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Dentist on tour...

Children who live in isolated areas in outback New South Wales are too far from town to visit the dentist, so the dentist goes to them. He makes his visit in a dental van conducted by the Far West Children's Health Scheme. Story and pictures on these pages tell of his tour.



"WHAT'S GOING ON?" asks Tony Watson as he sits on Colin Pack's shoulders to look through the window at the dentist's improvised surgery at the Canbelego school.

AT Mount Hope, on the central western plains of N.S.W., a dusty, battered utility pulled up outside the hotel, and the driver leaned out. "Hey, mister, are you the bloke that's pulling the teeth?" he called.

The superintendent of the Far West Children's Health Scheme, Mr. J. Ness, looked up from unloading the Far West dental van and walked over to the utility.

In the front seat of the utility was the man who had called out to him. Beside him sat his wife, holding a baby, and in the back seven tousled heads popped out through the top and sides of the worn canopy.

After hearing that the family had been chasing the dental unit from town to town for about 80 miles, Mr. Ness had a hurried conference with the Far West dentist on the tour, Dr. Walter Wearn.

In a few minutes the dental gear that had been used only an hour earlier at the Mount Hope school had been removed from the van, the instruments and basins sterilised, and the bathroom of the hotel transformed into a surgery.

Soon afterwards, the utility drove off with the family, four of the children now minus 24 troublesome teeth.

Staff photographer Ernest Nutt and I joined the dental unit when it was two-thirds of the way through its tour. The dental team comprised Mr. Ness and his wife, Dorothy, who acted as recording clerk, Dr. Wearn, and Mrs. Ralph Buring, who was the volunteer first-aid nurse.

By the end of the three weeks' tour—the seventh in nine years—the team had



visited 23 towns and travelled more than 2500 miles.

And the dentist, working in schoolrooms warmed by blazing fires, in hotel rooms, and in his own bedroom, had treated 949 children, removed 1892 teeth, and filled 175 more.

Five children in one family had a total of 53 teeth extracted, one youngster had 10 abscessed teeth removed, and a 14-year-old boy had 16 teeth extracted.

At times Dr. Wearn worked

By
NONI ROWLAND,
staff reporter

by the light of kerosene and hurricane lamps, and, on several occasions, with the aid of torchlights.

Jammed into the small van, we travelled with the team from Nymagee on the central western plains, through Canbelego, Hermitdale, Tottenham, Albert, and Tullamore to Fifield, the last town included in the tour.

We shared with the team the discomforts of the bone-rattling, corrugated roads that run in a straight line for scores of miles through fenced, dry paddocks thick with gum-trees but with little grass.

"IT DIDN'T HURT," says 11-year-old John Polack, pointing out to a group of his interested school-mates the work the dentist has done.

We unpacked and packed our bags in small bush hotels, groaned about the lack of hot water, and piled on extra woollens to keep out the cold in the early morning and evening.

But, as city folk, we also shared with them the pleasure of coming across a mob of kangaroos and emus, the sight of tall trees outlined against an uncluttered blue sky, and the rich emerald-green of occasional outfields.

We learnt a lot more about life in the country, its advantages and discomforts. And we realised for the first time what it means to have to travel 50 and 60 miles to the nearest dentist or doctor instead of calling in next door or travelling five or ten minutes in a tram to see him.

When we arrived in Nymagee on a cloudless Sunday, the dental team were relaxing after two weeks on the dusty outback roads and a tight schedule of school dental treatments.

After an early night, we climbed into the van next morning and drove several

SCHOOLROOM IS HIS SURGERY

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UNDER THE SIGNPOST at Fifield township, Mrs. J. Pearce points out the way to Mr. Ness, superintendent of the Far West Children's Health Scheme, who drove the dental van.

hundred yards to a neat cream-and-red schoolhouse, where our arrival was heralded by a mixed chorus of excited cheers and frightened squeals.

The rammy school verandah was selected as the best site for the dental work and the equipment was quickly unloaded and placed on desks brought from the schoolroom.

In a few minutes, the pressure stoves were alight to heat water to sterilise the instruments, the dentist had donned his white coat, and Mrs. Burling had changed into a nurse's soft blue uniform and veil.

While the pedal drill was being assembled beside a rough wood chair on the verandah, I asked youthful teacher Donald Hyde how the children had reacted to the news of the dentist's visit.

"Well," he said with a grin, "there was a great deal of excited talk until about Friday. Then on Friday afternoon it became a little more serious."

"The kids then began saying things like 'Gosh, I wonder if it will hurt,' and 'The dentist had better watch out for his fingers, because if he hurts me I'll bite them.'"

Meanwhile, the dentist had begun work, and our conversation was interrupted suddenly by a tawny-haired, freckled-faced nine-year-old boy who came racing up to his teacher shouting, "Boy, oh boy, I didn't have to have anything done. Boy, oh boy, I got off scot-free."

But the next patient, a tiny tot of six, was not so lucky. He had 12 teeth out.

A small bundle of misery, clutching a ball and balloon that are handed to every child after his session in the chair, he was driven home to his mother.

At Hermidale school, girls replaced tears on the face of one small boy when he found that nothing had to be done to his teeth.

But a quarter of an hour later he was dragged back to the school by his mother, whom I overheard say, "If you've been putting something over me and haven't seen the

dentist, you'll be in trouble, my boy."

At many of the schools we visited in towns that had once been prosperous copper and gold mining centres, a number of the children "lit out for the scrub."

Most were pursued by their mothers, who marched them firmly back to the dentist. The boys on bicycles, however, were harder to find, and I remember one weary mother returning after a fruitless search saying, "Talk about the wild west kids!"

However, most of the youngsters recovered quickly and were soon surrounded by a crowd of others demanding, "Go on, give us a look! How many did you have out? Gee, four!"

Those still shaken or not cold-blooded enough to open their mouths for inspection satisfied their questioners by holding up the necessary number of fingers to show how many teeth they had lost.

Some did even better and were able to produce the teeth taken out. These were



solemnly handed around for everyone to have a look at and then pocketed to take home "because the fairies will give me sixpence each for them."

One of the earliest patients in the chair at Nymagee school was curly-haired Michael, aged 5, whose family should remember well the Far West dental tour.

Michael's teeth were perfect and needed no attention, but his mother and father were not so lucky.

Soon afterwards, his mother had one tooth extracted. The previous evening his father had had 18 teeth extracted at the hotel.

When news of the extractions spread to the bar, the drinkers took up a collection and raised £25/11/2 for the Far West Children's Health Scheme.

At most of the schools we

SCHOOLROOM at Hermidale, in the central western area of N.S.W., serves as a surgery for touring dentist, Dr. Walter Wearn, and volunteer first-aid nurse, Mrs. Ralph Burling.

visited the team found parents waiting with their children after driving from properties up to 50 miles away.

At Canbelego I spoke to Mrs. R. Treverrow, who had driven in with her four children, Les (12), Bill (11), Joan (9), and two-year-old John. The three older children all had teeth extracted.

Mrs. Treverrow lives in a marquee on a property 18 miles out of town, where her husband works as a rabbit trapper.

"Only my husband, the baby and I sleep in the marquee," she said. "Joan sleeps in the front of the truck and the boys sleep on mattresses in the back."

Mrs. Treverrow, who gets her meat from the station and cooks on an open fire, told

me that she wouldn't change her marquee for a city dwelling.

"There's no rush and bustle in the country," she explained, "and it's free and easy and healthy for the children. They do their school lessons by correspondence."

It was at Canbelego that the dentist treated his oldest patient on the tour, Mr. C. Morris, who lives 20 miles out of town on a property he owns.

Although the tour is designed primarily for children, no adult is ever refused treatment and no charge is made.

Mr. Morris arrived in a utility with his daughter-in-law, Mrs. D. Morris, and her three children, Lesley (9), Ross (7), and Joan (6).

"We received a telephone call from a neighbor telling us that the dentist had arrived," Mrs. Morris told me.

"We should have been here half an hour earlier, but Mr. Morris got worried at the last minute about how difficult his teeth would be to pull and we had a lot of trouble getting him into the truck."

However, this tall, white-haired old gentleman marched in bravely after his grandchildren and after asking with a smile that must have cost an effort "Do I look white?" sat quietly while two teeth were extracted.

Later, while we were having lunch with the schoolteacher, Mr. A. Knight, and his wife in their cottage in the school grounds, Mr. Morris came over to give Mr. Ness a donation for the Far West Scheme.

At Tottenham school I met the first woman teacher I had encountered on the tour.

Attractive 21-year-old Jan

Cowle previously taught in Parkes, but is now happily settled in Tottenham.

"I like the city for holidays," she told me, "but wouldn't like to settle there. I find it very quiet out here, but I like country life. There is a ball about once a fortnight in the district, tennis on the week-ends, and films every Saturday night."

At various schools we visited, some of the teachers and their children also lined up for dental treatment.

At Tottenham, Mrs. Marion Wallace, wife of the headmaster, had five teeth out.

With a handkerchief over her mouth, she came up to Mr. Ness and me sitting in the van and asked us over to her home for afternoon tea.

When we demurred because of her session in the chair, Mrs. Wallace said, "Nonsense, come right over. With five children you can't worry about getting a few teeth out."

When we did knock on her door we found that she had been busy all afternoon baking biscuits in a fuel stove and preparing savories for us in between coping with crying children.

On the last day of the tour the team had just packed up their gear for what they thought was the last time when a car pulled up outside the Fifield school.

An apologetic father explained that he had driven in from his farm 40 miles out with his daughter, who was suffering from toothache. He said that he would have arrived earlier if he had known the team would be finished their job in half a day.

In a few minutes the equipment was taken out of the van again and shortly afterwards the 949th patient was on her way home.

Exciting time for children



WAITING THEIR TURN to visit the dentist at Tullamore school, aboriginal brothers and sisters, members of the Dunn family, smile cheerfully. They are (from left) 10-year-old Winnie, six-year-old Sabu, eight-year-old Emily, and 12-year-old Saba.