

in your opening up pumice land. You open up more space in opening the central, but it is useless space. I would put it in this way: take mile for mile of railroad, you would have a great deal more on the Stratford route.

33. Then you would have the Committee believe that 103 miles of railway from Eltham to Ongaruhe would open up more land for practical settlement than 103 miles of the central route from Hunterville northwards?—I have not the slightest hesitation in making that statement. One line being longer it opens up more country, but much of it is barren patches of no utility. By making the route from Eltham to the point of divergence you would be able to put two settlers along that line to where you could only put one on the other.

34. *Mr. Blake.*] Your general remarks go to prove that the principal part of the land is to the northwards of the Wanganui River?—Yes; I do not wish to say anything about the Waimarino Block. I do not know it.

35. It seems that all this land northwards of the Wanganui is still to be taken up?—Yes.

36. It seems by your evidence that it is principally good land to be taken up?—Yes.

37. *The Chairman.*] Are you acquainted with the Awarua Block?—No. I know where it is, but I have not been on it at all, excepting where the railway route goes along one side of it, I believe. The country about Turangarere on the central route is, as I have said already, very good; I also think that the Moawhango Block is very good.

38. Your remarks as to the Ngaire route carrying two settlers to the central route's one must be qualified to a large extent by your want of knowledge of the central route?—Well, you can put it that way if you like. I do know a great deal of the land on the central route. If you would look from Turangarere to the point of divergence—I know that country on the east side—the soil will not carry settlers. A man to make a living there would want 800 or 900 acres, and then he would probably have to file his schedule. That takes about seventy miles out of the central route that I know about, one-half of which is no use.

39. The distance from Rangatira to Ongaruhe is 140 miles. You can only speak positively of the bad land on one-half of one side of that distance—about one-fourth of the country along the central route beyond Rangatira?—We can say one-fourth.

40. Did you give any evidence as to the central route in 1884?—Yes.

41. As to the Stratford route also?—Probably I did. I was engaged on the exploration of that route.

42. Have you seen much of the country on the Stratford route since 1884?—Oh! yes. At that time I had seen very little of the land. I had been exploring for a railway-line down the valley of the Awakino River, so when I came down to give evidence in 1884 I knew little or nothing about it. I am speaking now with a much more intimate knowledge. I have been from end to end of it.

43. Would you indicate what part of the country you alluded to in 1884 as only having 10 per cent. fit for agriculture?—That was the country in from the coast up to Tongaporutu Stream. It is fearfully broken country, and the worst piece of land is up this river. By 10 per cent. being fit for agriculture, I mean it is ploughable.

44. So that you speak with more knowledge now when you say that the Ngaire route has about 25 per cent. of agricultural land?—Oh! yes. I admit that I was very much surprised at the quantity of useful land. I did not think the country nearly so good.

Mr. HARRY MAY SKEET, sworn and examined.

*Mr. H. M. Skeet:* I gave evidence on this subject in 1884. Since then I have acquired a much better knowledge of the country, having been over all of it. I do not know the central route, except from the Porotarau Tunnel to Taumarunui. I have very little knowledge of the central route, except the land on the Wanganui River. I am a district surveyor in the Government service.

45. *The Chairman.*] Were you engaged on any part of the survey of the Ngaire route?—Not beyond taking the railway men over portions of it.

46. Have you a better knowledge of that country than you had in 1884?—Yes.

47. State what your opinion is of that country as regards fitness for settlement and construction of railway, and what advantages or disadvantages it has over what is known as the central route.—Well, so far as the central route is concerned, it is a question I cannot deal with. I have no knowledge of the central route, except the land contiguous on the Wanganui River. I am not competent to speak on it. The only part I have been over is from Taumarunui to the Porotarau Tunnel.

48. Well, then, starting from the northern end, will you briefly describe it—from junction of central line to Eltham?—From Porotarau to Taumarunui I should say is a mixture of open country with hills and small flats near streams, with slight patches of bush. Great quantity of pumice. Unfit for settlement except in very large blocks. From the junction of the Stratford and central routes the first 10 miles, towards Stratford, to the 90 miles has a great deal of pumice. In the Ohura Valley the hills on the west side are mostly covered with bush, and the ground is a great deal better—good pastoral country. From the 90 miles to 80 miles a mixture of open valleys and hills and bush; all good country for settlement. The hills are of low elevation, from 200ft. to 700ft. high above the valleys. When I speak of settlement I mean small holdings.

49. Is it suitable for settlement in small areas?—Yes, I should say not less than 200 acres, and that only in the better portions. This particular piece of country stretches on both sides right across to seven miles on each side of the route—all available. From 80 miles to 70 miles the country is slightly better. It is all forest, with better soil. I may explain that in the open country there have been so many bush fires that the soil is so burnt that it would require many years of cultivation to bring it back to its proper quality.

50. Is it not the practice to burn the bush on much of the land in the North Island previous to