

my bills. I have offered my gum at Evans's store, at Te Kao. I owed the storekeeper £5 for goods. The gum was bought at £2 12s, when in Mangonui I was offered £3 3s.—expenses of transit paid to Mangonui; but I was so handicapped I could not get that price. There was only one opposition store, kept by a Maori, at Te Kau. The bill and the balance of the money was handed over, and if it was wrong it could be regulated next time. The storekeeper will send up by the bullock-dray three pounds' worth of goods; the order may be £5. "Short of articles"; the order would not be completed. There would be no invoice with the goods, and when the final settlement takes place a bill is supplied with the £3 all lumped together. Storekeepers will not give particulars, but enter it in the bills as goods supplied. The storekeepers having our money, there is no remedy, and we cannot object to the price of goods, as they are not particularised. I am speaking of Evans's store, at Te Kao, only. [The following men gave in their names, stating that Joe Evans, storekeeper at Waipapakauri, held balances of their money, and they could not get proper settlement: Ross Taylor, J. D. Williams, Charles Deapces, James Lombra, John Roache.] If a man had money in the storekeeper's hands, and did not choose to take the prices that were offered by the storekeeper for his gum, if he went to sell it to another store the storekeeper would say, "Take it to the man you buy your goods from." Once in the storekeeper's hands you are bound to sell your gum and get your provisions from him, and accept his prices. The men lose time if they come down to the store to ask for their rights from the storekeepers in regard to the items of their bills. This game is carried on until they are tired out, and they quietly submit. Storekeepers give "starts"; they prefer doing so, in order to get hold of the digger. [Twenty-five present corroborated these statements with regard to the truck system.] The freight to this place is £1 10s. per ton, landed at the store. The following are the prices of some stores: Sugar, 4d.; tea, 2s. 6d. to 3s.; flour, 9s. for 50 lb. bag; candles, 1s.; tobacco, 6s. 6d. to 7s. 6d.; tinned meat (2 lb.), 1s. 3d.; fresh meat, 4d.; butter, 1s. 3d. to 1s. 9d. per pound; potatoes, 18s. 8d. per hundredweight. There is reason to believe that the storekeepers have different prices for different people. If a man is supposed to be able to pay he will have to pay higher than those who are supposed to be bad marks.

J. D. Williams: I am a gum-digger on the Waiharaha field. The storekeepers take advantage of the diggers in buying their gum. They come and buy the gum on the field, perhaps with no money with them. Sometimes they pay by cheque, and you have to go down to the hotel (Waipapakauri) to get your money, and the chances are you come away without any at all. Storekeepers do not intend that a digger shall leave the field with a shilling in his possession. If your bill at the store is not a big one he will not buy your gum, leaving it on your hands on purpose to punish you for not having dealt more largely with him. When you send your gum to the grocer in Auckland a digger has to take part in goods, but he gives a higher price for the gum than by selling it direct to the merchants, who only give you market-price at the time. When the digger gets his stores from the grocer in town he has great difficulty in getting them ashore, as there is no wharf, and there is great difficulty in landing goods, as the storekeepers own the boats. This shows how storekeepers work against the diggers. I consider the storekeepers treat us very unfairly. The North is not adapted for settlement.

HOHOURA.

Joidah Edward Thomas: I am a digger, and a settler under a Government lease. I have been on the land for ten years. I think the most serious thing for us thirty families settled on the land from the Government is that not one of us could possibly live on his land without having the gum to work. We came here without capital, improving our places, and when the flour-bag ran short we fell back upon the gum. If the Austrians come on to the place we cannot compete with them; if many come the gum will be done very quickly, and, if the supply exceeds the demand, down the price goes. There are about three hundred Austrians in the Waihopa district. A few came four years ago, and if they keep on increasing at the rate they are we shall have to leave the place. Their style of digging is quite different from the Britishers, who dig independently, but the Austrians work on the face, and dig everything out of the ground before them. They work long hours—from daybreak till dark. They are law-abiding men. They do not enter into our social life in any way. They never subscribe to charities, to my knowledge, but simply contribute to the general revenue in as far as the provisions they require. We think, before any alien should be allowed to dig gum, he should be naturalised. Another suggestion is that they should be made to take up land for settlement, and show that they are *bona fide* settlers. They come with the avowed intention of getting so much money, and they only spend enough money to keep body and soul together, and when they have got their money they clear out. Their average earnings come to £1 10s., with their tucker. [This was corroborated by some of the other witnesses who were present.]

Thomas Thatcher: I was employed by Mr. Tynan, one of the gum-buyers at Waihopa. There were about seventy Austrians. Their average for nine months was £10 a month, clear of tucker, tucker coming to 9s. a week. The reason of this was that it was winter time, and they could get in the swamps 6 ft. and 10 ft. deep. They also worked the summer fields in the winter time. I think it wrong on the part of the Government to dispose by lease or purchase of any lands containing gum. It should be kept as a right for the people at large. It opens the way to spoliation. I could take you on to gum-land held by private individuals to the extent of 300 acres, which is full of gum, taken up by one man. It is held by Joseph Webb, of Kaimanawa. [Re disposal by lease of gum-lands, all those present (about forty in number) agreed that Government should not dispose of it.] I think the Land Act should be amended so as to reduce the time which has now to expire before a man applying for land can obtain possession of it. In many instances it has taken eighteen months' delay between the time of application and the granting of it. A great number of men are thus prevented from taking up sections. [The witness was recalled later on.]