

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

DARGAVILLE, 18TH JANUARY, 1898.

Thomas Somers : I have not worked on Mitchelson's Lease since 1894. I have been gum-digging in the Maunganui Swamp for the last two years, and I must state that the conditions under which I work there are perfectly fair. I pay 2s. a week royalty to dig gum, with perfect freedom to buy stores, and I also get a fair price for the gum. Mr. John Owen is the owner of the land I work on, and Mr. N. N. Downey is the agent. There are about ten British diggers on this lease and twenty-five Dalmatians, and all work under the same conditions on Owen's land. Mr. Owen has no connection with any of the stores from whence the diggers derive their supplies. We feel the competition of the Austrians very severely even at Owen's land. They come in large numbers temporarily, and exhaust the gum, and the British diggers, many of whom have taken Crown land, have practically no resources left to meet their liabilities or work the land. The working of the fields by the Austrians is different from that of the Britisher. If a British gum-digger discovers gum the ground for a certain radius around that spot is considered to be his, and no other gum-digger works there. If an Austrian finds gum, a large number of his countrymen crowd around him and work that gum. As far as I know, every man works for himself, and not as a co-operative party together. Some of the Austrians live well, and a great number the reverse, and any storekeepers in giving evidence are sure to quote the former. The Austrians are increasing in numbers. To the best of my belief, within the last six months three hundred have arrived in the colony, and are scattered over the gumfields, of which thirty came to the Wairoa. At the present time there are fewer Austrians in this district than in 1893. The Austrians found the conditions rather severe in the Wairoa, and so have left for the northern fields, principally Mangonui and the Marsden and Whangarei Counties. None of the Austrians have their wives living with them. The Austrians came *via* Sydney. I do not know whether they arrive under contract. There is such a belief among the gum-diggers. Our greatest trouble is the alien invasion. I have heard some twelve months ago of their being too much in the hands of the lessees of the private gumfields. The reason why I do not hear these complaints now is because I am working on Mr. Owen's land, where the diggers are under more favourable conditions. There are great complaints about defective weights and measures used by the storekeepers in buying gum, and it is urged that a frequent inspection of these should be taken in hand by the Government. I know of a case in which a gum-digger was paid for 7 lb. of gum less in every hundredweight of gum he disposed of. The fees for gum-licenses are at present not collected, nor have they been for years past. They are supposed to be collected, but the County Councils and other local bodies find it too difficult and expensive to collect. The roads suffer very much through the gum-traffic, so I consider some contribution should be paid by the digger. The gum-diggers are not averse to the collection of gum-license fees, so long as they can get some protection to the industry. If the Crown would give gum-diggers facilities for the acquiring of small areas of Crown land wherever available it would probably result in the diggers settling more permanently on the gumfields. I think it would be judicious to make provision for old diggers, the number of whom is very greatly increasing in the fields now; and certain blocks of gum-land should be reserved for them specially. These might be put in charge of the County Council, whose duty it would be to see that no gum-diggers under a certain age—say, fifty or sixty years—should be allowed to work it. It would be of interest to the local body, since without such provision numbers of elderly men would soon be thrown on the county resources for charitable aid. It has been published in a local paper that Austrians have already come on the Hobson County for hospital fees. The price of gum is not going down at present. Large numbers of Maoris are gum-digging now; they get their stores principally from Europeans. The ordinary gum-digger, if he saw a fair chance of settling down, would do so if the land was adjacent to a gumfield; but the Austrians seldom take advantage of settling on land near gumfields. It is injurious to the Crown settlers adjacent and to intending Crown settlers that the surface of the ground should be broken up in such a systematic way as is done by the Austrians in the winning of gum. I consider the license form (marked A) submitted to me as being fairly representative of the license issued some years ago; and licenses of nearly similar tenor are in existence now, and are issued to the diggers on the Flax Lease. I am not in favour of an export duty, as it would be borne by the digger. I think a gum-digger should have a digger's license issued to him, under the same lines as a miner's right. I would like to see a three years' residential qualification before anybody could be the holder of a license to dig gum. There is a difficulty in connection with the collection of license-fees over Crown gum-fields, but it might be met by authorising Postmasters to issue the licenses. If I, as a settler, had some crops to sell to diggers on adjacent leased fields I would not be able to dispose of it to them. If the diggers were inclined to buy they would be turned off the field. There have been instances of this.

The evidence given by Thomas Somers, of Dargaville, before the Gum Commission in 1893 is as follows: I am a gum-digger, and have been three years on Mitchelson's Lease. From observation of a camp of the Austrians I am sure the cost of their living is not more than 7s. a week, or thereabout. I have had no quarrel with them, and they have not interfered with us in any way. They are very hard-working and sober. I consider their presence here in large numbers would tend to deteriorate the condition of life. I can earn £3 a week at gum-digging, and it costs me 18s. or £1 to live. We should be quite willing to pay a license-fee of 10s. if granted to naturalised persons only, after two years' residence.