

and they stick to themselves—too much so. I have never known an Austrian to subscribe to sports or charity. One great objection is that they are spoiling the country. We settlers' sons would manage to earn a living and get along decently for years and years, but we are now being driven out of the country to find work in other places. My idea of meeting the difficulty is to insist that each Austrian should become a settler. I should survey gum-lands into small sections, and make each gum-digger (no exception made) a landholder, and have to make application to the Land Office for the land. I should make very stringent rules that the land should be improved and occupied, and in default a severe penalty. The storekeepers on these fields give "starts," as a better class of men come here than at the Wairoa and nearer Auckland. At the Waihopo there were about ten Austrians four years ago, and last winter there were about a hundred and fifty in the district, and a large camp further north. The settlers at Herekino two years ago could find gum two or three hours' ride from their homesteads, so as to enable them to return home for Saturday. Now they have to go away north and different places on the coast. That is because the Austrians have been through the fields. There is no such thing as truck on these northern fields. The storekeepers deal fairly by us. There is no complaint. There is periodical squaring up when we sell our gum. The digger is usually asked whether the amount supplied should be deducted, and the answer is usually "Yes," and the balance is handed over to the seller of the gum.

James Baker : I am a settler, from Herekino. I have been a digger for seven years on this field. There are a number of the Herekino settlers who, like myself, come over here during certain seasons of the year to raise a few pounds to enable us to make further improvements on our holdings. I have listened to the evidence given by Mr. Russell, and I fully agree with everything he has stated. The Austrian difficulty is one which is getting very formidable, and should be dealt with in some way or another.

WAIHARARA, 4TH FEBRUARY, 1898.

Matthew Steed [there were upwards of fifty diggers present] : I am a gum-digger. I may express sentiments that may not be in accord with the rest of you, but I shall give it from my own standpoint, as far as my own interests are concerned. The gum industry has been neglected for many years, and it is now almost too late to think of improving it. I think it is time something should be done; and there are many grievances requiring redressing—not only the Austrian question, but many others. I am sorry that I do not see any Austrians here. I have no fault to find with Austrians as men, but it is their competition with labour, which reduces the price of British labour. The Austrian in the majority of cases takes whatever price is offered him for his gum without comment, and he generally pays for his goods the same way; and when the gum-buyer, whoever he may be, comes along to the camps (I do not mention names) they offer a price—say £2 8s. per hundredweight—and he takes it, although the market-value may be, say, £3. The buyer then comes along to the British camp and offers £2 10s., 2s. in excess of what he has offered the Austrians—that is, the value, the price given to the Austrians; and their gum is quite equal to the British. Again, the Austrian is charged more for the goods than we are, and he takes them, saying nothing. When the Britisher demurs against these things he is told to clear out and deal elsewhere. Your gum will be left on your hands, and perhaps the storekeeper will leave you hungry without stores. If you do not accept the terms laid down by the storekeeper you have to go elsewhere. Practically there is only one store on this field. There are three cash buyers on this field, who go about with a bag over their shoulders and buy gum, promising to pay in six weeks or three months, which means that they pay you when they get paid themselves. Austrians are law-abiding citizens, and no man has a word against them as men. They are a good race of men. To all intents they are supplanting the men with families. Their mode of working is very fair; they will not rush on to your patch and dig the gum away from you. [Remark made here that cases have been known where Austrians have got up earlier in the morning and dug a patch out, before the Britisher, who had left his spade and spear on that patch, had arrived.] The settler cannot move about from place to place, and consequently he is debarred from getting gum, which is all the assistance he has in keeping himself and family. I have given this question great thought, and I have tried sending my gum from the field to Auckland. I have been fairly well treated, and for a time received what was the market-value for the gum, as given in the paper. After a little time some undercurrent must have been at work. I got a lesser price in Auckland than I could get on the field, and below the *Weekly News* quotations, after paying all expenses and freight; therefore I was compelled to come back to the field. There are storekeepers here who say that they prevented the diggers getting a higher price than they would get on the field. It was an arranged matter. Mr. Edmunds, with three or four more, shipped gum at the same time as Mrs. Rose and another did. Mrs. Rose's gum was superior to the others. The storekeepers got 2s. and 3s. per hundredweight more for inferior qualities of gum, and I got less than the storekeeper by 2s. or 3s. Mrs. Rose was informed that those in the trade always got a preference. The gum-digger should receive the actual value of his gum; but he is blocked by the storekeepers. The supply of gum is getting very rapidly exhausted. This ground (area, fifteen square miles of gum-land), five or six hundred men would turn over from end to end in five years. It is not all gum-land; there is nothing on the ranges, and the swamps will have to be drained. The swamps now could only be worked for four months. This is a very dry summer. The rumoured drop in gum prices is because of the large stocks in Auckland now. From the date of the last Commission the price of gum went down, and has never been up again. Gum fluctuates far more to-day than it used to do before the date of the Commission. The dark gum is in greater evidence now than it ever was. The truck system is the greatest trouble we have. It is from my own personal experience. I can produce