

Country Hotel

By DARRY MCCARTHY

THE REOPENING of hotels in Invercargill precipitated a far-reaching inquiry into the drinking habits of the people of this country. Eventually the press agreed that standing over counters for a certain limited number of minutes during the day brought to the fore the worst features of the system of consuming liquor away from home. Nobody mentioned that the ideal hotel atmosphere exists in the country—in small places hardly ever recorded on maps, where men ride twenty miles for the nearest available beer.

In these places the pub is set down in paddocks and looks rather like the home of a prosperous farmer, except that it is situated beside the road and has a window labelled "Bar." From the road the dust blows in, and the place has to be cleaned again during the afternoon, but on the whole the hotelkeeper does not mind, because it makes his customers more thirsty. After their long, hot ride they appreciate the liquor, and its consumption becomes something of a social ritual. The harder a man works to get a beer, the better it tastes.

The stock sale in town, which may be thirty miles away, only takes place every week or fortnight. In between times local farmers rendezvous at the hotel, which serves the function of club as well. As they sit on forms in the bar or on sofas in the lounge, the men discuss wool and superphosphates, knowing they have hours of leisure before them. The loneliness of the lives they lead is temporarily mitigated. Drunkenness is rare, because the long ride home over deserted narrow roads will need alertness. Any one in such a state that he cannot be trusted to go away is looked after by the hotelkeeper, who gives him a bed for the night and sends him off in the early morning. The proprietor's responsibility to his guest is a conspicuous feature of country hotelkeeping. He provides meals for those who are in need of such steadying, and counter "lunches" look like feasts. In districts sparsely settled, where every one knows everybody else, good will is essential. The hotelkeeper in town, whose custom is assured, rarely feels such marked obligation to consumers.

