

TWENTY YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS

Who Are Engaged on a New Social Experiment



TAKING THE LEVELS on a Rietvlei farm, where 20 young South Africans are building a dam. The oxen are dragging down another load to the growing earth wall.

BY
BRIAN
LELLO

ON an isolated Natal farm, 17 miles from the nearest railroad, 20 young South Africans are nearing the end of a self-imposed term of 14 days' hard labour. From all walks of life and from the length and breadth of South Africa they have gathered to build a 1,000,000-gallon dam for Mr. F. P. van Rooyen, a Rietvlei farmer.

These people are officially Oxford Groupers, but they place little store by religious dogmas. With their fervent pulpit preaching is at a discount. Instead, they put their religious convictions into constructive practical effect.

They have formed the opinion that here in South Africa—in common with the rest of the world—the sole aim of the existing social system is to take—from our fellow men and from the land itself. They believe that for permanent social stability all this must be changed into a spirit of giving.

Along these lines they plan to start a revolution among the youth of the country which will direct much of its often misplaced energy into unselfish, constructive, yet nevertheless enjoyable effort.

The dam, which is now almost completed, is the first definite sign of this new movement. The whole work will be completed at absolutely no expense, largely as the result of the ideals of an earnest young freelance journalist, 22-year-old Lex Rodger, of Maritzburg.

IN a camp of half a dozen tents under a range of rugged and eroded hills his enthusiasm has brought together as strange a collection of townspeople as one could imagine, to build an Afrikaans-speaking farmer's dam. They include a number of women who have sacrificed the comforts of civilisation to cater for the hungry gang of workmen.

From the North has come Dr. J. Gibson, a missionary from Nyasaland and Arabia, and from the South Miss Audrey Sauer, daughter of the ex-port captain of Capetown. Others at the camp are:

Mrs. Brink, wife of Brig.-General Brink, of Pretoria;

Lieut.-Commander and Mrs. R. Wilson, of Kloof;

Miss M. Sueter, daughter of Admiral Sueter;

Two University students from Stellenbosch, two from the N.U.C. and one from Pretoria's Afrikaans-speaking University;

Three senior school boys from Maritzburg College;

A young farmer from the Northern Transvaal;

An assistant engineer from the Native Affairs Department;

A draughtsman from the South African Railways;

A bank clerk;

A Post Office official.

Completing the commissariat are Miss E. Bremmer, daughter of Dr. Karl Bremmer, M.P., Miss A. Cousins, of Durban, and Miss Drury, of Kloof.

For many of these this will be their only break from the daily routine of life for the next year, and they have all come to out-of-the-way Stanger's Hoek at their own expense.

WHEN I visited the farm I found the 80ft. thick earth wall more than half-completed.

Here the once fertile valley had been rendered largely useless by the ravages of over-grazing and consequent soil erosion. But eight years ago, when the Van Rooyen brothers first realised their "responsibility to the nation as primary producers," they cut down their herds and by slow degrees the veld grass began to return and even checked the growing dongas with a protective covering of vegetation.

To-day the soil erosion problem is well on the way to curing itself on the 28,000-acre Van Rooyen farm.

The surrounding hills form a natural watershed and the dam will enable anything up to 50 acres of irrigated lucerne to be grown in the fertile valley bottom, supplying a tremendous reserve of winter feed for the stock.

Youthful Lex Rodger, in his search for a useful holiday occupation, seized upon this place as the starting point for his campaign of directing youthful energy into constructive channels.

Expert advice was secured and the whole scheme planned on a thoroughly sound basis. On the day before the work began there were several visitors, and an impromptu gathering was held near the site of the proposed dam.

The men told of the motives which had drawn them to Umvoti County

from the ends of South Africa. The young farmers told how, in spite of lack of capital they had contrived to improve their farms.

Eric van Rooyen, on whose section of the farm the dam is under construction, explained how he loved his country and the only way in which he could give practical expression to his love was to cherish his small section of South Africa and finally, when he died, hand it over to posterity at least as good as it ever was.

It may be strange to hear a typical member of our much-maligned farming community speak in this vein, but

he avers that such convictions arise naturally from his simple religion of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love—a religion which is not an organisation but a formula on which to mould his life in all its every-day aspects.

THE next day the work began, and 20 townsmen returned to the earth.

There were 32 hardy Zulu oxen, and the equipment consisted of a sub-soil plough and several dam scrapers. Side by side in the swirling clouds of choking winter dust, Englishman, Afrikaner and native toiled to build the dam.

A week ago they had all toughened up to a large extent; but, in spite of heavy gauntlets, the pick and shovel work and the handles of the kicking dam scoops had played havoc with their hands. Yet there was no doubt that they were enjoying themselves.

One of the University students said: "This is better sport than any 'Varsity rag." Later, watching him shouting madly at his oxen as he clutched wildly at the loaded dam scraper broadsiding down the steep banks, it was easy to understand the appeal of such work to vital youth.

In constructing the dam the sub-soil plough tears up the ground on the

upstream side of the wall. The scoops follow up, root out the loosened soil and deposit it, load by load, on the growing wall of hard-packed earth.

There the clods are broken by the pick and shovel gang, the grass tufts removed and the soil evenly spread over the entire area.

Since the watertightness of this cheap but efficient method of construction depends on the care of the labourers, theirs is an important and a laborious job.

By now the workers will have handled nearly 600 tons of soil, building it up into a wall 80ft. thick at the base, tapering to approximately 6ft. at the top, where it is 50yds. in length. With the help of the natural shape of the valley this will hold back 1,000,000 gallons of water with a useful "head" of 20ft.

The scheme has aroused the interest of prominent farmers in the district, chief of them being Mr. Hunt Holley, who has long been impressed with the improvements effected on the Van Rooyen brothers' farm by means involving no capital outlay.

The dam scrapers and oxen have been loaned by neighbours, while the subsoil plough came from the Roads Department.

LATER, after a short break for tea, Lex Rodger, whose initiative is behind this novel holi-

day scheme, left his labours to explain his ideals.

He is young, level-headed, tremendously enthusiastic, but no fanatic. He claims to have found a religion which fits in with the enterprise and vitality of youth.

With a face all smeared with dust and sweat, he explained how, when he first took to religion, he was conventionally anxious to inflict it on his fellow men.

"At work they called me 'Holy Joe,'" he said, "and I deserved it. I must have been a pretty rotten sort of prig. I soon realised, however, that there is so much work to do for anyone who wants to advance himself and his fellow men that there is no time for preaching.

"We are not concerned about finding an answer to the problems of South Africa, but we are every bit concerned about being the answer ourselves. Thus, in our own small way we have started the ball rolling by helping to overcome the forces of soil erosion, one of the greatest of our agricultural menaces."

Lex Rodger believes that all evil springs from moral decay and materialism. Because of this he feels that to love South Africa, to live creatively

and finally to attempt to build her anew, there can be no place for moral decay.

"You can't make a good omelette with a bad egg," he succinctly puts it. That is how, he claims, his religion of "honesty, purity, unselfishness and love" finds a necessary place.

He may be an idealist of the highest order, but at least he is no theorist. The building of this dam with voluntary labour drawn from the extremes of South Africa is the first proof of a practical basis.

The sweat still trickled down Lex Rodger's face as he warmed to his theme. He wiped it away again, leaving an even more grimy trail.

"It is true that traditional religion sets out to improve the lot of mankind," he continued. "But if it ever does achieve anything in this direction it usually only changes the mental state to a more or less limited degree. Our religion hopes to control our

lives even in their most insignificant phases.

"Traditional religion takes the Bible for its text book. So do we. The Bible was written by men of action, however, for men of action, about men of action. But firmly interwoven through all this record of achievement are the principles of control from the Godhead.

"Properly interpreted, the Bible is essentially a book of vital action. Vital action is the keynote of youth. We follow exactly what is set out in the Bible, that is why our religion must attract and not repel youth.

"Take the University students, for instance. It is their principles that

have influenced them in giving up their conventional holidays to come and work here, but now that they are hardened to the work, they are having a far greater adventure than any normal vacation could possibly have given them.

"These chaps are but the advance guard. When we have our conference in Bloemfontein next Michaelmas and young people come in their hundreds from all over South Africa we hope that things will be started in a really big way and this job will be as nothing to what we will accomplish in the future."

Meanwhile the failing light put an end to talk and work alike. Looking back as I drove off down the rutted road, I saw Lex Rodger standing by the roadside, wrapped up, no doubt, in his dreams for a new and better South Africa.