

Goods, £12 6s., including meat; value of gum, £14 8s. For five weeks: Goods, £2 14s. 9d., and value of gum, £16 7s. Fifty-eight remittances, amounting to £1,277 9s. passed through my hands between the 13th September and to-day for Austrians, but a greater number of the Austrians are doing their own business, either remitting the money directly, or deputing someone to proceed to Mangonui, and get out remittances for a number of others who will trust them.

MANGONUI, 9TH FEBRUARY, 1898.

*John Thompson Jellibrand*: I am a Government leaseholder at Ohia, Mangonui district. I am acquainted with the gum-digging industry. In my vicinity there are forty or fifty diggers, chiefly Maoris; no Austrians. All the settlers—twelve or fourteen—resident in the neighbourhood are digging gum. We could not keep our holdings if it was not for the gum. The field has a diameter of fifteen miles. The gum is not first-class, and the field is almost untouched in comparison with other fields. My proposition made before the previous Commission was that any Austrian arriving on a field should be made to go to the nearest post-office, accompanied by two residents, and there take oath that he had been in the country for two years. He was then to receive a certificate for a certain sum, and he would have the right to dig gum for life. It is now too late for this to be carried out. My proposition now is that every man who is to be allowed to dig gum should have a residential qualification—that is, he should take up a certain quantity of land, and hold it. In this case the residents would have to unite amongst themselves to see that non-residents were not allowed to dig. My other alternative, which would perhaps not apply to every place, is that a patch of gum-land containing about 300 acres should be set aside for the exclusive use of the settlers adjoining. It would be possible to keep an eye on this without too great expense for inspection. The settlers would do that themselves. I have been deputed to represent my fellow-settlers, especially as regards the setting-aside of this particular piece of land for ourselves. I am aware that the truck system is in force in many districts; but it does not apply to gum-diggers only, almost all labouring men are subject to this system. They understand, without being told, that if they do not deal with certain stores their employment is very precarious and uncertain. The only good that is derived out of the kauri-gum industry for the State is that gained by those few settlers who, digging gum, take the price of it to help to improve the value of their sections. The productive part of the industry must be conserved for the people who are going to do some good—that is to say, not for those who send it out of the country in hard cash as the Austrians do, nor for those who waste it by drinking, nor for those wholly in the hands of the storekeepers, as many British diggers are, but only for settlers or people who show their willingness to become settlers, whether they be Britishers or Austrians.

*Robert Morrow Houston*: I am member of the House of Representatives for the Mangonui District, Chairman of the County Council, storekeeper, and gum-buyer. I have been twenty-three years in this district, and am thoroughly well acquainted with the industry. As a member I have knowledge of grievances which do not apply to this particular district, but to others. Those that apply to this district are as follows: There are two kinds of fields—private fields and the public fields. The former are those that are leased by private individuals from private owners. There is no such thing as leasing fields from Government now. There are no large tracts in this part of the electorate owned by private individuals, but in the Wairoa there are,—some living here and some in the Old Country. These are leased to the highest bidder, generally by tender. They have the exclusive right to the gum on these fields, and the general arrangement is by written agreement that any person digging gum on these fields must take all their stores from that storekeeper, and sell all their gum to that storekeeper, and I have seen one of these written agreements held by a gum-digger. Under it the person leasing the field could claim his gum, no matter where he dug during the twelve months. This, of course, was illegal, as a case was tried some time ago, and, of course, it failed. He had no right to claim the gum the digger got in other fields. Another complaint was that the diggers had to pay too high a price for their stores, and did not get a fair value for their gum. The kind of gum they were digging at that time was gum I do not deal in myself; it was black gum. I do not know anything about the fair market price of it. I have not heard any complaints about the weights and scales being wrong; there have been no complaints to me about that. I know myself years ago the weights were of the most primitive kind. I have seen a large stone used, and this stone would decrease or increase at the option of the purchaser. I have never heard any complaints in this district as regards the truck system on the gumfields. I am quite satisfied of this, as far as my knowledge goes: there is no such thing on the open fields, but it is so as regards the private fields. At the same time I firmly believe that if an agreement is entered into between man and man—storekeeper and gum-digger—the storekeeper advancing the digger goods on condition that he deals with him, I say there is nothing dishonest in that, notwithstanding the Act. The digger is entitled to his balance most decidedly. If he gets advances from the storekeeper, I say, in all justice to all parties, he is entitled to pay that amount when he gets that gum, and the storekeeper is in duty bound to pay the balance to the digger after the stores are deducted. I have avoided giving cheques as far as I can, there being no bank here. I get the cash by the steamer, but sometimes it happens I do not have sufficient. I have made it a rule myself to pay for gum in cash. I have been obliged at times to pay by cheque. We used to have periodical sales of gum, weekly or monthly. We would, perhaps, have 3 tons to 20 tons of gum to deal with, and I would have the cash lying in my store for two or three weeks to buy the gum. Two buyers were here, and the Maoris used to auction it, and get the best prices for it. It was all Native trade at that time. The Austrians on the fields are a great evil at the present time. Everything else sinks into insignificance. I can come to no other conclusion. In