

Fruitgrowers who gave evidence before the Commission were agreed that the varieties to grow for export are—Delicious, Dougherty, and American Horn.

THE POPULATION OF THE GUMFIELDS: THE DIGGER AND HIS WORKING OUTFIT.

It is a difficult matter to arrive at a correct estimate of the number of workers employed in gum-digging. Your Commissioners, having given the matter careful consideration, are of opinion that fully six thousand workers were employed gum-digging during the past season. In this estimate no account is taken of the number of men employed in sorting and preparing the gum for export in the various centres, nor of the number employed in the work of transport from the gumfields to the port of shipment. It is a fair assumption that the six thousand workers have at least two thousand dependants on them, making a total of eight thousand souls actually supported by the gum-digging industry.

Here it is interesting to note that the Official Year-book for 1913, on page 599, gives the following information: "As the demand for general labour in New Zealand increases the occupation of gum-digging upon the barren country north of Auckland becomes less attractive, and the number of diggers has greatly declined, until at the present time barely a thousand persons are so employed."

In order to show how absolutely wide of the facts such a statement is it may be pointed out the actual number of licenses issued to diggers working on the Crown gum lands from the 1st January, 1911, to the 31st March, 1912, was 4,391; from the 1st April, 1912, to the 31st March, 1913, was 2,352; and from the 1st April, 1913, to the 31st March, 1914, was 3,538. It is well known in the northern districts that there are a great many diggers on the Crown lands who do not take out any license. So that the number of licenses issued does not give the actual number of diggers on Crown lands alone. In addition to men digging on the Crown lands there are those working on privately owned gum lands, the number of whom it is estimated amounts to about three thousand.

To the casual visitor to the gumfields the everyday work of the gum-digger, and the conditions under which he lives, would seem to offer but few attractions. Nevertheless the gum-digger's life must have its compensations, for there are a great many men now living on the fields who have been engaged in gum-digging all their working lives, whilst many men who from time to time have left to follow other occupations have been unable to resist the call to return to the free and independent life of the gumfields.

A feature of the gumfields is the number of old men supporting or helping to support themselves by gum-digging. Many of them are drawing the old-age pension, but quite a number of them, though old enough to draw the pension, prefer to maintain themselves without any help from the State.

The life on the gumfields certainly seems to appeal to the Maori temperament, and every summer hundreds of men, women, and children camp on the fields and actively engage in the industry.

Here it is hoped that it may not be out of place to give a short account of the gum-digger's methods of work and the tools he uses. The ordinary equipment of the gum-digger comprises a spade, a spear, and a "pikau." The spade is much the same as the common garden spade, but it is of much stronger make and more durable, being made of the best steel. The spear, which is used for finding the gum, is a steel rod from 4 ft. to 16 ft. in length, and gradually tapers to a blunt point. A few inches from the point, and then at intervals of about 2 ft. 6 in. up the spear, are coils of fine wire, covering about three-quarters of an inch of the spear, and neatly and securely put on. The device of the coil of wire was discovered by accident by a digger casually thrusting his spear into an eyelet and then thrusting the spear into the earth in order to get rid of the eyelet, when he was surprised to find the spear penetrated the ground much easier with the eyelet on it than it did without it. The transition from the eyelet to the coil of fine wire was an easy one, and soon every spear was equipped with one. To the top of the spear is affixed an