

*Mr. Rhodes* : You cannot do it. You would have to walk through the bush.

*Witness* : I went through last summer with Mr. Cadman and others ; it took us five days' walking ; but any one would get a very fair idea of the country by doing as I have said.

25. *The Chairman.*] Have you had any experience in surveying railway routes, Mr. Hursthouse?—Yes.

26. What part of the country?—I did all the preliminary survey of the railway from Nukumarua to Waingongoro, and from Waitara to New Plymouth. I have set about five or six miles of line on the Main Trunk line, and I have explored what was originally called the Mokau route—I think it was in conjunction with this Main Trunk Railway—and I have been constructing railways and roads for about fifteen or sixteen years of my life.

27. Then, going back to the question of the commercial aspect of the business, is it not a fact that Auckland at the present time divides the trade with Wellington as far south as Palmerston?—Well, I do not know ; I do not think so.

Mr. JOHN STEVENS, sworn and examined.

28. *The Chairman.*] The Committee understand that you are able to give them some precise information as to the quality of the land on the central route, more especially of the Waimarino Block?—Yes.

29. Be good enough to tell us what you know of that part of the country?—I could point it out better on the map. [Map produced.] With respect to the Waimarino Block the land from Ohakune, right away through to very nearly Taumarunui on the lower side—that would be on the south-west side of the land—is principally bush. The country is hilly with a great deal of flat on it, and in parts is as rich as any land I have seen in New Zealand. The Natives there have cultivated largely in the Manganui-o-te-ao Valley. There is a tremendous lot of cultivation going on there in the shape of wheat, oats, and so forth.

30. How far from the Wanganui River?—It is a tributary of that river, Sir.

30A. How far distant?—From the edge of the Wanganui River, about twenty miles up to where the good land is.

31. Then it would be within five or six miles of the railway route?—Not by the river, but as the crow flies it would be shorter.

32. The total distance from the Wanganui to the railway route is under thirty miles direct?—Yes ; that is so, perhaps, but following the river it would be about twenty miles in one direction and thirty in another.

33. About midway?—Yes. There is another block there [pointing to map] containing about 20,000 acres. This is Government land, not Native land. From the Manganui-o-te-ao River, up the Retaruke River, and right away up to about twenty miles to Taumarunui, the soil is comparatively good ; but when you get to Taumarunui there is pumice land in some places, and in other places very good land. Between Taumarunui and Waimarino Plains there is a totara forest about 30,000 acres : it is the finest totara in New Zealand. The railway-line runs through the edge of this forest.

34. Have you any knowledge of the soil beneath the forest?—Yes ; I should say the soil is of fair average quality ; it is not very rich land. You will find small terraces there with complete changes of soil. For example, I saw the Natives at Waimarino digging for worms for fishing, and the soil turned up was in some places very good, but the character of the soil changes, certainly, in a great many instances. Take this totara forest, for example—30,000 acres. It is estimated to value £750,000. It was estimated at that value by Mr. Rochfort, Mr. Blackett, and the late Mr. McArthur.

35. Purely for mill purposes?—Yes ; then coming from that land to the Waimarino land—the railway-line, particularly—the land is very light as compared with that low down on the Retaruke Stream.

36. You have given us, in reference to that forest, the estimate of a gentleman who is dead and two others. Can you give the Committee your own estimate—are you prepared to confirm what they say?—I am quite prepared to confirm their estimate from what I saw myself. I must say I did not go into the calculation. I did not measure the country, but it was measured by Mr. Rochfort, who surveyed the land, and I was with him while I was purchasing the Waimarino Block for the Government. It was my business to go to every Native settlement for the purpose of obtaining signatures to the deed of sale, and for that reason I have a better knowledge of the block than people who merely travel through the country.

37. Naturally. How many days did you spend in that country?—I spent four months and a half in, and about the Waimarino country, constantly moving to and fro amongst the Natives. No matter how far out of the way any Native settlement might be it was necessary for me to go there to obtain the signatures to the deed of sale.

38. Assuming that country to be cleared of forest, do you think half of that entire block fit for settlement?—I think as much as two-thirds well fitted for settlement. As an example, there have been forty odd thousand acres sold by the Government to small-farm associations and in other ways. That forty thousand odd acres have been sold for more money than the total cost of the block. The total cost was some £41,300 odd, and there have been forty odd thousand acres sold, and are now occupied.

39. Occupied?—That is to say, occupied to this extent : They have made the selections and the people are beginning to fell the bush. The total area of the block is some 384,260 acres, *plus* 25,000 acres.

40. That is to say, four hundred and nine thousand odd acres?—Yes.