

THE SERVICE.

The service on the river is performed in three sections, and by three different classes of boats. The larger boats ply between Wanganui and Pipiriki, the smaller between Pipiriki and Kokakonui, and the smallest between Kokakonui and Taumarunui. This entails transshipment of all through passengers and goods at Pipiriki and Kokakonui. The two larger classes of boats are coal-burners, and the smaller now use liquid fuel. Making due allowance for the difficulties of navigation, the necessary smallness of the steamers, and their restricted appointments, we are of opinion that Messrs. Hatrick and Co. give the public a fairly good and regular service. There is, however, reason to think that the discipline on board some of the steamers is capable of improvement, but this is a matter which will be dealt with in connection with the complaints of settlers.

COMPETITION.

About twelve years ago a company was formed in Wanganui to run a steamer to Pipiriki in opposition to Messrs. Hatrick and Co. The opposition company was unsuccessful and went into liquidation, its steamer eventually passing into the hands of Mr. Hatrick.

During the past six years a Mr. Ross has been successfully running a launch on the lower reaches of the river, and his evidence will be found at page 78 [not printed]. Mr. Nichols, a former employee of Mr. Hatrick, is now the promoter of a company for the purpose of entering into competition with Messrs. Hatrick and Co., and it is said that a steamer will be running within twelve months. She is, however, intended to run only to Te Tuhi, thirty-three miles up the river from Wanganui. Mr. Nichols's evidence will be found at page 72 [not printed].

TRAFFIC.

There are several unusual features in connection with the traffic on the Wanganui River. The busiest months of the year both for passengers and freights are those in which the river is lowest. The cost of handling the traffic in the upper reaches by boats of such small tonnage, entailing as it does transshipment at Pipiriki and Kokakonui, must be very heavy. The small boats running between Taumarunui and Kokakonui carry five hands. The larger boats between Wanganui and Pipiriki carry seven and eight hands. The only produce of any magnitude which the settlers at present have to export is wool. This is brought down to Wanganui mostly during the months of December, January, and February. There is but little carried out during the other nine months, the bulk of the traffic then being supplies carried in to settlers. This feature of the service will no doubt be gradually modified as settlement advances, and the produce of the settlers becomes more diversified.

EFFECT OF RAILWAY AND ROAD EXTENSION.

As has been previously stated, the extension of the Main Trunk Railway had the effect of seriously diminishing the traffic on the river. The same thing is said to have occurred at Tangarakau. The settlers there until last year used the river. Since the rails have been laid to Whanganomona the trade has almost entirely been diverted from the river. Owing to the difficulty and cost of handling goods on the upper reaches of the river at low water, it is likely, we think, that as practicable roads are provided there will be a tendency for goods to find an outlet and inlet by land at Taumarunui and other convenient points on the railway-lines. Allowing for all this, however, if fairly reasonable charges for the carriage of goods can be secured by settlers, the Wanganui River must remain the natural highway for a large area of country.

COMPLAINTS.

The complaints made by those using the river service are in some cases, we think, well founded, and in others they are the result of misapprehension or a desire to secure more than can be reasonably expected. They cover practically every point of the service, and we deal with them seriatim hereunder :—

(1.) *Excessive Freights at the Taumarunui End.*—This complaint we regard as justified, and it is dealt with in our remarks under the heading of "The Contract."

(2.) *Delays in Removal of Wool from the Upper Reaches of the River.*—It is admitted by Mr. Hatrick that such delays have occurred. His explanation is that the wool could not be removed at the time it was produced, owing to the lowness of the river. The complainants who saw us in most cases admitted that Mr. Hatrick's excuse was a valid one. It can hardly be supposed that Mr. Hatrick would in his own interest leave wool lying at the landings which he was in a position to remove, and for which he was to receive payment at the rate of about 10s. a bale. Mr. Hatrick suggests that the proper remedy for these complainants is to shear early,