

575. So that it would start near the railway and go in the direction of the centre of the swamp? That is where you saw it?—Yes, but it does not always travel straight. It might sweep round, and back, and all ways.

576. Next day you did not see the big fire in the plantation?—No.

577. Is that swamp not too wet for any person to cross?—Yes; it was at that time. It was full of holes.

578. What kind of holes?—You might cross in places if you picked your way.

579. But it would not be safe for a man to cross the swamp?—Well, I would not care about it.

580. And there would be no object in the Maoris burning the swamp if they could not enter it?—It would be a convenient time to burn the rushes.

581. But the Maoris would not fire the swamp unless they meant to dig for gum?—Yes, I think they would.

582. At any rate, they could not dig it?—But they do not dig: they draw the gum up.

583. But it is too soft, is it not?—In some places it is hard.

584. We have had a number of witnesses to-day who have referred to numerous fires along the railway-track. You have been a platelayer for some years in Mr. Farrell's gang: what is your experience—are they frequent?—We had a big fire only five or six weeks ago. It started from the south road.

585. Not from the railway?—No; it burnt to the railway, and there it burnt itself out.

586. Do you know the boundaries of the wattle plantation—it comes to the railway, does it not?—Yes.

587. And fires have occurred there frequently?—Yes.

588. Alongside the railway?—Yes.

589. How do you account for those fires?—I could not say. I do not think there is any accounting for them.

590. Do you think the engine might be guilty?—I could not say that. I have never seen a spark come from an engine that would set the swamp on fire.

591. Have you not seen a fire get up after the train passes?—Well, in that case anybody might throw out a match from the train.

592. You think the fires are caused by matches, then?—It might be that they happen that way.

593. But you would not blame the engine in those cases?—I do not blame any one.

594. Well, it is like this: you say the fire is caused by matches?—It might be.

595. I suppose the engine would never do it?—It might, and it might not.

596. You admit the engine might cause a fire?—I do not admit anything, because I do not know.

597. There is no such thing in your experience as fires being caused by sparks from engines?—I could not say.

598. You have never seen diggers digging in that big swamp where the fire was?—I have seen hundreds of Maoris there. About twelve or eighteen months ago there were three hundred Maoris camped about the hills. They were taking gum out of the swamp.

599. You have no theory to account for the fire on the 15th December at all?—No.

600. *Mr. Cooper.*] The fire might have been caused by the Maoris as well as by the engine?—Yes.

601. In the summer of 1896 the Maoris were gum-digging. In the three succeeding summers have the Maoris been about?—I believe they all cleared out two or three days after the big fire. They have not been back since. There is not a single Maori who has been digging from that time to now.

602. *Mr. Oliphant.*] Are there not other diggers besides Maoris?—They are all Maoris. I have never seen a white man digging there.

603. Practically the gum-digging ceased after the big fire?—Yes. I have not seen a Maori since.

604. And yet fires have since occurred along the railway-track?—Yes; one occurred about six weeks ago. It came from the road, and the sparks crossed over the line and set the swamp on fire. Some time ago there was another fire, about two miles and a half from here. It also came from the south road.

605. But there have been no fires alongside the railway-track for the last three years?—Only the one I have mentioned.

606. And it came from the road?—Yes.

607. Your length extends over—how many miles?—Seven miles.

AUCKLAND.

FRIDAY, 2ND MARCH, 1900.

JAMES WALLACE, sworn.

1. *Mr. Brookfield.*] What are you, Mr. Wallace?—A farmer, residing at Papatoitoti.

2. You own a farm?—Yes, I own two—in fact, three.

3. There is one particular farm, is there not, on which fires occur?—That is the homestead of 113 acres.

4. How long have you lived there?—Since 1851.

5. What is the homestead farm used for?—Grazing.

7—H. 2.