

William Wade : I have been a gum-digger for three years in this district. Since I came to this district there has been nothing else but the truck system. Storekeepers supply goods, and take your gum in exchange, and pay over and above the amount that is owing to you. As to the prices diggers have to pay on this field for provisions, Mr. Tynan charges for onions 4½d. to 5d. per pound; they can be bought for ½d. and ¾d. per pound in the Auckland market. Jam can be bought in Auckland for 2s. 9d. a dozen tins, and I pay 7s. a dozen here for the same class of jam. Bag of sugar (56 lb.), 18s. 8d. Flour, 8s. 6d. for 50 lb.; in Auckland, 10s. 6d. a hundredweight. Tea, 2s. 6d.; butter, 1s. 3d. per pound; potatoes, £4 a ton in Auckland, and 12s. a hundredweight here; tinned meat, 14s. a dozen here, £1 8s. a case in Auckland. As to the Austrians, my suggestion is to tax them, so that they shall not come here in too great numbers. I would put a poll-tax on them. If they become settlers, let them work gum, and if they earn weekly wages, let them come. At Te Kao, where there are two or three hundred at work, I have seen them myself go alongside another digger who had found some gum, and take it away from him.

Frank Urwyn : I am a gum-digger and settler on freehold of five years in the district. I struck a bit of gum, and fourteen Austrians came right round me working towards me, and worked me clean out of it in a ring. If the Austrians go on increasing at the same rate that they have done lately, in a few years there will be nothing but Austrians here; the Britishers will be driven from the field. There are three stores on this field, and we are practically free to deal wherever we like. If I give Mr. Evans an order, he buys my gum, he brings the goods to my *whare*, and gives me cash for the balance. I can get more for my gum here than I can in town. Myself and Mr. Thomas made the attempt to dispose of gum in town. We explained the position to Mr. Edmunds, and he thought it was a very good plan to follow; but a while after he made inquiries whether the gum in the schooner "Atalanta" came down from here, and whether it was ours, and, being told that it was so, he expressed his regret that he could not deal with us. This, to our minds, shows clearly that there are some underhand workings in the purchase of gum, which fixes the producer and makes it impossible for him to dispose of it to any one else except the storekeeper on the ground.

Thomas Thatcher (recalled) : I am a Government leaseholder next to Mr. Urwyn. There was a man who sent gum to town, and he got a very poor price for it. I asked a storekeeper whether he could stop a man getting a good price for his gum, and he said he could write to the man that received the gum in Auckland, and, if that gum merchant gave this digger the same price that he was offering, he would stop his trade; consequently the poor digger always has to suffer, and is in the hands of the storekeeper. A digger informed me a little time ago that a storekeeper came round buying gum. He gives credit for the stores you owed, and, if you have money over and above, you receive it. A man whose gum was worth more than what the storekeeper offered refused to sell it. His tucker was stopped, and when a man's tucker is stopped what can a man do? It being two hundred miles from Auckland, he is in the hands of the storekeepers, and must cave in. I know an Austrian who sent away £136 in nine months. He told me that capitalists in Austria advance a man £26 to pay for his passage and get him on the fields, and within twelve months he has got to return that £26, and £6 interest. The capitalist keeps that £6 profit, and advances that sum (£26) to another one recommended by the first Austrian. There might be ten men sending away money, and these sums are simply fetching more men into the country. If ten men sent out £320, that fetches ten more; and of that, £260 is used to bring out more men, and the surplus used to bring out still more. I have every reason to believe that this is the general system which is in work amongst the Austrians, and which accounts for the great number flooding the country. I do not believe the Austrians come out here under contract to any person. Last winter the Austrians were working the Kimberley Flat because it was so rich, and we fear that next winter they will be on R.S.T. Flat and Shooting-gallery Flat, and if these are worked out we shall have to clear out, because there is no other gum for us. They are only a quarter of a mile away now, and I suppose they will be soon on me. If a man gets on a bit of gum they will swarm around him, and he is powerless to resist them taking the gum. The Britishers and the Austrians do not clash, but the Austrians have had rows amongst themselves. Every year they receive a letter from the Austrian authorities to inform them about their military service. If they receive a letter marked in red they must return at once to join the army, or be outlawed. I object strongly to the Government throwing open land containing gum. I agree with what Mr. Thomas said about the leasing of gum-lands. Whenever there is a doubt as to whether land is gum-land or not the opinion of the gum-diggers on that particular field should be taken before the Land Board throws open the land for selection. I think the opinion of the gum-diggers would be better than that of the Ranger, or County Clerk, or surveyors. [Those present, being representatives of the various fields in this district, indorsed generally the opinions expressed by the witnesses who had given evidence.]

WAIHOPA.

Albion Walter Cheeseman : I have been a gum-digger only for the last four years. I was digging at Otaka, Mangere, Pipiwai. I was bush-working in the Wairoa for the Kauri Timber Company. We tried to get up a petition amongst the gum-diggers between Mangonui and Parengarenga (British section), but want of funds prevented that being carried out fully. We sent a petition to Mr. Houston, our member, to be presented to Parliament, and it was signed by 290 British diggers. The settlers think, if something is not done at once to stop the Austrians digging, the gum industry will be a thing of the past. The settlers cannot make a living owing to the Austrians. There were only a few Austrians here three years ago, and now there are about forty Austrians between Hohoura and Te Kao, but there were about two hundred at Te Kao twelve months ago. Most of the Austrians that were at Te Kao migrated to Mangawhai. Amongst these I should think there were a lot of new arrivals at Te Kao in the last year. I would suggest that the Government should