

243. Where was that fire?—I had just left off wattle-stripping in the plantation a few miles north of this, and a ballast-train passed. I went to get my horse, and immediately I had crossed the line I looked round, and my attention was attracted by some smoke, which I thought was issuing from the swamp. I had a quantity of bark in the shed, and I was anxious on that account to know where the smoke was coming from. I ran to look, and I saw flames going up the cabbage-tree, and the grass on fire. I got some green tea-tree branches and put the fire out.

244. Did you see any one about?—No; there was no one within a mile or two. The platelayers had gone home. The fire was an incipient one, but if allowed to go on it might have burnt the shed.

245. You know the east side of the line from here to the big swamp?—Yes.

246. Have you ever seen gum-digging on that swamp?—No, I cannot say I have. I do not recollect seeing any. I think the swamp is too deep, and the gum would be too deep to get out.

247. Have you examined the spot where the big fire commenced in 1896?—No.

248. Are you acquainted with the value of bark? What would be the value of an acre of land with trees in full profit?—That is a difficult question to answer, because the trees vary so.

249. Well, where the trees are 30 ft. or 40 ft. high?—It would depend on many things, and it would be difficult to say. I understand something about the bark, but I could not give a confident opinion. An acre of bark might be worth so-much, and in another part of the field so much more or less.

250. *Mr. Cooper.*] On the occasion of last Wednesday week how far was the fire from the railway-line?—Within 12 ft. or 15 ft. from the middle. I did not measure the distance. That is where the cabbage-tree was.

251. Do you mean the cabbage-tree by the bark-shed?—Yes.

252. It is close to the road, is it not?—No.

253. There is a private level crossing there, is there not?—Yes. That is used by myself, and by no one else.

254. How long have you been in the district?—Five years.

255. Are there not in the dry season frequent fires all over the district, quite irrespective of the railway-line?—There are fires about the district through people firing and settlers burning off fern to obtain cattle-feed, but the fires near the railway are far more frequent than the other fires.

256. But there are other fires in other parts of the district?—Yes; but they are infrequent as compared with the fires that are traceable to the railway.

257. You said you were about nine miles away on the 15th?—Yes, by the road.

258. Were you there on the 16th?—I do not remember the date, as it is so long ago.

259. *Mr. Oliphant.*] You speak of frequent fires along the railway. Has the department taken any extra precaution within the last few years in the way of burning off close to the track?—I have noticed it within the last few months. The platelayers have been burning off dry grass. They did so before the dry weather set in.

260. Did they do the same last season?—I did not see it.

261. Do you remember if that was done prior to 1896?—Not from my own personal knowledge and observation.

262. You think the department is recognising now that there are frequent fires?—Yes; they recognise the danger, and are taking steps to prevent the fires.

HARRY STRETTON, sworn.

263. *Mr. Oliphant.*] You are a settler?—Yes, at Whangamarino.

264. Have you noticed frequent fires along the railway-track?—Yes, in dry weather.

265. What is the cause?—I have always understood they were caused by the engine.

266. Did you see a train passing and then smoke arising?—Yes; that was the general thing. It is generally in the edges of the swamps that I have seen fires.

267. Have you noticed any particular instance in which you could directly trace the cause of the fire?—No, I cannot say I can. My evidence is simply what I have been told, not what I have seen.

268. You cannot attribute the fires to the engine at all, then? There might be some other cause?—I do not think it is likely.

269. Have you ever seen gum-diggers in the big swamp about a mile lower down?—No.

270. You have not seen them digging on the east side?—No, I cannot say I have. I have been told they have been digging there, but I have not seen them.

271. Could they dig in the big swamp?—I think they would have a job to. They might have to use a hook.

272. You have never seen gum-diggers fire the swamp?—No.

273. *Mr. Cooper.*] How long have you been here?—About two years.

274. *Mr. Oliphant.*] Have you ever had to leave your work at stripping to go and put out fires?—Yes, last season. I have also seen fires in places where I thought there was no danger, and did not bother about them.

275. Do you see fires frequently?—Yes, in the direction of the railway, and I think there is no doubt of their being caused by the train, but whether it is by sparks or by some other cause I do not know. I have seen shovels of fire that have been thrown out of the engine, but whether it was alive or not when thrown out I do not know.

276. And fires might arise from that cause?—Certainly.

277. *Mr. Cooper.*] Where would that be?—Between Whangamarino and McLean's Crossing.

278. How near to the station?—About a mile from the station.

279. Was the coal alive when you saw it?—No, it was dead.