FIFTEENTH DAY.

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE.

given before

THE ROYAL COMMISSION APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO THE CAUSES AND ORIGINS AND OTHER MATTERS ARISING OUT OF BUSH FIRES IN VICTORIA DURING JANUARY, 1939.

held at

WILLOW GROVE.

TUESDAY, 28TH FEBRUARY, 1939.

PRESENT:

HIS HONOR, JUDGE STRETTON, Royal Commissioner,

Mr. Gregory Gowans; Appeared to assist the Commission.

Mr. Barber; Appeared on behalf of the Forests Commission.

Mr. Kelso; Appeared on behalf of the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works.

MR. BARBER: If Your Honor pleases, I am here to appear in these proceedings on behalf of the Forests Commission.

THE COMMISSIONER: I welcome your appearance, Mr. Barber, but at the same time I wish to say that I regret that the office of advocate which has been filled up till now by Mr. Lawrence is to be vacated by him.

I wish specially to say to Mr. Lawrence that I think he has performed his part in a way in which very few men could have performed it. He has had to cope with the gravest of difficulties in the presentation of his case, and throughout those
very trying circumstances, he has been guided obviously by a very strict sense of honor. I do not wish to dilate upon the difficulties he has met with but they have been very obvious, and, Mr. Lawrence, I think you have carried out a very onerous duty in a very honorable and successful way.

MR. LAWRENCE: I am deeply grateful to Your Honor for your very generous remarks and I can assure you that I am very appreciative of all your kindness.

MR. BARBER: I might say that throughout the course of these proceedings I am to have the advantage of having Mr. Lawrence instructing me.

GEORGE CLIFTON PURVIS: Sworn and Examined.

MR. GOMERS: What is your full name?—George Clifton Purvis. I am a storekeeper and grazier residing at Booe.

Where are your grazing interests?—I have four farms around about the Booe district and grazing licences out in the area behind Willow Grove, between here and Tyer's River. The grazing licences are obtained from the Lands Department.

Have you any licences from the Forests Department?—No.

Were any of your properties damaged by fire during January of this year?—I had one store burnt at Booe.

Is that the only place where your interests were affected?—We have a store at Erina also. The actual property itself was not the mill affected, but in the district were and that automatically affected the store.

Did the fires pass through the areas that you are using for grazing?—They passed through the bulk of them.

I understand that you have certain views about the causes and prevention of fires in this area. Will you give those views to the Commission in your own words?—In introducing myself I want to say that I have sixteen stores throughout Gippsland. I am the Managing Director and the biggest shareholder. Our interests stretch from Bairnsdale to Trafalgar. I have been in Gippsland for 30 years, living on the fringe of this area.
We have stores at Erica and Noojee also.

I would like to make it clear that despite anything I may say here, I have no personal animosity against the Forests Department. As a matter of fact, I know the big majority of the Forests Officers personally and I think that they comprise as fine a body of men as we have in our public Service. I have no complaint to make in regard to them as public servants at all; it is only that they are so keen that they hate to see a little gum tree destroyed and that is where we think differently from them. I believe that a lot of the fires around this area on the bad day in January were due to the fact that so many farmers had failed to burn off and protect their own properties. They did not burn off because they were afraid of the Forests Commission coming down on them. Everybody used to burn off many years ago; we would meet a few of our neighbors and say "What about a fire". We would get together, burn off, and protect each other, our fences, and so on. There was no danger, and no trouble was caused. Nowadays, if we want a fire werisk out in the dark, light it, and let it go. We are afraid to tell even our next door neighbor because the Forests Commission is so definitely opposed to fires anywhere, that we are afraid to admit that we have anything to do with them. As a result, the bulk of the farmers do not burn their land. During the last week up to January 13th when fires were coming from different quarters they realised at the last minute that they had to burn to save their property and their lives. A lot of people burnt protection breaks out in this country at the last minute, and, of course, those fires went back into the forest where they all met in one huge fire.

One result which comes from lighting fires in that way is that people will not stop to put them out in order that they should not be charged with lighting them illegally. On a bad day you
cannot put the fire out once you light it. You just let it go.

THE COMMISSIONER: I think that what Mr. Gowans has in mind is that if a man burns off ordinarily within the prohibited period, he does not stop to watch it in case he is caught?---Exactly.

If we were encouraged or forced to burn off, we would do so in the early part of the year or in a late period when there is a heavy dew on the ground. Practically right up to Christmas time in a normal season there are heavy dews every morning and a fire will not burn for more than two or three days. I know that personally and I never make any secret of the fact that we burn our leased country in order to get feed for our cattle.

MR. GOWANS: At what time of the year do you do that?---As early as we possibly can. If we can get a burn in November, we burn then.

This year we burnt in November.

We have been told that graziers generally do not burn at all during the proclaimed period because they much prefer to burn after that period. What do you say about that?---It may be so but special circumstances apply to special cases. Normally this is a very wet district. We have a 40 to 45 inch rainfall and frequently if you wait until after March you will not get a burn at all because the weather has broken and everything is too damp. If there is a north wind in November or December we go out and burn and if the fire lasts for a couple of days we are lucky, because as soon as the wind dies down the fires go out.

Might not the whole evil in these districts be that the proclaimed period is not suitable for this particular area?---Yes. In my opinion the period should be proclaimed at different times for different parts of Victoria. One proclamation for the whole of Victoria is unsuitable. This being a wet district, normally we have not been given a chance to burn except in the
proclaimed period. There are a lot of other causes in connection with fires amongst which are railway trains and railway gangs burning off. For instance, we know of fires arising in our district not many miles away from here where railway gangs have been burning alongside the railway lines. The fire has been let go and in one case it went straight into Crown land that was alongside the line. It burnt one man's fences very severely.

What time of the year was that?—Just prior to 13th January. It was after 1st January.

What railway line was it?—The Walballa line, up near Gould.

Apart from burning the fences, did that fire get away?—It just went back into rough Crown land.

Do you know of any cases of fires being lit by sparks from trains?—
I have seen fires for which we blamed sparks from trains. We did not actually see the sparks start the fires but they sprang up when the trains had gone by. In that dry period a stack of grass within a quarter of a mile of the railway line at Noe caught alight under the farmer's eyes. It had been stacked for months so the fire was not caused by combustion. A spark from somewhere got into it and it went up while the farmer watched it. By the time he got there with a bucket of water it was too far gone to be stopped.

In the case of another farmer a few miles out of Noe, a fire started a few yards away from his home right out in open grass country after the Walballa train had passed. We cannot swear that the fire was caused by the train; it may have been caused by a spark from fire half a mile back in the forest which was burning at that time, but the nearest fire was at least half a mile away.

Was the wind blowing from the direction of that fire towards the farmer's property?—Yes, but it was not a strong wind on that particular day. Campers and lightning are responsible
for fires also. The other day one of our trucks was travelling along the road and the tarpaulin on it fell on to the exhaust pipe which set fire to it. The truck spread burning tarpaulin along the road for about half a mile. It set fire to the Princes Highway for about that distance and we had trouble in getting the fire out. As a matter of fact, our driver did not even know that he had caused the fire until a man on a motor bike came along and informed him of it. Fortunately, the wind happened to blow the flames on to the railway side and railway property only caught fire. If the wind had been blowing on to bush country, the bush would have caught fire in just the same way.

The last big fires in 1926, 1932, and in January this year that have affected Erina and Noojee have come principally from the west and north-west. None of our serious fires come from the east. In regard to the problem of protecting the good forest country, that is, the good ash country, I consider that a big break 20 or 30 miles long should be constructed. At the present time the Forests Commission puts little breaks 9 ft. wide through the forest. They call them fire breaks but we would not call them by that name at all. They may be all right as tracks but definitely they are useless as fire breaks. Mr. Darling and Mr. Denby were trapped in one of those fire breaks and it has been proved that they are only a menace to human lives. In my opinion a big break should be constructed north of the Thompson river, just below the good country. It should be about 5 chains wide and should be definitely cleared. It should be kept clear in the same way as the Electricity Commission keeps its transmission line clear. All scrub and everything of the kind should be kept cut down all the time. A big break should be formed across this Noojee country on the western side in the same way, forming a
sort of semi-circle around the good ash forest. I am not worrying about the messmate because the fires do not hurt that so much. That break would be used only as a burning back break. Every year they could burn back from it into the lower and poorer forest areas. If the country is burnt back for half a mile or more there would be a big line of burnt country in a kind of semi-circle to stop the serious fires before they got into good forest areas.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is your reason for suggesting such a wide break if it is merely used for burning back purposes. Is it so that the men will not be trapped?—Yes, and so that there will be no chance of a change in the wind or anything of the kind blowing the fire back so that it crosses the break, as, for instance, if the wind were very choppy. Fire creates its own wind. When the fire is lit, the wind may be blowing in one direction but soon afterwards it may be blowing the opposite way. The fire causes a draught. If a fire is lit on a narrow break it is only necessary for the wind to turn and it will shop the fire across the break.

MR. COWANS: There might be an eddy in the wind?—Once the fire has crossed the break on a bad day, you are gone. Another reason in favour of a wide break is that when standing timber that has caught fire is cut down it may throw sparks for a long distance back into forest country. With a half mile break that danger is overcome.

THE COMMISSIONER: And those trees would throw sparks back on to the other side, across the break, if they fall that way?—Yes. All standing timber on any side of that break should be removed.

(Page 993 follows).
Do you think a break of that kind you describe would have been any assistance on Friday the 13th?—Definitely, because the fires would not have reached the extent they did.

It would have, to some extent, decreased the intensity of the fire?—Absolutely.

THE COMMISSIONER: If you had had permission you would not have waited until the 13th?—No.

You would have burnt before hand?—I was speaking to Mr. Wilson at Noojee who has a small patch of bush. He told me he burnt it in October, and this other fire which went through on January 13th went through it again; but that bush is still alive and green. He said it was not burnt because the fire was not intense enough to affect it, so that even a fire travelling over a burn a second time, as it was capable of doing this year, would be so light that it would definitely cut out. We were trapped in a fire going to Erica on the 13th—we were carrying water at the request of the Forests Commission at Erica, and were stopped by a fire which was blowing at a terrific pace.

It was at the gully at Moondarra and the moment that fire reached a place that had been burnt earlier in the season it practically cut right out, and we rode through the fire without any danger whatever. Even a break of half a mile or less is quite capable of stopping any fire which would start in the low country. The fires start in the low country but do not get big. It is not until they get into the big forests that they get such a big blaze. Inside that break, of course, I would not permit any settlement at all, farmers or anything. I think if there were any settlements inside the Forests Commission should have to buy out those farmers, because they would be a definite menace.

For what distance would there be no settlement?—There would be no settlement inside the break at all. I would put the
break round the good ash country — what is left of our valuable country — which I presume will grow again. If we are going to protect that country in future I would not allow any settlement inside it, because if someone is burning inside it is useless to burn outside. Of course, that break would have to be burnt regularly every year. In my opinion once you get that break clear, like the Electricity Commission's break, there would be no trouble in keeping it clear; it would not be an expensive job. I think the Electricity Commission has a reasonably good idea for clearing the Forest in burning periods. They have a caterpillar tractor with irons in front like a bumper bar. This tractor walks over the top of the low scrub and smashes it down. It was done in the Haunted Hills to protect Mallourn. After it is down it is very easily burnt, because it is broken and half dead. I think a scheme like that could be worked by the Forests Commission if they had a tractor to keep down the scrub and undergrowth. These tractors are a reasonably cheap way of keeping the undergrowth down. I would certainly insist that all people holding leases, and in the farming community in areas like the Ridge and Fumina should be compelled to burn them as often as it is possible to burn to protect all of us. It is no good expecting a farming community to go in and farm this ridge country, and the country here, and to prohibit them from burning. They have to burn to save their lives and clear their farms. If you have land you have to clear and stove stumps. You cannot do that until you get suitable weather. If you are not going to allow a man to burn, how is he going to clear. I think it should be compulsory to burn as often as possible.

Q: Whenever you got a settler who was inexperienced, or did not have much sense, you would have to watch him with his burn. What would you think of the suggestion that there should be a local Committee to decide when and where burning should take place during the summer.
season, at the beginning or end of the summer?—I think it would be a very good idea if there was a local committee, a bush fire committee or something like that, formed in every area.

A committee of experienced men?—Yes.

If you left it to the settlers, some are careless, some inexperienced and some have no sense in those matters?—Yes, I agree with that.

If there were experienced men to guide them when they would have to burn do you think that would work?—Work in conjunction with the Forestry officers?

Or some person in authority who would take charge of the burning?—I think that would be a splendid idea.

MR. GOWAN: Would you give the Forestry officer the right to forbid burning under any circumstances?—I do not think I would give the officer the sole right; I would like to include

THE COMMISSIONER: A committee authorised by law to guide them in that way.

MR. GOWAN: I suppose especially in a case where there is likely to be danger or damage in ash forests?—I do not think they should burn where there is any danger of burning ash.

Are there any mountain ash areas in this area?—No, the good ash areas are behind. There are odd small sections of ash; but it is in the mesmate country where the fires should be burnt to save the fires getting back into the ash.

THE COMMISSIONER: Suppose you have such a Committee as I have suggested authorized by law to order a man to burn and supervise the burning, and you burn out his grass; what about compensation. Would you put a tax on the local inhabitants because it is for their protection, or would you go to the Government?—I think that if a man knew it was compulsory to burn he would regulate a time to protect himself.
He would burn at the best season for himself?—Yes. He would say "I have to burn but I do not want to burn yet as I have some cattle". He would ask the authority could he wait for another month. We are compelled to cut our blackberries and ragwort and destroy them, and it would be just the same if we were compelled to burn.

MR. GOWANS: They may not want to take their blackberries out but they want to burn?—Definitely, if a paddock is a menace to their farm. If they own a bush block it is not any good to them unless it is burnt. Cattle die in green bush of compaction and cripples. On a new burn the cattle do remarkably well in the winter time, in the rough weather, so you would be doing them a good turn if you burnt it for them.

You have told the Commission about the graziers who have leases from the Forests Commission or Lands Department burning for the next year's feed. Do you think there are any graziers who do not do that?—In my experience there are none. I am only talking about this central Gippsland district; I do not know anything about the graziers in any other part of the country. Would you think there are any graziers who do not burn in the prohibited season? I mean graziers in the hilly country where it is difficult to get a burn outside the prohibited period?—I cannot speak of northern or western Victoria or any place like that; I can only speak for this Gippsland area.

It would be hard to get a burn outside the prohibited period?—We cannot get a burn except in very lucky years. We cannot get a burn unless we are fortunate enough to get one early in November. The moment we get two or three warm days the Minister brings in the Proclamation about a month earlier than before.

You are not supposed to burn?—No, he is always one step ahead of us.
THE COMMISSIONER: On your evidence you are always one step ahead of him?—We try to be.

MR. GOWANS: Have you ever asked a Forestry Officer for permission to burn during the proclaimed period?—No.

Have you ever heard of anyone asking for permission?—Yes, I asked for permission just back recently; not the permission of the Forestry Officer but the local policeman. It was a 60 acre ploughed paddock and there were 3 acres in the middle with millet growing all round it. It was burnt on the four sides of that 60 acres. The three acres in the middle would not burn in ordinary times. It was tea-tree. I asked the policeman for permission and he said it was only wasting the time of the Forest Commission to apply at the moment.

You know a police officer has no power to give you permission to burn?—

I understand it goes through him to the Forests Commission.

You make your application to him and he passes it on to the Forestry Officer?—Yes.

You took the advice of the local police officer?—I did not burn, although there was no risk.

Have you ever heard of people asking a Forestry officer for permission to burn during the proclaimed period?—I cannot say I have.

Do you know why it is they are reluctant to ask for permission?—No, except that they think they will be refused, so they do not bother.

That is a common feeling?—Yes.

Drawing the analogy of blackberries, when are you required to cut your blackberries in these areas?—I think we are supposed to cut up to about December. We get a notice from the Noxious Weeds Inspector.

What time do you get it?—Different people get it at different periods.

You are required to cut within 30 days of receiving the notice.

That about yourself?—Usually about the 1st December.
That means you are required to get rid of your blackberries within 30 days after last December?—Yes.

Of course, there are two ways of getting rid of blackberries, either to cut or burn them?—Even if you cut them you have to burn them afterwards, because it leaves so much dead bramble next year you cannot cut.

When you get your notice in December, do you find there is a temptation to put a match in the blackberries and run the risk of getting away with it, Proclamation or no Proclamation?—Blackberries usually grow along the river banks and more or less in the clean country. I have never heard of a fire getting away when burning blackberries.

Even assuming you have not heard of it, do you know whether it is a practice in this neighborhood to set a match to blackberries when you get the notice from the Noxious Weeds Department?—Most of them cut first and put a match in afterwards, because just putting a match in it makes the job all the harder the next year.

I understand that is so. The Commission has also been informed in other parts that it saves a lot of trouble by just putting a match in?—I would say that is an alternative, because in these parts they mostly cut and then put a match in. In regard to the good mountain ash country, of which I was speaking previously, and which I suggest should have big breaks nuk round, I would not allow any sawmilling inside that area.

I think that nowadays with modern equipment transport and good roads, sawmills ought to be concentrated in to special towns. I do not know about other parts of Victoria but in this area and around the Bee Bee Forest I should say Noojee, Bee, and Erica could be three forest towns where the sawmills could be concentrated.

The logs could be hauled along good roads which would have to be constructed out of the forest country into those towns.
THE COMMISSIONER: What would be the advantage of that?—In the first place the conditions under which the average sawmill worker lives are not ideal. They are just in small wooden huts round the mills. Their school facilities for the children are very bad and the living conditions for the children are bad. We sometimes have to send the stuff into some of those mills by pack horse, or send it on the tram which takes the timber in.

(Page 1000 follows).
Some of the mills in the Erica district have no roads into them at all. You either have to take provisions in on horse back or send them in on the tramline on which the timber is carted on the trucks.

Apart from the comfort of the settlers, what about the question of the safety of the mill workers and proprietors? There would be no trouble there; they would not have to worry about their lives or about getting the people out of the bush in a time such as we experienced in January last. The workers would have better living facilities. I am not a sawmiller and the sawmillers would have to be consulted regarding the practicability of my suggestion. At present logs are carted long distances to Melbourne on transports. If it can be done over a long route surely it can be done by carrying the logs into a centralised district.

I have seen logs that have been carted long distances into Melbourne, but still I am told that they cannot be carried to a mill in a town close to the forest? A miller at Morwell is carrying his timber for a long distance. He is dragging logs for considerable distances, and there is another mill owner operating similarly from Traralgon.

MR. GOWANS: What are their names? Mr. Davis, Traralgon, and Mr. Loviston, Morwell. There is also Clive King at Moe, but he has purchased that mill since the fire.

THE COMMISSIONER: Are there any sawmillers present here this morning? One or two.

Perhaps we will have the benefit of their evidence later on? I am not making the suggestion in connection with the poorer type of timber country, such as messmate country. In that class of mill you must mill practically at the timber on account of the dead haulage of waste timber.

I am talking particularly about the good ash country, which is worth doing something to save, timber that is worth 1000.
hauling when you get it. The value of ash for kiln
drying makes it ever so much more valuable than the messe-
mate, therefore, the millers could afford to haul it and
go to more expense to get that class of timber, because of
its increased value.

Would it be more expensive, except for the waste that you carry with
it, and which has to be discarded when you get the logs
to the mill. It has all to be hauled some distance in the
end by somebody?—I cannot see that it would be much more
expensive, especially in the good country where there would
not be much waste log hauling. In my opinion it would be
a definite safeguard in the bush, because at present the
sawdust heaps are burning all the year, and they are a
definite menace. At Minett's mill at Erica they were
burnt out twice last year, once right back in October.

You would not have a crew camped in there, not even the winch crew,
because they could come in with a large truck of timber at
night?—A few miles by motor truck is neither here nor
there. At Yallourn there are probably 100 employees
who live at Moa and go backwards and forwards by motor car
or motor cycle or bicycles each day. That is about five
and a half miles. Others live at Trafalgar, which is
11 miles away. Transports would be running backwards and
forwards into the forests to get the logs, and transportation
could quite easily be arranged to take the men to the mills
in the morning and to their homes at night. That would
not be a serious proposition. There would be nothing to
stop the employees living on the fringes of a good area,
if they wanted to live quite handy to their work. They
would be a few miles out of the area, but I definitely would
not allow the mills inside the area.

MR. GOWANS: Have you ever had occasion to go into the question of
the extra cost involved from the point of view of milling?—
No, I would not know anything about the cost of the sawmilling. I have lived on the edge of sawmills all my life and have had an interest in one or two sawmills, but they were not a huge paying proposition. I would leave that question to practical sawmillers to work out. I am only suggesting it as an idea and I think some of the practical sawmillers should be called to give their advice in connection with it. That is practically the whole of my evidence.

Since the fires of 1926 and 1932 I suppose you have had an opportunity of seeing what measures have been taken in the State Forests at Erica and Noojee by the Forests Commission to try to make fires less probable. What is your opinion about that matter. Do you think the Forests Commission has done all that it can to make fires less probable?---No; I think the policy that has been adopted by the Forest Commission is going to make for bigger fires every few years.

That is by adopting the general policy of leaving the forests free from fires as much as possible?---Yes; it is just saving up for the rainy day.

Let us assume for the time being that that is the right policy to pursue; do you know what steps have been taken by the Forests Commission since the last big fires in the district to make fires less probable?---The only thing I know of is the construction of 9 ft. tracks.

Have many of these tracks been constructed in the last six years?---Yes, quite a few through the Erica district.

Do you know anything about the Noojee district?---No, not out back;

I do not know much about that.

Are those the only measures taken by the Forests Commission that you have observed?---Yes, they are the only measures I have personally seen.

THE COMMISSIONER: Reverting to the suggestion of supervisory committees for the purpose of burning and to watch burning
off do you know if you would be able to get experienced men who
would be willing to act. For instance, do you think local
business men would get on bad terms with the people in the district
if they accepted a position on that committee?—There would be no
trouble in getting men to act voluntarily on a country fire brigade.
I mean the Committee of men who have to make the decision. If a Committee
of three men were appointed in each district would you be able to
get three experienced men to take that position, or would they be
afraid of getting into bad odour with their neighbours in the
district?—I think they would probably co-opt the assistance of
the local Noxious Weeds Inspector, the Dairy Supervisor or Inspector
or some of the Shire Officials.

To be used as shock absorbers?—More or less.

I suppose already they are not very popular?—They are travelling through-
out the district and they understand local conditions pertaining to
certain farmers. They would know better than I would who would
be travelling along the main road mainly. I would not know the
conditions of a farmer down on the river. If he sent in a report
that he did not want to burn for three or four weeks, I would not be
in a position to say "You must burn now". Men travelling in the
district continually would know that his report was incorrect,
if that was the case. They would know whether or not he had
stock there, and could say whether he was genuine in asking that he
be allowed a little extra time.

The main point is you think that you would get experienced and reputable
men who would be willing to accept the position?—Yes, I think
so, because we realise the enormous damage caused by fires in the
last few years. People living here, and who have lived
here under these conditions, realise that the fire menace is a
terrific danger. I think there would be no trouble about getting the co-operation of the main body of the people. There would only be a few who would prove to be anything like snags.

Are there any Bush Fire Brigades in this district?—No.

Do you think you would get co-operation if you tried to form one here?—Yes. I do not think there would be any trouble about it. We have only to ring the fire bell in any of the towns around here, and we would have 100 men ready to go out in a very short time. That happened in January last, when we had the men and the motor trucks available at once.

Are they experienced men who know what they are doing in the bush?—Yes, definitely country men, born and bred in the country. They know that when they come out to fight a fire they must bring matches in their pocket. That is one of the principal things to bring with them.

Do they submit to leadership, and appoint a leader to direct them?—Yes, they have gangs and they work together. Definitely, there is no trouble. The response of the people on January 13th was wonderful, and the same thing applies right throughout that period. The voluntary efforts around this district were absolutely outstanding.

On those occasions, which cannot be foreseen by anybody, the men arrive in a great hurry and then sort themselves out into gangs?—Yes.

Do they accept the leadership of one man, or of several men?—Generally one or two men take charge and the others fall in. Most of the men would know that a man was talking commonsense in connection with these things, and if he was talking commonsense, they would follow him.

How do they get on for equipment?—This year we were fortunate in being partly equipped by the State Electricity Commission. That Commission loaned trucks, knapsack hoses and such
things for fire fighting purposes.

What about slashers and rakes?—We had our own slashers, rakes and such things.

If you formed a Bush Fire Brigade here would you need to give the younger members of the community or any member of the community, any instruction on the method of fire fighting, or do you think they already have a fair idea of that work?—Not much instruction is necessary for those born here. They are born in an atmosphere of danger from fire all the time.

It is mainly a question of equipment and organisation?—Yes, mainly the provision of quick transport to get the men from one spot to another with the least possible delay, to where the danger is most apparent. There would be no trouble about getting trucks and cars in most cases. On the morning of Sexton’s fire I walked out into the street, called for a dozen cars and they were there within five minutes. The trucks were there just as speedily and within a few minutes 50 men left me for that fire.

That was a splendid response.

MR. BARKER: I understand you are the manager of a number of stores and are a business man in this district?—Yes.

Have you had much actual bush experience?—What do you mean, live in the bush? I have fires all around this area and cattle grazing in the bush. I muster them myself when I want a holiday from business.

Your usual occupation is that of a business man but you venture into the bush occasionally—is that a fair estimate of it?—I should say I am frequently in the bush.

I understood you to say that farmers all around here prefer to burn early in November?—If we can get it to burn.

You were suggesting that you were prevented from burning in November by the Proclamation?—No, I did not suggest that we were prevented in November, but we were prevented from
burning by the weather. As soon as we got a few fine
days on which we could burn, the Proclamation came in.
I thought you suggested that the Proclamation prevented you from
burning in November?--No.
With the exception of this year, you realize that the Proclamation
has never previously come into force in November?--Yes.
MR. BARNER: I suppose you have read the Proclamation?—No, but I saw in the press that Mr. Lind had issued a Proclamation — No Fires — that was all.

Do you realise that under the Proclamation you can burn for certain periods without a permit, even during the proclamation period?—No.

You do not realise that?—No.

THE COMMISSIONER: How are they to know that when knowledge of the Proclamation is not disseminated, that is, unless they look at the advertisement columns of the paper.

MR. BARNER: We understand that these proclamations are distributed?

I know that there was some question about that.

THE COMMISSIONER: They are distributed at places where they are least likely to be seen.

MR. BARNER: I should have thought that persons who were interested in burning off would take the trouble to read them?

THE COMMISSIONER: If they could find them.

MR. BARNER: (To Witness): You suggested that a local Committee should be formed. Do you think that a policeman would be a useful member of that Committee?—Yes, definitely.

You must have met a number of local policemen. From your own knowledge do you feel they would be competent and proper people to serve on the Committee or to run the Committee?—I would say that 80 per cent. of them would be.

What is the precise reason in your opinion why the settlers must burn?—They would not be here at all if they had not burnt in the early stages. If you take over a forest block, there is only one way to clear it, and that is with fire and the axe.

Why should it be necessary to continue to burn when it is cleared.

I am not saying it should not be done but I am asking you to tell me why it should?—If you go up the road running past this hall for a few miles you will see that a lot of
farms abutt on to forests or rough timbered land. In many instances they have fences running around that rough country. They have to burn in order to protect those fences and to protect their grass which is inside the fences. If a fire comes through the bush and sweeps the grass out in dry weather, it will sweep out the whole of their assets and their buildings also. That happened in the last fire. I think there were 25 homes burnt within a few miles of where we are now.

You are putting it that they must burn for protective purposes?---Yes.

Is there any reason apart from that as for their work and their livelihood, that settlers must burn?---Only in the clearing of their semi-rough blocks. The bulk of them have rough, half-cleared land which has to be cleared in the summer time. You cannot burn the sodden logs in the wintertime.

Is it possible to get a second burn except on a hot windy day?---It is not possible to get a second burn without a windy day. It is not necessary for it to be hot but there must be a strong wind blowing.

You spoke about the complete isolation of the ask country. Would you regard it as desirable to have any burning within that country at all?---No, I would not like to see any burning at all in ask country.

You would just leave it in its natural state?---Yes, providing a fire break was made around it that was big enough - not one of those 9 ft. breaks.

Do you know whether any requests were made to the Forestry Officers for permits to burn during the last proclaimed period?---No, I could not say.

MR. KELSO: You just said that you would not have any burning inside the break you suggest. I presume you foresee that even though the mills were removed, that would not do away with the falling of the timber. The timber has still to be
fell. In a country, or in any country, do you consider it proper for the heads of the timber to be left lying unburnt inside the breaks in the forest?—No, definitely not.

You did not mean that?—No, that is only burning up the rubbish.

You were referring to not having any widespread burning for protective purposes, other than the heads?—Exactly. Once the heads are dead they will burn on any decent day at all as long as it is not all wet. They will not burn in the winter. They will burn in any mild weather and the fires will not go any further.

Even if the mills were removed in the way you suggested, there would still be this problem in the felling areas of dealing with the fires inside the breaks?—For the heads, yes.

Do you know much about the condition of the forest in this district with regard to the heads?—No, I could not say as to that.

I go to the mills but I do not go right back where they are actually felling the trees very much. As far as the mills is my limit unless I want a day off.

You do suggest that the mills be taken out of the forest?—Taken out of the ash forests only.

I understood you to say that they ought to be taken down nearer the towns?—Yes, but I do not suggest taking them out of missionary or low country where the poorer grade timber grows. I only advocate taking the mills out of the first class timber areas where the timber is highly valuable.

The question of expense has been raised. What do you think about the proposition—apparently it is your own idea—of having one big efficient mill instead of a large number of small and less efficient mills, as to whether that would not, in fact, overcome the little extra cost of transport?—Do you mean one big efficient mill in the bush.

No, somewhere out of the bush as you suggested?—That would create a monopoly.
You think that the monopoly aspect would be objectionable?—Yes.

There would be a fair number of these big mills for all that. For instance, there would be one in each main valley?—What valleys do you mean.

I mean in all of the main valleys. We will mention the Tanimill and the Tarrago Valleys?—There are quite a few mills up those valleys now.

It is a question of whether there would be any great saving if we could reduce a large number of less efficient mills and put in their place fewer but more efficient mills. Would not that support your idea?—I do not know. Who is to judge the efficiency of the mill.

I was making that a basis of supposition. Assuming the mills were more efficient, what do you think about it?—The Forests Commission might have a different idea of efficiency from the sawmiller or the general public. It would be hard to find a judge of efficiency.

The actual cost of working might prove whether it was efficient.

You do not seem to have thought of that aspect of the matter. Your idea was to get the mills out, having in mind the question of safety and the living conditions of the people?—Spread over a long time I think that would be more economic. Murrurts have been burnt out twice during this 12 months and it has been a tremendous cost to the firm to rebuild again. Look at all the other mills that have been built out. According to press reports Saxton's lost £31,000 worth of sawn timber which was stacked in the bush. That amount of timber, which they could not get out in time, would pay for a tremendous amount of transport. Other sawmills have to be built again which costs thousands of pounds. Every now and again you see mills that have been burnt out. O'Shea's mill in the Thompson valley has been burnt out three or four times. He got tired of it and
and gave the game up. Harrod took over his mill. Fortunately he saved it on this occasion but he had a terrific fight to do so. The cost that is incurred by the burning of these mills every few years should be credited to the cost of houillage into the centralised towns.

If, in addition, the cost of timber over the saw were 7/- in your proposition, and 10/- or 12/- in the other proposition, that would be something more to your agreement?—Seven shillings where?

Seven shillings over the saw; in the stack after you have cut it?—In the bush.

In the town?—As against 10/- in the bush.

Yes?—They would be rushing up there now if it were as good as that.

Mr. Barber: I do not quite follow your suggestion. Do you want to have the mills taken right out of the ash country?—Yes, the good ash country.

Why do you want them to be taken out of the poorer country also?—Because the poorer country is not ruined by fire like the ash country.

I thought you based some of your arguments at least on the comfort and the safety of the workers involved?—That is correct. Most of the assessable country is lower down, closer to the towns. Some of the mills out here, for instance, are almost alongside good, sanded roads. They live around these areas and they have their motor cars and good roads. They go to work and they have school facilities without any trouble, whereas back in the big country, there are no such facilities and they cannot even get their cars in.

You would bring them out of the forests that were distant and difficult of access and leave them in forests that were easy of access and fairly near towns?—Yes.
There is no real distinction between messemate and ash as far as your plan is concerned except that in fact it usually happens that the ash is in the difficult and dangerous forests and the messemate is in the nearer forests?—Yes, on our experience round here.

In regard to the burning of heads, do you appreciate the fact that there will be some danger of destroying the young growth in the ash forests when those heads are burnt?—Yes, but if you have one million acres of forest and you burn half a dozen young saplings it is not going to upset the position.

In general, do you appreciate that the burning of heads does tend very often at any rate to destroy young growth?—It might destroy a little of it but if you try to save 100% of the trees, you only save them for January 13th.

Of course, the heads in ash country would be pretty well unburnable after one winter had passed?—Yes, because of the undergrowth which would cover them and they would be sodden.

That is, in normal years.

MR. GOWAN: In drawing this distinction between messemate and mountain ash country relative to shifting the mills out, I think you said that in the case of mountain ash you would be able to bear the cost of transport much better than in the case of messemate?—That is correct.

It is more valuable timber?—Yes, once it is sawn, because it can be used for kiln drying which makes it become more valuable.

That is another reason for suggesting that the mills be taken out of the ash country but left in the messemate country?—That is one reason.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

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Purvis.
Edward Hunter: Sworn and examined.

Mr. Cowans: What is your full name?—Edward Hunter, and I am a farmer living at Nee. I am the President of the Narracan Shire.

I understand you were concerned in the recent fires to some extent, although your property was not affected?—That is so.

You have heard the evidence given by the previous witness, Mr. Purvis, do you desire to add anything to that evidence so far as what he says as to the causes of fires in this district?—No. Preventive fires are what I advocate for doing away with heavy bush fires. I sum the position up this way: you have the choice of two methods, small fires or big fires. The mountain ash country is not subject to fires without extensive heat. I say that definitely, because I travelled through the mountain ash country about a week before these disastrous bush fires. I venture to say, unless it was a fallen tree that had a live head on and died, you would have very great difficulty in starting a fire at all. It was absolutely green—green wild oats, green ferns, green timber and scrub, and practically moist at that.

The Commissioner: How long before the fire was this?—It was the day after Boxing Day.

What part of the country were you in?—That was in Saxton’s area. I was out and around that mill.

Mr. Cowans: That is near the source of the Tanjil river?—That is so.

To control the fires you have to get back out of that area, into the messmate and stringy bark areas where the timber is not much good at all.

Once the fire gets into the mountain ash area it burns pretty well?—It does with extensive heat, but you have to get a wall of fire to start it going.

I understood the fires round here were probably worse in that area once it got in there?—Probably they were as bad, but I do not say they were worse. The extensive fire and the
huge heat was caused long before it reached the Mountain ash.

Did you notice anything of the condition of the bush in that region from the point of view of unburnt heads?---No, not a great deal.

Do you mean there was not a great deal of heads unburnt?---No, not that I observed. They were cutting but I was not out in that area to any great extent, so I cannot say definitely.

Have you yourself observed any of the steps taken by the Forests Commission in the forest areas in recent years?---Yes.

What have they been doing mainly to prevent fires?---In my opinion very little as far as preventing the fires.

The Commissioner: Perhaps you can say what in your view ought to be done, and from your observation, what has been done?---In my opinion what ought to be done is to control fire in the messmate country, that is systematic burning. To bring about that systematic burning you must make it compulsory. We have settlers all round these areas, wherever there is decent country. A great deal of that area is taken up with 100 acre, 200 acre, and 300 acre blocks. It takes a man a lifetime to clear that area. From year to year he has to cut and clear a little bit at a time. There are many of those settlers who are neglectful and they will not burn when they ought to. There are others who burn to a certain extent. Sometimes it has been neglected at certain periods and they go on until the danger arises. They have their wives and families and all their belongings and they take that risk. They really should not be allowed to take that risk.

Mr. Cowans: Do you approve of the idea of having a local committee?---Certainly. I think local advice is far more valuable than anything else you can get.

It would not be very much good making the farmers burn off if you were going to leave the Crown lands in a dirty state.
or if you were going to leave some of the forest areas unburnt?—Certainly not; not in this mesmate country.

What are we going to do if the Forests Commission does not want to burn. Are you going to make it compulsory for them to?—They want to alter their policy.

I do not suppose you would give power to the local committee to make the Forests Commission burn in its own country?—It is a matter of co-operation; they should work hand in hand. Local conditions in practically every part of the State are different. In this area probably the Proclamation is issued far too early; it may be too late, it varies. It is only a matter of common sense to guide them.

Would you have a Proclamation at all?—It might be advisable, but it wants to be administered the way it should be.

What is the condition of the Crown lands in the neighborhood of your holding?—At the present time they are burnt, but a great deal of them has been burnt since the Proclamation.

You mean burnt by the bush fires?—Yes.

What was the condition of those Crown lands before those last bush fires?—A lot of them very very dirty, absolutely dangerous.

Have you ever known anybody from the Lands Department to take steps to burn off in Crown lands?—No. They have been just getting dirtier and dirtier, until they are cleaned up by fires. Every fire that goes through causes them to become dirtier; they grow more undergrowth. They want looking after.

Do you know of anything being done by the Lands Department in those unoccupied Crown lands to make the fire menace less?—Nothing at all.

Are they regarded as a menace?—Absolutely, unless they are controlled.

Were there any other ideas you desire to add to what has already been said?—I do not know whether I can add anything to what has been said. I have lived in the bush all my life and have traversed all the forest areas. It does seem...
to my mind very advisable, a great number of those mills should
be withdrawn from the expensive timber areas.

Did you have big fires through here in 1932?—Yes, but not to any
great extent. They were more in the mill area at Erica.

The last big bush fire round here was really in 1926.

Was anything done by the local inhabitants after 1926 to make things
better for the future?—Not a great deal.

I suppose you find they soon forget about it?—Yes, they would to
some extent, but they have not the power to do it as they
wish.

MR. BARBER: You have been a Shire Councillor of Narracan Shire for
some time?—Just about 20 years.

A while ago you were speaking about co-operation with the Forests
Commission. Do you remember after the 1932 fires the
Forestry officers went to the Council and asked for its
co-operation?—Yes.

And as I understand it the Council promised all the co-operation
of which they were capable?—That is so.

Did you ever call any meetings to further that proposal?—Yes.

How often?—There were no special meetings, but it was discussed at
the Council table on many occasions.

Did you ever call any public meetings or anything like that?—Not
that I can remember.

In other words, can you tell the Commission what was the co-operation
with the Forests Commission; I do not mean yourself, I mean
the Council?—We put up the proposition to the Forests Commission.

What was the proposition?—The proposition was just what I have
outlined. I was at a conference with the Forests Commission
at Traralgon or Sale, I am not sure which, and we discussed the
whole proposition then. I was delegated to speak by the Shire
Council at the time.

THE COMMISSIONER: Who did you meet at that conference, your local
Forestry Officer, the district officer or the inspector.

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You did not meet the Commissioners?—There was one man from Melbourne; it was not Mr. Halbraith, but I cannot remember the man’s name. There were one or two from Melbourne from the Forests Commission, and I think there were two or three Forestry Officers.

What reception did your proposals get?—Not very good, and nothing came of them.

MR. BARRON: You made a number of propositions to the Forests Commission which amounted to telling them what they ought to do?—Exactly.

Beyond that, have you done anything to co-operate with the local Forestry officer for fire prevention?—No.

You said that when dealing with Crown Lands every fire causes them to become dirtier?—That is so.

Will you explain the value of burning off in those lands?—To control the undergrowth. The undergrowth is dogwood, scrub, ferns and so forth.

You would suggest and be in favour of continual annual burning or something like that?—If it is possible, burn annually.

Those local settlers we have heard about from the earlier witnesses have to burn to clear their blocks originally?—Yes, that is so.

I suppose they clear a little at a time over a long period of years?—That is so.

When they are burning they usually burn the whole block, do they not?—They will burn at the time.

They hope to burn?—They cannot burn the whole block; they have to preserve certain amount of the block for their stock. After you have burnt the land is denuded of the tallest growth and it may be for a lengthy period; it just depends on the rains.

MR. KELSO: The Commissioner asked you to say firstly what you thought ought to be done, and secondly what was being done by the Forests Commission. I do not think you answered the second question.

THE COMMISSIONER: I think it was a rhetorical question. I asked him what ought to be done, and having been told that, I understood very little was being done. Perhaps we can ask the witness more specifically.
MR. KELSO: Do you know whether any burning such as you describe is being done anywhere by the Forests Commission outside the ash country, very little indeed.

THE COMMISSIONER: Has the Commission done any burning in the past; if so, where?—It has done none that I am aware of.

MR. KELSO: Nowhere?—No.

Do you know of any other of its activities—Has any forest thinning been undertaken?—Yes; I personally saw an area that was being thinned, where they had the boys camped over at Noojee.

What did the Commission do there?—It simply thinned out, cut the scrub and undergrowth clean and made the floor of the forest quite clean. It looks, and is, an excellent job, providing nothing happens to it.

Were the parts thinned out and the thinnings burnt?—Yes, the Commission burnt the thinnings.

THE COMMISSIONER: What size trees would be taken out in the process of thinning?—Any trees from approximately two inches to six inches in circumference.

How high would they be?—Long slender poles up to 40 ft. high.

The Commission cut them out and destroys them?—Yes, the faulty trees are taken out, to see that the trees do not grow too thickly.

What happens to the trees that are taken out?—They are either burnt or carted off, as far as I can say.

The Commission would have to leave the trees for some time before they would burn?—The majority taken out is small stuff.

MR. GOWAN: The Boys camp was at Loch River near Noojee, was it not?—Yes, I think so.

The activities of the boys would be confined to a small area?—I do not think they did a very big area; I was only a passer-by and did not inspect the area.

It is not there now, is it?—No.
Do you know for how many years the boys' camp was there?—I think it there until just before the big fire.

It was only there for a fairly short time, was it not?—I was only through there once, but I know that boys from the Moe district have been there on and off for four or five years. They were unemployed boys who could not get other work to do?—You could hardly call them unemployed. They were boys of about the school leaving age who were learning. It was a kind of forest educational treatment they were being given more than work.

MR. KELSO: You only saw this area once; when was that?—It might be twelve months ago.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

ALFRED JOSEPH WEBB, Sworn and Examined:

MR. GOWANS: Your name is Alfred Joseph Webb. You are a dairy farmer living at Hill End, which is a little north of Willow Grove?—That is correct.

During your lifetime you have had a good deal of experience with bush fires?—Yes, since 1905. I was about 5 years of age when my Dad's property was first burnt out. From 1921 we had a big grazing lease. We had it for one or two years and then the Lands Department sent out a special notice that we had to keep all fires out of that area. The fire regulations have been greatly altered since the war. In 1926 we were burnt out. We then went on for another six years until, in 1932, another fire took place and it almost got into this district. Sparks set part of the district alight and burnt in patches of the forest, but the fire did not actually reach Willow Grove. Again in 1939 we had similar experience with the big fire. I was burnt out in 1932. I saved the house, but only actually the shell was left.

You were almost burnt out in 1932?—Yes, and completely burnt out in 1939. In 1926 we were all very disturbed about that.

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fire because, as bushmen, we understood what was taking place. It means that every six or seven years these occurrences will come and each time the fires will be worse. In this hall in 1926, with Mr. Hunter in the chair, we formed a deputation to wait on the Forests Commission. So far as I can understand two gentlemen went to the Forests Commission, they approached some of the members but could not get an understanding or a hearing from them. They came back, but they could not give us any information beyond saying that our ideas were considered to be absolutely useless. Our main idea was to put it to the Commission to burn, at a reasonable time, the bush on Crown Lands surrounding the district. Many people thought that it was advisable to burn Crown Lands in October or November, but that is absolutely out of order. For two out of every three years you can burn in this country at about the present part of the year and then for the next three years you can burn on any suitable day. If that were done, there would be no fear of big disasters such as the last one.

In what part of summer would you do it?—In the middle of summer—in January, February or March—when the heavy timbered country will make a fire that will burn the gullies out. It is in the gullies where the scrub is most dense. For two years after such a burn you would find no smoke in this district. The trouble occurs in the heavily timbered country, where the furnace starts. That is not liable to happen here or at Mill End. The fires probably start around Harburton and within a short period the whole of the country is alight. They start mainly in the mesasate country and the slopes to the west. About the 8th January last year some people were in at the river fishing near Pandra South. They lit a fire, it spread in the country and burnt about 3,000 acres. I can show the Commission that area of 3,000 acres where the country that was burnt in that fire did not have a leaf burnt off

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the trees. The seedlings that were growing were left and the whole of the district was saved. That is an area between Moojee and Hill End. Not one person was burnt out at Yumina South. The burning in that area was such that there was nothing to be burnt in the big fire. Actually the fire came on to it and went for 5 or 10 chains into it and burnt out. Where the fire went through last January it burnt clean and there was nothing to fire. It had been burnt on 8th February 1938, and it was completely burnt with a fire that you could walk up to and handle comfortably. No experienced bushman would run away from a fire of that description.

Was that a deliberate burn?—I would say no.

It was not a burn that was authorised by the Forests Commission?—No, it was a burn for the protection of the public.

THE COMMISSIONER: When did that burn go through?—About 8th February 1938.

MR. GOWANS: I suppose a number of those burns are carried out for the protection of the public and without the authority of the Forests Commission in that area?—If it were not for the local people and the "Criminals" as they are called at present— I should call them the reverse—there would not be a living being in that country, because every individual would have been burnt alive.

THE COMMISSIONER: What was the size of that burn?—About 3,000 acres. It was about 2½ to 3 miles wide. That area can now be seen, and not a leaf was scorched off the trees.

It was sufficient to check the force of the fire?—Yes. The fire from over the Latrobe River entered it for a distance of about 5 chains. It did not go through but went out.

Normally what sort of country is it?—The same as this country—a heavy dense scrub country that cannot be burnt before December. The gullies cannot be burnt before that time.
In fact, you think it was that break that saved the country?—Yes.
The Fumina South people were absolutely safe while that country was burnt, with the direction of the wind. It was a west to south-west wind that burnt out all this country. I can honestly say that that burn saved those people from being destroyed.

MR. GOWANS: Apparently your view is that you and all people around here should be allowed to light a fire in or around February but that the Forestry Officer does not seem to know it. Is that your view?—Yes, the Forests Commission, but I would not say that the Forestry Officer does not know it. He would know it if he lived among the people here long enough. But to send a man direct from College up here means that he has to abide by the laws and regulations. He cannot say "Conditions are favourable, you can burn"; but he says "You cannot burn it". Because the law says he must say so.

Of course you know, and I suppose most people in the neighbourhood know that you can go to a Forestry officer even during the proclaimed period and say to him "I want to burn off and I want your authority to do it." Did you know that?—No, I understood the Forests Commission gave us a certain date, as shown by notices that are placed on every other tree in the district. The proclaimed time is from 1st November this year until 1st March or 1st of April next year. We understand that those notices are posted up each year and we have to abide by them.

Perhaps you are under some misapprehension about that. Do you know that between 1st November and 1st March you are prohibited from lighting fires close to the forest boundaries, but that a Proclamation is issued some time towards the end of November fixing the period over which you can burn only with the permission of the Forests Commission. You can only burn anywhere then with the permission of the Forestry officer. Did you know that?—No, I did not understand that.
THE COMMISSIONER: What was your understanding on it?—We understood that the Proclamation was issued, and when the notice was put up on the trees by the local police officer we were not allowed to burn any portion of the country and were not even allowed to fire even in our own paddocks. I understand a man asked for permission to burn a few logs in his paddock even after the surrounding country had been burnt black. The paddock was burnt as clean as the road and when he asked for permission to burn the logs, permission was refused. I think there is a £200 penalty for lighting.

Could not that man apply for permission?

MR. GOWANS: Yes, he could have applied for permission. There seems to be this misapprehension, in the mind of this witness at any rate, the period between 1st November and the 30th March is fixed by Act of Parliament as being the period when you are not allowed to light a fire in the State Forests, and it becomes an offence if you do so, or if you light within half a mile within the boundary of a State Forest. Quite distinct from that, a proclamation is issued which prevents a person from lighting a fire anywhere, whether within a State forest, outside it, or outside the half mile limit, without the authority of the Forestry officer. There are certain conditions attached to that. The witness seems to be confusing the statutory period laid down by Act of Parliament which relates to state forests and the immediate neighbourhood, and the proclaimed period which relates to everywhere.

THE COMMISSIONER: He is not alone in that confusion. Most people are in a state of great confusion on the matter.

MR. GOWANS: I appreciate that, and I wanted to bring it to the mind of the witness to see if he understood that distinction?—No, I did not understand that.

When you speak about a Proclamation, is this a copy of the Proclamation you saw?—I think so, but I have not read it exactly.
MR. GOWANS: We have been told that this Proclamation is posted up at Post Offices and Police Stations, practically nowhere else. We have been told that even by forest officers. Do you think it was this proclamation that you saw (exhibiting proclamation)?—Yes, I am sure I saw that; I think it was at the Police Station at Trafalgar or Ome. Then I saw the notice on the trees. I have not taken much notice of it. We have not read them from start to finish. Really, we are not interested in those notices.

THE COMMISSIONER: Can the ordinary man understand them?—Yes, I think they can. I do not know why they should not.

MR. GOWANS: If I wished to pursue the matter, I might cross-examine you on the contents of this Proclamation.

THE COMMISSIONER: I think that some of the lawyers have difficulty in understanding the notice themselves?—A lot of it would be quite understandable but we would not be interested in reading all of it. There is another thing I would like to put to the Commission and that is in regard to the prevention of fires. If we were to take the whole community out of this area at the present time I would say that within the next twelve years this forest would be burnt out without anyone having been in it. One of the members of the audience can tell you that he put out a burning tree on his mill area recently, and yet three days previous—yes, it would be on the Tuesday—there was a thunderstorm. Since I have been an infant I have seen eight trees lit by lightning. We had to fell five of them ourselves to save our own homes and grass paddocks. What little hope has the Forests Commission of protecting this country—not the mountain ash country but just the messmate country on the steep inclines towards the mountains. There is little hope of trying to protect them and I guarantee that now the mountain country is burnt, they will never hold it longer than twelve years.
From my experience I said in 1926 when we sent a deputation to Melbourne that the next fire would be twice as bad as that one, and the next one would clean the lot of us up. I said to myself that the individuals who stayed in this district without protection would have no hope. The majority of the messmate timber has been killed with these fires.

The first thing to come up is the undergrowth and the bracken fern. It is the same as with lighting an ordinary fire; there must be the wood then the kindling wood and something to start it. In this case that is the bracken fern. I say that these fires will come again unless steps are taken to burn out Crown Lands every three or four years. It is impossible to burn every second year. There is only one year in three when that can be done. There are two years out of three that are suitable for burning and one that is not suitable because it is too wet, and then there is one year like the present year when it would be criminal to light a fire anywhere.

THE COMMISSIONER: Apparently you are under the belief that the Forests Commission has the right to light fires on Crown land and burn off?—Somebody should be responsible.

Has it not been your belief that the Forests Commission should burn in Crown lands?—Not necessarily, but I understood that if we were caught felling a tree in forest land, the Forests Commission officer could prosecute. Therefore, I thought he would be responsible for fires.

You may be mistaken about that. In fact, you do not know that the Forests Commission has no power to light fires in Crown lands for the purpose of burning off except in very special circumstances, although it has the power to stop people from felling timber?—I think they should have the power.

That is a different question?—Who has the power?

THE COMMISSIONER: A lot of people might agree with you but it is a bit early to say so.
MR. GOWANS: You spoke about Forests Officers being sent out from College and not knowing enough about local conditions; have there been any such instances in this area?—In regard to saying that they do not know the conditions, certainly they will not know the conditions when they are educated in a College; it is impossible. The only people who would know the conditions would be those who were bred and born in this country and know it all through from A to Z.

THE COMMISSIONER: If you had a man born and bred in this district you would not think that he would be under a handicap as the result of having been educated in the Forestry College?—It would certainly be a good thing if he had both, but you would find that he would not have it. None of the Forest Officers here, or Mr. Galbraith himself, is a bushman. I do not think any of them are bushmen on the statement they have put before us.

MR. GOWANS: You are not speaking of any Forest officers in this area?—No, I think they all have to abide by the regulations given them.

Have you ever gone and asked the Forests officer for permission to burn?—No. When or find that these notices have been issued, we know that we cannot burn. We know that we cannot burn in October and November in the average year. The only year in which we could burn in November would be a year like the one we have had. Once a fire was lit in November it held its own until January 15th. A fire that was deliberately lit saved a lot of residents in the district. That was on the 14th November, and it lit up later on the 15th January and burnt just as fiercely as it had done before. There were no rains to put the fires out.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

1025.
WILLIAM GARFIELD ESPIE, sworn and examined:

MR. GOWANS: Your name is William Garfield Espie and you are a dairy farmer living at Hill End like the previous witness?—Yes. Have you any view that have not already been put that you would like to place before the Commission as shortly as you can?—There are not many views that have not been put already.

THE COMMISSIONER: I am beginning to agree with you?—I believe in burning the forest to keep the bed of the forest clean. By doing that big fires will be prevented.

How are you going to preserve the settlements that are close to the bush areas. What do you think is the best thing to do about that?—If we formed parties of men or kinds of brigades, we who have lived in the bush all our lives should know just about the time to burn. When a Proclamation is issued stating that we are not to burn after the 1st November, it means that we cannot burn at all. In this Hill End district we cannot burn on the 1st November except with exceptional conditions. If that ban were lifted and we had until the 1st January or a little later in which to burn the bush, the Crown lands, and even into the forest areas, I think that we would avoid all these heavy bush fires.

MR. GOWANS: You have the same idea as has been expressed by others, that you cannot burn between 1st November and the 31st March?—Yes.

Have you seen any of these proclamations?—Yes.

Did you read them?—Yes, I have read them.

That does not say what you have said?—No, but I take it for granted that we cannot light a fire.

Because you would not get the authority from the Forestry officer?—We would not get the authority to light a fire.

Have you ever tried?—No.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.
MR. GOWANS: Your full name is Francis John Hillman and you are a dairy farmer living at Fumina South?—Yes.

I understand that your country escaped the recent bush fires?—That is so.

How did that come about?—The surrounding bush for about a quarter of a mile wide was burnt in the spring. I do not think there was any concerted action by anyone, but you would see smoke come up, perhaps on the north side on one day, on the west on another day, and gradually it got burnt for about half a mile wide.

THE COMMISSIONER: What do you call the spring?—In October and November.

When this fire came on the 13th January we did not know what was happening around us because we could not see for smoke. When everything cleared off we found that the bush which had not been burnt previously had been very badly burnt, the trees had been damaged; the fire had gone out and consequently we escaped.

Was the fire very fierce where the breaks had not been burnt?—It was not very fierce because it did not get into that part until late in the afternoon.

I am referring to the part around Fumina South that was not in the break?—It did burn very fiercely. It is almost clear ground.

What direction did the fire come from?—One fire came from the west but the bush seemed to be absolutely alight in all directions.

Have you any idea of the cause of it?—I am almost certain that some of the fires up that way are lighted by fishermen. They go to the rivers to fish and find the undergrowth so dense that they cannot get up and down the streams to try the different water holes. In order to make it easier to get up and down on the next occasion, they set it alight before they go off home and leave it.
MR. GOWANS: And leave it?—Yes, and leave it.
And sometimes consumers?—Yes, possibly.

How are you going to deal with them?—The only way I can see is to burn up and down the river, look after it and make a good, direct track down where it is wanted.

You agree with the suggestion it would be a good idea to have a local committee to control burning off?—Yes, it would be a good idea.

Is there anything else you can say to assist the Commission?—No, I think I have said all I wanted to say. I wished to point out a great deal of property and many lives would have been saved if only the settlements were burnt around at the right time.

That could be done under the control of this Committee?—Yes, that could be done.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

CLAUDE STANLEY STAFF, sworn and examined:

MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—Claude Stanley Staff and I am a farmer living at Hoo.

You have heard some of the evidence given here this morning; are there any points you would like to raise before the Commission that have not been touched upon, or is there anything you disagree with?—I think most of the points I wanted to enumerate have been touched upon. I think there is only one way to prevent the big fires, and that is by burning off. If I had not burnt off this year— I burnt off after the Proclamation was issued—I probably would have been completely burnt out; but we picked out day, had a gang of men and burnt the country. When the big fire came through everything was saved.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is the date of the proclamation?—

MR. BARBER: It operates from 23rd November until 21st March.

THE WITNESS: In this country you have to wait your chance to burn. My contention is that a local committee could deal with that
sort of thing. We could make the whole country safe, as far as keeping the fires out of the forests. I agree with another witness that lightning causes fires. Three dry trees on my property have been struck by lightning, and we had to put them out. If that happened on a small holding you can see what might happen on millions of acres.

THE COMMISSIONER: You are saying you will always have fires, but you are advocating the best way of protecting the settlements?---That is quite true.

MR. GOWANS: Apart from lightning and human causes what other causes have you had experience of?---Spontaneous combustion.

Have you ever had experience of that?---Yes, I had a hay-stack set on fire by spontaneous combustion.

Is not that a rather different thing; you have never heard of a bush fire starting by spontaneous combustion?---I have never seen one, but I do, not know why it could not happen. In the bush there is a lot of debris on the ground, and with the heat of that day there would be the same action as in a hay-stack.

It is not heat which lights a fire in a hay-stack?---Yes, it is heat. You have to get it damp?---You get the same thing in a forest. That debris is all dry ferns, gum leaves and bark. You get that in the forest, specially in these big gullies where it is tremendously dense. It has never been proved, but if our scientists would go into that they might find some of the causes.

Nothing very much could be done about it?---It is a matter of doing something to prevent the bush fires. I think you should get the areas around the mountain ash country burnt periodically. You cannot suggest a time, because, as another witness said, sometimes you can burn every second year and sometimes every third year. I think the only people who can tell you when it is in a state to burn are the local people.
What about the local Forestry Officer? Should not he know the conditions in his particular area?—The majority of the Forestry officers have not lived long enough in the country to know when it is in a state to burn. They have not had the experience, but if they did have the experience they might know. The men get shifted here and there. They are in one place for two or three years and then they are shifted to another district. A man can never learn in that way.

Where is your nearest Forestry officer?—Erica, as far as I know.

Have you ever seen him down this way?—I cannot say I have.

How long have you been here?—All my life.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know any Forestry officer at all?—No.

Do you know any by sight?—I cannot say I do. I knew the previous Forestry officer by sight.

MR. GOWANS: Where did you meet him, here or Erica?—Erica.

THE COMMISSIONER: The Forestry officers have a tremendous territory to look after; you know that?—Yes, far too big for one man to administer. He might be wanted in this district and in another district 30 miles away on the same day. You might get a day to burn that might suit, and then not another day for three weeks, so the opportunity is lost.

You have to wait for his permission. Other people might want him, and he cannot be in two places at once?—That is true.

Where is your nearest police officer?—No.

He has a pretty big district to cover?—He has a large district to cover.

If you were going to have some kind of authority to authorise burning off it would have to be probably someone closer than either of those?—The local policeman would be a good man to have.

The majority of policemen are practical men.

THE COMMISSIONER: Provided they had been in the bush a good deal?—Yes.
MR. BARNES: You have had the same objection to policemen as forestry officers; they may be shifted here from other areas?—Yes, but they would be more or less under the direction of their local committee.

The local committee would really have the say?—The local committee would really. It would be a matter of going to the local policemen and telling him you desired to burn, and that conditions were safe. He would see there were sufficient men to control the fire when it was lit.

I suppose there would be a majority decision of the Committee whether it would be lit or not?—There would have to be a majority; you could not leave it to one man.

When did you last see a forestry officer?—Roughley two years ago.

Was he a young and inexperienced man?—I could not say he was inexperienced he was a man who seemed to know his business fairly well.

Have you ever met a forestry officer who did not know his business?—As I say, I have only met the one forestry officer.

You have only met one forestry officer, and he knew his business fairly well; where did you get this idea forestry officers are young and inexperienced?—You can go by the ages of the different chaps who are in these districts that have been burnt. They are not old enough to have had the experience.

You appreciate, of course, a forestry officer, in the course of a year, attends practically every bush fire in his district, and in the course of five or six years attends a great number of fires indeed?—I think it would be impossible for him to attend every bush fire in the district.

If there is more than one fire he cannot be in two places at once.

I suppose you will agree he does attend a very great number of fires in the course of a few years?—I have been fighting a few fires this year, but I have not seen a forestry officer. You will not agree with me?—That is my experience, I have not seen a
a Forestry officer.

THE COMMISSIONER: He has not attended the same fires as this witness.

MR. BARBER: What I was going to put to you was this; a Forestry officer whose duty it is to attend these fires would attend a great number, and have a greater experience of fires than any individual settler who would attend only those fires in his local area. Would you agree with that?—-I do not know whether he would attend more than a local settler of 40 or 50 year's experience.

How many fires would a local settler attend in 40 years.

THE COMMISSIONER: This is not a building case. We take rather a broad view in these matters.

THE WITNESS: That would be very hard to estimate, how many fires he would attend in a period of 40 years.

MR. BARBER: You put it that different areas require different treatment?—-Yes.

Do you realise the Proclamation comes into force on different dates in different years?—-Yes.

You do appreciate that it comes into force at different times?—-Yes. It came into force as late as 15th December in 1937?—-Yes. If I remember 1937 was rather a wet year.

The 1936-1937 period of Proclamation was from 27th January until 31st March?—-Yes.

THE WITNESS WITHDRAW.

I AN ALEXANDER STEWART, sworn and examined.

MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—-Ian Alexander Stewart and I am a farmer living at Willow Grove. I have only lived there for 18 months.

Can you tell the Commission what were the conditions so far as fires were concerned in the week before Friday 13th January?—-I should say that during the week before Friday 13th the greater part of the country between Willow Grove and Mt. Erica was alight or had been alight.

1032. STEWART.
Did you count the fires on any particular date?---On Sunday January 8th I counted the fires from the Hill End Road. There were thirteen.

What direction were they from Willow Grove?---South-west to west.

Did you go out to any of them?---No.

That day was fairly hot, was it not?---It was not really a bad day at all, later on in the afternoon there was a fairly strong wind.

What is your view about the cause of those fires at that time of the year?---There may be several other causes, but in my opinion the principal cause is 60 in a box.

Matches?---Yes.

Assuming that is so, what is the main reason for lighting fires at that time?---There are two causes. Firstly, I would say those who have grazing leases and desire winter feed for their stock light fires to encourage the young sweet growth. I would say those were the causes of the fires on Crown lands. In my opinion the big fires that we experienced on Friday January 13th were principally caused by those small fires meeting and forming into one big fire which swept down on to the settled country. During those bush fires on the 13th and 14th, I think I am quite right in saying this, I travelled very little short of 300 miles in and out of the forest areas. I know for a positive fact that I drove my own truck for over 200 miles, and I was in another man's car for over 70 miles. Furthermore, on Saturday 14th January I was one of those who faced that track into Tanjil Bren to bring out those bodies that had been incinerated there.

(Please 1032-Follows.)
is at Saxton's Mill?—Yes, I do not agree with some of the statements that have been made, but I sympathise with the point of view of those who have made them. I believe sincerely that their ideas are perfectly honest.

If you will tell us some of the ideas with which you do not agree, that would be of some assistance?—I do not agree that Kumina South was saved by a fire break half a mile in diameter. I was up at Kumina South as soon as I was able to force my way through in a motor truck. When I arrived there I was right inside the cleared space and I saw a tall dead tree with sparks streaming from it. That tree must have been well inside any forest break. In my opinion—and I think it can be proved quite clearly—the reason why Kumina South did not go up was not by reason of the existence of the forest break but simply for the reason that the grass was too short to burn on a day such as it was, with such a terrific wind. If you were to go less than half a mile along the road outside this hall you would be able to see that my statement can be borne out by facts. I do not consider that many little fires in a season such as this would prevent big fires. On the 29th December portion of the bush at the rear of this hall which my brother and I own, was burnt by fire. Several days later, another fire was lit in it and, I think, with the exception of a small area close to the road, all that forest had been burnt prior to January 15th. What happened?—That fire came out of the forest from a westerly direction, and if you want to know the speed at which that fire was travelling, while I travelled half a mile in the truck, that fire lit from just on this side of the Latrobe River right across for two miles to the other side of the Tanjil River opposite our place. During the course of that fire, some of this forest country
near this hall burnt for the third time.

THE COMMISSIONER: What do you mean by the third time?---It was burnt for the third time in the same place.

Had there been a previous burn through there?---There was a burn on December 29th. That forest had been burnt the year before and the floor of the forest had been burnt clean.

MR. GOWANS: Would it burn as hot in that part?---No, I do not think it would burn as hot because the material would not be there.

You told us of a fire lit by graziers?---I want to differentiate between two different kinds of grazing interests. I have read in the newspapers graziers denying such a statement as I have made, but I have not been given any indication of what particular district those various graziers come from. It is a well known fact that on the high plains no grazier would think of lighting a fire in the summertime, for the reason that that is the time of the year in which he has his cattle in that country. The reason why fires are lit in other grazing areas is simply because the farmer or grazier wants to get young sweet growth for his cattle. His cattle do well on it in the wintertime and it is a winter grazing proposition.

Around those areas do not you have your cattle in the forest in the summertime?---Not as a rule, for the simple reason that we are nearly all dairymen around here who are milking cows.

Those graziers about whom you are speaking -- those who light fires -- have they any cattle in the forest at the time they light the fires?---I do not think a man would light a fire and have his cattle in there at the same time.

Have they their cattle there?---I do not know, and if you ask me for an opinion, I repeat, I do not know.

Do you think that somebody else might have his cattle in there?---I do not think so.

You draw this distinction between grazing interests in the high plains
when they have cattle there definitely and nobody to assist them, and other places. What is the position here? In general, are there cattle in the forests in the summer?—Very few.

Why do you bring them out?—As a rule we bring the cows in to milk in the early spring and we have them on our home farms.

That is because you are dairymen in this section?—Yes, principally because we are dairymen.

Assuming that many of the fires here in the summer are lit by graziers looking for feed—That is not the sole reason for fire lighting.

What is the remedy; how can you stop the graziers from doing that?—There is only one way, to compensate them and to prevent them from having grazing interests.

THE COMMISSIONER: But what about the poacher?—Any scheme for preventing forest fires to be at all effective is going to cost money.

What about the man who grazes illegally?—If there is someone there to see that he does not graze illegally, that would do.

MR. GOWANS: I suppose plenty of that is done on Crown lands around here?—I could not answer that.

Your belief is that every year you will have fires lit by graziers so long as you allow the graziers to have leases of Crown lands?—There are some years when it is difficult to save a fire, even a plain fire.

Even if it is possible to get a fire alight you are still going to have them so long as you allow graziers on to Crown lands?—Of course you are.

How would local residents view the idea of taking away from them the right to graze on Crown Land?—I should think they would be very hostile to it.

What about you; would you be in favour of it?—If it were going to save
the forests, I would say "Yes", because in my opinion our forests are a national asset and they must be looked after.

Are there any leases on forest areas as distinct from Crown lands?---I could not say.

Apart from fires lit by graziers, what other reasons would you advance for the bush fires?---I know of one fire that was lit by campers.

Was that the other cause you had in mind?---Yes. Another fire I recall was not lit by campers, or by graziers, but the fire was lit.

I do not know what the idea was, unless it was to save himself from another fire which might eventually come.

I suppose there is a good deal of that done, burning off in the hope that it might save property?---There is burning off, and I consider there should be burning off, otherwise how could we clear our farms. But I believe in controlled burning off. Not only should sawmilling areas be under the control of an authority like the Forests Commission but I consider that all trees in the State, in appreciable areas of a few acres or so, should be under the control of the one authority.

Do not you know that that is so, that all trees are under the control of the one authority?---If that is so, why is it that these small fires that could have been stopped as small fires were not stopped. It appears to me to be no one's business to stop them.

Perhaps you do not realise that although the trees are under the control of the Forests Commission wherever they happen to be, provided they are on Crown lands, the Forests Commission has no power to burn off or do anything sell timber on Crown lands?---Yes, but the land itself on which the trees grow is not under the control of the Forests Commission, or is it?

MR. BARBER: Perhaps your remarks should be confined to dairying.
interests, but apart from that, is forest grazing a winter or a summer procedure?—It varies according to the district. In some districts, definitely it is a summer grazing proposition while in other districts, it is just as definitely a winter proposition.

What is it in this district?—Definitely a winter grazing proposition, I should say.

THE COMMISSIONER: It would depend on the snow and the cold?—Very likely.

MR. BARBER: So in this district cattle would be in the forests in winter time?—That is so.

I take it you are suggesting there is a temptation to burn in the summer time in order to get good young feed in wintertime?—That is so, and if I had a grazing lease, I would do just the same thing.

MR. KEEL: Can you see the high country, the tops of the mountains where they are grazing, from your holding?—We can see the Baw Baw range.

Did you ever see a fire right on the top in February?—No.

Not during the time you have been here?—I cannot say that I have.

THE WITNESS WITHDRAWN.

JOHN LECKEY, Sworn and examined:

MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—John Leckey and I am a farmer at Willow Grove.

You have heard the evidence this morning. I shall not ask you particular questions; but have you any ideas you want to put in addition to those already advanced?—There was one idea mentioned by the last witness. To stop the leasing of grazing areas to farmers around the district was suggested by him, but I do not think that would be of any benefit. If the Forests Commission was compelled to burn the country every time it would burn, there would be no big fires and it would leave

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the country for the people who are on it today. That would be an asset to the country, and there would be no danger at all.

When you say the Forests Commission I suppose you mean that some body should be compelled to burn on Crown lands?—Yes. As far as the burning of heads of trees is concerned, I think that would not result in a loss, as some witnesses mentioned, because the seedlings would come up quicker after a fire, which is an asset. Small fires do no harm to anybody.

Have you been around the various areas and see heads lying about?—I have not gone out into the forests where the mills are, but I have been in the bush long enough to know what fallen heads are like, and what a fire they can make if left to accumulate, more especially in the messmate and stringybark country.

Do you think it would be possible to form a Bush Fire Brigade at Willow Grove?—I think it would. I think all farmers between Hill End, Willow Grove, and Trafalgar, should have power, without being menaced by the Forests Commission, to band together and protect or burn the country which is not forest country but is composed of settlement in country which can be burnt at a time that is quite safe to everyone and when no harm can be done.

(Continued on page 1038.)
There is another thing: I think a lot of fires are lit deliberately. I do not say who lights them, but there are a lot of farmers in the back country who drop a match sometimes. For instance, I could go down into my paddock during the prohibited time and spend the whole day lighting fires to burn, say, 200 acres. I would be caught and fined. It would cost me a few pounds, or perhaps I would be sent to gaol. I do not say that I would do such a thing but any amount of men would. Some men would put in one match and go. The fire would go up. If small fires are lit at the right time and controlled properly there would not be the trouble that there is today.

THE WITNESS WITHDRAW.

ALFRED THOMAS SAXTON, sworn and examined:

MR. GOOWNS: Your full name is Alfred Thomas Saxton and you are a dairy dairy farmer residing at Hoe?---Yes.

For many years you were a sawmiller?---Yes, I was a sawmiller for some years.

Put your views to the Commission in your own way?---Somewhere about 1890, following the land boom, and the financial depression, the then Government and the press agitated for the people to go back to the land. I was one of those settlers who went back into the Upper Yarra Shire as a free settler. I selected land at a place not far from Powelltown which is now known as Gilderoy. The district was settled mostly by young farmers' sons from Ballarat. They thought it was a second Bungaree, but they were mistaken. We settlers did not know much about the law in regard to burning off and we burned indiscriminately. One fire checked another. Brown's fire last year checked Jones's fire of this year, and so on. As the years went by the
settlers dropped out because the country was unsuitable for farming but still the same thing went on. Then an agitation was started to conserve the forests and the Forests Commission was created. I can say with all truth that the forests were practically intact up to that time. I have seen a dozen fires and more burning done at once in the summertime. They were patch fires, like a patchwork quilt. One fire of one year swept into another another year. When I first went there I was told by a relation of mine who was then a member of Parliament, and who we thought knew everything, "Alf, when you go up there, burn off whenever you can. Do not take any notice of the bushmen. They will tell you that you cannot burn off more often than once every 3 years." I tried to follow his advice but soon found that it was impossible to burn more often than once in 3 years, and moreover, the longer it was left — say, for four, five or six years, — the bigger the fire would be. I also discovered that if you lit a fire in February, particularly in the first fortnight, when most of the big disastrous fires have occurred from Black Thursday onwards, with the exception of this last one, you could burn the green tea-tree swamp. I did that and did not know that I had done anything out of the ordinary until a very old resident in the district seemed astonished, but I remembered it years afterwards.

Somewhere about 1920 I was milling on my own ground and I also bought property containing timber from the Northern Timber Co. My sons and I were milling there. Some of the country that we had not milled was very difficult to handle except in the summertime, and my sons, excepting the youngest one, happened to be away when the 1926 fire came on us. It burned the mill and thousands of feet of timber that I had there. I am a carpenter by
trade and I had speculated in building in Melbourne at that
time. It was a frightful fire but we had a splendid water
supply and managed to save the house. The dynamo, power-
house, and practically everything went.

The same thing occurred again in 1932. I had
made up my mind in 1926 not to do another turn on the place,
but after a time I was working like a madman to rehabilitate
things. Early one morning - about 4 o'clock - in 1922 I said
to my wife, "What is the matter with you?" She said "I do
not know Dad; but get up and have a look around will you."
I got up and I just got around to the side of the house and I
saw what was the matter. I rushed out on to the verandah
and shouted to the school-master who boarded with us "Get up,
the fire is coming". We got water and wrapped my youngest
daughter in wet blankets. Twice the school-master poured a
bucket of water over me, otherwise I would have gone clean out.

Once I go on the roof and turned the iron back with my hands.
There were shingles underneath. They make a cool roof
but they had caught alight. I managed to get them out
with buckets of water that were handed to me. I was a
Shire Councillor and I went to the oldest Shire Councillor,
who had been there for 40 years and had never missed one
Council meeting. He supported me and we asked for a
Royal Commission. They refused and sent up the Forests
Commission instead. From 1926 to 1932 the young forest had
come up in an amazing manner. I was surprised even
though I was used to seeing the quick growth after fires.

In many cases the young growth was nine inches thick
and 40 to 50 feet high. I began to make a move to rehabil-
itate my mill. I reckoned that I could cut small case
material. Then the fire came along and wiped it all out.

The Forests Commission was sent up to Yarra Junction;
the Government would not grant a Royal Commission.

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SAXTON.
As soon as the doors were opened they were rushed with sawmillers, principally. Needless to say, a sawmiller is not a free agent.

THE COMMISSIONER: Why do you say that a sawmiller is not a free agent?—They are under the direction of the Forests Commission and it naturally follows that if a man gives adverse evidence against that Commission in front of the officers, they are not going to have any pleasant memories of him. I do not say that they have anything against me. I was never on Crown lands as a sawmiller. I was well acquainted with the officers and they had nothing against me. The fact that I am an honorary forest officer is proof of that. My soul is not for making a statement here today. I wished to make a statement in the papers long ago but my wife always checked me because she considered it would injure my sons who were working under the Forests Commission. My considered judgment about the forests is this: imagine this hat is a hill. The ash grows on the south and eastern slopes and nowhere else. The messmate grows on the western and northern slopes. If you walk up through the messmate timber on a hot summer's day, you will be very warm indeed. When you walk down into the ash country you will find tree ferns growing there and nowhere else, with long moss hanging two or three feet long. When you get to the bottom you will be shivering. My argument is that the messmate country is not of much value. It only amounts to about 15,000 feet to the acre of sawn timber on good messmate, whereas the ash will go from 60,000 up to even 1000,000 feet to the acre, and it is much more valuable timber. My experience as a farmer and settler is that you can burn with safety right up to the end of December and again in March, but not in January or February. By that, I mean that you can burn messmate. The sooner
you burn messmate the better, either before or after the winter.

If the messmate country is burnt the old forests will be preserved and have a natural growth. That is the solution of the whole thing. Many a time I tried to burn the green ash for the purpose of getting growth of native oats, but I could not do it. The oats grow anything from 6 ft to 12 ft high and they are wonderful feed for cattle.

I suggested to the Commission at Yarra Junction that it should give its forests officers more latitude, and it said that they had a free hand. I forgot it at the time but that very year I had applied for a permit to burn in November some stacks of saplings close to my house. It was on land that had been ploughed. I had cut down a whole lot of the saplings and stacked them ready to burn. I had scraped up all the ground so that the fire would not get into the young timber. The forest officer said that he would call one Sunday. Bye and Bye he sent one of the younger men up. He looked at the stacks and said "Mr. Sexton, you cannot burn those stacks of timber." I said "Why". He said "Here are the regulations. They must be 40 ft away from all of those fences, and that one over there is only 30 ft away from young standing timber." I said "You know that I could not possibly burn any of that young timber." He said "Yes, I am well aware of that, but here are the regulations. I said "I do not want to burn that timber; you could not burn it if you tried". He said "Yes, but here are the regulations; you must shift that book 40 ft. off the fence or you cannot burn them."

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WITNESS continued:— Needless for me to say what I did. That was about the limit, I was right on the border of the forest. There was a forest break, but I had very little time. I suggested to the Commission to have graded earth roads through the forests to cut it up into smaller sections, to bring anybody in and out of the forest, and for the forestry officers, who wanted to protect the break, to get in and out. I think that is about all I wish to say.

MR. GOWANS: Since the big fire in 1925 in that area it must have been pretty apparent to people in and around this neighbourhood that a fire of that kind might happen again?—Decidedly. Did you feel that yourself?—Yes.

It must have been fairly obvious, not only to the inhabitants, but to the forestry officers as well. Has anything been done down here, that you know of, since that time, to try and make provision that such a fire would not happen again?—Not that I am aware of. I went into the Taniil Imm about 3 months ago. My sons were piling up huge logs with a winch, but not burning them. They cleared around the mill site and so on, but what struck me between there and Noojee was the mass of debris and dead trees in and out of the forest, not only on private land but in the forest. I knew it was practically a barrel of gunpowder. It would not have mattered who lit it. I warned my eldest son who was burnt out. I said "Son, for God's sake get your timber out of there. I do not know whether you realise what sort of a place you are in."

MR. GOWANS: I do not think he did realise as much as I did. He said "We are doing our best. Of course, this is an old road and rough as you know. We have 12 trucks carrying timber out as fast as they can. We realise if we had the timber there and a fire came we might be split between two stiles; trying to save the country, and trying to save the
timber. We are doing our very best to get the timber out." However, I do not think he realized to the extent I did the fearful danger they were in. They were mighty fortunate in the timber forest. They had hundreds of thousands of feet of timber stacked there during several summers, and they got off. I think the old fellows got a bit more cautious than the young fellows.

You spoke of the debris in the forest; did you mean dead material that had been cut and left there, or did you mean the ordinary accumulation of bark and stuff from the trees? All of it. In the messmate country the outer bark is very inflammable and it may carry for miles. If it was burnt in the cooler months - you could not do it every year - not more often than once in three years - the result would be you would not have that condition in the forest. You would burn in the messmate country and you would find the ash was never touched.

Do you know of any roads being put through by the Forests Commission in the forest areas? I was instrumental in getting a road carried through from Powellstown to Maycock East. The Country Roads Board had that in hand. It has been a tremendous advantage to people in that forest.

Do you think it would be better if a few more roads were put through these State forests? That is exactly what I argued to the Forests Commission in 1932, that the country be dissected with earthen roads. Those roads could be improved later on. They would cut up the areas, and the areas of messmate could easily be burnt off.

What did they say to that when you suggested it? They politely listened. For 50 years the Metropolitan Board, and the Forests Commission for a slightly lesser period, have followed one idea, and that is, no fires. If it were a possibility it might be all right; but it is an impossibility. That area I viewed 6 or 8 months ago in the

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Tanjil forest was a barrel of gunpowder; that is, as near a s I can say. Any man who knew anything about a forest knew it was prime and ready for a match or lightning strike. I saw lightning strike a tree in my paddock, so it is quite feasible apart from human agency. I do not doubt there are many scandalous men who would light fires. I know some of my own knowledge; they worry the life out of me. At one place the Forests Commission got right around me, except on the northern face which was held by an absentee. That was a source of trouble to me, as people would put matches in without any consideration for me, and of course, the Forests Commission would not burn off, and would no allow me to burn off. Eventually I had to pull the house to pieces and sell for what I could get. I had 560 acres freehold without any debt on it, a beautiful home, beautiful streams and everything. It was a terrible wrench to leave it. I eventually sold it, or gave it to the Commission, if you like to put it that way, for a pound an acre. That was to be rid of it after spending 40 years on that property.

You mentioned the Board of Works, have you had experience of their areas not being kept clean?—I was through the Maroondah area— we called it the Watts River those days—a little over 50 years ago. They were just clearing the settlers and sawmillers out at that time, and there was some magnificent timber there. I was there about ten years ago and there was mighty little timber left there. As far as I could see it was rubbish, dead timber.

MR. BARKER: Should millers in the mountain ash country burn heads?—

Decidedly.

What about damage to the young ash?—My considered opinion is that there will be very little. While a mill is working in an area it is hardly possible. Once a mill is gone

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they can get a fire over the heads and a fire over the debris that is left. The possibility is they will get a good growth of young forest. On my land at Gildersoy my experience was that after a fire went through sometimes we got native oats and sometimes you might say we got nothing. It was a case of getting native oats and young eucalyptus growth.

Was there any protection? ——Yes, there was a certain amount of protection.

MR. KELSO: When you went into the forest first, how would you describe it? ——It was beautiful country — hugh timber. The first land I cleared was the messmate swamp. I should have burnt it, but it had trees growing on it. On that particular part they had no tap roots. A brother of mine and myself grubbed a number of those trees and afterwards I burnt them off. When those trees were lying on the ground some of them measured 12 ft high. We have a photograph of one tree which was 25 feet through. It was a hollow tree and tumbled over a few years afterwards. The growth of ash is marvellous. I should say you could mill timber from the young seedlings — I do not say the timber would be matured — in 25 to 30 years, quite easily. When I first came into our district there was young growth that had been killed in some way by a fire. They were all milled about 20 years afterwards and were splendid sticks.

In those ash forests, was there very much undergrowth, or was the bush pretty clear? ——In my property there was dense scrub underneath the ash.

Growing right in among the ash? ——Yes, it would be 10 to 15 ft high. That kind of forest naturally would not burn very readily? ——No.

That was your experience? ——You would have a job to do it even in January or February, but of course when a fast fire

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started lower down everything would go.

If you did succeed in keeping that forest in its natural state it would be fairly hard to burn?—Yes, except in January and February. If the messmate country was burnt off as I say there would be absolutely no danger.

You do not think the mountain ash country is inflammable?—No.

You would not describe a mountain ash forest in its natural condition as being a menace?—No. My opinion is that it could not possibly burn except in the two months January and February. I have seen it burnt off deliberately after the hazel had been cleared.

When you speak of a forest as a barrel of gunpowder, what is the other element that has been introduced?—I believe the aboriginals fired periodically to get feed to bring game, and that at intervals those fires went up into the messmate country. On rare occasions it may have killed the ash but that was very rare indeed. At Bunyip, after the 1932 fires, practically all the timber went up. Nothing was said in the papers; probably then did not want it known, but there was a lot of good timber and practically all of it went up. If a tribe of aboriginals had been let loose in that forest, and carried on in their old ways, they would have preserved that forest by doing just what the gentlemen here and myself have suggested, that is, burning off and making it compulsory. As far as the local committees are concerned I would suggest the Crown bailiff should be the man. He is the man who makes the settlers get rid of the bracken, rabbits, and ragwort. He would be a very suitable man and would have local knowledge.

When you want up into these Tanjil forests, and felt they were a barrel of gunpowder, was that because they had something that is not natural, that is, fallen mill beads and that kind of thing?—I did not see where they were cutting the
timber; I was not there. They had had no fire there while I was there, except one that was supposed to, have been started by some fishermen on the west side of the mill; I was sorry to know it did not burn. My sons and the men put it out. Probably it would have been a protection if it had burned.

Do we understand the dangerous condition was the scrub?—And fallen debris. The debris falls, and until it gets right over on the ground you cannot burn it. There might be a lot there, but sometimes you can burn it in three years; but more often in four or five years, even in six.

In your opinion that scrub is actually produced by fire?—No, I would not say that.

What produces it?—In the same sense that the timber itself is produced by fire, there is no question about it, the eucalyptus is a fire plant. It comes from the seed. It is a query even among forestry officers and bushmen as to actually whether the seed floats down after the fire or whether it is there beforehand. Generally the bushman's idea is that it is also in the ground, and that is my idea. I mentioned native oats; a settler that I knew was walking over a paddock that had been burnt years before. He noticed a square iron plate lying on the ground. He did not know how it got there, but he picked it up and threw it aside. The space where it had been was left uncovered.
WITNESS contd. - There had been a good fire over the ground. Some months afterwards that square came in native oats. You may get a fire that brings up the native oats. We imagine that when there is a certain amount of dampness in the ground, when a fire goes over it, it brings up the native oats. That would have to be burnt if you wanted a growth of forest or for seedlings to come up later.

MR. GOWANS: Have you ever heard of a Crown Bailiff to light a fire on Crown lands for the purpose of clearing it off?—No, I have not.

THE WITNESS WITHDRAWN.

LUNCHEON ADJOURNMENT.
UPON RESUMING AT 1.50 P.M.

CHARLES THOMAS WEBB, sworn and examined.

MR. GOWANS: Your name is Charles Thomas Webb, and you are a farmer living at Hill End?—Yes.

You have been present this morning while the evidence is being given. Is there anything you desire to add to that evidence?—-

There is one thing I should like to add; I believe in periodical burning off for the safety of human beings and for the protection of our forests. I am of the same opinion as the previous witness, with the exception that I differ with respect to the suggestion that a Committee should be formed in each district. I think it would be better to appoint one man in each district similar to Hill End, where an experienced bushman could be appointed to burn in suitable weather and to keep the undergrowth down in the forests. That would relieve the risk of big fires in dry seasons.

Do not you think there would be danger in selecting one man for such a responsible job?—No; I think the average experienced bushman could do it. I have lived in the bush for most of my life, with the exception of a few years when I was away, but I do not say I am the type of man to be appointed. I could nominate several people in the district who would be ideal for the purpose.

Do you think they would take the responsibility?—I do, and I think they would do the job thoroughly.

What part would the local police officer play in burning off operations?—

I think he should be over the man appointed.

Would you not then have divided control?—Yes, in a measure, but in the Army and the Navy there is a superior officer. He hands down the orders in accordance with the laws and regulations.

What is the difficulty in the way of forming a committee?—I think
it would be a bit bamboozling. In the summer when the scrub is lying about creating a danger in the district farmers such as myself would be hard at work and possibly would not be able to attend to the burnoff, or the meeting necessary to arrange for it. I may be wrong but I think it would be better for one man to do it.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do not you think two or three heads may be better than one?—That may be so.

You prefer single control?—Yes.

There is this about your suggestion, that probably you would get quicker action and there would be no time lost in arguments?—That is so; but still I think an experienced man in the bush could control burning off and the organisation necessary better than two or three men.

Whatever form it takes you think that some sort of local control is necessary?—Yes.

THE WITNESS WITHDRAW.

FRANCIS EDWARD PAUL: Sworn and Examined.

MR. GOWANS: Your full name is Francis Edward Paul; you are a timber worker with your home at Hill End, but you are at present employed at Hutchinson's Mill at Fumina?—Yes.

Hutchinson's mill has only been shifted to Fumina since the fires?—Yes, and previously it was near Hill End.

That mill was burnt out was it not?—Yes. I was there until 11 o'clock on the morning of the fire. We were short of water at the mill and we were sinking a well in the creek by blasting out the rock. I was down in the bottom, the water was running down and kept it cool. My mate was up top winding the windlass. I said, "What is wrong, something is coming; I am getting out of here. The fire will be here before long." He said "Do you think it will burn?" I said, "I am sure, I am getting out now." I came back to the shaft and decided to get out.
I do not want the whole of the conversation, but what actually happened then.

Did you go and take refuge in a dugout or did you get out?---

I went to my home at Hill End, but the man working with me went to the tunnel and took refuge there. That was a long tunnel that I had helped to construct and it had been driven in for mining purposes. It was not far from the mill and was easily reached.

How far from the mill was it?---About 700 or 800 yards. It was through bush but not through real scrub and there was a track right to it.

Was that the nearest place of safety?---No, there was another tunnel a little nearer, but he preferred that one. There was no dugout at the mill and there was water where we were sinking the well. One tunnel up the creek had water in it, but the tunnel where the men sheltered had no water.

Had any of the tunnels been fitted up as a place of safety?---No, but the men knew they were there. They were quite sound and safe because the tunnel went in for 180 ft. That man remained there and he said that he was as safe as in God's keeping.

Were there any people living at the mill?---Some of the men were away before the fire and the mill was not operating. They all left the mill before the fire actually got there. Ordinarily 13 men are employed at the mill and they could quite easily have all entered the tunnel. In fact, all Hill End could have gone in there.

What is the position at the present mill, is there any place of safety?---

A tunnel is to be established, I believe.

You took some part in the burning of the break at Fusina South?---

In the spring we burnt the tops belonging to the mill, adjoining the area worked by the previous witness, which had been burnt the year before and that made a secure break to Fusina South, over which the fire never crossed.
MR. GOWANS: We heard one of the witnesses say that in his opinion breaks had nothing whatever to do with the question of safety at Fumina?—It is my opinion that if those breaks had not been there, Fumina South would have been wiped out like Hill End. There might have been an isolated house left.

Hill End was wiped out?—Bar an isolated house.

How many houses went?—I have not got the figures. I know that in our road every house went.

Where did the people take refuge?—In open paddocks or wherever they could.

All the people in our road got into an open paddock beyond a very high hill. The grass was short and we hoped to get it out. In fact, it was so short that when it did light it blew out again. There was nothing to keep it going.

What was the condition of the bush around Hutchinson's Hill at Hill End?—We cut and burnt in the bush around it. It was fairly good except on one side. We burned a little bit of it there but most of it was out of his area and he had nothing to do with that. It belonged to the forests outside his area.

What do you mean by "outside his area"?—He had an area allotted to him and outside that was not his area for milling purposes.

The part in which he had been milling up to that time was on Crown Land, was it not?—I was given to understand that it was in State Forest Land.

I understand that it was in Crown land. What do you say was the condition of the country outside his allotment?—It was very dirty. There was grown up scrub— an accumulation.

We have lived here all our lives. My father was an old miner in the early days and it was his idea to burn the ridges first when they would burn, and then burn the gullies later and keep the forests. The forests hardly
ever got scorched enough to kill the leaves. There was very little scrub there because the fires were not big enough to bring up the scrub. As soon as a big fire like the 1926 one comes through, a wall of scrub springs up which you can hardly get through in three or four years' time. It cannot be burnt unless it is a favourable time to burn. It has to be reasonably dry before that thick scrub will burn; when it gets so thick you cannot burn it except on a particularly good day and then it cannot be burnt on a bad day like the 13th. There was a certain section of the country on which were certain runs that could not be burnt under the Act. It had been saved up. I saw it before Christmas and said to a gentleman "If this gets alight, look out for us." On the Tuesday the fire came from the south of Neejee somewhere and burnt this strip; then, after midnight, the wind sprung up from the west, blew the fire across the river, and burned back south-west of us. It lay there for two days smouldering and burning quietly. On the 13th, it was just ready for the wind to start it. As soon as it started, it was one wall of flame from end to end. It came straight into this country that was not burnt. It burnt out one of the men who have given evidence here 20 minutes before me. A spark lit further up the hill, and it went up there like a furnace. I said to my wife, "I do not like to lose our home; but we will have to save our lives". Before we left our home a fire was alight in a little paddock alongside the house but there was no fire within a quarter of a mile down the hill. If we do not burn the bush at a suitable time when it will burn, next time the fire comes there will be no one there to tell the tale.

Did you have the area round your house clean?---I burned some last year and some this year early in the spring, but too
early to have a good burn. It was so dirty further away that the fire swept clean across.

You think that the dirty condition of the Crown lands around your place added to the intensity of the fire?—I honestly think that the strip of country was responsible for burning all of Hill End out. Otherwise, the fire would never have got in there because thousands of acres were burnt last year, and we burnt a big piece early this year in the head of the creek. There was a lot more burnt south down the river but there was a strip in between on the southerly slope and they were not even allowed to burn it up till Christmas. Had that been burnt as it should have been the fire would never have gone up that creek.

There was one death in your neighborhood?—Yes, Mr. Loosemore.

I understand that that was due mainly to the fact that he would not leave his property?—He was asked to leave his house but he had had experience of fires before and thought this would be the same kind of fire. He would not leave and we think he must have collapsed, fallen on the roadside, and got burnt. He was an old man.

What was the practice in regard to burning off heads in Hutchinson’s mill?—Practically all of them were burnt. Our miller believes in burning tops when they let him.

When did you burn last year?—Someone lit a fire right up close to Christmas and that really saved Nasina because it burnt clean and left a good break. On the Friday the fire came right up to that part and then there was no more fire.

That was an accidental burn?—Yes, but still there was a lot burnt ahead of that, early in the year. It was a dry year.

Burning of the tops?—Yes.

Have you been in the habit of burning such year?—Yes, every year.

Do you know where Bilston’s mill was?—Yes, I have been past there but I never went in there.
Did they burn off their heads there?—I could not say. I was not there last year. I know that other mills in the district burnt their tops in the spring always.

There is some difficulty about that?—No, the tops will burn as soon as you get a warm day in the spring, whereas other bushes will not burn.

Have other mill hands in this neighborhood been concerned about their safety in the past?—A lot of them have had their belongings taken to tunnels.

Do you know whether any attempt had been made to persuade mill owners here to put in dugouts prior to this year?—I do not know about that. I have not been working long at a mill and I do not know exactly what the law is in relation to mills.

I am asking you whether the men have ever taken any steps to ask for dugouts to be put in?—No, I do not think there was anything of that kind in our mill. We had the tunnels in our mines there and knew that we could get to them in a short time.

Was there any dugout at Milton’s?—I could not say.

MR. BARNES: Tunnels were more satisfactory from your point of view than a dugout?—I must prefer a tunnel at any time.

If the country is steep you can go into the tunnel and have an iron door which can be shut. There would then be no danger.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is the difference between a tunnel and a dugout on the side of a hill?—The tunnel is driven straight into the hill into hard solid rock. The timber part is cool, nothing will burn.

Is it not only a question of names. If a dugout is constructed in the side of a hill, is it not a tunnel?—Some of the dugouts go downwards but they reckon that might be a trap because there would have to be something on the top as a roof.
MR. BARBER: You have had some mining experience?—Yes, a lot.

Do you say that it would be an advantage to have the floor sloping downwards from the door?—You would not want to have it sloping in so that it would accumulate any water.

I mention the matter from the point of view of smoke?—The smoke does not seem to be any trouble whatever.

Did you say that there was a fire on the 8th February?—There was a fire on the back of this country on a Tuesday.

You are talking about the 8th January?—I do not know about February.

Around Bilston’s mill was extensively burnt last year, was it not?—I was not there last year.

MR. KELSO: What is your job at the mill?—I do different jobs. The last one was working in the log yard. I have not been a faller, but I have been cleaning tracks right out in the bush where the fellers work.

What time of the year was that burnt?—We burnt some of the heads in October.

The heads would burn all right at that time of the year?—Yes, providing it is a dry time. You have to watch the day. I would sooner burn later. They burnt in October last year because it was a dry winter, but in an ordinary year it is necessary to burn as close up to Christmas as possible.

It was not a bad burn in October?—Not this year; but the year was exceptional. It was a good burn about Christmas. It burnt everything clean.

Was it extensive?—It was in that area. It was a controlled piece.

It could not get out because the ground around it had been burnt.

Why were the heads left in October?—That was in the creek. It was a bit damp; rain came before they got burnt. They got less in quantity, and there was not the burn. In some years you might get a patch burnt; the men would still be felling and you could not get the remainder of the tops burnt after the season closed. You must not touch fire then.

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Where were they actually cutting for the last six months?---About one
and a half to two miles north of the mill.

How long has that mill been cutting there?---For nearly three years;
it is just about cut out.

Who lit the fire in December?---No one knows how it got alight. We
think that perhaps an old smouldering stump caused it.

I noticed a stump steaming away on Sunday last when the rain
was coming down. It had been burning since the 13th January.

How do you think a stump could have got alight?---Some of the old logs
in which the wood gets nearly broken apart will smoulder in a
dry year for months and months. The fire may have burnt
into the dry part. No one knows who lit the fire. The
men were at the mill and they cannot make out how it started.
There was some burnt country adjoining it, and the rain put
the fire out.

Was that the burning of the heads that you spoke about?---Yes, earlier
in the year. I have seen fires caused at different times
by lightning striking trees. There will be thunder storms
at times with very little rain. The lightning may strike
a tree and you will see fires spring up. On going over
it will be found that the tree has been struck by lightning.
I do not think that will happen every year but there will be
years when it will happen.

Was there much burning of heads in December this year?---No, I do not
think so. The Proclamation came in. They are
frightened to light a fire and break the law after that.

Did you see any fires being lit in the heads in mill areas in December?---
No, I have never seen any.

What do you mean when you say you have never seen any?---I do not
know if they were lit but the fires came in our heads near
the mill. We do not know how they got alight.

It is a bit of a mystery. What about the end of November?---I could
not say exactly how late we burnt but I know that we burnt in October. This year was such a good year for burning that you could burn early.

MR. GOWANS: There is always a chance of a fire starting if mill heads are left around?---Any sensible man would have mill heads burnt around his mill. He would not leave them there to burn down his mill.

It often happens that a fire starts with heads being left around like that?---I do not think so because no mill owner would have heads lying around his mill.

THE COMMISSIONER: We have heard of several cases where they have?---He cannot be quite sane.

MR. KELSO: It would not matter so much if they were some distance away?---No, but they should be burnt because that makes it safer for everybody. There are men working right out in the bush.

THE COMMISSIONER: That may be the position in your district, but we have heard descriptions of places where they have not burned tops for years?---The mills may have been in very damp places where they could not burn when it was permissible to do so.

No, everybody agreed that they ought to have burnt, but they did not?---I do not know anything about that. I am not going to argue about it.

I was just referring to your statement that no mill owners do that. Some of them do.

MR. KELSO: Have you burnt heads?---Yes.

How do you go about it?---The bush among the heads is dry in most cases.

If it were not dry, you would have to burn the heads separately. If it is very dirty the heat from one lot of heads causes the fire to creep from one lot to another.

How many of you go out to burn the heads?---Two or three. We would burn at snig tracks through the bush. You can burn quite safely
without burning right into where the men are felling.

You actually take a piece of bush with a lot of heads in it, set fire to it, and expect that whole piece of bush to burn?---Yes, if you have time you might light it in several places.

What do you do if the fire gets away from where you expect it to burn?---If the heads are burnt at the right time it might go out when the night comes. We have never had any such fires get away in my experience. My father is 73 years of age and he has lived right in the bush from the time he was two years old. He lived in a house that is burnt today. My brother is a farmer. Many years ago they had a house with a bark roof. They saved their home, so you can tell the kind of fires they had in those days. Recently a brick house would not have stood where we lived.

Did the fire in December get away?---No, no fire got away. It was only an isolated place. It was burnt all around it.

MR. GOVANS: Who do you actually get instructions from to burn off these heads?---From our mill owner. We get permission to burn before the proclamation is issued. We say "Here is a good day; send someone out to burn". Or else, we go out ourselves and burn.

Do you get instructions from the forestry officers?---No, I have never had any forestry officer's instructions. I know a man who wrote to ask for permission to burn from a forestry officer. He waited and waited for permission to burn his scrub, but no word came. It was getting late. Anyhow, the scrub was burnt. He got word from the Forests Commission afterwards but there had been three inches of rain and it would have been impossible to have burnt it then. There were no more days on which it would have been fit to burn.

I suppose the mill owner could have got instructions from forest officers without you knowing it?---He may have done so; I could not say.

MR. BARBER: Are you putting it that there was unrestricted burning
in your father's day?—Yes, there was no law about burning in these days. You would burn the parts that would burn early, and then burn the other parts as they got dry enough to burn, and it meant that there were no bush fires.

When do you think the change-over occurred—when the restrictions were imposed in your district?—I have never seen any fires serious enough to do much damage up till the 1926 fire. There may have been isolated cases where men were burnt out; but those things happen anywhere.

When did this change from unrestricted burning occur?—I think in 1922, but I am not quite sure.

Do you put that as the date when restrictions were first imposed?—I am not sure of the date, but it is from that period onwards that we have had these big fires.

THE WITNESS WITHDRAW.

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JOHN GODFREY SAXTON: Examined.

MR. GOWANS: Your name is John Godfrey Saxton, and you are a timber miller living at Moos?—Yes.

Before the fire on the 13th January you and your three brothers were associated in a timber mill at Tanjil Brave?—Yes.

That is about 27 miles north-west from Moos?—Yes.

How many people were employed on the mill?—There were 40 all told on that day.

I understand that you had a number of buildings there; the mill itself, a blacksmith's shop and so on?—Yes.

Did you have any timber there?—About 350,000 super feet. That was cut and ready for seasoning?—Yes. It was all burnt.

I understand that the mill was burnt out on the 13th and you and some 29 others took refuge in a dugout?—There were 30 others.

Your brother, his wife and another man took refuge in a smaller dugout, and were burnt?—That is correct.

Further down from here a number of families, including the Rowleys,
were burnt out also and five people were burnt to death?—Yes.

Would you mind telling the Commission the dimensions of the dugout in which you took refuge.

THE COMMISSIONER: Describe it to us gently?—I cannot swear that I am exact, but it is approximately 50 ft. long, 7 ft. wide and 6 ft. high.

Is it built in the hillside?—Yes, in the hillside, a few yards above the logging winch.

There is no roof anywhere?—No, it was dug into the hillside and the roof and part of the sides were timbered in case water or anything else should dislodge the roof.

MR. GOWANS: Was there any water laid on in the neighborhood of that dugout?—Yes, there was water very close by, but it was not laid on. We relied on tubs, buckets, etc. and carted in a supply beforehand. Actually, there were a couple of tanks within 15 yards.

Was there any exposed woodwork?—There was a little right on the front of the dugout. The end of the timbers which formed the protection to stop the roof falling in would be exposed, together with a couple of posts. Otherwise there was no exposed woodwork.

I understand that none of the timber work caught fire?—No, it did not.

You were there for quite a long while?—Two hours.

There is just one part of your experience that might be useful.

I understand that you hung a blanket over the front part of the dugout, and subsequently when the air got bad you had another blanket placed farther back from the entrance?—Yes.

You found that it was of some assistance?—Yes. One man said "We cannot hold it here; can we put the blanket farther back."

I was one of the men holding the blanket at the time so I got relief, grabbed a couple of wet blankets, and made another screen about 6 ft. back. We found that it eased
considerably the position of the men in front. That was not our original idea. We left the two lots of blankets there.

What do you think was the effect of hanging this blanket further back?---If you light a fire out in the open and attempt to dry, say, the knees of your trousers, the smoke comes up into your eyes. You walk around the fire and the same thing happens.

In fact, the smoke will follow you around and get in your eyes. That is when there is no wind. I consider that we formed a sort of chamber and the second blanket formed a buffer for the smoke. It did not penetrate through there, and also eased the pressure.

You actually stood between the two blankets?---No. There would be about eight men who stood between the two blankets and the rest were further back in the dugout.

That was not the only dugout. I understand there were three others?---Yes.

There was one nearly as large as that?---No, that was the largest by far. What was the size of the dugout nearest in size?---There were a couple that were about 25 ft. long, 9 ft. wide, and 6 ft. high.

Nobody took refuge in those at all?---Yes, six men took refuge in them. They came out of it all right?---Yes, they had a pretty difficult time.

One man is still practically suffering from his eyes. Taking it on the whole, they got off pretty well.

The smallest dugout was where your brother and the others took refuge?---Yes.

Speaking generally, I understand that the timber in that dugout caught fire and some part of the roof collapsed?---Yes, about 6 ft. of it - the first section. It was split into about 6 ft. sections.

How did it come about that you put these dugouts in originally?---
That goes back a long way. I think it was my Dad who suggested in the 1926 fire that if he had been one of the people up at Whalley's mill or the settlement close by, he would have run a couple of hundred yards up the Beanak road and got into a mine tunnel. I think it would have been a good couple of hundred yards, but still the idea was there. Mr. Scanlon of the Timber Workers' Union heard of the idea and that was the origin of the dugouts as far as fire protection to the sawmills was concerned.

(Pages 1064 follow).
MR. GOWANS: Was it simply because of your father's idea you put in these dugouts, or was there any kind of exchange of ideas between the sawmillers and the Forests Commission?---The Forests Commission took the idea up. We were sawmilling in the Erica district at the time, and the Forests Commission advised all sawmillers to build dugouts. We were all born and bred in the bush and it seemed a good idea to us. We put in a dugout, which incidentally was never used for that purpose until this last fire. I understand some of the forestry men took refuge in it. It is still there.

You did the same thing when you started off in this other area?---Yes, but we went one better at Tanjil. We built a more extensive dugout there.

You had no previous experience of having to shelter in a dugout at all?---No.

I believe the two small dugouts on your property were built by the Country Roads Board?---That is true.

What had been the position so far as your mill was concerned with regard to the burning off of heads?---Every year we were issued with a notice; I cannot say exactly when it was, August or September, requiring us to burn off under the Forest Regulations before the end of October. Some years that was quite possible; they were burnt off, but other years they were not. If you started a fire it might burn a little and leave a mess on the ground, then the brother who was burnt in the fire, and who generally looked after that part of the business, would speak to the Forests Commission and ask for an extension. That may or may not have been granted, but if the extension was granted as it was several times, we would burn off before the end of November.

We generally did get a burn although there was a little variance between us and the Forestry officer in charge, because the Forestry officer would say it was
hot and dry enough to burn, and the brother Ben would say it was not. There was a bit of difference of opinion in that way. For instance, when we burnt we liked a burn that would really clean up the rubbish, not a burn that would leave a bit here and there and leave the rubbish on the ground next year. The Forest Commission would go the other way; they were a little cautious and wanted to make sure we did not get too fierce a burn because they said it would destroy the seed trees. If it came a year like this last one there would not have been any need for an extension of burning, because it was all burnt around in those areas.

When did you have the last burn off?—I cannot tell you exactly; I think it must have been during last October.

In general did you find the Forestry Officers were anxious you should burn off the heads?—Yes, definitely. That was part and parcel of our contract if it came to the point.

That was one of the conditions of the licence?—Yes.

Who was the particular forestry officer dealing with you?—In the area we are now in, Mr. Bonallack of Nearim South.

How often would you see him?—It is more or less conjectures on my part. Generally my business did not take me out into the back. I could not say how often he would get out there.

It has been suggested today, and at other times, that having regard to the risk you run it would be a good idea to get the mill out of the forest area altogether, and so have both the mill and the men right outside the forest. Have you any views about that?—Yes, I think as far as the sawmill itself is concerned, it would be quite a feasible idea; but logging operations must necessarily remain in the forest. I think if you took the logging crews out of the forest you would get into trouble.

In what way?—In this way; in a forest like this you would get well into it, anything up to 12, 15, 20 or possibly up to 30 miles. You would probably be that far from your
settle, and you would probably have to pay men walking or travelling time. By the time you paid their transport it would not be an economical proposition.

Are you cutting mountain ash out there?---Mostly.

Have you turned over in your mind the question of the extra cost incurred in taking the logs out?---Yes.

What are your conclusions about that; would that mean a great deal of difference to you in the case of mountain ash?---It would mean a considerable difference, but it has its compensations. For instance, you could get rid of your waste for paper pulp.

The demand for paper pulp is developing?---Definitely. As far as mountain ash is concerned there is no worry at all about it; they can take it as fast as you can get it. They are anxious for it.

So far as you are concerned, the whole scheme would have to be limited to keeping the mills outside and leaving the men in the forest?---Only those men engaged in the logging.

How many men were engaged in the logging at your mill?---Round about eight.

That would be out at the cutting area?---Actually the winch or the log hauler. It is situated right at the mill, but as you pushed in you shift it further back.

Were you here in the days of the 1926 fire?---In the Erixa district.

Can you tell the Commission, of your own knowledge, what steps have been taken by the Forests Commission to make the forest area safer in the parts you know of?---Cutting fire breaks or patrol tracks. In some cases the tracks are, I think, round about 20 ft. wide, and in some cases they are only 9 ft. or 10 ft. wide. However, they criss-crossed the country fairly well with those, and in a few instances they formed rough earthen roads.

Do you think if they had put more roads in it would have been of any advantage?---I think the roads are definitely an advantage.
You think you could do with more roads in these areas around here and Erica?---Yes, definitely.

MR. BARBER: I do not know whether you have told the Commission in which direction that 50 ft. dugout faces?---It is facing due south.

Have you any theories about the proper direction for dugouts to take?---I think they vary with different localities. For instance, the most disastrous fires are generally fires with a north wind behind them; but in some cases you might have, as we did in Tanjil Breen, a fire coming from a different direction. The fire that came on us was almost south-west.

Do you think it would be an advantage to have some sort of baffle plate of earth, or something like that in front of the dugout, so that you could enter from each side?---I do not agree with that idea. I think the idea would be to have a door made of a steel frame, fairly rigid, and even covered with galvanised iron to take the full blast of the fire. A fire like that always has a terrific wind, and the dugout would not be air tight. What I have against the baffle in front, and the two entrances - I may be totally wrong - the tendency would be to drive the shore air from the dugout. If it did that, it would be a lower pressure inside the dugout, and the hot air and smoke would blow in.

That may be so; I wanted to get your ideas about that. You spoke about the market for paper pulp?---Yes.

That is only local to this district?---Yes.

MR. KELSO: In your time have you ever had to burn your heads after the Proclamation?---After the Proclamation has gone through Parliament?

Mr. Lind's Proclamation?---No, I can never remember having to do so.

You have always been able to get your burn done before the Proclamation?
I would not say that. There have been years they will not burn, and the heads are left until the next year; but we have never burnt after the Proclamation.

Is it a fact that in an ordinary year you do not get all your heads burnt?—It often happens, but as a rule you can, unless the year was very hot, obtain an extension to burn from the Forests Commission or the local officer up until the end of November. If it was not safe, that would be the end of it; there would be no burn attempted. If a fire got in after that it would be accidental. To my knowledge we have never put in a match after the Proclamation, and we would jump on anybody who suggested it.

It has been stated that it is unnecessary to burn the heads of Ash, because the ash bush will not burn. You do not agree with that?—I burn them, though I admit if you did not burn them this year, and you had a wet year following the probability would be that most of those heads would not burn next year.

Not even in a dry year like this?—Yes, when you get a volume of fire coming in; but I was speaking of putting a match right in on it.

A cold fire?—Yes.

Did not mean that?—It will definitely burn if you get a volume of fire. Up to date that has always come from the low country.

You would agree the way to destroy the ash forests is to leave the heads in them?—It would certainly contribute fairly well to it, but at the same time when a fire like the one we had on January 13th comes in the heads in the Tanjil forest would only be a bagatelle. There were not enough heads in the forest. There were only two mills and they had not been there any length of time.

Some witnesses have said they have not been able to get their burning
done before the Proclamation. Apparently that does not
apply to your area?---No, I would say it did not apply to
that area. We were definitely able to this year.

Though you are a good deal higher than they?---Yes.

And in a forest that presumably would not burn so easily?---Yes.

MR. GOWANS: You knew where the Rowley’s lived?---Yes.

What was the trouble there, that those people were burned to death?---
Was there no clearing around?---There were a few acres more
or less cleared but very little.

Scrub right up to the house?---On one side/within a few yards of
the house. Not only that, as it turned out, perhaps it
did not make much difference, there was a fire on the West
Tanjil about November, and my brother, with a gang of
men, had a pretty tough run in putting it out. That fire
burnt up alongside Rowley’s, but it was not what we call a
good burn; it went through and killed the leaves but left
them on. It was a tinder box and the whole thing
would go like gunpowder. They thought they were safe
because a fire had been through there, but quite a few others
did not think so.

Was there a settlement around there?---No.

They were on their own?---Yes, we were nearest to them, probably a
little more than two miles away.

Was there any road out from their place?---Only the road we carted
the timber over. It is a Council road, but they were the
only settlers there and the Council naturally did not do a
great deal towards keeping it open for them. Since we have
been in there, we have kept it open.

Do you know if they had a motor car?---Definitely, no.

MR. BARBER: In your view that the leaving of heads in the
ash country contributes to the intensity of the fire.

Apparently you agree with me to that extent?---Yes, that is
correct.
As I understand you, a fire would go through whether the heads had been left there or not?—A fire like this last one, definitely yes; but a normal creeping fire would be quite all right provided no heads were about.

But in a big fire— I think the expression you used— they were a mere bagatelle?—That is right.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

RALPH FRANCIS BROWN: Sworn and Examined.

MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—Ralph Francis Brown, and I am a First Constable of Police stationed at Mirboo North.

I have been a member of the Police Force for the last 13 years. The greater part of that time has been spent in the forest country in Gippsland. I was stationed for 3½ years at Noojee. Prior to joining the Police Force I was a farmer and timber worker at Erica.

I understand you have certain views with regard to the prevention of fires which you wish to put for the assistance of the Commission?—I have been accustomed to fires practically all my life. Except a small part of my service in Melbourne in the Police Force I have been in contact with outbreaks of fire and endeavouring to suppress fires, prosecuting people for lighting fires, and endeavouring in every way, to avoid destruction of the forest by fires in the dangerous period. I have come to the conclusion that in spite of the efforts of the police, the Forests Commission, the Water Commission, and other authorities, it is impossible to prevent the forest from getting on fire at some time or another. People say that fires start by lightning, but I have never seen a fire start by lightning.

I have seen many trees struck, but I have never seen one burnt. I do not think there are many fires started in that way. I think most fires are lighted deliberately. Some people light them for the
purpose of getting additional grass; others light them for what they consider a protection against the extension of the fire to a property that might be adjoining. Other people light camp fires. They do not care for them and they spread. A good many people light fires for no apparent reason, possibly only to get some sort of satisfaction in seeing a good blaze. Before I start on the method of prevention of fires I might say I am convinced that once a mountain ash forest is cut the heads of the trees should be burnt, and no other fire whatever should be permitted to go into it, because the ash trees is so tender that it is impossible to burn the floor of the forest without destroying the trees. It applies just the same as burning in an orchard.

THE COMMISSIONER: Where do you get that knowledge from, that you injure the ash trees by burning?—I have travelled all over the Now South forest from Arica to Wood's Point in all directions, and found thousands of acres of forests killed by fire. There is no settlement anywhere near it; the trees have not been ring-barked but they are killed—huge areas of them—wholly and solely by fire. There have been successive fires over the area and the forest has been burnt out. The seed has been burnt and it has gone into scrub land. I have witnessed that. The mountain ash forest will not stand fires. The only forest that I know will stand firing without much destruction to the forest is the type of forest adjacent to here—Willow Grove—which in a poor class of forest growing on bayonet grass country. Following my theory that it is impossible to prevent a forest getting alight, I would suggest a ridge be selected at stated points in the seed forests, I would say 10 miles apart, and cleared of all eucalyptus for a distance of say 40 chains wide. In that clearing a poplar forest could be planted. The poplar
forest is non-inflammable and is very difficult to burn, even when dry. It does not grow dry sprouts on it like a eucalyptus forest. The leaves will not burn as they are non-inflammable. A eucalyptus forest, when alight, burns just as well green as it does when dry because of the inflammable gas it gives off. It is impossible to check it if you have a fire break half a mile wide, without trees. I do not think you could possibly prevent a fire blowing across that, but if it was a poplar forest it could be prevented as the trees are so green they will form a natural wet barrier to the on-coming sparks. The leaves and debris from those trees could easily be cleaned up and burnt in the wintertime, or even blown away from under the trees. The poplar forest would be of national good because it is valuable timber.

MR. GOWANS: Do you know any place around this Erica - Noojee district - where you think that idea could be put into operation?---

Yes. I was stationed at Noojee, and since Noojee has been burnt down I have visited the place, I am convinced that the portion of the forest on the western side of the town which is owned by the Forests Commission should be cleared and planted with poplar trees instead of allowing the eucalyptus growth, because I am afraid if it is allowed to grow as hitherto any town that would be built would be endangered in a dry period.

That is somewhere near the Boys' Camp was?---That is the spot I have in mind, commonly called Peacock's property. Another thing I think should be done where settlers surround Crown Lands or State Forests is that they might be approached by the forestry officer and asked what burning off they desire to do. That could be ascertained from them and some assistance rendered to them under the direction of the forestry officer. In districts where
there is no forestry officer, I think the local police
might be authorised to grant permits to burn. Very often
farmers go to the police and say they have a piece of land
which requires burning. I am positively certain all due
precautions could be made that the fire would not spread.
Farmers have requested me to give permission, but, of
course, I must always refer them to the Forestry Officer.

(Page 1073 follows).
When you were stationed at Noojee, during those three years, did you see the Forests Commission putting into operation any ideas to minimise fires?---The Forests Commission had gangs of relief workers from Melbourne and other places employed under the guidance of an experienced bushman. He directed their operations in the clearing of tracks, the cleaning up of the forests and the general opening up of the State forests.

Do you think there is any difficulty about carrying on that work from the point of view of the Forestry officer; has he plenty of men, money and time to do it, so far as you know?---No, I think the Forestry officers have such a huge territory to control that they cannot effectively control it during the period when patrolling is required.

What about fire-fighting; do you find that they have enough men in those places to fight fires in or near forest areas?---During the period I was at Noojee there were no fires of consequence that I observed, and there was no opportunity to determine whether or not the equipment available to the Forests Commission was effective. They had no occasion to use it, so far as I can recollect, in the forests around that neighborhood.

Have you any State Forests at Mirboo North?---Yes, there is a small portion on the north side of Mirboo North of Crown lands and forests, either 5,000 or 6,900 acres in extent, and practically all of it has been burnt.

Was it during January?---Yes. Portion was burnt in the winter, some in the spring, and right up to the 13th January, when the fire practically consumed all the area.

Who fought the fires in that area, or how did you deal with them?---There was not very much fighting done until the fire menaced the settlers. It was practically impossible to get people to volunteer to go out and fight a fire unless...
it was going to injure them, or some of their friends. They did not take notice until it reached a danger point to settlers, and no notice is taken there of fires in Crown lands.

Who actually does the fighting when it menaces a settler's holding — you or the Forestry Officer? — There has only been a Forestry officer there for a short period — Mr. Galbraith. When the fires are noticed a combination of farmers adjoining the property alight and whatever volunteers can be obtained from the townpeople go out and attack the fire. Some use beaters, some use spray pumps and we endeavour to control the fire in that way.

Is there any lack of co-operation between you, the Forestry officer, and the local people or do you find that you all work together? — There is no collective system at all in regard to the farmers, until a fire menaces them in a particular area. The individuals in that locality then become collective. If a fire breaks out on the western side people on the northern side would not rush out in great numbers to fight the fire, but when the fire comes around their corner, they are quite all right. They are very individual, and I have noticed that amongst the farming people a great deal. I noticed an exception when I was staying at Coleraine, where the people would fight a fire wherever it broke out. I think they have realized that fires travel over large areas. In Gippsland they have been so used to burning that they do not view fires with the same alarm as they do in the Western district, where they think the best thing to do is to prevent the extension of the fire wherever it breaks out.

When you find that there is a fire somewhere in your area, what is the first step taken? — I organize all available persons and send out a truck load. I take my own car and as
many volunteers as I can, to prevent the fire from spreading over the properties. No houses or sheds were burnt down in my district during the danger period.

In January last when did you first see fires in the region of Mirboo North?—Fires were burning in and around the district on the 11th January.

Did not you see one before then?—Yes, there were fires previous to that. On the 3rd January there was a fire burning in the forest country.

Was it on Crown lands or was it in the forest country?—I do not know which is the division because it has only recently been excised.

What steps did you take about that fire?—It was burning on Crown lands and I went and mentioned the fact of it burning to the local forestry officer. I suggested that if he could get the Commission men from some other district it would be a wise precaution to surround the fire and subside it.

Was that done?—I did not see any men arrive. The fire eventually burnt up towards the town where it was attacked by a railway ganger and other volunteers on a Saturday afternoon.

Did you hear from the local Forestry officer why he was not able to deal with it?—Yes, he spoke to me later and said that he had telephoned for men but at that time all available men were engaged in fighting fires elsewhere. There were outbreaks in all forest areas, and there were no men to spare to sent to Mirboo North.

Are there any other matters you desire to mention for the assistance of the Commission?—There is one other matter in connection with the Proclamation. To my mind it is not wholly practicable so far as it relates to permission to burn off scrub, wood and other things. In effect the Proclamation says that a fire can be lighted after 4 p.m. on a day
when the temperature does not exceed 90 degrees and not more than a light breeze is prevailing. There is also a direction as to receiving the written permission of the forestry officer, and that directions are to be obtained from him. At the finish it says that all fires must be extinguished by sunrise. I consider that it is practically impossible to extinguish a fire once a stump or a log catches alight. It is impossible to put it out until the rain comes. You could not carry sufficient water on to it to put out a fire like that.

MR. BARBER: I suppose that is often a danger with this late burning off, that people who burn off fairly late are likely to leave some of the logs burning?—It is impossible to determine when the fire is right out.

I suppose there is no very great fuss made about people who light fires after 4 p.m. and do not get them completely out by sun-up?—No, nobody has been gaol for it yet.

What permanent forest were you referring to when you said the Crown lands had been dedicated in 1938 as permanent forest?—It is portion of the land adjacent to the Thorpdale road, extending towards Darlamurra, but I do not know the dimensions of it, and I do not know what part it was separated from. I was one of the movers to have it dedicated as a forest. It is poor country and it is needed for the district.

That is the only permanent forest in that area, is it not?—In the area patrolled by me, that is the only permanent forest; but there are other Crown lands.

There is another point in your theory on fire prevention, that ridges should be cleared and planted with trees. Do not you think that poplars would be difficult to grow under those circumstances?—No, I have seen poplar trees grow on that high country, and grow quickly and well.
Is there any particular advantage for poplars over oaks, or chestnuts, or anything like that?—No, but I think a poplar tree will grow into more useful timber. It is a good tall tree which would form a strong barrier, to an on-coming fire.

You think it would be easy enough to grow poplars there?—Yes, I have seen poplars growing and I have fought fires around houses where they were growing. At Dalburn there were poplar trees around the house, together with one gum tree. The scrub all around caught alight, but actually the poplars saved that house.

In fires such as were experienced in January last a half mile belt would not be sufficient to stop a fire?—I think it would.

How far have you seen a fire jump—the furthest distance you have seen?—I have seen it flying from one place to another.

Fire has frequently jumped over a greater distance than half a mile?—Yes; but I suggest a ridge to be taken, which would be one of the highest points around, and then the fire would have to rise over the ridge and blow right over it. I do not say it is impossible to pass a barrier of that kind, but I am convinced that it would be an effective firebreak. The present fire breaks could not be expected to prevent the extension of a fire of any proportion.

Even if the ridge did act as a protection it would only protect the half on which the fire had started. The half on which the fire started would be burnt up before the fire got to the ridge?—Yes; I suggest that they be put in at intervals.

MR. KELSO: The real point of your suggestion is that you would not have a big fire if you had breaks such as you propose. The fire would not reach the condition in which it would be able to jump?—I am against firing forest country.

What was put to you was that once a fire assumes tremendous proportions
it can jump for a number of miles. But if you had fire
breaks in the right places you would prevent the fires from
reaching such dimensions?—That is exactly as I was endeavou-
ing to explain. I wish to isolate the fires.

We have heard a good deal of discussion about whether settlers read the
Proclamations or whether they ask for permission to burn after
the proclaimed period. Do you think a man who has seen on a
Proclamation that he has to put a 12-ft. fire break around
the parts to be burnt; that he has to burn between 4 p.m.
and sunrise and must have the fire right out next morning is,
under those circumstances, likely to ask for permission?—No;

THE COMMISSIONER: Why do you pick on poplars? It is an interesting
theory you propounded. Will not a poplar burn at any season?—
—No, it is a very poor burning timber. Only last winter
I was given a number of poplar cuttings, loppings from trees
that were carted into my yard by the contractor who did the
job. I used them for fuel, but they were very poor burning
wood. If you put a block of poplar into the fire you must
put a lot more wood with it. If you then take the burning
block and throw it outside, it will go out straight away.

You would want a few million of them every year for planting purposes,
would you not?—It is a rapid growing tree and it will grow
like the ash. There are several different varieties of
poplars. Other European trees may be non-inflammable.
I know the eucalypt tree will burn green just as well as
dry when you get sufficient heat.

MR. GOWANS: Do you think poplars would be a better proposition than pines
?—Yes, the pine is the worst tree in the world to plant
anywhere near a house.

Have you asked the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works what they
think of pine trees?—I know how the pine trees burn.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

1078.

BROWN.
MR. GOWANS: What is your full name?—Alan George Galbraith; I am a forest overseer stationed at Mirboo North. I am under the supervision of the Neerim forest officer.

What area do you patrol?—I have just been transferred to that district in the last few months and I have not yet been over the whole of my area. I have been busy on fighting fires most of that time. There are Crown lands scattered right through there from Leongatha to Moe. There are reserved forests at Alanbee and Balmoral. I have nobody helping me there, and the nearest forestry officer or employee of the Forests Commission is at Neerim South, about 60 miles away.

Is it part of your duty to patrol that area as far as possible, to spot fires in various parts, or to find where the fires are threatening forest areas?—Yes.

Do you remember the last witness, Mr. Brown, speaking to you about a fire, early in January when you were not able to get enough men to fight it?—Yes. I rang up the Chief Forester at Neerim South but there was no help available. Everybody was busy and they were practically all in the same boat as myself.

Nothing could be done about it?—No.

Where was that fire?—It was coming straight out of Crown lands up the railway line in the township of Mirboo North.

Was it threatening the State Forest in any way?—It had gone through the State Forest. It came through Crown lands and State forest, which is right alongside these Crown lands.

To that extent it was a matter for the forestry officers?—Yes.

Apparently that fire was threatening the township of Mirboo North but nothing could be done about it because of the fact that you could not get any men?—That is so.

Were any men available, any that you can think of?—There were
local men available but I could not get them to volunteer to help until the fire practically got to the town, then they came out. When it threatened the golf course and the Cemetery, they came out.

How many days after Constable Brown spoke to you did it really threaten the township?—He spoke to me in the morning and said it was threatening the township on the Saturday prior to the big fire, about the 7th January. It did not burn any houses in Mirboo North and we got it under control around the town. It burnt right up to areas that had been burnt in the spring. It completed that on the Sunday, the 8th January.

Would you have had a better chance if you had been able to get men on the 7th January?—Had I been able to get men to help me on the Friday I would have been able to get the fire under control, because it was burning over country which had been previously burnt in that year and was just creeping about. But it was much too big for me.

I am not suggesting that you should go out and do it on your own.

MR. KELSO: Can you say when that fire actually started?—There was a fire burning at Boolarra below Mirboo when I was transferred to the district on the 12th December. That fire would go out and start up again. I would not say it was the one fire all the time but it seemed to start up from time to time in the same place where the previous fire had died down. On every warm day there would be a fire.

Did anybody go out and try and put out that fire?—Only railway men and myself. I was working in conjunction with them.

Did you have any men with you?—No forestry men.

How long after that did it go to the State forest?—It was burning for about three weeks on Crown land and private country before it got into the State forest, early on Saturday morning the 7th January. That is the morning when it threatened the township.
Is that the first time that you took vigorous action about it?—No.
That is when you rang your superior officer for help, on the day that
the policeman mentioned it?—Yes.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

CHARLES WILLIAM ELSEY, sworn and examined:

MR. GOWANS: Your name is Charles William Elsey, you hold the rank
of forester and are in charge of the Erica forest district?—
That is correct.

I understand that district has a large area of State forest included in
it?—I can give you particulars in round figures. The
district consists of about 572,000 acres.

There are about 72,600 acres of reserved forest?—No, about 106,000
acres, including protected forests.

Will you take these figures, that the district contains 72,600 acres
of reserve forest and protected forests totalling 132,000
acres, or a grand total of nearly 204,000 acres of reserved
and protected forests?—My figures do not altogether
agree with that.

You have assisting you in Erica an assistant forester, a cadet forester
and four foremen?—Yes.

Are they all stationed at Erica?—Not all at Erica, but close to it.

You have a large number of sawmillers in your district?—Yes. I have
been in the district about 3½ years. Prior to that I was
at Stawell for a short period as an assistant, and before
then I was in charge of the Lal Lal district. At Stawell
I was there temporarily during the change over. Previous
to that I was in the Warburton district and I spent most of
my time in the Warburton-Powelltown district.

Are you a graduate of the Creswick school?—I am.

The Erica district suffered from severe fires in 1932, did it not?—

Not the Erica township, but in the neighbourhood.

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ELSEY.
What steps have been taken in the reserved forests around Erica since the

time that you have been in charge to make the forest safe?—The area has been divided up. The State forest area includes State forests and Crown lands around the face of the Baw Baws. That has been divided up by 16 ft fire lines or patrol tracks — frequently called fire breaks — which is a wrong name. The area has been divided by these lines running up spurs from the rivers to the top of the Baw Baw plateau. We have been putting in cross lines to divide it more or less into squares. That was the first operation.

How many miles of those lines have been put in since you have been there?—

—It is hard to give you that figure off hand. There would be over 200 miles.

Which have been put in since you have been there?—No, chiefly since the 1932 fires. I am only giving those figures out of my mind.

Those fire lines or tracks are simply used for patrol purposes and to enable burning back where necessary?—Yes, to give access and for burning back.

What else has been done?—We also put in a line of telephones which connected nearly every mill in the district and also connected huts where we have men.

(Continued on Page 1083).
THE COMMISSIONER: Have you done that for fire precaution or for general purposes?—Both; it assists greatly in general procedure and it is also a fire precaution. Then we have a system of look-outs and fire guards.

MR. GOWANS: How many fire guards have you in your district?—My number is three to five as required.

You are allowed from three to five fire guards for the whole of your district?—Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Your district comprises 200,000 acres?—Yes.

Do you feel that that is sufficient?—No.

MR. GOWANS: Is it all you can get?—That is all the finances will allow, I understand.

How did you get that impression?—Because I received an instruction not to employ out of the Commission's money more than seven men for the whole of that district. Of course, that does not include those who come under relief arrangements; that is, from the grant made to the Forests Commission. That includes the foreman.

And you have four foremen?—Yes.

You have never more than three fire guards?—I have to use foremen as fire guards.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you have four or five men all the year round? I use the foremen as fire guards. Sometimes I use one of the other men and class him as a fire guard. That is not a whole time job. They are employed in ordinary work during the year.

That is a sort of label that you stick on them?—Yes, during the summer months.

If they are told that they are a fire guard they go about their ordinary work?—They do their ordinary work on the quiet days. On a dangerous day they go on fire patrol.

You do not have four or five men allotted to you as fire guards. You have four or five men who give part of their time to that duty?—Yes, that would be more correct.
Do you read the Annual Report of the Forests Commission?—Yes.
Do you know whether its activities are carried on at a profit or at a
loss?—Do you mean the whole of the activities of the
Commission?
Yes, as far as you can glean from the reports?—If all the relief
money spent is taken into consideration, it looks as
though it is not carried on at a profit.
I am not trying to probe into the affairs of the Forests Commission.
I wanted to know why they were apparently understaffed?—
The Act reads that the Commission is granted a certain sum
of money for works. I understand that during the depression
that sum came back to $32,000.
Perhaps we should not ask you about these things.
MR. BARBER: You will be getting that information in Melbourne.
THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.
MR. GOWANS: Your foremen would have to carry out duties in connection
with the collection of revenue, royalties and so on?—No;
they do not do much with the collection, actually.
What about checking?—Sometimes.
THE COMMISSIONER: They do not check, do they?—Not very much. I
might send one out to a logging area to check logs where
we are measuring in the logs. They also inspect mills.
One of those men in particular is classed as a logging
inspector supervisor. He has a full time job inspecting
the logging areas and the mills, and also inspecting the
milling operations to see that there is no waste, and such
like.
MR. GOWANS: Have you told me all the steps you have taken since you
have been there to make the forest safer?—No; in that
district we have done quite a lot of what we call controlled
strip burning.
We know what that is. Can you give me any idea of the average involved?—
—It is in strips and perhaps I can give you a better
idea in length. The strips we burn are from 10 to 20
chains wide. We have done about 35 miles along the
Thompson River itself.

That is in the three years that you have been there?—Yes. The idea was to burn along the Thompson River itself and then burn strips from the river up towards the top of the Baw Baws. There were four strips of that nature burnt. They run east and west, more or less, and the idea is to stop fires coming down from the north. We have based all of this on the 32 fires which have come down from the north and the strips were run east and west to try and break that sort of fire before it became of any size, should such a fire start on the Thompson. The line as on the Thompson was to stop the fire if it started there and to stop any fire started by fishermen.

Did you carry out this controlled strip burning pursuant to any fire protection scheme drawn up for your district?—Yes. As a matter of fact, I started it before the scheme was drawn up last summer.

When you say last summer, do you mean the one we are still in?—No, 1937-38.

Was that the first time you knew of a fire protection scheme being drawn up for any district that you were in?—Yes.

Any systematic fire protection scheme?—Other than the officers.

Although Erica had a very severe fire in 1932, it was not until 1937 or 1938 that a fire protection scheme was drawn up by the Forests Commission?—I had been asked by the Commission what I intended to do in the Thompson Valley and I explained my system.

When were you asked to do that?—I believe it was before the summer of 1937-38—just shortly before it.

After you explained your ideas this fire protection scheme came to light?—No, the fire protection scheme as a whole was inaugurated when the position of fire protection officer was created.

You are referring to Mr. Torbett's position?—Yes.
Was his office created last summer?---Yes, Mr Torbet was in my district in March last.

MR. BARRIE: The witness may have misunderstood you there.

MR. GOWANS: Mr. Torbet's office of Chief Fire Protection Officer was not in existence last summer?---Not during the summer.

THE COMMISSIONER: What do you mean by that?---It was only a new position; I could not tell you when it was created.

MR. TORBET: It was created in December 1937.

MR. GOWANS: This Fire Protection scheme that you have mentioned came into existence after Mr. Torbet's office had been created?---You mean the actual scheme?

The systematic scheme itself?---We had been working on it beforehand. You had been working on your own ideas?---Yes, I had not got them from anywhere else.

We may take it for granted that before that scheme came into operation each district officer was left to employ his own ideas about his own areas?---We were instructed regarding the construction of breaks.

You were instructed in regard to details?---Yes.

What about mechanics?---Each officer submitted his ideas in the plan of operation. It went through the inspector.

When you came to the Erica district had any kind of systematic protection been carried out there?---Yes, most of that 200 miles break was put in before I came to Erica.

You do not like the word "break" applied to them; you mean fire lines?---Yes, or communication tracks.

Had the telephone been put in?---One long telephone to mills in the Tyers section had been put in before I came there. I was not in charge of the Erica district for the first few months that I was there. The second telephone was put in; it was not my idea.

When you came there the scheme, if you can call it that, was a kind of criss-crossing of fire lines?---Yes.

Had there been any strip burning?---They had attempted to do burning
in the Thompson beforehand but there had not been much done.

In the first year that I was at Erica I was acting as assistant, as I have said. They went to the Thompson River during the first summer and tried to burn but the weather broke and they could not do so. It was a wet season.

Have you been able to do as much as you wanted in the way of putting this fire protection scheme into operation?—No.

What has been your main difficulty in that direction?—Money

That means lack of men?—Exactly.

Do you think that if you had been able to get that scheme further into operation you would have been able to do any good with the last fire?—Not with the fire of the 13th January.

That was so because it came from a considerable distance?—Yes. The big fire on the 13th January came from a considerable distance, but other fires came from much handier places. They started on the 8th January, they really broke away on Sunday the 8th January. The main bush fire came through on the 13th January.

Does your answer mean that if you got another fire like the one on Friday 13th January no scheme you could evolve would be any good?—The strips that we had burnt through were burnt over again.

With the same intensity as if they were not there?—I was not there.

Have you any opinion as to whether they would decrease the intensity of the fires at all?—It has burnt the ground there. I have not actually seen the section which was burnt about the 1st October. That was in really good burning weather but a crown fire went through that again. There was not much alight on the ground.

I want to make sure of this. Your answer seems to be that if you got a fire like the one on the 13th January, given the forest in the same condition again, no scheme that you could evolve would stop it?—I cannot see that any scheme that
we can evolve can stop the fire if it comes in from a distance.

If some such scheme as this were put into operation at the place where the fire arises, that is, earlier, then there would be a good chance of stopping it from spreading?—You have a fair chance.

What practice have you put into operation in the Erica District with regard to millers keeping the forest clean?—We send out a notice each year advising them to burn off their heads.

What steps do you take to see that that is carried out?—We ask them to ring us up and advise when they want to burn. There are certain areas in which we like to protect our own interests, such as in regard to young seedling growth which may be adjacent. We want our men to be there. We also want to know actually where the fires are.

THE COMMISSIONER: What steps do you take to make them carry out your requirements?—Usually they do it without any steps being taken. Of course, we send out the notice telling them that they have to burn by a certain day.

What do you do if they ignore the notice?—We usually see them personally.

MR. GOWANS: Have you ever had to do that during your experience at Erica?—No, not in my personal experience. I have asked the man who I have spoken of as a logging supervisor to see certain people. His name is McKerrow.

Is he still supervising up there?—Yes.

On how many occasions have you asked him to do that?—That is really a hard question; not on very many occasions.

Do you frequently visit the areas where these mills carry on operations?—I try to visit them as frequently as I can. It is my endeavour to do so once a month.

Do you do it?—I find that I cannot do it.

Why is that?—I have inspections to make in certain areas.
district I have a tramway to look after; it is like a small railway, and it requires a considerable amount of time.

Have you seen this statement showing the duties of an officer in charge of a district (statement submitted to witness)?—I cannot say that I have.

Will you accept it as being a statement of the duties of an officer in charge of a district? It is furnished by the Forests Commission.

MR. BARBER: We have no objection to the statement going on record.

It has been prepared by us.

MR. GOWANS: (To witness) Does it look like a statement of the duties you have to carry out?—Yes.

I will put this in and I will ask that it be included in the shorthand notes as part of the evidence of the witness.

THE COMMISSIONER: Very well.

...... EXHIBIT ......... Duties of forest officer in charge of a district.

MR. GOWANS: Is it because of your manifold duties that you find it difficult to get around to these milling areas?—Exactly.

Have you heard any complaints by millers that it is difficult to get hold of forestry officers when the millers want to burn?—No, I cannot say that I have. I will say this about the Erica district; nearly all the mills are connected by telephone, and that makes it much easier for them to get in touch with the Forestry Officer.

Is it correct that even when they ring up they sometimes cannot get in contact with you because you are about somewhere else?—That may be the case but usually there is somebody there.

Is your assistant authorised to deputise for you in the matter of giving permission? I allow him to do so.

He does, in fact, do that?—Yes.

Is it not only a case of their ringing up and saying "We want to burn off; can we do so tomorrow?"—That is the usual procedure.
Do you then arrange for somebody to go up?—If it is in an area where we think some of our men should be present to protect our interests, as for instance, in the seedling area that I previously mentioned, and to prevent the fire getting away, we send our own men.

When you refer to these burnings, are you referring to burnings within the proclaimed or statutory period from November to March?—No, usually before November or even during November.

Is it necessary to get your authority before November?—Actually I do not suppose it is.

Is it nevertheless your practice to ask millowners to get in touch with you?—Yes, it is more or less a practice. They do not object to it, and it is helpful to us.

What is the position in regard to dug-outs at the mills in your area?

Are there dug-outs at all the mills?—Most of them have dug-outs.

What has been the practice so far as requiring them to put in dug-outs is concerned?—We have not actually forced them to put in dug-outs but we have urged them to do so.

What has been your reason for not forcing it?—I have not received any instructions to force it.

MR. KELSO: You said that on a few occasions you directed your logging supervisor to go into the question of burning heads because somebody had failed to do it; is that correct?—Yes.

On those few occasions how did you find out that they had not done so?—Usually we keep in touch with them. They report to us when they burn. I can see over most of the country in my area where millers are operating, and we can keep in our minds when smoke goes up. We know when a mill has burnt off. A fair amount of smoke comes up from the burning operation.
Do you suggest that the main way in which you tell whether they have burnt off is by watching the smoke?—We have officers who go into the mill areas. For instance, this logging supervisor goes into each logging area about once a fortnight.

I take it that the length of time in which they could burn is fairly short?—It depends entirely on the season.

It is perhaps over one month or six weeks?—I would not like to state a time. It depends on the season.

Is that fairly right in a general way?—A month or six weeks?

Yes?—Yes.

How many mills have you in your area?—Eleven.

How many men do you have to do that?—I have seven men that I can employ.

How many men do you ordinarily employ making sure that the heads are burnt in that six weeks?—Usually the three officers and the logging supervisor.

Does that leave you in a position to say as at a certain date that all the heads in your area have or have not been burnt?

Usually I can say that at a certain date.

You get enough information from those men in that time?—Yes.

What do you do about it when they are not burnt?—That depends a lot on the season too. Very often we do not leave it until too late. We are watching the burning off all the time, during the season, of course.

Supposing you are getting near to your burning period's end and you know that some of them have not burnt off, do you do anything about it?—Yes, we get in touch with the miller.

Is it a fact that during an ordinary year a good percentage is not burnt?—In an ordinary year, no.

Did you hear Mr. Saxton's evidence this morning?—Yes.

Do you disagree with it?—He said that in some years he could not burn off.
He said in an ordinary year there was a good percentage not burnt?---

Of course, it depends on what you call ordinary years.

I suppose it does?---It is a difficult thing to say.

What is your attitude? - I will put it as easily as I can - towards

this apparent fact that a fair percentage of the heads

in these mill areas are left unburnt. Are you satisfied?---

I would not say that a fair percentage of the heads in the

district up there are left unburnt. They are mostly burnt.

Would you say that 100 per cent. are actually burnt?---No.

Is not Mr. Saxton's statement typical, that is, are the other mills

better than Mr. Saxton's mill?---I would like you to repeat

Mr. Saxton's statement.

I have done my best to repeat it from memory - "In an average year a

fair percentage of these heads are not burnt"?---When

Mr. Saxton was in the Erina district, I have been over

his area and the majority of the heads in that area were

burnt, I would say.

Is he not in your district?---No.

Your personal attitude is to get as much burnt as you can?---Exactly.

In the mountain ash as well as the other timber?---Yes.

You are satisfied that it is perfectly safe to burn the heads in the

ash areas?---That depends. Every case has to be

regarded on its merits.

Have you in some cases not had the heads burnt because it was not

safe?---Yes.

How many of the 11 mills would that apply to?---There was only one

mill that I did not allow to burn during the last season.

You refused?---Yes, I told them that I did not want it burnt.

What about in previous years?---In previous years there were two

millers who we asked not to burn unless we were there

to take precautions. We had seedling growths right

alongside that we wanted to protect. We utilised our

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own men to look after our own interests.
So that sometimes you have not burnt the seedlings. A forest officer
said previously that he did not worry about the seedlings; he could not burn because of the weather because the mount-
ain ash area was never dry enough to burn outside the
Proclamation period. Is it your experience that you
can get your heads burnt if you want to?—Usually, not
always.
Except in the case of fairly rare exceptions?—They usually burn.
What about thinning work in your area?—There is none going on at the
present time.
you
Are/in control of it?—Yes.
It has gone on in the past?—Yes.
Will you describe what is done?—We have a stand of young trees which
may be up to 30 ft. high and are very thick. As a matter
of fact you can compare them to a crop of oats in places.
These areas have to be cleared out and timed. There
is no place to burn that debris that is formed and make
it safe. The men are put in there and along all
tracks and lines. We usually carry back a distance
of one or two chains, depending on the position, or else
bring it out on to that break and burn it. That is an
extremely expensive operation. It makes a safe
section on each side of the break or tramway or whatever
the track may be going through the forest. The rest
inside is pushed down and laid down as close to the ground
as possible so as to promote rot and get rid of it in as
short a space of time as possible.
In fact, the bulk of it does remain there?—Yes.
In among these trees that you are working on to save?—Yes.
What would be the effect of even an ordinary fire getting into that
when it had been there six months?—It is a hard fire
to stop.
Mr. KELSO: It would kill those others you were doing the whole work for?---Yes.

And that condition of the bush makes the trouble?---Of course, you have your tracks around the outside. There is a certain amount of debris on the ground beforehand, and when you lay that down you only carry that risk for a certain number of years before it rights itself. After that period of time you are carrying no bigger risk than you were beforehand.

So for that time you are carrying a risk. What is your opinion, is that a reasonable and proper risk to take in the forest?---

That risk is not being taken now; we are not thinning.

Can you tell the Commission about that? You have stopped thinning?---

Yes.

Since when?---The last 18 months to two years.

There has been no thinning done in your area in that time?---That is right.

Were unemployed put on in your area?---Yes, we have constructed fire lines and roads.

You are using the unemployed to do those protected works you were describing?---Yes.

Do you know why the thinning was stopped 18 months ago?---There was a Conference of Officers, and it was decided they could not see the reason for the expenditure. After that Conference it was decided not to continue with the thinning.

I think when giving your evidence you said you had no trouble in doing your Spring burning in October?---I do not think I said that.

Is it a fact that in ordinary years you do not have trouble?---You may have trouble.

Do you ordinarily get a decent burn in October?---No.

When do you get your strip burning?---That depends entirely on the year.

I have seen years when you could not do anything up until Christmas. Last year we could not do anything after the 5th October.

That was because it was unsafe?---Yes. The year before that we burnt out to within a fortnight of Christmas.
After the proclamation?---I do not know that the proclamation was in. What I am trying to get at is your opinion of the statement that has been made, that the scrub country in this district will not burn before the proclamation. Have you ordinarily done your patch or strip burning before the proclamation?---In comparing this area and some of the other areas, I think I should explain the Thompson Valley area is drier than some of the other country. I think if we took the rainfall within that belt it would be a lot less than around this side. I have not heard any theories on that, but it appears to me that after the rain goes over the Baws Baws there is a dry belt from the Thompson River across to Aberfeldie. It is all bare country. I can burn in the Thompson and not in other places.

How far does your district come down?---I come down to Fell Creek where it joins the east Tanjil, and follow the Tanjil.

You have a substantial area on this southern fall?---Yes.

You can burn that with strip burning if you try it?---No; we had some burns this year.

In that southern portion, had you tried strip burning before this year?---No; we tried it this last season.

This season was exceptional?---Yes.

MR. BARBER: You mentioned in your earlier evidence that Mr. Torbet is Chief Fire Prevention Officer, and subsequent to his appointment there was a scheme drawn up for your district. Prior to that time, had you attended many of those Conferences of District Officers?---Yes, I had.

How often did these Conferences take place?---Although I did not attend them I believe they took place annually.

Prior to Mr. Torbet's appointment, did those Conferences take the place of what is now done by the Chief Fire Protection Officer?---Yes, I suppose you can look at it that way.

Were they not for the discussion of Fire Protection measures?---They were.

They were a mutual discussion between officers?---Yes.
And for the development of a scheme for fire protection?---Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Mr. Gowans, do you question that?

MR. GOWANS: I do, but it is not my time to do it now.

MR. BARNER: Do you know where those Conferences were held?---Sometimes in Melbourne, and sometimes in country districts.

I presume Mr. Torbet has developed schemes for all the various districts?---I understand so, yes.

They will be co-ordinated?---Yes.

You mentioned telephones, and you told the Commission they were partly for fire protection and partly for other matters. I would like you to go into that a little more. Whose telephones are they, and who puts them in?---Really, it is done jointly by the P.M.G., the Forests Commission and the Millers. I would say the Forests Commission does the bulk of the work.

Have you any portable telephones which your men carry?---I have one which can be used to tap lines.

Did you find the telephones an assistance during the last fire?---They were a big assistance. As a matter of fact, we were able to warn all the people quite a while before the fires came to their mills, that the fire would probably come in. In my opinion that gave the mill people time to make up their minds as to what they were going to do - their course of action. In my opinion, the telephones were a great asset. I was also able to keep in touch with what the fire was doing and in what direction it was going. In some instances I was able to give advice to the people at the mills regarding the dugouts. For instance, the manager of one mill to whom I was speaking, told me he had all the women and children in the dugout. I advised him to take them out, as he was using up all the air which he might need later on.

Turning to another matter, have you had any difficulty in your area in the prohibiting of burning by settlers?---No, I have had...
very little trouble.

Have you had applications from them for permission to burn?—-I had an application this year from the Australian Paper Manufacturers. They wanted to burn around their stacks and a permit was issued. That was in the time of the proclamation.

Have you had any others?—-I had another application from a man in Nee who wanted to burn logs on an area. That was after the fire on the 13th January. I did not know the area, and the man speaking to me about it advised me that the policeman had been there on statistics the day before. I told him to go to the policeman and I would ring the policeman to tell him what the position was.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is all this leading to?

MR. BARBER: Did you in fact give this permission or not?—-I did not give it on this occasion.

Are these the only two cases you have had asking for permission to burn?—-One case was brought before the Assistant Officer, and the same procedure was adopted.

Was it granted?—-No, it was since the fire.

THE COMMISSIONER: The other case was before the 13th January, but this summer?—-Yes.

How many cases were there altogether?—-Only three. In the first case, permission was granted.

The rest of the settlers had gone ahead without your authority, that is those who burnt?—-Apparently.

That fact is established now.

MR. BARBER: Have you any views as to the isolation of forest areas by wide breaks?—-Really, I cannot see the use of wide breaks, because on the Sunday during the fires we have just been through, one of the fires was being held by a gang of our men and when the wind changes there was a terrific wind which apparently lifted that fire and set fire to all the country round the men. They had to run for the river and their camp. That fire started up 5½ miles away from the
gully where it got away from the men. It also lit up the
intervening space by sparks.

You deduce from that there is no particular virtue in a wide break as
distinct from a fairly narrow one?---Exactly.

Have you anything to say about local committees?---We have a Bush Fire
Brigade in Erica.

THE COMMISSIONER: Mr. Barber is asking you about a Local Committee.
A proposal has been made that local committees might be
formed to decide when a person might burn, and in what way he
might burn, and supervise the burning. It may be that a
Forestry Officer would be included on that Committee, or
perhaps he would not be. What do you think of the idea
generally. Would you rather not answer it?---There are so
many pros and cons that it makes it difficult.

MR. BARBER: Very well, if you do not wish to answer that question.

MR. GOWANS: How many of those Conferences of District Officers did you
go to?---I suppose I have been to five or six.

One each year?---No, I went to some and missed some.

On those occasions, what was the nature of the matters discussed;
questions of the type of protection it was desirable to use,
and that kind of thing?---That is right.

Merely an interchange of ideas as to what kind of breaks you might use,
when you could do strip burning and patch burning?---Yes, an
interchange of ideas. One of the points decided was the
width of breaks.

The mechanics of the thing?---Yes.

I do not want to lead you to say anything you do not wish to say, but
was there any kind of co-ordinated scheme which came out of
any of those Conferences you went to?---It was a general
scheme, and not exactly a scheme for your district alone.

When you say a general scheme, what do you mean by that?---After
discussion, certain matters are set out, for example, the
width of breaks and whether they should go on spurs or sidings,
more or less things of a general nature.
Can anything be done in the future to protect Erica township from fires such as that on the 13th?—Erica township was all right on the 13th.

That was your belief?—Perhaps.

There were some other people who disagreed with that?—Yes, I think there were.

Do you think anything should be done?—Yes, it would probably be advisable to carry out some scheme. There is quite a bit of private bush property around the town.

Whatever scheme it would be could be best done by the local inhabitants?—Yes.

In conjunction with you and the police?—Yes. As a matter of fact, we have assisted the local inhabitants to burn off this bush land. We have our forest which runs further behind the town, and then there is the bush land between the town and the forest. We have assisted those people to burn off that section of bush country in between our land and the township.

THE COMMISSIONER: You have often assisted. You create a state of danger, but you do not say you have often assisted to safeguard the township.

MR. GOWANS: How far is your boundary from the township?—It is varying distances. I suppose it would be closer than half a mile.

You are not doing very much in helping people to burn off the strip between the township and the State Forest. After all, you can require anyone to burn off in that half mile?—I do not think so.

You can under the Act?—We cannot require them to burn off.

Within 50 yards?—Yes.

And nobody is allowed to burn within half a mile of the boundary of the State Forest between November and March?—That is correct.

THE COMMISSIONER: We are not setting on you, but the point we are putting is this, do you agree that the floor of the Forest
are pretty inflammable, owing to your policy. They must be
so?---They must be so.

You have that condition of the floors within half a mile of the township.
Do you not feel you ought to help; you are under a duty to
safeguard that township against an escape of fire from your
territory as far as you can do so?---Of course, we bounded the
town by one of these 16 feet lanes.

Do you not think it is your duty to protect this township from this more
or less dangerous state of affairs you have created?---Their
own properties are in the same state.

That may, or may not, be so. People living in a near-by township are
entitled to protection. That question gets the same response
from all the forestry men. You do not realise you owe
something to the town, and you seem surprised to know you should
do something. Has not that ever occurred to you?---The thing
is, our forest is half a mile away.

We heard a fire leapt a great distance?---Of course, we cannot do anything
when a spark jumps 5½ miles.

If that sparks lands in fairly clean country, it is not likely to start
a fire of such intensity as if it lands on country with a very
dirty floor?---No.

However, the Commission gets the same answer from your brother officers.

As far as I can see, it seems to be a general outlook.

MR. GOHANS: How do you view the operations of the proclamation in your
area. Is the period suitable?---The period could stand a
little more latitude in various districts.

What about your district; would you burn later than the proclamation
period, with safety?---Sometimes yes, and sometimes no.

Last year, quite a while before the proclamation, any fire
that was lit in our district was immediately out of control.
Any burning on private property, or by the mill people burning
off, was done before the proclamation.

There were quite large fires in your district between the proclamation
There was one fire that burnt 1,300 acres between the 21st November and 1st December?---Yes.

You have not been able to find out what caused that?---No.

The fact is, that you have not been able to find out the cause of any fires that were lit in your district during the proclaimed period?---No, I cannot give any answer to that. Before the proclaimed period, you can find out, but afterwards one knows.

THE COMMISSIONER: Everyone knows, but you cannot prove it?---The same thing applies before as after. Really, they never admit it.

MR. GOWANS: There have been a couple of cases in your district of fires getting away from mills?---That is a fact.

During the last year?---Last year we had several get-a-ways from burning around a mill, and also burning off mill heads. One burned 226 acres and got away from the Erica sawmills, and another which burnt 24 acres got away from Ezard's.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.

THE COMMISSIONER: The Commission will now adjourn until tomorrow, 1st March, at 10.30 a.m. to Noojee. I would like to thank the witnesses who have attended at this district. I think they are a very good type of witness. I would not say anything more than that. Saying that, I am speaking comparatively.

ADJOURNED.
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