

ALFRED HENRY BRIDGER examined. (No. 25.)

952. *Hon. the Chairman.*] What are you, Mr. Bridger?—Manager of Sargood, Son, and Ewen's boot-factory and department.

953. How long have you been in New Zealand?—About thirty-eight years.

954. Were you in Australia before that?—No; but I have been there on visits.

955. Recently?—Yes, within the last few years.

956. Do Sargood, Son, and Ewen carry on business in Australia as well as in New Zealand?—Yes, in a large way, but not from a boot-manufacturing point; they are more in the soft-goods line—in fact, all soft goods. They have a boot department, but do not do anything in manufacturing.

957. Are their boots obtained from New Zealand?—No; they are all obtained on the other side. We do not send anything to them.

958. Will you state to the Commission your views on the question of New Zealand joining the Commonwealth of Australia or standing out?—I should be against it from a trade point of view, certainly, because there the wages are lower and the hours longer than in New Zealand. Besides, our conditions here are so varied and our population is smaller, and we have to treat with the thing from a very different standpoint. I may put it that as Australia is to America so are we to Australia; and, of course, the larger the cities and the larger the manufactures, the more they can, as it were, get on to special lines in large quantities, and by that means reduce the cost considerably.

959. Any other reason?—I do not know any other particular reason beyond this: that our trade at the present time is in a languishing state.

960. *Hon. Captain Russell.*] Which branch?—The boot-manufacturing. I do not think it could possibly stand against any further addition to the competition.

961. *Hon. the Chairman.*] Is your business affected from America in any way?—Very largely indeed.

962. What is that owing to?—Owing to the principle on which they work their factories. They run them on such lines and in such quantities that they reduce the cost considerably, and in that way handicap us very heavily. One of their large manufactories will run ten thousand pairs a day on four or five samples; but we have to run such a large variety that we are really not able to compete against their prices.

963. If your trade is a languishing one now, and free-trade was established in the Commonwealth of Australia, and New Zealand were a State, the condition of the boot trade would be worse?—It would simply annihilate it.

964. Have you considered the question of federation as affecting other industries in New Zealand besides the boot trade?—I have only heard from other witnesses the large interests of the workers here as against the agricultural interests. One would imagine that the manufacturing interest was of considerably more importance, as the amount involved is, I am told, thirteen millions as against exports of a million. Beyond that I have not studied the question deeply, but I would not like to give an opinion as against the opinions of those who have gone into the matter more thoroughly.

965. Do you think there is any chance in the future of the workers in New Zealand competing successfully against the workers in Australia with free-trade?—Our population will have to increase to the size of theirs before it can be done.

966. *Hon. Captain Russell.*] You say that America is a dangerous competitor in the boot trade?—Yes.

967. Increasingly so?—Yes, certainly.

968. Supposing we had federation with Australia, would the free-trade between Australia and New Zealand wipe the American boots out of the market?—It would all depend on the duty.

969. Assuming the duty stands as it is?—No; at present America can beat the world.

970. Therefore the question of federation on account of the boot industry need not be considered?—Only so far as a certain class of work is concerned. They make a certain class of work now, and America will make another class that they do not compete with; so that on the one hand we have to meet them, and we would have to meet the Australian markets on a still further ground.

971. You think the huge output from America and the good machinery there is such a counterpoise to the free-trade of Australia that in certain lines they could compete notwithstanding the 22½-per-cent. duty?—Certainly.

972. If Australia were to develop a particular line, would not America imitate it and produce it more cheaply?—It would depend on whether America took that class of work up.

973. Would it be possible?—Yes; but there are certain classes of work that do not come into the machinery so much as other lines; so that, while America can supersede us in certain classes, Australia, with its large population, and making to a very large extent, as it does, the classes of work we do, paying lower wages, could compete with us in lines in which America does not compete with us.

974. Where do you get the best boots from—America, England, or Australia?—As far as Australia is concerned, there are no imports at present. In America you can get all classes, from the best to the worst.

975. Does New Zealand or Australia produce leather of equal quality to the leather in the American goods?—There are certain classes they supply that the colony can compete in, but taking it in the aggregate I say No. They supply a class of leather from Germany and France and America of a much superior quality to what is produced in the colony.

976. Do we turn out good leathers in the colony?—That is largely a question of price. It is a matter of treatment.