

473. *Mr. Cooper.*] We are told this plantation of Fairlie and Patterson's was planted without a fire-break: was that not careless?—They do not adjoin the railway anywhere.

474. Would a fire-break be a reasonable precaution against fires in the vicinity?—Really, the thing that made me put in the break was this: I heard of fires everywhere, and I simply took up the position that it was better to be on the safe side than to run the risk of a fire sweeping the plantation out. It was better to spend the money than to have the discredit of having the whole thing burnt down.

475. There are a good many gum-diggers about there, are there not?—Not near us. They are chiefly Maoris.

476. They dig in the swamp?—Yes.

THURSDAY, 8TH MARCH, 1900.

JOHN GERRAND, SWORN.

477. *Mr. Poynton.*] What are you, Mr. Gerrand?—I am a miner at Waihi.

478. *Mr. Oliphant.*] You have been subpoenaed this morning to give evidence about a fire?—Yes.

479. In the year 1896 you were a labourer and ploughman with the Glasgow plantation people, were you not?—No; I was in the employ of the Government at that time.

480. At the time of the big fire?—Yes.

481. You remember the occasion of the fire—I believe it was on the 15th December, 1896?—Yes.

482. Where were you on that day?—I was working about a mile and a half from the fire. I was on top of a hill.

483. You saw a train go down just before that?—Yes; it was the 4.30 train to Auckland.

484. The fire started alongside the railway?—Yes.

485. How long had the train gone past before the fire started?—I noticed it twenty minutes or half an hour after the train had passed.

486. The fire spread into the swamp, I understand?—Yes.

487. Into what is known as the big swamp?—Yes; it crossed the swamp.

488. Did you see anything of the fire later on that night?—Yes; I saw the flames at night.

489. And next morning what happened?—Between 11 o'clock and 12 o'clock the fire went up a gully near Mr. Young's plantation, and went into the plantation.

490. That was the same fire?—Yes, it was the same fire.

491. Did the wind rise at this time?—Yes; it turned out windy that day.

492. And the fire was swept over the plantation, I believe?—Yes.

493. To a large extent?—Yes.

494. Have you any idea of the number of acres destroyed?—I suppose there were 200 or 300 acres that the fire went through.

495. You went to fight the fire, did you not?—No; I did not go.

496. Are you aware that some of the Government men went?—Yes; my brother assisted.

497. He was also in the employ of the Government?—Yes.

498. How many men went from the Government plantation with your brother to assist at the fire?—Four altogether.

499. Can you mention their names?—Caseley and Andrews went, and I fancy the other's name was Maidens. I think Mr. Kensington went too, but I would not like to swear that he did. I have an idea that he did go.

500. Had they a fire at the Government plantation on the same day as this fire?—Yes; a fire commenced there that day.

501. Alongside the railway?—Yes.

502. From what cause?—To the best of my knowledge, it was caused by the train.

503. By the same train?—Yes. There were no fires through the day. Every care was taken to have no fires there during the day, and after the train passed the fire was there.

504. *Mr. Cooper.*] Did you see it?—Yes.

505. *Mr. Oliphant.*] You did not assist in putting it out?—No; I got home about half-past 5, and the men were then away putting the fire out. I had a distance to come, and I had six horses.

506. Did you go down and see where the big fire had first started?—I suppose a week after that I went along in the train to Auckland, and then I saw where the fire had started. I heard there was likely to be some trouble over it.

507. Did you see any Maori gum-diggers about where the fire started that day?—There were gum-diggers at the Wairangi Station—several camps.

508. But you saw no gum-diggers in the vicinity of where the fire started?—Of course, there were gum-diggers at Wairangi Station, which is about a mile away, but where the fire started there were no gum-diggers.

509. You have no doubt it was started by the train?—In my own mind I think it was started by the train.

510. Speaking generally of fires, you were a considerable time in the district, and what was your experience of fires from the railway?—I have seen fires from the trains, I suppose, a dozen times while I was working there. I was there for two or three years working alongside the railway.

511. What do you think occasions the fire from the railway?—I think it is sparks from the engine.