

Ellis Rees Ellis: Having heard the evidence read over as given before the Commission in 1893, I indorse what I then said. Since then letters have passed between myself and the Labour Department with reference to the gum-diggers' grievances. There are two very great grievances—the influx of aliens and the system of trading on private gumfields. First, as to the influx of aliens, I have no objection to the Austrians personally, but we have ample of our own to produce kauri-gum. As far as I know, the Austrians are honest, and I know nothing objectionable about them. I do not think they will be settlers; their money is sent away out of the colony, and I think you can get sufficient proof of this. My opinion is that if a great number had not gone away there would be four thousand on the fields now. I believe the great majority have now gone to Mangonui. The Austrians have left the Wairoa because they have gone in search of free fields (Government Crown lands), where the conditions are free to trade as they choose. The Austrians find the conditions as irksome as the Britishers do. I think the owners of private fields encourage the Austrians because they can buy their gum cheaper, as they are ignorant of the value of the commodity. It is still my opinion that the Inspector of Weights and Measures should go all through the gumfields. I have had instances of defective weights and measures. I was gum-digging at a certain place, and I had occasion to suspect that my gum was not weighed correctly, and it was found that the steelyards were 10lb. wrong in a sack of gum averaging $1\frac{1}{2}$ cwt., which would mean 7 lb. in a hundredweight. It is three years and a half since the Inspector went round, and that was on the occasion when Sergeant Black laid informations against thirty storekeepers, and a number were convicted. The storekeepers generally get wind of the Inspector's visits. The storekeepers should be compelled to take their steelyards and weights to the Inspector of Weights and Measures for the district; then they would be adjusted periodically, and every weight stamped with the date on it when last adjusted. It was the practice in the Old Country to take the scales to the Inspector, and have them adjusted once every three months. It is my opinion that the export duty would have to be paid by the gum-digger. Seventy-five per cent. of the diggers would approve of having to pay a license-fee if protection was granted to them. The protection should be that the license should be granted to native or naturalised British subjects only, and that a residential qualification of at least twelve months should be insisted upon in connection with others, but not to apply to those already on the field. The license should be issued by the Postmasters or Government officers, and any person found misleading in applying for a license should be liable to a penalty. The diggers still suffer a great deal under the system of receiving truck or goods in payment for gum. There are places where the diggers get cash for gum, but have to hand the money back for their accounts. They have got to take the stores at the storekeeper's price. It would be far better if the lessee of the land would charge a rent to the digger for so much per quarter for the right to dig, leaving him free to get his goods or sell his gum where he chose. There is the difficulty of right of private property in this. I consider when once a man has begun to make agreements with the public in regard to his land it is to some extent not as private but as ordinary leasehold or freehold land. I think it would be impracticable for the proprietor of a gumfield to charge royalty, as it would be very difficult for him to keep watch on the different parties of men, and see how much gum would be produced under free conditions, but a direct charge would be much better. Most of the private owners of fields prevent any settler selling direct to the gum-digger; they would have to sell direct to the storekeeper. I could never sheet home the fact that the Austrians came out under contract. It would simply be a contract of good faith. I have nothing objectionable to say against the personal character of the Austrians. The platform of 1893 is given below, and was adopted by the Gum-diggers' Union at a meeting held at Opanake in September, 1896: "(1.) No export duty on kauri-gum. (2.) All Crown gum-lands to be reserved for gum-digging purposes. (3.) The production of kauri-gum to be restricted to British subjects only. (4.) The only legal charge to gum-diggers for digging on lands, private or otherwise, to be royalty, leaving the diggers to buy and sell where they choose. (5.) First-class land adjacent to gumfields to be first roaded, and then thrown open for selection, so as to give gum-diggers and others an opportunity to make homes for themselves. (6.) The Government to take over and maintain all main trunk roads in the North. (7.) State ownership of all gum-lands. (8.) Compulsory Arbitration and Conciliation Act." I still consider these as being the object of the main body of the gum-diggers. We were paying on the fields from 4d. to 6d. per pound for onions, whereas settlers were prepared to sell them at $1\frac{1}{2}$ d., but had not an opportunity of doing so, because the gum-diggers on private lands would not run the risk of being expelled if they purchased from others than the proprietors. A similar case occurred in connection with the raising of potatoes by settlers; they were ready to sell for 6s. a hundredweight, whereas the proprietors or storekeepers charged 12s. a hundredweight, which the diggers on these lands had to pay. The fees collected from the gum-diggers should go to the public fund, and not to the local bodies. The local bodies already receive rates for the lands from the proprietors. I think it would be a good idea if a gum-digger had to produce a license before he was allowed to enter into transactions for the sale of his gum. There is not one storekeeper in fifty who will advance an outfit to a stranger. An instance of the different prices of gum in different districts is that of a man who took gum to Maropiu, and Rawnsley's packer bought the gum there, and packed it through to Poroti, and thence carted it to Whangarei, and with all this was able to pay from 8s. to 10s. a hundredweight more than buyers in the locality. This shows the way that the men are imposed on when forced to sell to owners of private fields. The freight is £1 7s. 6d. per ton, railway and steamer, from Dargaville to Auckland; 1s. 6d. a hundredweight is charged on the fields to pack to the stores; and about 1s. 6d. for freight from Dargaville to Auckland: total, 3s.; so that any difference between 3s. and the deduction made by buyers on the field represents their profit. There is a great difference between what diggers call "ordinary gum" and what is "ordinary gum" in the Auckland market. "Fair ordinary" is the gum with the best of it picked out in the Auckland market, and up here it is all unpicked, called "fair average." They are hooking gum in the soft swamps over 20 ft. deep. As showing another instance of the storekeepers' practice, I know of a case of a man