

The Price of Human Safety

Some Searching Facts Bearing Upon the Fire Tragedy at Haileybury—Public Opinion Must Penalize Carelessness.

By Clyde Leavitt

IT IS AN old saying and a true one that in a democratic country, a law, to be effective, must reflect the moral sense of the community as a whole. Conversely, no law which does not reflect the general moral sense of the people can be adequately enforced.

Has not the application of this truism a bearing upon the catastrophe which overtook Haileybury and the surrounding district on October 4 resulting in the destruction by fire of some forty-four lives and of property valued at around eight million dollars, to say nothing of several thousand people rendered homeless at the beginning of northern winter?

In the Forest Fires Prevention Act of Ontario is a clause establishing a close season for the setting out of fire, within the Fire Districts, from April 15 to September 30 of each year, and providing that within a Fire District, permit areas may be set aside, within which, during the close season, no fire shall be set out for clearing land, disposal of debris or inflammable waste, or for any industrial purpose, except upon written permit from the fire ranger or other authorized official.

The Fire Districts were defined in the law, and the Permit Areas were duly established by Order-in-Council, the district around Haileybury, North Cobalt, Charlton, Englehart, etc., being included in both.

Settlers' Fires the Great Menace

In the North Country, fires escaping from settlers' clearing operations constitute probably the predominant element in forest fire losses. The country is comparatively newly-settled, the bush is a terrific obstacle to cultivation, the amount of in-

flammable slash left from logging and land-clearing operations is great, and the cost of outside labor for clearing is prohibitive, even had the settlers the money to pay for it. A very general feeling appears to exist that the only practicable way by which the country can be opened up and reduced to possession for agricultural purposes is by the liberal use of fire. Thus, the terrible fires of 1911 around Cochrane, and of 1916 around Matheson were by many regarded as substantially forwarding the process of settlement, although of course the loss of life and of improved property were most sincerely regretted. Both these were essentially

which is very inflammable when dry. In many sections, this layer of vegetable matter is so thick that it is a common practice for settlers to burn off the top portion, so that the plow may be able to cut through to the clay beneath and cause a highly fertile mixture of the two classes of soil. If the upper or vegetable layer is burned too deeply or too severely, the fertility of the soil is destroyed or rendered merely temporary. Enormous damage to soil values in the Claybelt has been caused in this way.

Undoubtedly it was the inflammable character of the soil itself which is largely responsible for the terribly wide and rapid spread of the fire between Haileybury and Englehart, where the forest has very largely disappeared and the country has more of an open or prairie aspect. It is this same character of the soil which must be taken very carefully into account if future recurrences of past catastrophes are to be avoided.

It remains true nevertheless that public opinion in the North Country has always regarded the free use of fire as essential to the clearing away of the forest debris and to the preparation of the soil, preliminary to cultivation.

The Permit System

As a result of the general sentiment adverse to restrictions upon the conduct of burning operations, a resolution was passed at the annual meeting of the Temiskaming County Boards, asking the Provincial Government to withdraw the fire-ranging staff from the organized townships, including the territory between Haileybury and Englehart. This action was taken, thus in effect repealing the permit system of regulating



Photo by British and Colonial Press, Toronto.

A Scene in Haileybury after the Fire.

bush-fires, which the fire of October 4th was not.

Fires escaping from settlers' clearing operations during protracted periods of dry weather, coupled with high winds, were a large factor, though not the only one, in initiating these destructive conflagrations. In these cases, like that of the Haileybury-Englehart fire of this year, the highly inflammable character of the soil itself contributed largely to the rapid spread of the fire. Throughout the Claybelt, the mineral soil is covered with a heavy layer of vegetable matter, of a peaty formation,