

526. Started by the Maoris?—Supposed to have been started by the Maoris. They were the only people about.

527. It is the practice, if they want to get the gum, to set fire to the swamp first?—Yes.

528. *Mr. Oliphant.*] You saw a fire in the middle of the swamp on the evening of the 15th December? Where were you standing?—I was down the line.

529. You were not so far down as the 52-mile post?—No.

530. Where did the fire start?—It was impossible to find out.

531. Did you go down to see whether it started from the edge of the line?—Yes.

532. And it started from the edge of the line, did it not?—No.

533. Did it not start in the swamp close to the edge of the line?—I do not think so.

534. Where did it commence, then? Was it not near the railway-track?—I do not think so.

535. Next day you assisted in putting out the fire in the plantation? Did you see whether the fire in the plantation was connected with the one on the swamp on the previous evening?—I could not say whether they were connected or not.

536. Have you any theory as to what caused the fire in the plantation on that day?—Not unless it is that the Maoris were burning off to get at the gum.

537. But there were no Maoris in the plantation?—I did not see any.

538. Have you seen Maoris working on the east side of the line?—Yes; I have seen Maoris working on both sides of the line in the summer.

539. We have had evidence of very numerous fires along the railway-track: can you say how those fires occur? You are aware they occur frequently along the railway-track?—I could not say. Sometimes passengers may throw out cigars or cigarettes.

540. You are not sure that the engine never lit any of them?—I would not like to say it did not light some of them.

541. How long were you employed on this section as platelayer?—Close on three years.

542. What years were they—about 1896?—I was here then.

543. You remember the Government plantation being on fire?—Where?

544. Near to the railway. Do you remember any fire on the Government plantation?—Not that I am aware of. I do not remember seeing any. It is a good while ago.

545. Have you seen fires along the lines frequently after the trains have passed?—No; I have never been near one when it started.

546. *Mr. Cooper.*] During the time you were in Farrell's gang the regulations as to burning were carefully carried out?—Yes.

THOMAS SLADE, sworn.

547. *Mr. Cooper.*] What are you, Mr. Slade?—A platelayer.

548. Were you a platelayer in 1896?—Yes.

549. In Farrell's gang?—Yes.

550. You recollect the wattle plantation being burnt?—Yes; it was on the 15th December.

551. On the 16th December?—Yes; and the fire in the swamp was on the 15th.

552. When did you first see the fire in the swamp?—When I arrived home, about twenty or twenty-five minutes to 5. I was with Hackett.

553. Where was the fire?—In the swamp.

554. Was there much of the swamp burning?—I could not tell at the distance.

555. You did not go down?—I went three-quarters of a mile to it. I then got on the high ground to see it.

556. It was then in the swamp?—Yes, about half a mile in the swamp. It seemed to be in a line, and it would be a hard matter to say which way it was travelling at the time.

557. Were you there next morning?—No.

558. Nor in the afternoon?—No.

559. You were on another part of the line?—Yes; I was at the other end.

560. Do you know of Maoris who came digging about that time?—There was a Maoris' camp. It was right opposite where the fire was supposed to have started. There were two or three tents, and there were more Maoris half a mile this way.

561. There was a camp right opposite?—Yes; on the rise.

562. Have you ever known of the Maoris digging gum out of this particular swamp?—Yes.

563. In the Messrs. Young's property?—Yes; for twelve or eighteen months they had been digging, but they dwindled down to a few.

564. They hooked the gum out?—Yes, with hooks 10 ft. or 12 ft. long, and some of them 14 ft. long.

565. So far as you are concerned the regulations as to burning have been carried out?—We could not do better than we are doing.

566. And the same was done in 1896?—Yes; and has been done ever since.

567. You did not see the fire originate, so you cannot give evidence as to the cause of it?—No.

568. *Mr. Oliphant.*] You saw the fire in the swamp?—Yes.

569. And you went to within a mile of it?—I went three-quarters of a mile, and was within half a mile of it.

570. Where had it started?—About the 52-mile peg. I would say at 52 miles 10 chains.

571. It started at the edge of the railway-track, did it not?—I could not say. It was a few days afterwards that I passed.

572. But you would see the remains of it?—Yes.

573. You saw the commencement of the fire?—Yes.

574. What way would the wind take the fire?—From the west, I believe.