

# MEMORIES OF THE OTAGO GOLDFIELDS

*"And Now Quietness Reigns" Where Once Life Was Hectic*

(By Margaret Saunders)

I wonder if the people who are now flocking in their thousands to the Centennial Exhibition realise the daily life of our pioneers. Although it is not quite eighty years since the gold rushes, and although my own memories go back less than sixty years, some impressions of the kind of world we lived in during the 'sixties and 'seventies may arouse memories in your older readers, and inspire comparisons in the younger ones.

The little township where we lived had become dull and quiet. But it had been the centre of a hectic gold rush, the enclosing hills echoing with the clamour of thousands of diggers pegging out claims and feverishly with picks and shovels driving tunnels and shafts.

It was about two miles long, running along one side of a gully, filled by the time I can remember it with gravel tailings and creeks of yellow sluicing water. The hills behind held the gold, and the enormous cavities torn into those hills day by day were a sure sign of the dissolution which in time was to engulf everything, houses, gardens and roads.

It was rapidly becoming a shadow township, with still water holes, abandoned shafts, dark and dreadful to us children as we peered down the overhanging banks. A few fossickers with tin dishes and cradles still hung around, trying their luck in any likely spot, and encouraged by a "colour."

Huts were dotted here and there with lonely bachelors ending their days quietly and sedately, men who when the blood ran hot lived riotously and recklessly. I was too young to appreciate their stories of the days when a man would light his pipe with a bank-note or "blow" £50 or £100 in one night, drinking, dancing and gambling.

They are all gone. One by one they slipped away, their work done, their fun over. Wistfully as they grew old, they talked of other days—of dancing all night to the strains of the concertina or violin, of songs they sang, unashamedly with misty eyes, old sentimental songs: "Ever Of Thee I'm Fondly Dreaming," "The Last Rose of Summer," "Sweet Belle Mahone," or the lovely old waltz "Sweet Dreamland Faces Passing To and Fro."

And they talked of their old mates—of George, of Joe, of old Bill, who drank too much. Poor Bill, a remittance man, who lived only for pay day. A decent fellow between-

whiles, but when the money came he shut himself in his hut and drank till he saw blue devils, writhing serpents and all. He kept on till the drink ran out, then crept out like a ghost a few days later, only to begin all over again when the next time came. He died a lonely death; a stroke and he was gone, no fight left in him. Only another derelict gone, but a good pal to us children when he was not "seeing things." Many a jammy biscuit I have had from him, and he many a red rose from the garden from me.

Then there were others.

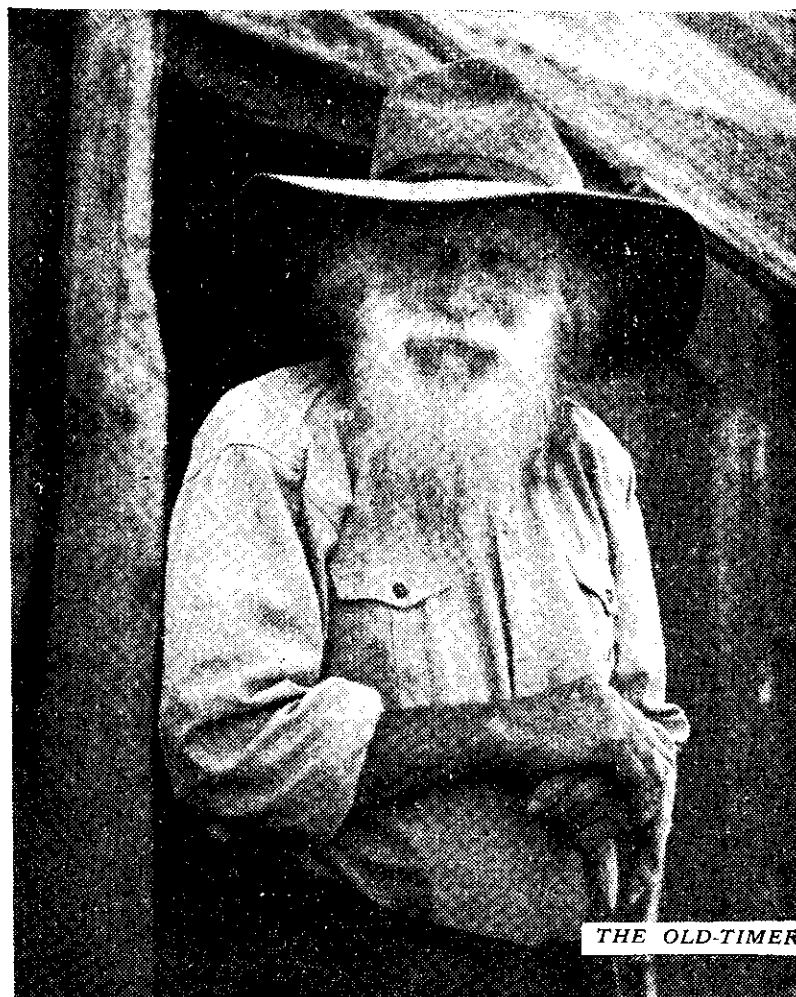
There was John R., a clever man with his fingers, who cut his own hair perfectly — no one knew how. He was an irritating old egotist, fond of argument, who would draw people on, then make his unanswerable remark, "Here am I, a man without a flaw."

There were the Chinese. At Festival times, attracted by their crackers, we rushed to their huts, knowing we would be offered Chinese nuts, sweet, oily cakes, and have all the fun of their fireworks. They were always kind to us.

There was old Tom, a hardy old Scot, rugged and conscientious, who thought nothing of walking twenty miles, each way, to church. He had had early tragedy. In their young days, he and his wife were both confirmed drunkards, and one night, during one of their bouts, their hut caught fire and his wife was burned to death. The shock cured him, and throughout his long life he never drank another drop.

There was Sally, a merry old soul, who had seen better days. When she was lying on the floor, too drunk to stand, she had just enough gentility left to protest. If someone swore, she would raise her head and say reprovingly, "Remember, there's a lady present."

There was another "lady," also bibulous, and the mother of many children, who carried these tender infants sometimes feet uppermost, sometimes head, whichever came handiest. Oddly enough, those of



her children who survived her loving care were very kind to her in her old age, and looked after her well, much to the envy of the "unco' guid" who had missed all the fun of the fair and had ungrateful children into the bargain.

Finally, I must not forget old Bob. A bachelor miner, he was carried into a nearby house. The doctor said he could not possibly live till morning, and two women offered to sit with him until the end came. He was apparently unconscious, and the women whiled away the time making a shroud for him.

On the table at the bedside was a bottle of brandy, from which at intervals they took copious draughts, and so many that they fell asleep. Bob, however, had his eye on them, and when this happened, he reached for the brandy and drank what was left.

Finally the women woke, and, seeing the empty bottle, each accused the other of finishing the brandy, and a right royal quarrel arose, much to the enjoyment of the patient, who lay quietly listening.

Old Bob recovered. It was very awkward for the two Saireys. Very.

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As the years went by, these old people, thrown up and cast aside by the stream of life, and with little left but their dreams, their baccy and their pint, dropped out of the ranks. Their huts, too, vanished — little wattle and daub huts — heavy with the reek of stale tobacco and the pungent smell of buffalo chips, a familiar stand-by of those times.

And now quietness reigns; the township is given over to desolation, but is mercifully hidden under a mantle of gorse which yearly adds its golden compensation for the gold of other days.