

411. *Mr. Oliphant.*] I suppose you frequently notice fires caused by sparks being emitted?—We often notice fires, but it is a question as to how they were caused.

412. You admit that sparks do come out and set fire to the country?—I believe there are instances where engines do throw sparks, but at the same time it is a question whether half the fires, or anything like a fair percentage of them, occur from sparks. The sparks are really so small that from the time they are emitted from the funnel to the time they land their danger is greatly diminished.

413. One day a train in which I was travelling stopped suddenly, and on going to ascertain the cause I found the engine-driver had gone back to throw a bucket of water on some timber that had taken fire?—It must have been on fire, then, before the engine came along.

414. *Mr. Poynton.*] Have you been driving on other lines?—I have been all through the South Island.

415. Are fires more frequent here than in the South Island?—Yes.

416. Has the coal anything to do with that?—Yes; the coal we use is lighter than the coal used in the South Island.

417. It is more likely to emit sparks?—Yes.

418. Have the cinders a tendency to remain alive longer than the cinders from other coals?—Yes, the lignite remains alive longer than any of the West Coast coals. For instance, if you put ashes of the lignite coal in a bucket in the back yard you will find it alight next day.

419. *Mr. Oliphant.*] What would be the best coal to use?—The heavier the coal the stronger the blast it will stand without ejecting sparks. That is my experience. Any of the West Coast coals do not throw sparks like the lighter coals do.

420. You think the Waikato coal is a source of danger in running on the line?—I have never seen any actual loss on the lines yet where I have been running through fires—nothing to speak of: I have never seen any great damage done.

421. Would the fires be less if the use of the Waikato coal were discontinued?—That means, I take it, that the sparks make the fires; but I am pretty well convinced that a good many of the fires originate from some other cause than sparks.

422. You said the Waikato coal throws more sparks than the West Coast coals, did you not?—Yes. I mean this: If you run the engines in the same condition as you run them with the West Coast coal you set fire to everything you come in contact with. Using the West Coast coal you do not require the same amount of mufflers that you do with the Waikato coal.

423. That shows that the light coal is easily blown out, and you use special mufflers?—Yes.

JOHN THOMPSON, sworn.

424. *Mr. Poynton.*] What are you, Mr. Thompson?—A bootmaker, residing at Ellerslie. I wish to say that my vinery and orchard of young fruit-trees were destroyed by fire on the 11th February, 1897. My place is beside the railway-line.

425. At what time during the day was the fire?—Between 10 and 11 o'clock. I am a shoemaker, and I was working in the house at the time. About 9 o'clock a fire occurred at the side of the house. It burnt a section of grass, but after a considerable amount of labour I beat it out. It did not come to my house.

426. Had the train anything to do with the fire?—I did not see a train pass. A little girl came in and told me the railway was on fire. Later on the Waikato train came from Penrose. It was a heavy train, and was throwing out a big volume of smoke, and after it had passed some fern inside the railway fence took fire. The fire blazed up and my grass was set on fire too. I tried to put the fire out, but the wind was strong at the time and the flames gained. Two men on the railway came to my assistance, but we could not put it out, and we could not prevent it reaching my vinery. It was a new vinery, with the vines growing on terraces. The terraces all caught fire. The fire then spread to the orchard, in which there were three rows of peach-trees with twenty-five trees in each row. The grass, which was ready to cut for hay, was burnt, and the trees were destroyed. I saw that fire directly set by the train.

427. What was your loss?—I put in a claim for £40. I had the damage valued by an expert. All the trees were destroyed.

428. Have you any knowledge of other fires?—Fires frequently occur about this quarter, but as a rule they work themselves out.

429. To what do you attribute them?—I notice that most trains after leaving Penrose and coming up to my section put coal on. It is uphill.

430. You think that some of the fires are caused by sparks?—Yes.

431. *Mr. Cooper.*] Your own letter says the fire occurred on the 9th January, 1897?—Yes, that may be so. You have the papers, and I am only speaking from memory.

432. *Mr. Brookfield.*] Do you say that opposite your place fires often occur after trains pass?—Yes, all the way from Penrose to Ellerslie.

433. Do you say you have constantly seen fires occur after trains pass?—Frequently.

434. Can you see any other reason except that they have come from the engine?—No; and invariably the trains that set fire are the trains that are emitting great volumes of smoke.

435. They are some of the heavier trains?—Yes. At this time all the inside of the railway-line was full of fern and long grass, which has been all burnt since.

436. *Mr. Cooper.*] The report made at the time says the railway property was cleared of the fern and grass, and that it was Mr. Thompson's land that was full of grass?—That is not so.

437. The report of Mr. Day, made on Mr. Thompson's complaint, is as follows: "There is nothing to prove that engine caused the fire. There was a good quantity of fern and dry grass near the railway boundary on his side: no rubbish on the line. No negligence on the part of any one else. I estimate his damage at £10"?—When that gentleman came out to inspect it there was not a green blade on my section. It had all been burnt black.