

MANY BIG ADIRONDACK FIRES WERE INCENDIARY

Federal Forestry Bureau Says Fire
Fighters Started Them.

THAT MEANT WORK AT \$2 A DAY

Another Motive for Incendiarism Was
Resentment Against Owner of
Large Private Preserves.

The sensational charge is officially made that deliberate incendiarism was the cause of no small number of the forest fires that in 1903 devastated enormous tracts of timber lands in the Adirondacks. The charge is made in the report on the "Forest Fires in the Adirondacks in 1903," just issued by the Bureau of Forestry of the Department of Agriculture.

This serious charge is made by H. M. Suter, the agent of the bureau, who prepared the report. As it is printed and promulgated by the Federal Government, it would seem that there should be sufficient evidence to bring some or all of the guilty persons to account. Only three convictions for the crime, however, are mentioned. One Warden fined his brother for allowing a small fire to escape. Another man was sent to Dannemora for a year on ample proof that he had kindled twenty-four fires in one day; his young accomplice was committed to the Elmira Reformatory.

Mr. Suter charges that the payment of \$2 a day to the fire fighters in many cases defeated the end for which the money was provided. The law reads that not more than \$2 per day may be paid for this labor, leaving the exact figure to be fixed by the towns. Most of the towns paid the full amount on account of the severe nature of the work. Two dollars a day is more than can be earned at anything else except guiding or skilled labor in that region. As a consequence, fires were set to prolong the work by the very men who were employed to put them out.

The fire fighters, however, are not the only men who are accused of incendiarism. Mr. Suter says that the rapid increase in the number and extent of private parks and game preserves in the Adirondacks and the resultant decrease in the area open to all for hunting and fishing have engendered strong feeling against private preserves among many who do not enjoy their privileges. Many of these private preserves were badly burned, and one of the largest was burned over from end to end. The report asserts that many of the fires on these private lands were of incendiary origin. The opinion is expressed that "the strong feeling in parts of the Adirondacks against private preserves is therefore an exceedingly serious menace to continued damage from fire. One man familiar with the woods can set fires which in a few hours are practically beyond control, and it is seldom possible to bring against him sufficient evidence to convict."

DAMAGES TO PRIVATE PARKS.

The report estimates that 75,000 acres in these private parks and preserves were burned over by fires deliberately set. Another source of danger is the fact that many persons living in the Adirondacks are very much irritated because the State Constitution forbids the cutting or the removal of timber or even of firewood from the State lands. They see the timber going to waste, while they have need of it, and their feeling about it is such as to encourage indifference and recklessness.

It is no wonder that the fires reached so appalling an extent when every condition was ripe for it and there were many persons who were ready and glad to kindle and fan the flames. The fires were almost unexampled in this part of the country. They occurred during the protracted drought of last Spring, when in fifty-one days after April 16 only a fifth of an inch of rain fell in the Adirondacks. The whole forest became inflammable to an unprecedented degree. Many of the surface fires mounted to the tops of the conifers, which is the most dangerous and unmanageable form of forest fire. Some fires in the

crowns of the trees traveled with remarkable rapidity. One of them, in the Township of Newcomb, closely pursued the Warden and several men. They ran at top speed for two miles, and finally escaped only by crossing a lake.

A map shows in red, approximately, the distribution of the burned areas. About three-fifths of the timber acreage destroyed was in the State Park, and fully two-thirds of the damage was in the northern part of the mountain region. There were thousands of small fires, most of which were extinguished; but the area destroyed by small fires was greater than that of the large ones. The most notable fires were those in the Rockefeller preserve, 40,000 acres; the Dix fire, in North Hudson, 18,000 acres; the Roaring Brook fire, 17,000 acres; the fire near Lake Placid, 14,000 acres, and the Catlin Lake and Horseshoe Pond fires, 10,000 acres each. The area burned over was 600,000 acres, and the direct damage from loss of timber and improvements was about \$3,500,000. As the indirect loss, due to the destruction of young growth that was to form the future forest, is believed to have been as large as the direct loss, the total damage is likely to have approximated \$7,000,000.

OTHER CAUSES OF FIRES.

Culpable carelessness and violation of the fire laws are assigned as the cause of the larger part of the fires, the remainder being the result of incendiarism and unavoidable accident. Sparks from locomotives formed a constant cause of fire, and the spark arresters required by law were not provided till after the damage was done. Next to the railroads, the burning by farmers of debris left after lumbering was the most prolific source of fire. The law forbids such burning in April and May, but it was deliberately violated. Hunters set fire to encourage the growth of grass in the Spring, and thus attract the deer to certain localities. Berry pickers burned land to favor the growth of berry bushes. Ginseng collectors did the same thing, to make their work more easy and profitable. In

one town boys were discovered setting fire after fire for the pleasure of seeing the men hurry to fight them. In another the Warden saw smoke roll up, and, hastening to the spot, saw the incendiary coolly enjoying the spectacle as the flames roared up a steep mountainside. He had absolutely nothing to gain by his act, and ran some danger of losing his cabin had the wind changed.

Among the cases of accidental fires were two where sparks from burning buildings ignited surrounding woodlands, and the interesting hypothesis is advanced that two fires were caused by rays of the sun focused by curved pieces of broken glass.

There was no loss of human life and few domestic animals were killed. Game, however, suffered more severely. The breeding and nesting season was at its height, and there was great loss of weak young animals and birds. The carcasses of several deer were found. Trout suffered severely. In a number of streams many dead fish were seen afloat. Fish washed up by bushes were found on the shore of one lake. The heat alone was probably sufficient to kill the fish in shallow streams; in deeper streams it is more likely that lye leached from the wood ashes, or the ashes themselves, had a poisonous effect. The after effects on the trout streams are likely to be most unfortunate. Trout require clear, cool water. The loss of heavy shade and the washing of impurities into the mountain brooks cannot but have an unfavorable effect on the fish.

The aggregate value of the logs, lumber, pulpwood, firewood, tan bark, logging camps, houses, barns, hotels, cottages, sportsmen's camps, bridges, and fences destroyed was estimated at \$1,131,900, which was, much less than one-half of the total actual loss.

The inference from the report is that human carelessness or dishonesty contributed as much as the drought to this calamity. It was unfortunate that the fire laws were not rigidly enforced from the first approach of danger, but Wardens are paid only for the time they are actually fighting fire, and it is hardly to be expected that they will leave their private business and spend a great deal of time without recompense in guarding against fires. Prosecutions of careless and willful fire setters were not so frequent as they might have been, and there was lack of effort to enforce the law against the railroads.

The report says that the great weakness of the fire warden service is that it is not,

employed to prevent fires, but merely to organize a force to fight them when they come to notice. The service should be supplemented by a permanent force of rangers to be continually on the lookout for fire. It will require careful study on the ground to work out the details of such service. But it is believed that this State can protect its forests from fire at a cost no greater than a reasonable rate of insurance upon the capital which these forests represent.

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