

the disadvantages already mentioned, are much better off as regards railway conveniences than some other important districts in the colony. I would advise the Government to defer taking any steps towards the construction of this line for the present and until there is a considerable increase of traffic." That was written in 1896—twenty years ago—and the Main Trunk line is now an accomplished fact and in full operation. [Grades indicated to members of Commission on map.] Mr. Hiley, dealing with the Palmerston North—Paekakariki Section, says, "The existing gradients are easy, the ruling grade being 1 in 100." What does he mean by that—the average grade?

*Mr. Hannay* : He means the steepest grade.

*Mr. Skerrett* : The result, therefore, would be that if you made the additional route which we suggest you would have a run from Marton to Paekakariki of seventy-three miles practically flat—a grade of 1 in 100, forty miles on this line and thirty-three from Levin to Paekakariki. Some attempt has been made to reduce the Paekakariki grades, but they have not attempted to carry out the whole scheme which Mr. Hiley recommended in his present report at a cost of £50,000. I desire to remind the Commission that if, as certainly will have to be done, the line is duplicated between Marton and Levin, it will necessitate the construction of two bridges. The Kakariki Bridge carries one line of railway, and it is wholly insufficient to carry two. It is a traffic-bridge in addition, and is very inconvenient. The same applies to the bridge at Shannon. I do not know whether it is suggested that that should be made wider, but your Honour's colleagues on the Commission will inform you upon that point. One would imagine that if they are going to duplicate it would be better to construct a new bridge capable of carrying two lines of rail, but I want to point out that this is an offset against the two bridges which are required to be constructed under this scheme if there is one across the Rangitikei and one across the Glen Oroua. Now, sir, I think it is impossible for me to hope to be of very much assistance upon this practical and indeed technical and engineering question, nor do I expect that the witnesses will be able to afford you very much assistance, but whatever assistance we can afford we propose to bring forward. I venture to put to the Commission by way of submission that the importance of saving this distance and this time cannot be overestimated, and that the importance of securing the grade over seventy-three miles over which the maximum load can be hauled at the maximum pace and with the minimum wear-and-tear is of the utmost importance. We must look ahead.

*The Chairman* : I know that at Home if you get a grade of 1 in 75 you are considered to have a very excellent line.

*Mr. Skerrett* : Of course that may be so. I do not profess to be familiar with that, but nevertheless 1 in 100 is better.

*Mr. Myers* : Most of the goods traffic must necessarily be on the existing line.

*Mr. Skerrett* : No. His Honour referred to the question of the proposed deviation, and, speaking subject to correction, I understand the deviation would be used for express and through trains from Auckland to Wellington and New Plymouth to Wellington. It would also be easy for that class of goods traffic which is called express goods. It consists of trains made up between comparatively long journeys, say from Taihape to Levin and so on. Although the main traffic would be deviated, the Marton—Palmerston—Longburn line would be left there for local goods traffic, and it would be left—which is more important still—for the constant and important traffic which exists for the purposes of the freezing companies on the line. As the members of the Commission are aware, the frozen-goods traffic is one of the most difficult traffics to deal with, and the opportunity of the sheep-farmer and the sheep-buyer is a difficult matter to resist. I venture to submit that the gentlemen who are instructing my learned friend Mr. Innes to oppose this claim do not appreciate that it cannot affect the trade or commercial prosperity of Palmerston North. At present the traffic which is diverted only stops for a fraction of half an hour—for ten minutes, I think—and cannot in the least degree affect Palmerston North. Take an illustration: after the acquisition of the Manawatu Railway the Government diverted most of the mail-trains from the Wairarapa line via Woodville. Has Masterton suffered? Not at all. Its prosperity is not affected nor its trade affected. Your Honour adverted to the fact that it would be necessary to run local trains from Palmerston North to Marton and from Palmerston to Levin as feeders to the Main Trunk line. That is so. That is already done in the case of Wanganui.

*The Chairman* : They have to wait a long time at Marton, and in that way they do not feed at all.

*Mr. Skerrett* : They ought to. It is possible. I suppose they do the best they can, at any rate.

*The Chairman* : Then you see you have to consider the Hawke's Bay trains coming in.

*Mr. Skerrett* : They would have no difficulty in dealing with that.

*The Chairman* : But it will mean running four trains a day extra.

*Mr. Skerrett* : That is more a question for a railway manager. Palmerston is already very well provided with trains, and I venture to think—

*The Chairman* : You see the whole thing is this: there are two opinions about the running of railways. There is the one notion of running a railway as a straight line between two ends. The other way of running a railway is to run it where you can pick up the traffic of the different towns and settlements on the way. The colony, when it started railways, did not run the railways for speed between two termini, but to pick up traffic at the different places, and hence the railways might touch small centres of population on the way. That was the idea of the railways when laid down.

*Mr. Skerrett* : I understand in many places in England enormous sums have been spent in shortening the time of express trains and the distance between the termini and London. In all probability there must soon be extra trains from Napier to Wellington, because it is proposed to connect Gisborne by Napier with trains. That is already in course of construction, and if that is so it will necessarily mean extra trains running through on this branch. I should like that my learned friend should give me to-morrow or the day after a statement of the general heading of his objections. How can I direct my evidence when I do not know what I have to meet?