

over was hastened by the cutting-up of enormous blocks of grassland in the eastern portion of the Waikato Basin. The history of this grassland belongs to the "extensive" phase of Waikato farming, which was going on at the same time as the delta farmers were trying to evolve the English system, and which arose out of the speculative aspect mentioned earlier as being one of the two main influences affecting the development of the Waikato.

The Bad Times

During the great depression of 1880-1895 strenuous efforts were made by Waikato farmers to keep farming profitable. They were being squeezed in two ways—by falling prices and by soil exhaustion. In other parts of the North Island "bush-burn" farming was progressing on a grand scale, but hostile Maoris to the south and bush sickness to the east effectively prevented the settlement of both the King Country and the Patetere Plateau (Mamaku Hills). The Waikato was a dead end.

An attempt was made to meet soil exhaustion by improving farming methods, notably by growing swedes and turnips with the aid of manures in an effort to have fat stock ready for the market in winter as well as summer. Farmers tried to avoid the peril of falling prices by diversifying their farm produce and by "eliminating the middle men" through co-operative enterprises. Fruit, tobacco, and sugar beet, which were suggested as alternatives to meat and wheat, all failed. The Cambridge Farmers' Club proposed that to encourage barley growing it should be illegal for brewers to use sugar for brewing, but the Government took no notice. Wheat, which is usually a reliable crop, was quite unreliable during this period, falling from about 8s. a bushel in 1877 (during the Russo-Turkish War) to 2s. 8d. in 1887. In 1887 the Waikato grew its largest crop (8000 acres), but the acreage declined rapidly in succeeding years, the reasons being, according to "Brett's Almanac" of 1894, "the absolute necessity of using large quantities of manure for cereal crops, (and) the uncertainty of our local markets, which rightly or wrongly it is generally thought are worked by rings against the farmers' interests, so that the producer never has any idea whether his crop, however good it may be, is going to pay him or not" (8).

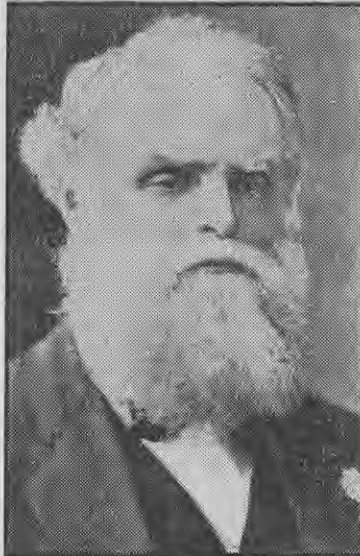
In 1882 the North New Zealand Farmers' Co-operative Association, Limited, established to build an abattoir and freezing works and engage in retail butchering and general merchandising, set up its headquarters in Auckland to "meet the business men

on their own terms" (6). In a few years it was suffering from cut-throat competition and from a bad habit of buying businesses from its directors, and in 1887 it was wound up amid general lamentation. Great things had been expected of the co-operative movement, but, as one of the liquidators said, "if we seek protection from the Auckland middle man, it is not the wisest thing in the world to rush into his arms" (6).

Henry Reynolds opened his Pukekura creamery in 1886 and started making "Anchor" butter. In 1892 he had eight factories and in 1895 dairying was second in importance to meat production and the depression was over.

Josiah Clifton Firth

After the conclusion of the war against the Waikato Maoris the way was opened for the purchase of land from the Arawa tribe, the "friendly" (5), whose possessions stretched



[By courtesy of Clifton Firth Ltd., Auckland.]

J. C. Firth.

eastward from the Waikato River toward Rotorua.

The first man to take advantage of the situation was Josiah Clifton Firth in 1865. "The passing of the Native Lands Act was the first step taken to open up the unconfiscated portion of the Maori lands. Firth here saw his chance, and he began negotiations with William Thompson (or Wiremu Tamehana, the Te Waharoa chief) for the Matamata country . . . Men smiled, for it was commonly said that at Matamata 'Fern is King,' but this in a short while might have been changed to 'Firth is King,'" (9).

J. C. Firth was the prototype of a small group of men who represented a large amount of Auckland and London capital seeking to be invested. The investment of this capital in land initiated an era of speculation which ended disastrously in the great bank crash of 1895. But such a bald statement does not do justice to the situation, which had its constructive side as well.

Firth was an educated Englishman who had founded the Wharf Steam Roller Flour Milling Company in Auckland before 1860. The mill prospered and he participated in public affairs. He was a handsome, attractive, and energetic man, and acquired a strong following. His name crops up in accounts of nearly every colonial activity—acclimatisation, afforestation, secular education, the eight-hour day, gold-mining, flour-milling, kauri gum, municipal and provincial politics, land settlement, and even literature. For a time he was a director of the Bank of New Zealand and the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company Limited. He was a born publicist and an object of suspicion to those of his colleagues who preferred to work in the dark.

Firth's plan on acquiring Matamata was a grandiose one. He had acquired the freehold of about 50,000 acres of easily ploughable scrubland which he proposed to turn into a "bonanza" wheat farm similar to those described in a previous article in this series. The wheat would be carried in his own ship down the Waihou River, which ran through his property, to the Firth of Thames, and thence by sea to his Auckland flour mill. To do all this he had to clear the land, fence it and grass it, stock it with cattle to improve it, sow, harvest, and thresh the wheat, store it, erect homes and buildings and a wharf on the river, build a ship, and finally clear the river of snags for 60 miles. Yet when he had done all this it was not enough. A "missing link" in his plan made it unworkable.

Matamata

A description of the Matamata Estate in 1880, when it was at the height of its productivity, is to be found in the Piako County Council's diamond jubilee publication (9). It was evidently a remarkable sight. A grand avenue 23 miles long led completely through the estate from the Waikato River to the landing on the Waihou. Double gateways 20ft. wide led into paddocks a mile or a mile-and-a-half square containing wheat, red clover hay, Lincoln and Shropshire sheep and Down-cross hoggets, and Shorthorn and Hereford cows and steers for cheese and beef production. There were also an apiary of several