

prices; they quietly go away to other storekeepers if not satisfied; they do not haggle. This is, perhaps, through their ignorance of the language. From the storekeeper's point of view they are very satisfactory customers indeed. I think they would make a very good stock to infuse into the general body of the community, and I think they would make very good settlers. I recognise that the Britishers have a grievance against them. I do not think the Austrians have made a very great deal of difference to the price of gum through increased production. They may have only taken the places of ordinary diggers who have been absorbed into other industries, such as timber-getting. My experience is only local. There are certain fields where the truck system applies; nobody is forced in this district. We have branch fields, and the diggers near the stores are expected to deal there, but there is no signed contract compelling them to do so. It is merely the propinquity to the store, and the long distance to any other store almost compels the digger to deal with that store. My experience is that the digger obtains a higher price for his gum than he could get in Auckland. This is brought about by competition among the storekeepers to obtain the store accounts. They pay a higher price for the gum. I know of a firm who have steadily lost for years on their gum account, hoping to recoup themselves by the sale of goods. I think this course of action is unsound from a business point of view. Diggers do not send their gum to Auckland from this district; a small parcel or two might have been sent. As to the earnings, some exceptionally good men can make £10 or £12 a month clear of tucker, others can barely make their food. A certain extreme case is that of a man named Hoey, who came here and received a cheque for £20 for five weeks' work, and complained that the field was not good enough, and went away. I know, however, that the ordinary adult gum-digger can earn from £6 to £7 per month gross. Some of the men bank their money. I know of two cases in which diggers have accumulated over £1,000 each. These are exceptions. I am aware that the great majority do little more than pay for their food. I do not think that many of them would be inclined to settle; among diggers now there are more settlers who are helping themselves by getting a little gum than gum-diggers who would be likely to settle. I think it would be a good plan if some control—say, by the Government—could be exercised over the gum market—to steady it, to prevent rises and falls—if such a plan could be devised without interfering with the economic aspect of the question. There would be a difficulty in thus regulating, on account of the differing qualities of the same grade supplied by different purchasers. We suffer from a variation in the market also. Thus in New York we think we are far more honestly treated than in London, in the matter of expenses and delivery and loss of weight through sampling. In London, charges are levied by the brokers on every conceivable pretence—for example, furnishing bags to put samples in; and samples are abstracted with a very free hand, and this becomes a tax upon the industry. We have far more grumbling on account of the weights in London than New York, on account of this practice of sampling the best specimens of gum, which appears to have become a vested interest among certain persons, but which is a dead loss to New Zealand, and, consequently, the producer. There are two ways in which gum is exported: Some gum is shipped for sale in the open market, and some is bought in Auckland for dealers on commission. In the case of these direct consignments portion of expenses of shipment is saved. As to the prices quoted in the Auckland newspapers, I consider there are two conflicting interests at work—that of the commission agent, who wishes to see the prices quoted as high as possible, so that he may show his principals that he is buying to advantage; and that of the man who ships for sale in the open market, and whose purchases are therefore unfavourably influenced by the high quotations. Of late years the Auckland merchants seem to have controlled this matter of quotations to some extent, and the evil is not so glaring as formerly, when the two newspapers were quoting widely different prices, the *Herald* quoting a fair price and the *Star* an inflated one. In the interests of the digger and of the honest storekeepers I think it would be a good thing if the Inspector of Weights and Measures was to make more frequent visits, or depute his duties to the local constable. An Inspector has only been twice here in thirteen years.

TOTARA NORTH.

William Richard Lawrence: I am a storekeeper and resident in Totara North. In conjunction with my business I buy a little gum, principally from the Maoris. The production of kauri-gum is most decidedly falling off. The stuff I am buying now would not have been looked at fourteen or fifteen years ago; it would not have been marketable. In this locality the majority is white gum, but we have swamps in which black gum is obtained. Most of the gum we are getting in the last six months comes from Awanui and Waiharaha. The diggers send their gum down to us, probably, because they get better prices than on the field. Austrians do not deal with us; practically, I have not known Austrians until a month ago as customers. I have been informed they have a very good name among storekeepers. This last week there was a case of one Austrian suing another for £9; so that they are not altogether so united as is sometimes represented. A Maori digger spends from 10s. to 12s. a week while he is digging; they dig in a very intermittent way. I have heard no complaints about the truck system on the fields in this vicinity. I know of no means of steadying the trade, unless some of the larger merchants would combine and hold gum for a favourable opportunity; but how to control over-production I do not know. We are getting advice of drops of £10 per ton in the medium quality dark gum at the present time. I do not think we are unfairly treated by the Auckland merchants, but there is a heavy leakage in the quantity of the gum on arrival in Auckland. Part of this is owing to the friable nature of the gum, which allows a quantity of dust to continually escape, but part also is from the drying of the gum. I consider that the best way of trying to settle the floating population of the North would be for the Government to try earnestly to get them settled on the land if possible, perhaps even to offer them special advantages.