

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

FRIDAY, 9TH AUGUST, 1907.

GEORGE SHEAT examined. (No. 1.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What are you?—Farmer, resident at Dunsandel.
2. How long have you been a farmer?—Twenty-five years.
3. What size farm have you been cultivating?—Three thousand acres. The point I want to emphasize is in connection with the camping-out. A number of farmers, like myself, have scattered places.
4. What do you mean by “scattered”?—Not always in one block. Some are separated by ten or twelve miles. In such cases men cannot go into the homestead, and they are put into camps, and for the convenience of shifting they have a narrow whare. Farmers are in the habit of putting two men in a whare, and we think that in a case like that the Bill should not be made to apply. The men prefer to be together. They have their little stove in it and their bunks, and they are as snug as bugs in a rug, as the saying goes. The Bill asks us to give a certain air-space in that kind of whare; but there is a little window in it, and the men have the bracing air of the Southern Hemisphere, as has been stated already. We concede this: that there may be some instances around homesteads where the men have not had the accommodation they should have had. It is recognised that in some instances in Canterbury the men have been roughly provided for, but to make a drastic rule to compel every employer who breaks the Act to come continually before the Court is, to say the least of it, going to be harassing. Very often my son goes out with some of the hands, and they prefer to work together, and would prefer to break the Act, but I, as the employer, should be brought before the Court. With regard to mustering in the hill country, Mr. Teschmaker, who wished to be present to-day, pointed out that it would not be possible to take the tent accommodation on to the back country. The men are only there, perhaps, one night, and they would not bother to take it out. To these cases I do not think the Act should be made to apply. I think the scheme for the settlement of villages would be a good one. We want to get our workers on the land and identified with agricultural pursuits. In that way we should do away with a lot of this labour-unrest. There is a large field for them, and they would go on rising like ourselves. I am one of the old settlers' sons. In the old days—in 1842—it is marvellous how they lived, and reared sons of my calibre. I want to emphasize this point, that it seems to me that we are having too much grandmotherly legislation. In a little ten-by-twelve house they used to rear a whole family. There should be a provision to make it incumbent on the men to keep their houses sanitary. In the homestead they have a place 10 ft. by 12 ft., with a fire alongside, for a sleeping-room for three men. In harvest-time they might have four or five. I asked my wife if the men kept their place sanitary, and she said they kept it like a pigsty. My wife and daughter put it in better condition, the walls were distempered, and the floor was clean enough to take your food off it, but I went into it the other day and found it like a pigsty. I think some provision should be made to protect us, and compel the men to keep their places clean and sanitary.
5. You think that men should be held responsible for the sanitary condition of their accommodation when it is sufficient for them?—Yes. I may say that personally I do not object to this Bill, because I think it will make some people sit up who have not provided sufficient accommodation; but one swallow does not make a summer, and, taking agricultural labourers as a whole, they are well housed. The employer wants to treat his men as one human being should treat another. There is a growing sentiment in the direction of providing better conditions for the men. In the Dunsandel district three or four settlers have given their men the use of two or three acres, and built them cottages, in order that they may retain their services in the place.
6. Is there any flax-cutting in your district?—No; there is only one mill.
7. You are speaking of the conditions in the old settled agricultural district?—Yes.
8. *Hon. Mr. Millar.*] Is it not a fact that the best agricultural labourers are leaving because they are taking up land under the Settlement Act?—No; there is a tendency for men to go into the towns.
9. I have ascertained that your best agricultural labourers are taking up land for themselves?—Yes, the saving men are those who ultimately become the employers. I think it should be the aim of every farm labourer to become eventually an employer.
10. With regard to the suggestion by Mr. Teschmaker, what provision would you have for waterproof tents?—It was the air-space he referred to. It is too large.
11. There is no mention in the Act about air-space in tents. It says, “A sufficient waterproof tent or a building.” They are two separate things?—Then the air-space would not apply in that case. It was misunderstood.
12. You think yourself that it is necessary a man should have a tent to sleep in if he is likely to be out all night?—Yes.
13. Air-space is only mentioned when it is a travelling hut?—Then it was misunderstood. The huts are built in particular places so that the packmen can take food to the men.
14. *Mr. Poole.*] You would not advise the continued use of sod huts?—No.
15. Have you known cases where men have been badly treated?—I have never heard one.
16. Do you think it pays a farmer to be good to his men?—I am positive it does.
17. Can you give any reason why the men are so reckless in their habits in connection with the accommodation provided for them?—Only this: that very often these men who are insanitary seem to be of drunken habits. We get wastrels from the towns foisted upon us who come for food and accommodation, and if you put these men into a hut they seem to lose all idea of cleanliness. In fact, they get covered with vermin, and one contaminates the other.