

A RICH MAN'S HOBBY?

I KNOW some of the Lees Valley men well enough to ask questions that I would not put to strangers or mere acquaintances, and I tried to find out if I could in what circumstances the

WHAT WAS WRONG?

original settlers might still have been there. But I could get no answer on which they would all agree.

A 1917 man assured me that the original trouble was high-priced land and excessive rent. "When our homes, sheds, and fences were added we were in an impossible position without the snow and the slump."

youth and my wife's, which neither of us complains about. But our children have been thrown in, too, and that's too much. What we have paid in rent would have educated them; but we've had to keep them home to earn the rent."

A later man told the same kind of story but put it another way. Farming in that kind of country, he said, was a rich man's hobby.

"I was a fool to come here with a few hundred pounds. A man should either have a low country block and use this in summer only, or he should have enough money not to worry when the snow comes. It's the worry that knocks us—the fear each winter that we may get cleaned out."

A third man's view was that the settlement had been a gamble from the start. There were safe blocks and dangerous blocks, and it should have been clear at the outset that the good country would sooner or later absorb the bad. It was a mistake to make the blocks so small, though the division seemed reasonable enough when it was first made. "But none of us knew what we were getting until it was too late."



"Sheep and cattle can live where trees can't"

"Could you see that when you started?"

"No, we were young, and blind, and hopeful. But we can see it now."

"What about your burdens to-day? Do you still pay the same rent?"

"No, we've had rebates and concessions, some temporary, some permanent. But we think we should have had more."

"But if it gave you further concessions the Government would have very little left."

"Some of us wonder why it should have anything left in country like this. If it is for the good of the community that this valley should be occupied, occupation should be made possible."

"But it is possible. You've been here for 30 years."

"Do you know what I've paid for staying?"

"A few thousands in rent, I suppose, and a few more in interest. But you've had a living."

"I've lived like a peasant and worked like a navvy. I've thrown in my own

man that their rent should be a token payment only.

"I don't go quite so far as that yet," he said, "but I may when I've been here as long as he has. I certainly

think that rent should be the lowest amount the Government can charge us without losing money on us."

"Your neighbour's argument seems to be that the investment idea should be forgotten. Men should be encouraged to occupy such places in the interest of the community as a whole. The Government should not think of what it gets back in rent but of what the occupier contributes to the national income. What do you think about that?"

"With dangerous country I think it is right."

"But if country will not pay rent should it be occupied at all? Should the Government not resume possession and make some other use of it—plant it in trees, for example?"

"Have you noticed the trees in this valley?"

"I've seen some dead ones."

"They are nearly all dead out on the flat, where they are most needed."

"Fire, I suppose?"

"No, cold. Wind and frost and snow. They were destroyed in one howling blizzard."

"What is the moral?"

"That sheep and cattle can live where trees can't."

"You don't think Lees Valley should be made a second Hanmer?"

"I don't think it can be. But it can be made to produce store sheep and wool."

"And as long as it does that you think men should be encouraged to live here."

"If they are willing to live here. Not many want to, and not all of those who do are the right type. But it has not been timber country for centuries, if it ever was."

"There are big patches of bush on the hills."

"Yes, and big logs here and there in the swamp. But it is tussock and mata-gouri country in general—nature's compromise with the wind."

"But isn't grazing a gamble as well as tree-planting? The trees have been killed only once. How often has snow killed half the sheep?"

Instead of answering this question he invited me to call at his house in the evening and see some meteorological data he had collected. "I don't trust my memory or my feelings. But it's all there in my diary. In the meantime I have to kill a sheep."

DIARIES have a habit of repeating themselves and of leaving you in the end where you started. I shall not, therefore, quote at length. But here are some entries from his first winter—July and August, 1945.

| FROM A DIARY | |
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| July | |
| First week. | Six fine days. One wet day. |
| Second week. | |
| 1st day. | Fine. S.W. snow at night. |
| 2nd day. | Snowing all day (four inches). Frost. |
| 3rd day. | A few showers of snow. Frost. |
| 4th day. | Fine. No thaw. |
| 5th day. | Fine. Nor-west. A thaw started. |
| 6th day. | Strong nor-west gale all day. Heavy rain in evening, which turned to snow from sou-west about midnight. |
| 7th day. | Thirty inches of snow. Fine day. Hard frost. |
| Third week. | |
| | Seven fine days. Hard frosts for five nights, then two light frosts. Very little thaw. |
| Fourth week | |
| | Sunny faces on the hill starting to clear. Still six inches of snow on the flat at the end of the week. |

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| 4th day, | Nor-west with showers. |
| 5th day, | Fine and mild. |
| 6th day, | Mild but raining all day. |
| 7th day, | Showery. |
| 8th day, | Snowing all day (19 inches). |
| 13th day, | Sunny faces beginning to clear. |
| 17th day, | Thaw properly started. Fine and nor-west. Next fortnight fine. |

"For nearly two months, then," I said, when I had copied out these entries, and we were having a cup of tea, "your sheep were starving."

"Just about starving. They had nothing in July after the first eight days, and although they got a picking during the first week in August, they ran into another storm on the 8th, and starved for nine days."

"There was nothing you could do?"

"Yes, I think there was, but it was my first winter and I was not ready."

"You had no clear country at all?"

"Not at first. But I don't wait now for the snow to go before I organise relief. Wherever I can get a horse I clear lanes with a snow plough and drop bundles of hay. Where the horse can't go I try to go myself on skis and tramp lanes to possible feeding-places. Even a bite or two of feed every day will keep the sheep alive."

"In other words, you fight the snow?"

"Yes, in my feeble way. I plan ahead for it, and when it comes I try somehow or other to save all accessible sheep from absolute starvation."

"I suppose many are inaccessible?"

"In a bad snow, yes. But not so many as you may suppose. It is surprising how many you reach when you've planned ahead. I can't accept the idea that when a big snow comes you just put another log on the fire and hope for the best."

I am as anxious as he was not to give the impression that he thought he knew something that the older men didn't know; but when he showed me his snow plough, made with his own hands, and his spare woolshed bulging with bales of hay, I could not help thinking that God usually helps those who help themselves.

(To be Continued.)

NATIONAL FILM UNIT

"YEARLING Sales," held at Trentham recently, feature in the National Film Unit's Weekly Review released on February 14. The auctioning and bidding that accompanies each thoroughbred as it is led round the ring contributes to a lively and interesting film.

Another item, the open cast mine at Huntly, is of general interest for, though comparatively few may know anything about mining technique, coal plays a vital part in the lives of all of us. Also included in this newsreel is a pictorial description of the starting of the Trans-Tasman yacht race from Auckland.