

Showtime in Central

"MARCH is always a good month in Central," we told each other as we hurtled through the dust clouds and over the corrugations of the Tarras-Wanaka road. It had been a nor-wester all the way from Christchurch. Timaru was parched; Kurow and Omararama lay still and panted under the hard clear sky. The bus driver explained that this sort of weather was likely to last for the rest of the month.

The Upper Clutha Agricultural and Pastoral Association hoped it would, last, at least for their Show in two days' time. Wanaka, where the Show is held, looked remarkably green for

Written for "The Listener" by
G. le F. Y.

IT was still raining on Saturday morning. The Show was off. My host went into Wanaka to see to his stock at half-past ten. About mid-day a small creek a mile from the homestead, evidently dammed by a slip, burst out and tore a little gorge through the road, 15 feet across and six feet deep. My host left his car on the Wanaka side and walked home knee-deep in pug.

The rain stopped at 3.0 p.m. on Saturday. There had been five inches in 40 hours. We trudged here and there in the home paddocks looking for trouble. We found it. A near-by creek had gouged 20 yards into its bank, obliterating the homestead water race. The pioneers had thought nothing of carrying water from the lake, but we were used to turning a tap. My host thought we might be able to dig a new lead in and clear the silt from the lower parts of the race before the house tank ran dry.

The road looked pretty hopeless. What hadn't been used by creeks, strained beyond their own bed resources, was covered in squelching pug. The new gorge looked a week's job for a bulldozer. We went to bed bathless, anxious for the water the floods had cut off from us.

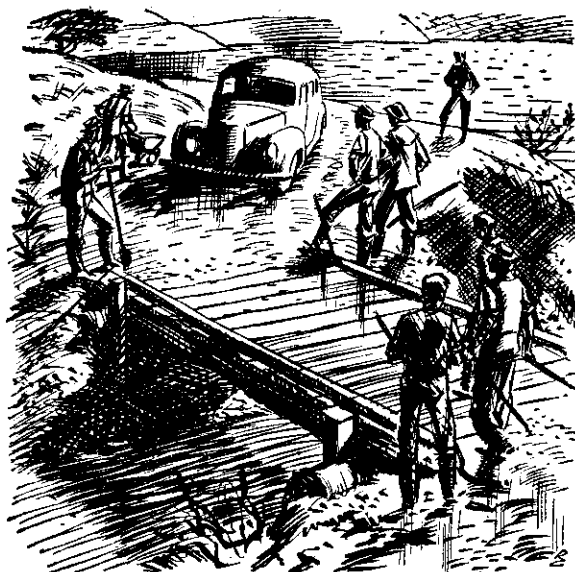
On Sunday morning the sun shone. There were dirty finger marks down the hillsides where the creeks had slashed through the bracken, and the drying pug smelt like bad bacon. There was more inspection and a lot of telephoning. It all seemed rather vague and planless, but after mid-day people started appearing from near-by stations. A bushman came down from the Matukituki in an explosive old Ford. He'd seen a blue gum trunk that might be useful. Somebody else had some planking. My host had a case of spikes. There seemed no end to the number of shovels, picks, crowbars and slathers. We moved off to the creek about half-past one. By five there was a bridge, solid enough to take cars. It was as simple and surprising as that.

SO the Show was held on Monday. The butter, made on Friday, had been eaten, the rain-battered flowers weren't worth picking, but we took in a pumpkin and trios of onions and red beet. The weather had deteriorated into a howling westerly.

"More rain," said my host.

In the back of the car we grunted under a bag of chaff and the pipe clayed bridles. The dogs snarled and scabbled in the boot.

Wanaka wore a green spring smile. Officials puttered about the Show ring with rammers and shovels. Members, vice-presidents, and marshals conferred. The president and secretary organised their papers into piles, while the curious



"By Five there was a bridge"

March. The farmers admitted that they had plenty of winter feed, and so far as they were concerned it could stay fine for the rest of the month.

Sitting round the kitchen table after dinner, picking over a Show entry of rape seed, my host said he'd had a pretty good year. There was some hay to be baled and a few acres of oats to be sown; that could be done next day. Saturday was Show Day. We would come home laden with cups and red first prize tickets on Saturday night, recover on Sunday, bathing our heavy heads in the cool lake water, and then on Monday, start the autumn muster. So we planned, picking over rape seed, pipe claying bridles, polishing saddles and boots.

It started to rain about eleven o'clock that night, a quiet and unspectacular drizzle without much wind. The Show horses went into Wanaka in the rain the next day. It was wet. The poplars shouldered the lowering sky. Water dripped off the gums and the weeping willows, off the horses' covers, off the brims of the men's sou'-westers, off the oilskin slickers, off the men's noses. Silt oozed into the corrugations of the road, the drains filled, in places there were small washouts.

The truck came for the Show sheep at tea time, and they were loaded in the rain. The baking was done and the butter made, but the flowers could not be picked. Neither was the hay baled nor the oats put in.

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