Pedy

DEAR ELIZABETH GEORGE—Now that the time is drawing near when all fortunate folk in towns and cities are making preparations for the festive season, the Coober Pedy opal field residents are divided into two parties—the “wills” and the “won’ts.” The former are busily overhauling their cars and travelling gear in readiness for the 600 mile trip south—for they will have Christmas holidays. While the “won’ts” are gloomily looking on—they won’t do the trip south. Dismally they survey their dugouts and remember last summer’s temperature of 127 deg. Disgustedly they view their own particular opal claim, which should have yielded enough for a holiday—but didn’t.

Philosophers at heart, they soon dismiss the “might-have-beens,” and make plans for an opal-field Christmas.

No scrubbing of floors or cleaning of windows will take place in their bachelor cave-men’s dugouts. The floors, walls, and ceilings being all of sandstone, and windows an unknown luxury, “color schemes” are dependent on the locality of the dugout—some are pink and others white—while occasionally the ceiling is “white-washed” black, owing to a lazy chimney.

Those lucky men who have wives to attend to the housekeeping will have nothing to trouble them, but the bachelor population far outnumber them, and these poor lone males will have to do their own “chores.”

MAIL DAY

I think Christmas falls on a Sunday—that’s lucky, being also mail day. There will be parcels and letters to give us all the Christmassy feeling. Cakes and puddings in tins for the less industrious ones, who won’t bother to make them (in the interests of truth I must confess myself included), and news from the lucky ones who are wallowing in the sea and drinking iced drinks, and we shall feel hotter than ever reading about it. Such things are not for us.

I wonder—are we very good or very wicked? We have a police station, but

wicked? We have a police station, but no policeman—the nearest is 160 miles away. No church, though we are visited about twice a year by a travelling clergyman. And finally, no doctor. It means a journey of 400 miles if one dares to be ill enough for medical attention.

The field itself is just gibbers and saltbush—more gibbers than saltbush—but with an average rainfall of two inches a year, and water 5/100 gallons (delivered by motor truck), one does not expect to see verdant herbage.

WOMEN WORKERS

Some of the womenfolk go digging for opal stone as well as the men, and one heroine actually digs down to a depth of 14 feet and throws the dirt to the surface. It takes lots of men all their time to do that—they use windlasses, and sometimes sink shafts 60 to 70 feet and perhaps find nothing after all their hard work, but they take it all as it comes—for who knows? Perhaps the next shaft will have hundreds of pounds worth of opal at the bottom, and all their long-cherished plans and schemes can then be realised.

“Cop ‘em” (Tarlee). I think I can tell you a good cure for your husband’s hands. It was given to me by a doctor who had a good deal of bush experience where the complaint is common. Make a paste of Epsom salts mixed with glycerine and bind on the sore places. It is rather painful, but very effective. A little Epsom salts in the breakfast cup of tea each day helps the cure.

“PUGGY.” Far North.

(Thank you very much for responding to my request, and do please write again.—E.G.)