

STONY RIVER BLUE RATA.

By

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Designated locally as Stony River Blue Rata due to the location and the colour of the wood when green, and remarkable for the great strength, weight, durability, and straight grain of the timber, these trees were also conspicuous for the fact that growth was invariably terrestrial.

Originally covering many scores of acres of stony ground on either bank of the Stony River where it emerges from Egmont Park Reserve, and forming a dense and in some places almost pure stand of tall clean trunks with comparatively small crowns, this patch of rata was well defined. In striking contrast in the surrounding forest were magnificent specimens of rata (Metrosideros robusta) with immense distorted somewhat squat trunks and enormous crowns of typical epiphytical origin.

The terrestrial ratas, possibly originally numbering some thousands, had in many cases unbranched trunks of upwards of 50 feet with comparatively small ascending crowns, the trunk diameters at four feet from the ground for the most part not exceeding three feet. Trunks tended to be flattened on one or more sides towards the base but this often gave way to a smooth cylindrical barrel.

Although in character of growth and quality of timber these trees are strikingly distinct, the writer knows no botanical features to separate them from typical Metrosideros robusta.

Now reduced to a pitiful remnant of a once unique rata forest, the few remaining trees are but another tragic indictment of man's vaunted progress. It is approximately 25 years since the sawmill in this area closed down. It was possibly the only one in New Zealand operating for a considerable time almost exclusively in the conversion of rata. The timber was utilized mainly for cross arms for telegraph, telephone and electric power lines. These were supplied to many parts of New Zealand, even as remote as southern parts of the South Island.

The following particulars testify to the qualities of the timber.

A boundary fence erected many years ago of alternate posts of Stony River rata and best heart rimu was found when being repaired 17 years later to require replacement of all rimus, whereas the ratas without exception were sound. This indicates a durability in the ground more than double that of the usual form of rata under similar conditions.

The weight when green is excessive, and even a piece of wood that had been in a dry shed for 25 years when placed in water went straight to the bottom.

These rata swingle trees used by the writer under the most severe conditions never fractured, whereas specially selected ironbark bars of considerably greater section broke repeatedly.

Used as gluts (wooden wedges) for wood splitting, it proved greatly superior to ironbark or any other woods tried; indeed when it was fitted with ferrules constant use with heaviest steel hammers failed to make any impression where ironbark with the same treatment crumbled away.

For cabinet purposes this timber was fairly easy to work and of most attractive colour and grain. That off the back particularly often exhibited such beautiful grain as to merit a high place amongst the most prized of timbers.

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