



Aftermath of the 1916 Holocaust in Northern Ontario showing the fires in progress close to Matheson. The recent fires occurred in an area a considerable distance south of that above pictured.

Why Forest Fire Plague Defies Cure

By Dr. Clifton D. Howe, Dean, Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto

FOREST FIRE protection is a question of public morals. People do not realize how much we depend upon the products of the forest for our comforts and necessities. We come in contact with these products every hour of the day and every day of our lives, from the wooden cradle to the long wooden box. The forests are the very foundation of our industries. Next to agriculture no industry contributes so largely to our national and Provincial wealth. The lumber industry of Ontario gives employment to 17,000 men in the bush alone, with an annual payroll of \$12,000,000. Pulp and paper mills of Ontario employ 8,000 people and pay wages \$7,000,000 a year. The invested capital of these two industries is nearly \$150,000,000.

Nearly 500,000 acres of forest are burned every year in Ontario. We have not a supply large enough to stand this awful drain very much longer. If the forest fires continue at their present rate of destruction these industries which I have just mentioned will simply have to go out of business. We know approximately how much forest area we have. We know how much is burned. It is only a simple arithmetical problem to calculate the time of the crippling of some of our most important industries, if not the time of their actually going out of business.

I say forest fire protection is a question of public morals, there never will be adequate fire protection in Northern Ontario or anywhere else until the people demand it. Over 95 per cent. of all forest fires are due to human carelessness. You see, the responsibility rests almost entirely upon men themselves, upon the managers of the railways, upon the tourist and the camper, upon the settlers and the lumbermen. All of these are residents or travellers in the North Country. We will never have adequate fire protection until we can educate the fool with his match, or until we can educate carelessness out of the human system.

It costs the Ontario Government over \$3,000 a day in the summer time to look after the fool and the criminally careless who wander at liberty, or who work in our forests. You and I help pay for that. No forest fire fighting organization in the world can give adequate protection without the support of public opinion and this support our Provincial fire protection service does not have in the North Country. It is very easy to criticize another, and specially easy to criticize the government organizations, but before we become too critical, I think we ought to ask a few questions about conditions in the North Country.

It is reported in the newspapers that the disastrous fire at Haileybury started with a settler burning his

potato stalks. We ought to ask whether that settler made any attempt to put out his fire when he saw it getting beyond him. We ought to ask how many settlers passed by that fire without offering a hand to put it out. We ought to ask how many settlers evade the permit system for burning slash in operation in many sections of the North. We ought to ask to what degree this evasion is winked at, or even encouraged, by the leading citizens of those towns. We ought to ask even if the members of the Legislature for those districts do not sometimes petition the Government to let up on the enforcement of the forest protection regulations, on the basis that they are so unpopular that, if the member espouses them, he will fail of re-election. Before we become too critical we ought to ask if there are not the lines of a big railway system running through the North Country that has been practically indifferent to the regulations in regard to the care of engines that throw off sparks along the right of way. The railways are responsible for over 40 per cent. of the fires that occur in the North Country.

As I said in the beginning, forest fire protection is a question of public morals, and it will never be adequate until we have educated this carelessness and indifference with regard to the destruction of public property on which our welfare depends. We should protect the things we value.