

A Pick and Shovel Preacher

Robert S. Lynd Dug Shoulder to Shoulder With His Parishioners in a Northwestern Oil Camp

Can you "sell" religion for everyday use to men, especially in a rough oil camp where they work six and a half days a week?

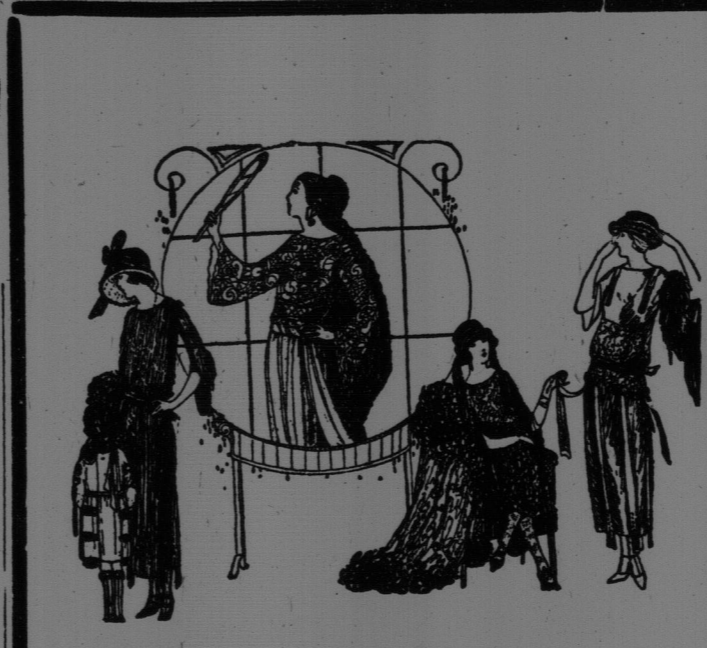
creasingly intolerable, until you understand why the casual laborer tells his boss to 'go to hell' often in order to get fired and have a chance to break the monotony by moving on somewhere—anywhere—to a new job.

However, his departure from the usual routine of a clergyman was making an impression, and he writes: "All week the people turned out to watch the preacher in the ditch with his shirt off getting his hands dirty—and blistered."

"I was up at four, finishing my first sermon; in the ditch at seven; caught a hurried shower at noon at the only warm-water shower in camp; dinner with a family, the wife nervous at cooking for the preacher and burning the wry chicken, the husband celebrating in my honor by putting on a pair of 'city' shoes without the formality of socks; Sunday school at 2:30; fifteen minutes lying across my bed in the blessed remoteness of Butcher and Lang's Odyssey; a noisy supper with a family of seven. Finally, at 7:15 I slipped the key in the lock of the schoolhouse door and looked about with a decidedly 'gone' feeling at the pit of my stomach. I lighted the gas, swept the floor, and finally, holding my scantily drilled sermon open in one hand, laid hold of the fatal bell rope. The first dull clang of the bell terrified me. I wanted to run. With a jerk on that rope I was digging myself in deeper for fifteen long weeks of this. But after the first half-dozen devastating peals, I yielded to inevitability of it all. I haven't come out here to preach theology to you all—dang!—You and I have problems that look as big as a barn to us—dang!—and the thing we're a right to expect religion to do for us—dang!—is to show how to meet these practical problems—dang! They told me afterward that nobody ever rang the bell for more than half-a-dozen tolls, but in my ignorance I had determined that, even if people did not come, they should at least know that a church service was being held, and so I rang—and rang—and rang.

"The first arrival was a stuttering boy of six, who siddled in with the bashful question, 'P-p-p-preacher, is t-t-there going to be anyth-th-thing to eat? Perhaps I can best summarize that service by quoting the scrawl I made in my notebook before turning in dog tired that night: 'Got away with it—despite fact that a baby in front row tried to outtalk me; fifty-five on deck, every seat full, twenty-one men, including my foreman, the surveyor, five of the nine men from the ditch, and a lot of hard-boiled birds in shirt-sleeves.'"

But preaching by itself was only a small part of the problem presented by a community like Wolf Basin. The writer says:—"The recreational problem was critical, with the exception of the shabby pool hall where the men gambled mildly and the boys hung about trying to grow up fast, there were no recreational facilities of any description. It was twenty miles over bad trails to the nearest 'movies.' Somewhat reluctantly I decided at length to try out an informal, for-all-community 'sing' hoping by car-tricks and similar home-brew vaudeville stunts to attract the men. One of the men in the ditch with me admitted that he played the piano a 'little bit'—it developed that he had aspired to become a professional accompanist—while Shorty strummed a wicked banjo. So I headed lined the two of them as the 'World



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his summer had proved nothing. Wolf Basin in its isolation and lack of the varied distractions and intellectual and artistic opportunities of the more sophisticated community had not been a typical test of the appeal of religion qua religion; then there was the problem of gaining recognition among the men, which had proved comparatively simple through the expedient of the job on the ditch, but elsewhere might be vastly more complicated. And yet there was something portentous in the capacity of the people of the Basin to become interested in the more enduring aspects of life; the extent to which the latent religious in this community of five hundred souls had responded, had reached out, to any one who could offer it spiritual and social leadership, had startled him again and again; it had been impressively indicative of a human unsatisfaction that was deeper than the local conditions in the Basin."