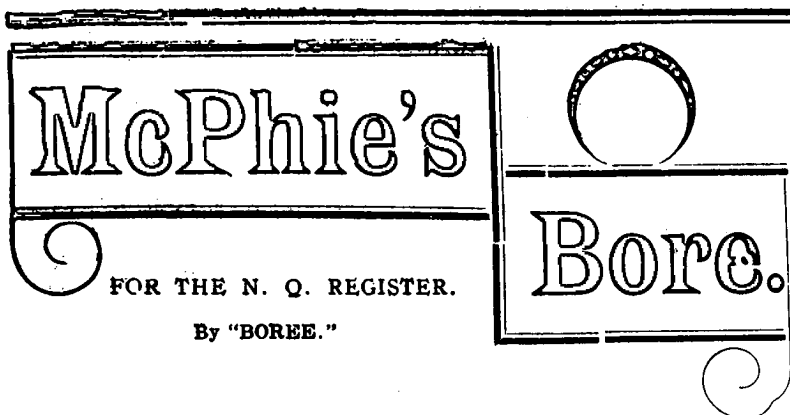


Monday, December 17, 1880.



McPhie's

FOR THE N. O. REGISTER.

By "BOREE."

Bore.

McPhie sauntered outside after tea, and sat on the woodheap. He glanced up at the sky as he sat there smoking. It was a fine clear night. Always fine. He listened. It was the trade wind coming through the timber from the south-east. "Aye," he said to himself, "south-east, south-east! It never changes. The same damned dry weather and south-east winds."

McPhie was a grazing farmer and had sheep. He had lived half a lifetime in a dry country. Once or twice a year it rained, and ran the little creek that meandered through his property. Once or twice a year, in good years, the water had lasted him through, but, more often it had given out, and then McPhie had to travel his sheep and his family. They were three girls and a boy. The children had their pets, a poddy calf and some pet sheep, and as McPhie sat there one of the sheep came up by the woodheap and lay down beside him, munching away at its cud. McPhie put out his hand and scratched the sheep's head, "It's getting dry again, old woolly," he said, musingly. McPhie dreaded drought. He'd knocked his lambs on the head to save his ewes before now, and he'd seen his milking cows and working horses staggering and dying for want of water. He had a dam near the house, but water was low in it, not more than two months' supply. He'd always had a hope of being able to put down a bore, but it was beyond his slender means. Drillers' price was £1 a foot. A few miles away there was a bore on the neighboring station. Four hundred feet deep, but £400 was as hopeless to

McPhie as was £4,000. Sometimes he had thought of trying to put down the bore by his own primitive means, but when he spoke with those drillers he was disheartened. They were lordly fellows these Canadians, who drove in buggies, and who looked down on the common mortals of the earth, and spoke of derricks and walking beams and four-inch sinker bars, and thousands of feet of wire rope, with a blandness that killed McPhie's hopes, and sent him back thinking of the fast receding water in the dam, and his sheep.

Once he was able to do a small timely service for a driller by lending him a fresh horse, and the great autocrat of the boring world so far descended from his altitude of magnificence as to speak a few words about shallow bores, which rose McPhie's hopes again.

The driller spoke with a nasal twang. He said: "What you want is a Gad damn spring-pole rig. In our country, poor people put down these Gad damn pot holes in quite a few days."

McPhie hung with such homage on his words, and showed such terrible, fearful interest in every word he spoke, that the great man — not a bad fellow at heart, descended further to the extent of taking a leaf from his pocket book, and sketching the outline of a "spring-pole rig." McPhie thanked him, with gratitude beaming in every line of his face. The scrap of paper gave him hope. He might save his sheep yet. With his boy and the two or three blacks about the place he could cut the long pole and fix it as the driller had described.

A spring-pole drilling rig, let me here tell you, consists of a sapling twenty-five or thirty feet long, with the big end fastened low down to a tree or post. Then raise the long end up, putting a log under it, as close up to the tree as you can get it, so that the spring-pole hangs over at an angle, like a great fishing-rod. To the high end of the pole is attached the rope upon which hangs the iron bar, which is the drill. With another piece of rope two men pull down the pole quickly till the bit strikes the ground, then they let go, and the pole springs up, and so on, up and down, the drill cuts its way into the earth, and is constantly turned to keep the hole round and free. Water is poured into the hole, and the hard earth is made sludgy and comes out until

the hole gets deep, and then a "sandpump" is put down. This is a piece of pipe with a clack valve in the bottom, which opens as it strikes the mud, and closes when lifted up, fetching the mud with it, and cleaning the hole.

With the aid of his boy and the two blacks McPhie rigged the spring-pole. For a sinker bar he forged an old springcart axle to a drill point on one end, and with a hole punched at the other end for the rope to go through.

It was a proud day on the place the day they had the rig completed, and started work. Mrs McPhie and the girls were with them, and stood by admiringly.

"And will the water run down the creek like it does at the station?" asked one of the girls.

"Yes children, if we are successful, and there will be no barbed wire fences to go through to get to it," answered McPhie, full of hope, but he was conscious as he spoke of the immensity of the "if." The girls were happy in the thought of saving their pets, and the wife of the home smiled cheerfully. She knew what work and worry it meant for her husband before that water flowed in the creek, if it ever did. She would do her part, though. She and the girls went away back to the house. The two blacks pulled down the pole rope, the boy carried water from the dam, McPhie turned the drill, and so McPhie's bore started.

The rig worked well. At first there was a little trouble lowering the drill as the hole went deeper and deeper, but McPhie got the screw of an old wagon brake, and forged it so that he could lower the drill without stopping, by letting out a turn of the screw from the top. It was tedious work after a week of it, and it was hard too, pulling up the sandpump by hand, hard on the arms. The blacks took a lot of encouragement. "Plenty tumbacca, by and by," said McPhie, and they'd pull away.

Although McPhie encouraged his blacks, yet his heart smote him. It might be he'd miss the water-bearing strata. They had struck the water at four hundred feet in the station bore. He knew where the sandrock cropped out fifteen miles away northward of his place. The inference was that the strata rose, and he should get it at a shallower depth, but was it the same

sandrock? The dreadful thought of failure, of missing the water, was ever in his mind. Those whom he spoke with only laughed at him. "You'd better leave boring to them that understand it," they said. They joked at his expense, and "McPhie's bore" became a by-word in the country. "McPhie walks about all night, talking to the bloomin' trees," said Slippery, down at the pub. But McPhie pegged away with the spring-pole, and kept his own counsel. He had forsaken the woodheap after tea, and used to walk up to the bore, and sit there for hours in the evenings. The hole was down now below the alluvial into the blue shale. The sandrock containing the water was below the shale. It was a long way off yet.

On a Sunday his boy and he paced off four hundred feet on the ground, and put in two long pegs. Then they put in another peg between. That was the depth of the hole. Daily as the work went on – if there was light enough to see, when they knocked off – this peg was shifted, showing how far to go.

At the end of a month's work it was past the centre of the space, half the work was done. It was terribly heavy pulling on the drill and the sandpump, but McPhie never tired. His arms were strained and his face haggard and worn. Meantime the water in the dam lowered day by day and the ewes took to staying around it lingeringly, instead of drinking and going away to feed. The water was getting bad. The wife of the home had been putting ashes into it, and making no complaint.

The work got heavier and heavier. They struck soft bands in the shale that clogged the drills. McPhie had rigged a windlass to heave up the sandpump, but even with that it was dreadful heavy work. The blacks were weary and exhausted, and McPhie, eager and untiring as he had been, was failing. More than once he had staggered and fallen. The drill clogged more and more, and at last there came a time when it would not work. The spring of the pole was not enough to lift the drill. They tried again and again. McPhie urged, and poured more water into the hole to soften the sludge, but no, it came not, and the work of the "spring-pole rig" had reached its limit. There was yet a hundred feet to go to reach the sandrock, where McPhie had hoped to strike the water. He was beaten.

That evening he sat by the hole. Long into the night he sat there, thinking, devising some scheme to continue the work. If he only had a little engine of some kind. McPhie knew little of steam power, moreover he was afraid of it.

The water in the dam was terribly low now, and there was green scum on it. The bullfrogs dabbled about in it. The sheep got bogged, and had to be pulled out. They'd been carrying the water out to a trough for the horses and cows for some time now, for if the big stock got in, they would puddle the water and destroy it.

It was necessary to devise some new rig. McPhie had now mastered enough of the drilling operation to know what was wanted. The drill must be lifted and dropped. He thought out many appliances, then he decided to try a long lever in a fork, like a whip works in a well. He rigged this, and set to work again. It was practicable, and the blacks could pull it down. He wanted a heavier drill though. He abandoned the old axle, and got a railway rail that he'd once used as a lever, for a wool-press. But the dreadful heaving on the sandpump had yet to be done. Sometimes it took all four heaving at the windlass to get it up. Then he thought of a new plan, and he rigged up three long sheer legs, and borrowed a pulley block. He tried pulling it up with a horse. It was a troublesome job to get the horse to work steadily. Sometimes he'd pull it half-way up, and stop, and then he couldn't start it again, and they had to hold the awful weight by hand until they got it fixed on the windlass, and McPhie began to think of the dreadful consequences if the rope broke with the jerking of the horse. He'd never be able to get the sandpump up again, or get hold of the rope. It would ruin everything if the rope broke, and it wasn't very strong. Sometimes, too, the horse would stop with the sandpump half-way up, and commenced to jig about until he turned round, then the harness and collar would pull on to his ears, and he'd plunge about, and he'd pull back struggling, by the neck, until they flew to the rope and took the strain, whilst they got the rope to the windlass again, and the horse free. At last, though, McPhie got a steady old mare that would pull it right up, and so they worked away in all the hours of light, day after day, until at last the inter-

mediate peg got nearer and nearer to the end of the four hundred feet pegged out.

If the water bearing strata rose, as McPhie anticipated it did, he should strike the water at three hundred and eighty feet, and as they neared this depth his hopes were high. The mental strain and the worry was telling on him as much as the physical work. Strange to say, his boys, after many promises from him, worked steadily. He had told them of gifts when the hole was down, and their understanding did not go beyond seeing the pegs on the surface come nearer and nearer. "Close up pinish um now," they said. They had none of McPhie's doubts, none of his worry, nothing of the fearful thought of missing the water, and the struggle to get the sheep away alive when this happened. The water was drying up on the roads. If McPhie had to go at last, there was twenty miles of a dry stage for a start, and with his sheep weak, would he ever get them over it? He had thought of hiring a horsedriver and sending the family away with the team, but when this was mentioned the wife of the home stood her ground. She'd stay to the last, she said, for who would cook for them when she and the girls were gone?

The blacks worked well. At three hundred and eighty-five feet they were in great glee, and they'd bring the big pole down with a swish. "Close up now. Big fella water bogey, by-and by," and they'd laugh together, and down would go the drill, "Plump, Plump." They did not know the dread that was at McPhie's heart. "Plump, Plump," the sound of the drill punching away, far down in the bottom of the hole. The boy, too, was expectant. McPhie had kept his doubts to himself; only his wife knew, and she, poor woman, gave no outward show of her misgiving. Sometimes she'd stand at the humpy door and look up towards the bore. She could see the big lever going up and down, and see them slaving away. Her eye would moisten, but no one knew she cared. When meal time came she was cheerful. The ration bags were low. There was no milk. It was too dry to milk the cows now, and the water was bad. The girls had taken to watching the dam and pulling out bogged sheep, and yet McPhie punched away, "Plump, Plump!" The sound was never out of his ears. Night or day, sleeping or waking, he heard the

sound of the drill. Daily he watched the gradually wearing rope. If it should break! And so three hundred and ninety feet was reached.

The next day saw three hundred and ninety-three feet, and yet no change, the same blue shale. McPhie's heart failed him, but he stood there turning the drill. Three-nine-six, three-nine-seven, three-nine-nine!

The sheep were all hanging about the dam now, the water was rotten. They just sipped it and ran around bleating. Four hundred feet! McPhie staggered back from the drill rope. He was done. The dreaded climax was reached. He had missed the water-bearing strata. The blacks looked askance at him. He signed to the lad to go to the drill rope and go on turning, then walked away to the house. He had played his game and had lost. As he walked on everything seemed hazy and dim. In his mind's eye he saw the sneer of the neighbours. He heard the coarse joke at the public house. He recalled the warnings of his friends. A great silence seemed to have fallen on his home as he entered the door. It was dinner-time, and they put forward his chair. He took it in silence. He could not eat. Every morsel of food seemed to stick in his throat. His wife never spoke. Through an open door into the storeroom he saw new ration bags, packed, and travelling gear, hobbles and bells, set out. Quietly the girls and their mother had been making ready for the road.

As they sat there the eldest girl put up her hand and listened. Then she rose and went to the door. "What is wrong up at the bore?" she said. "They are shouting and running." McPhie rose and went to her side. Looking out he heard the blacks yelling, and saw them dancing about.

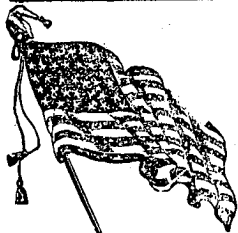
"God! God! They'd struck it." McPhie was half-way to the bore. Hatless, with his eyes starting from his head, he ran on. As he neared the derrick he saw the gleam, he saw the rush of the water, he saw the blacks and his boy wild with delight. After him came his wife and the girls. Aye, there it was, the great stream, rushing out of the bore, and already making its way to the creek, and McPhie rushed into it, muddy and blue with the shale as it was at first, and bathed his face in it, and threw it over himself and splashed in it, and the blacks corroborated round

and round, and yelled, and the boy started playing a mouth organ he had, and the girls commenced to jump to and fro over the water, and slipped and fell in, and the wife of the home stood by and enjoyed it all, and McPhie came out of the mud and said, "Well, old woman, we've got it after all."

She laughed heartily at him, wet and covered with mud, and said, "Yes, now you'd better come and change your clothes," and then she remembered the dinner and said, "Run girls, run quick. The fowls will be on the table."

And McPhie brought the boys along. "Plenty tumbacca," he said, "An' new fella chirt, an' spell." But the worries of this life never end, and after dinner McPhie got the horses in and made a general muster of the sheep on to the new water.

And that night McPhie sauntered up to the bore, and sat down in his old seat and listened to the gurgling of the stream. He smoked, and almost dozed, weary and tired as he was, and out of the still night air, audible to him alone, there came a sound, plump, plump, and McPhie started and rose, shaking his head, and went home.



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WHILE YOUR TEETH

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