

FRIDAY, 23RD SEPTEMBER, 1892.

Captain RUSSELL, M.H.R., sworn and examined.

1. *The Chairman.*] You are member for Hawke's Bay district?—Yes.
2. And are acquainted with some portion of the country through which the North Island central railway is proposed to go?—I have been over the central route.
3. Do you know anything of the Stratford route?—I know nothing of the Stratford route.
4. Will you be kind enough to tell the Committee what you know about the country that is traversed by the central route—as to the quality of the land and its suitability for settlement?—I have travelled the Northern Trunk route from Turangarere as far as the head of the Mokau, and undoubtedly the greater portion of that country immediately adjacent to the line was very light indeed. We went through some valuable timber through a considerable portion of the line, and a few miles before coming to Taumarunui we passed through an extremely valuable totara forest—an excessively valuable forest of totara. I may also add that the country between the Rangitikei River and Turangarere, on the road from Napier to Turangarere, is, most of it, of fair quality of land—a light land, but a fair quality of land.
5. That is the upper portion of the Awarua Block?—No; it is to the eastward, I should say, of the Awarua Block. It is not that block I am speaking of. The piece of land I am alluding to is not in that block. The land I rode over from Birch's Station, near Moawhango, until we reached the homestead at Kerioi, was also a fair quality of rather light land.
6. Open land or bush?—Open land, suitable, I should say, for growing oats, or grass, or turnips. Well, from Kerioi we rode through forest land, most of it covered with pumice dust; but in the deeper cuttings of the bridle-track in many instances papa cropped out, and there were indications of shelly lime. The opinion I formed, and it was only an opinion, that westward the country would in all probability improve; that is to say that the pumice dust would get finer and lighter, and would never overlay the good land at a depth sufficient to do harm. The forest was so dense that it was impossible to really know what the soil was like. Then, from Ohakune to Waimarino the same remarks will apply; but on the Waimarino Plain and open country the land was of very poor quality indeed. From Waimarino to Taumarunui, when once off the open country, again there was light pumice dust overlying at varying depths a good quality of soil. The timber seemed to me, in most localities, to be valuable. Approaching the Wanganui River above Taumarunui the country improves a good deal, and shortly before striking the river we passed through a large area of the finest totara I have ever seen—a most excessively valuable block of totara. From Taumarunui up to Poro-o-tarao, along the Ongarue Valley, there were small plots of land of good quality, but the surrounding country was undoubtedly, for the most part, light pumice land capable of growing inferior kinds of grasses. There were large cliffs from which you might almost have believed to be basalt, but which were in reality nothing but compacted pumice. From Poro-o-tarao, on to the vicinity of the head waters of Mokau, the land was of indifferent quality—pumice. Then from Taumarunui I went down the Wanganui River, and, so far as it was possible to judge, the water of the river being very considerably below the level of the surrounding country—but, so far as one could judge, it justified my belief that all the country as you get westward from the railway-line steadily improves—in other words, that the Northern Trunk Railway line runs on the edge of a pumice plateau, but that directly you get away from the edge to the west of that plateau the country improves. That is an opinion formed after actually seeing the land, and from the surrounding circumstances.
7. What season of the year was it, Captain Russell, when you travelled over that land?—I think it was in April; it would be about the end of April.
8. Have you any knowledge of the climate over this central route?—I should imagine that over the southern end, near Turangarere, there are light snowfalls occasionally.
9. Only occasionally?—Three or four times in the winter I should think, but I do not fancy it ever lays over a couple or three days, if so long.
10. Is it a part of the country that you think likely to attract settlers?—In the immediate vicinity of the railway certainly it is not suitable, I should say, for small settlement, with the exception of the land between Hunterville and Turangarere, and I imagine that all the country to the westward of the railway is of a similar character to that between Hunterville and Turangarere. For instance, I have been on the Ruanui Run to the westward of Turangarere, and it is a piece of land of remarkable fertility.
11. That is freehold land?—No, it is Maori lease; but I know it is capable of carrying two sheep to the acre in a moderately improved condition, and carries the English grasses well.
12. *Mr. C. H. Mills.*] How many miles did you go down the Wanganui River?—I went from its source to the sea. We went right up the Ongarue Valley—the main branch of the Wanganui River.
13. Is there much open country going down the river?—I should say not, but I could not give you really an opinion. You see the country when you get below Pipiriki; but I believe it to be all bush country.
14. *Mr. Rhodes.*] Do you think there is any necessity for taking the line beyond good country? Would not good roads be suitable to bring the traffic at present?—My own belief is now, and always has been, that it is unnecessary expenditure of money to complete either line of railway. I should like, if I may, to state that, from my own point of view, the central route is the more suitable for the country generally, inasmuch as the eastern coast would participate hereafter in the benefit of that line of railway; in other words, it brings many more portions of New Zealand in communication with Auckland than the coast or western line.
15. Would you advocate some other line to connect Napier with the central ultimately?—Yes, undoubtedly.