

Forests of the Oxford House District, N.W.T.

[In the annual report of the Director of Forestry for 1911, recently published, an account is given of work carried on by one of the Dominion fire-rangers, Mr. J. T. Blackford, in the Oxford House district of the Northwest Territories, some distance to the northeast of the present limits of the province of Manitoba. This is a district whose forest conditions are not well known, and the account is therefore reproduced here.—*Ed.*]

Mr. J. T. Blackford, an experienced woodsman acquainted with conditions in the north, was appointed to explore, estimate and map the timber, and act as fire-ranger in the district surrounding Oxford House.

Accompanying this report is a sketch-map made by Mr. Blackford showing the districts which he traversed, and the location of the timbered and burned-over areas. Mr. Blackford travelled south from Oxford House to Minnihik, Clearwater and Rat lakes, and north and east from Oxford House to Fox and Deer lakes, covering in all about 5,433 square miles of country.

About 1,612 square miles of this territory still bears merchantable timber; on about 3,821 square miles all the merchantable timber has been destroyed by fire.

There are abundant evidences that this whole country was originally heavily forested with spruce, tamarack, jack pine, balsam fir, birch and poplar. On the islands, which have been naturally protected from fire, are dense stands of trees two to three feet in diameter, and around some of the lakes are blackened stumps two to three feet in diameter.

A reliable Indian, between sixty five and seventy years old, said that 'long ago there used to be lots of fine large timber. Every summer there have been fires, more or less. Long ago (about twenty five years) there was one terrible fire which ran for many days. We could not see

the sun, and the only way I could get my breath was by putting a piece of flannel over my mouth. This fire started at Robinson Portage and ran from that east to Oxford lake and west as far as Deer lake. Up to this time there were lots of fur and deer by thousands, but since then we have not had much fur nor have I known one deer to be seen within three or four days journey from here. Before the fire we saw only an occasional moose, but now there are lots.* * * * Two summers ago we had large fires all around us. The Indians say that many of the fires started inland where there are no people, and that many of them are caused by York boat men. The big fire of twenty five years ago was started by Indians working on a York boat.'

Hunters on their way to the winter hunting grounds are careless with their camp-fires and are responsible for many forest fires. Mr. Blackford found that in this district freighters and trappers are very careful. The Indians, carelessly leaving camp-fires, start forest fires in the Oxford House district every season.

After fire has destroyed the original forest there is nearly always a dense second growth in which jack pine, poplar and birch occur in a greater proportion than in the original forest. This second growth would in fifty or sixty years produce a valuable forest if it were protected from fire. Unfortunately after the first fire there is always a residue of dry resinous wood, which together with the inflammable nature of the young growth itself renders a second fire almost inevitable.

Travelling between Fox lake and Norway House, Mr. Blackford found that day after day he had to cut his