

diggers who had no residential qualification. Some of the men on this field are nearly getting too old to work, but there are others, I believe, who are really lazy men, and are quite content to allow the storekeepers to keep on packing goods to them until he stops. As a rule, storekeepers are not anxious to give starts here, and give only a fortnight's credit.

*Albert James Wright*: I have been a storekeeper for the last three years, and digging before that in the district for eighteen years. I am well acquainted with the industry. The quantity is falling off. Everything called gum is now bought. It is chiefly swamp-gum worked here now. Last year four or five diggers got 65 lb. a week each. I know this, because they were dealing at my store. This would be a fair average. If you took a dozen men, 12s. 6d. would be the average a week. A good few are elderly men, just barely earning tucker. The gumfields are a last resort for men past middle life, and failures in other businesses; eventually they must be a burden on the charitable aid. The digger pays no rates, and the roads are principally cut up by supplying him with food and getting his gum out. The whole of the trade here is the gum trade. We settlers have to pay the rates. Everything nearly the digger lives on, barring beef and mutton, comes from town. He does not benefit the local settler much. The settlers cannot grow potatoes of a sort that the digger likes, so they come from Auckland, the reason being that the ground is so porous that it will not hold the moisture in dry weather. Oats are just the same, but maize grows to perfection. All the land here is owned by Natives, there being only about 100 acres of Crown land. It would be an exceedingly good thing if Government purchased some of the good land here, and if opened for settlement any amount of diggers would take it up. Some of the diggers have to keep their wives and families in Auckland, and of course it is a severe strain upon their resources; they have no hopes whatever of bettering themselves. I have heard no complaints of the truck system. Gum-diggers are, as a whole, well treated by the storekeepers. There is keen competition here among the storekeepers. Such a thing as paying royalty to a leaseholder is not known here. The only complaints I have heard is about the Austrians inducing very severe competition. They work long hours, and clean the ground very thoroughly. I have known three Austrians under treatment by the doctor for overstrains and over-exertion at gum-digging. Austrians do not deal with me. There is no other means by which a digger can be benefited except by giving land for settlement. I think the price of gum will be doubled in the next five years, simply because it is an article that is required, and manufacturers cannot do without it; the scarcer gum gets, the higher the price. The other objection against the Austrians is that the money earned is sent out of the country. Austrians are very saving, and nearly every one, when his banking account reaches a certain amount, remits the money Home; and it is my opinion that what constitutes national wealth should be farmed in a judicious way, so as to render benefit to the country, which now it does not. A large portion of the proceeds from the gumfields is sent to other countries.

*Alfred William Edwards*: I have been a storekeeper and gum-buyer for the last ten years in this district. I am well acquainted with the gum industry. There is not such a great quantity of gum being produced now as there was ten years ago, and the quality is inferior. It appears by the demand for kauri-gum that the manufacturer at Home must have gum, even if of inferior quality. I should say that there are about one hundred Britishers on the field in this vicinity. I do not deal with Austrians, so therefore know nothing about them. I deal principally with the Maoris; they bring in large quantities of gum—in fact, their principal source of subsistence is from the gum. There are a few settlers—perhaps a dozen in all—who are among the one hundred diggers I have mentioned. There are no settlers in this district proper; they come from Punikitere, about eight miles away. If Government could acquire lands from the Natives, and throw them open for settlement, it would be a great boon to the district. There are some valuable lands if the Natives were willing to sell. Some of the Natives are willing, mostly the younger ones, but they appear not quite certain as to the title, and they are afraid of investigation. The truck system is unknown here. We reckon that the Austrians are clearing the land of gum; but we plainly see that they cannot be turned off the Crown lands, on account of the international question. The Natives charge from 5s. to 10s. for a season, or, in fact, as long as they like to remain on the field. There is a great deal of Government land here, and the diggers work on such free. If gum is sold in the open market considerable loss in the weight is sustained between that of the gum as we weigh it here and the weights which are recorded in Auckland. I think it is a legitimate loss—through sacks getting burst, &c. I do not think the rise and fall of the market is the greatest evil we have to contend with; it is the dishonesty of the digger himself—the digger obtaining goods from the storekeeper on credit, and then disappearing without paying for them. No check can be kept on them. It is impossible to have business on a cash basis, as many of the men are so poor. They pay up once or twice, and then get away, sometimes on the spree; but they are never seen again. I consider the gum industry should bear some proportion of the cost local bodies are put to in maintaining roads, but I think it would be difficult to persuade the digger of the fact that he ought to bear his share of the maintenance and construction of the roads. The only suggestion I have to make is that there should be a small export duty levied, if it could be so arranged as not to fall direct on the digger. I do not think the sudden depressions in the gum market are owing to the influence of rings. I think they are simply the ordinary commercial fluctuations which affect all staple products. The reason of the great fall of 1893 was owing to the crisis in America, which threw all the gum on the London market at forced prices. I do not think such an over-production as that is likely to occur again; the gum is not here. It is my opinion that it was brought about by the low state of the timber market, and mining industries, which would free so great a number of workers, a large proportion of whom flocked to the gumfields, and in a similar way in connection with other industries. It takes a great deal more labour to get a ton of gum now than it did formerly. An able-bodied man could easily get 1½ cwt. of gum in a week: now the same man under the same conditions would get about ¾ cwt. This refers to this district. I think in this district the proportion of the gum-diggers who might require charitable aid would not exceed 5 per cent.