

[There were eleven other Austrians present, who agreed with what the witnesses under examination had stated. They explained through their interpreter that they were very much obliged to the Commissioners for the explanation as to the possibility of taking up land, and that a good many working on the swamp would be able to avail themselves of the conditions offered.]

TE KOPURU.

John Perry: I am a fruit-gardener, residing at Totareki, and authorised collector of gum-licenses and dog-licenses in the Hobson County. I commenced the collection of gum-licenses about two years ago. During the first year—1896—I issued thirty-seven licenses, which brought in £9 5s.; in 1897 twenty-one licenses were issued, which brought in £5 5s.: total, £14 10s., out of which I received £3 8s. 6d. as commission, leaving a balance of £10 1s. 6d. for county revenue. With the exception of four men who were infirm I got all those working on Crown lands in the Hobson County. The year previous to my appointment there must have been two hundred gum-diggers, and the year before that three hundred, but when I commenced collecting the licenses a rush took place to some of the northern gumfields. I have experienced a great difficulty in collecting the licenses, and had to take promises to pay at some future time again and again. I did not proceed against them, on account of the heavy expense. Some of the diggers evade paying licenses by simply shifting from Crown lands to private lands when they see me coming along. I interviewed some Austrians some time ago. I told them it was necessary to take out a license. They said they had been digging on lands, and had never been asked for licenses, and they would make inquiries to see if I had power to collect these licenses. The policeman is coming down to help me to collect these licenses. Another way they have of evading me, when working on swampy grounds, is simply to go across to the other side through 3 ft. or 4 ft. of water, so I cannot follow except by going miles around, and even then by that time they would be across again. I do not think the license-fee is high enough. It does not pay the Council to collect it, and I think the issue of a license is the best way of collecting a tax on diggers, and it should be strictly enforced. I think an amendment should be made in the law whereby a storekeeper should demand the production of a digger's license before purchasing his gum. I have been twenty years in the Northern Wairoa, and thirty-seven years in New Zealand altogether. I have dug gum myself, and have been employed at gum-stores, and have for the last twenty years gathered a thorough knowledge of the gum industry. I was on the Flax-mill Lease seventeen years ago, and it was then said that it was worked out, but more gum has since been got from it than during any previous period, and numbers of men still earn their living there now. The Austrians are a very honest and industrious class of people, quiet, law-abiding, and very hard-working. I have been in their camps, and believe the Austrians live quite as well as the Britisher. I was employed at Mr. Moloughney's store at Tataraka three years ago, and noticed that the Austrians got like supplies with the other diggers. I have never had any reason to believe that the rumour was true that the Austrians came out under contract to any of the storekeepers, or any person in their own country. I think if the Austrians could be induced to bring their wives and families and settle they would be a most desirable class of settler. I simply object to them in the industry because they send their money away, and do not settle in the country. From my experience, south of Dargaville the prices charged by the storekeepers are generally fair and reasonable—in fact, if they were not so the gum-diggers would not deal with them. Competition is keen because the fields are free; but north of Dargaville there have been a great many complaints, and the complaints I am in a position to say have been justified. There is nothing in the shape of the truck system carried on on the gumfields south of Dargaville. The weights given in this district by the storekeepers are just, and I doubt whether the many complaints emanating from the gum-diggers are resting on any good grounds. They are a suspicious people, and I know that frequently complaints were made because their weighings of gum in small parcels on spring-balances are often not correct, and do not tally within a pound or two with the storekeeper's scales. In this district many blocks of Crown lands were withdrawn from selection simply because they were known to contain gum. I think that was a mistake. It would be far better for the district if *bona fide* settlers were allowed to take up these lands. The gum would assist them in the cultivation of the land, and the local bodies would be great gainers, for the revenue derived from the gum would not come up to what the local body would derive by way of rates and "thirds." The license-fees charged by the Government when compared with the charges made on private lands seem ridiculous. What between the low price paid for gum and the high price paid for provisions, together with the license-fees charged to diggers on private gum-lands, they are really sometimes paying at the rate of 8s. to 10s. a week—equal to £25 per annum—as against the paltry 5s. license-fee charged for digging on Crown lands.

DARGAVILLE.

Richard Mitchelson: The evidence read over to me, which I gave in 1893, is substantially correct. I noticed a statement given in evidence before the Commission that a man got £4 for his gum, which was 8s. or 10s. more than he could get from my store. Rawnsley, of Poroti, was the buyer. The explanation is this: that the gum must have been of a superior quality to that offered at my store. I think it a curious thing that a man from Whangarei could give a better price than competing storekeepers on the river, as the gum was taken from Government lands. The very fact of that storekeeper not purchasing gum in the Kaihu Valley again seems to prove that it was not of a profitable character. As to the statement *re* the price of potatoes, it would all depend on the time of the year as to the price paid. Gum is getting scarcer, and so the earnings are getting less, and the gum-digging must be of a more systematic character, and the old idea of spearing is gradually being abandoned. The swamps must be drained. I hand in Statements A and A1, showing total average earnings per week of two Europeans and two Austrians dealing at the Babylon store, of five men dealing at the Flax-mill store, and of three men at the Maropiu store. In regard to those dealing