

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

(Mr. R. McKENZIE, Chairman.)

THURSDAY, 1st AUGUST, 1901.

CHARLES KERSE, Farmer, residing at Dunrobin, Otago, examined on oath.

Witness : I am one of the petitioners in the matter of this railway extension, and the acquisition of Moa Flat by the Government. I am sorry that such a plan of the proposed line as I saw at the draughtsman's office is not produced here. I have made repeated applications to have it produced, but have failed. It would have explained our position more clearly. However, we are here to support this petition from residents of Dunrobin and the surrounding districts. We wish the line of railway to follow the survey made by Ross, which has from time to time been urged by the petitioners. To begin at the very beginning, I must say that this affair commenced about eight years ago, after the passing of the Land for Settlements Act. It was thought then by acquiring the Moa Flat Estate, and putting this railway through it, the districts would be benefited. Fruit-growers and producers generally would be provided with a means of carriage and communication which would be a great saving and convenience. To urge these advantages a very large petition was got up at this time and sent up to this House. A deputation was also sent to support the petition, with the result that in a very short time the Government issued instructions to have this railway surveyed; hence the survey made by Ross. There was not a word about any deviation. Agitation was kept up by the people until the session of 1898, when the first vote of £2,000 to commence this railway was passed. At the end of the session, however, it was found that the Authorisation Bill had not been passed, and consequently the vote lapsed. Right up to the session of 1899 the people were still agitating for the work, and urging the opening-up of the Moa Flat for settlement purposes, and thus provide homes for our increasing population and sufficient traffic revenue for the maintenance of the line. In 1899 another vote of £2,000 was passed for the work, with this proviso: that the land for settlement be acquired in the vicinity—presumably the Moa Flat, as no other land is available in the vicinity. That vote of £2,000 was carried, and during the same session the railway was authorised. The petitioners thought everything was going on all right, being led to believe that the Government were in treaty for the purchase of the Moa Flat Estate. After all, however, the estate was not acquired, and the vote fell through. This brings us up to the year 1900, when the people were still agitating for the acquisition of the Moa Flat Estate, and the construction of the railway through it. In the session of 1900 a vote of £5,000 was carried for the commencement of this work unconditionally, and during the following summer preparations were put in hand for the work. All this time, as I have said, the people believed it was the Moa Flat route which was to be taken. It transpired about Christmas, however, that the line had been authorised to Eddievale. It was only a report, however; nothing definite was known; but the people took the matter up very seriously in order to find out where the railway was really going. The only course open was to make application to the Minister for Public Works, and with that end in view a public meeting was convened. We had all along thought that the Moa Flat route was adopted or authorised, but on our communicating with the Public Works Department the Minister replied as follows:—

Public Works Department, Wellington, 21st November, 1900.

SIR,—

Waipahi-Heriot Railway Extension.

I am directed by the Minister for Public Works to acknowledge receipt of your letter of the 14th instant, asking to what point it is intended to carry the extension of the above-mentioned line, and to state that the point to which the line is proposed to be carried, and to which it has been authorised by Parliament, is about six miles and a quarter from the Heriot Railway-station—namely, to Eddie's.

I have &c.,

H. J. H. BLOW, Under-Secretary.

That reply increased the interest of residents in the district in the question, the result being the holding of another public meeting; but prior to the meeting we sent two gentlemen to Roxburgh to ascertain the feeling of the people there. We found that they were with us most unanimously in our efforts to have the Moa Flat Estate opened up and a railway put through. At the meeting held at Dunrobin a motion was passed setting up a vigilance committee and to generally work up the affair in the interests of the district concerned. And now the petition of these people is here before you. The petition was got up rather hurriedly, otherwise it would have been more numerously signed. You will notice that there are really two petitions; but one supports the other in condemning the extension of the line to Eddievale. The petitions support each other. We take exception to the line going by way of Eddievale, because that route is against the block vote of the settlers interested. A few more cases of fruit may possibly be carried by that route, but that would not materially increase the revenue, seeing that fruit is carried at such a cheap rate. It was very different with regard to farmers' produce and what the farmer wanted. From Rae's Junction to Roxburgh there was comparatively nothing for a railway to do. The traffic advantages are all in favour of the route which we are agitating for. I would like to read a short article from one of our local papers in support of this contention.

The Chairman : We cannot accept a newspaper article as evidence.

Witness : The newspaper article would only back up the opinions of the petitioners. As to when the petitioners first became aware that the extension of the railway to Eddievale had been authorised, I would like to quote a footnote which Mr. Matthews, secretary to the Roxburgh Rail-