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ONE WITNESS OCCUPIED ENTIRE DAY AT FIRST SESSION OF POTATO ENQUIRY

Evidence Produced Developed That All Potatoes Purchased Were Shipped To Cuba, But Were in Bad Condition When They Arrived and Dealers Refused To Accept Them.

In the municipal council chamber at eleven o'clock yesterday morning Commissioner James McQueen, K. C., of Shediac, opened the investigation into the potato shipments to Cuba made by the Department of Agriculture in 1915. Peter J. Hughes of Fredericton represented the Foster government, while Hon. Peter Veniot, master of the administration, was present in an advisory capacity and frequently prompted Mr. Hughes as to the investigation. Mr. Veniot, who is more concerned regarding possible political capital to be secured in the future, but it was significant that during all of yesterday's session he appeared deeply interested in a synopsis report of the legislative debate in which he evidently found inspiration for questions to be handed on to the council appearing for the government.

P. E. Taylor, K. C., appeared for Hon. James A. Murray, Minister of Agriculture at the time of the potato shipments, and the only witness yesterday was Rev. J. B. Daggett, who was secretary of the Agricultural Department. Mr. Taylor asked for an adjournment until Hon. J. A. Murray could be present holding that he was interested, particularly when his deputy was on the stand. Mr. Taylor explained that Mr. Murray was acting as chairman for Kings county for the Victory Loan campaign and his duty to the country demanded his presence there, while his duty to himself demanded that he should be present at the investigation. He, therefore, asked that the session should be postponed until after the conclusion of the Victory Loan campaign.

The commissioner refused to grant the request and the session opened. The net result of the day's testimony was to show that all the potatoes purchased in the province had been shipped to Cuba and that while in good condition here they were bad when reaching their destination and that because of this the consignment refused to accept them and the province made a loss on the transaction.

Morning Session.

Mr. Daggett called.

When the session opened yesterday morning, Rev. J. B. Daggett was the first witness called. He said he was formerly associated with the firm of B. F. Smith Ltd., and prior to that was Secretary of Agriculture for the Province under the Flemming, Clarke and Murray governments.

Mr. Hughes presented a certified copy of the Order in Council, authorizing the gift of "patric potatoes" and witness said it was authorized in 1914. By virtue of the order \$75,000 was appropriated to pay for the purchase and shipment of 100,000 bushels of potatoes to the Imperial Government. In carrying out the directions of this order potatoes were purchased from a number of dealers, and witness named B. F. Smith, C. M. Isaac, White & Co. of Sussex, and Rideout of Hartland. He could not recall the others, but identified the names from the Auditor General's report for that year furnished by Mr. Hughes.

Of the total amount 31,865 barrels were purchased from B. F. Smith by verbal agreement later confirmed in writing by which Mr. Smith was to purchase from farmers at \$1.00 per barrel and to receive ten cents per barrel as commission for loading, etc. Mr. Smith was on the Department of Agriculture when the potatoes were purchased and the drafts were to be paid after the purchases had been inspected.

Did Not Pay For Rejected Potatoes.

Leslie Slipp was inspector, with power to reject potatoes. Potatoes were rejected and were sold by A. C. Smith & Co. The government did not accept or pay for rejected potatoes. They were charged to the account of B. F. Smith and were sold by A. C. Smith for B. F. Smith.

Witness said there were some potatoes over which there was discussion. Seven cars were rejected by Mr. Slipp. The cars were from B. F. Smith, East Florenceville.

Witness later said the 7 cars were not absolutely rejected by Mr. Slipp, but were afterwards re-examined and some were accepted and paid for. A. C. Smith & Co., St. John, were to receive the potatoes and look after the

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bagging, marketing and handling at the ship's side. The agreement was in writing, and A. C. Smith & Co. were to receive 20 cents per package—whether barrel or bag.

Mr. Daggett remembered that A. C. Smith & Co. sent a charge of 40 cents per package for handling the surplus potatoes. Potatoes of B. C. Moisan and H. C. Duncan were also rejected as in the case of R. F. Smith potatoes. Those rejected were sold by A. C. Smith for the shippers. The only potatoes paid for by the department were those passed by Mr. Slipp. Several carloads were paid for before they were sorted and there was afterwards a rebate of several thousand dollars charged up to B. F. Smith.

To Mr. Hughes witness said the highest price for potatoes in that year was \$1.00 per barrel, and that towards spring of 1915, "you could scarcely give potatoes away."

When "Spuds" Were Cheap.

Mr. Daggett remembered a price of more than a dollar received in 1914 in the open market by Carleton Co. farmers.

Mr. Daggett said slightly over 40,000 barrels or slightly more than 100,000 bushels, were shipped on the S.S. Sellaia. Mr. Daggett went across with the potatoes. He handed the shipment over to the British Board of Trade and personally looked after the unloading and distributing.

Mr. Hughes—"You gave a letter to the Florenceville Bank."

Witness—"Yes. What instructions did you give the bank?"

Witness—"That we were buying potatoes from B. F. Smith, and that the government would accept drafts with bills of lading attached. The letter, witness said, was on file in the department."

Mr. Hughes—"How many bushels of potatoes did Mr. Smith purchase?"

Witness—"More than 100,000 bushels. In addition to the potatoes shipped to England, 150,000 barrels of potatoes were forwarded to Belgium."

Mr. Hughes—"Can you refer to the letter to the Florenceville bank which witness said was on file in the department of agriculture?"

Mr. Hughes asked witness of the latter, in view of certain statements made on the floor of the House by Hon. Mr. Murray, still held that the letter was on file.

Witness replied it was on file. Mr. Taylor again asked for postponement of the hearing until Mr. Murray could attend.

The chairman replied that he had already given his ruling.

For Belgian Relief.

Mr. Hughes then read the order passed October 27, 1914, authorizing the forwarding of 150,000 barrels of potatoes for Belgian relief.

Witness could not recall how many barrels of potatoes were left after the Belgian shipment. A record was kept in the department by H. H. Morton of Sussex. The book was a petty ledger.

To Mr. Hughes witness said a large number of potatoes could not be made early without over-buying. A total of 14,638 barrels was forwarded to Belgium and 54,000 barrels were shipped altogether. There were 15,000 or 16,000 barrels left over.

Mr. Hughes—"Do you think it impossible to ship 60,000 barrels overseas without having a surplus of 15,000 or 16,000 barrels?"

Mr. Hughes—"What did you do with the surplus potatoes?"

Mr. Daggett—"We sorted them. We sold a certain amount. A. C. Smith & Co. and Frank Clements were authorized to sell. Witness sold some himself to a house in Cuba. Witness did not think A. C. Smith & Co. sold any."

Mr. Hughes—"Did A. C. Smith & Co. buy any?"

Mr. Daggett—"No."

Mr. Hughes—"Were the surplus potatoes of food quality?"

Witness—"They were ordinary merchantable potatoes. Thirty per cent of the purchase was of the sort we did not want to ship over."

Mr. Hughes—"How much was B. F. Smith told to ship in?"

Witness—"Twenty thousand barrels at first."

Witness then explained that on account of a misunderstanding during his absence in Toronto, too many potatoes came in. This arose in an instruction to A. C. Smith that should the other shippers fall down on their knees, B. F. Smith was to be asked to send more. The potatoes then came forward rapidly.

Mr. Hughes—"Then it was not necessary to buy so large a surplus. The reason was that the surplus was due to a misunderstanding."

Witness—"That is my interpretation."

Inquiry then adjourned to resume at 2:30.

Potatoes Depreciated.

At the afternoon session Mr. Daggett resumed the stand and in reply to Mr. Hughes' questions said about ten per cent of the surplus potatoes were shipped in as the result of a misunderstanding. Perhaps, from seven to ten cars were secured in that way, and at the time there was no local market in which they could be sold. It was for the inspector to say whether part of the surplus was inferior

potatoes. All that were not merchantable were thrown back on the agent's hands; these included small potatoes or those that had become cut or bruised. Mr. Clements and A. C. Smith & Co. Ltd. had been authorized by witness to sell the potatoes for the government. By the time the potatoes shipped they had somewhat depreciated in condition, had become dark and were in some cases affected with dry rot. Too much artificial heat was the cause of the potatoes turning dark.

Made Inspection Trip.

Witness saw the potatoes before they were shipped to the West Indian points. He also made a trip to Cuba with J. C. Manser, to see what market conditions were there and to look after the New Brunswick potato interests generally. This was in January or February. He was in Cuba for seven or eight days, and had no record as to the exact time of his return. From the nature of his visit some potatoes were sold, but he made no sales directly, as he could not talk Spanish and was thus handicapped. The sales were made by Mr. Manser. He did not know whether they were sold direct or on consignment to Mr. Manser as the agent of the province. Prices were low in Cuba, but he was unable to recall the exact quotations. Mr. Clements sold potatoes after witness returned from Cuba. He did not think A. C. Smith & Co. sold any. No potatoes were sold before he went to Cuba and none arrived in Cuba while he was there.

One Bad Shipment.

On his return he saw some potatoes in St. John as they were being shipped. One consignment was shipped on the schooner Irma Bentley. On that vessel witness saw good sound stock being packed, except that it was dark. On one occasion he had been called to the Bentley because of potatoes that had been poorly packed. Mr. Elkin called his attention to it, and he saw several barrels which had broken open through falling on the deck. In these the potatoes were rotten. He asked Mr. Clements for an explanation and that gentleman told him they had been shipped by mistake, bartered from a pile of culls. There were but a few in that lot that were so shipped. Mr. Clements assured him that while the potatoes were dark they were sound, and he was sure they would all through all right. All potatoes were shipped in the name of A. C. Smith & Co. for the Department of Agriculture. Manifests of the cargoes were filed with the Auditor-General. Mr. Clements and A. C. Smith & Co. acted for the government in making the shipments.

Department Made a Loss.

The only statement witness received as secretary of the department of agriculture was a statement of the cargoes which went on the vessels. As far as the department was concerned it got no money out of the shipments. All returns ever made were made to A. C. Smith & Co. and some small remittances sent to the department from Cuba were turned over to A. C. Smith & Co. to form a part of their final account. A. C. Smith & Co. were to pay all the bills and costs, collect all the remittances and then submit a final statement to the Department of Agriculture. As to costs, freight, commissions, etc., and witness thought the statement produced in court by Mr. Hughes was that statement.

This statement was then put in evidence.

Both Shipments Spoiled.

Continuing, witness said two vessels had been sent to Cuba with potatoes but he was unable to recall much about the second shipment. Both shipments went bad and the transaction was a loss. He believed the returns of the shipments made by Mr. Clements were correct.

These returns were then put in evidence.

In all 9,500 barrels and 2,283 sacks were shipped. Witness could not tell the quantity of potatoes in the sacks. All the shipments by the Irma Bentley and the Minnie had been reported to him by A. C. Smith & Co. as not realizing sufficient to pay the expenses. One of these vessels was partly loaded by W. W. Boyce, who paid part of the freight. He thought it was the Minnie. The government did not have enough potatoes to fill the second vessel and were glad to take Mr. Boyce's shipment. The government, of course, paid no commissions on the Boyce potatoes.

The court then adjourned to permit the commissioner to attend the unveiling of the tablet to the memory of Elias Hardy in the supreme court room.

No Irregularity.

Resuming witness said he did not think it irregular for the government to take the Boyce potatoes along with the other shipment. He did not know whether returns had been received for any of the shipments sent to Cuba, but thought they were all practically a total loss.

Mr. Hughes submitted a final statement from A. C. Smith & Co. and the witness said it had been prepared by himself, by Mr. Clements and Mr. Smith, and submitted to the Auditor-General.

Mr. Hughes—"When was that made up?"

Mr. Daggett—"It ought to be dated, if it is not dated I would not attempt to swear when it was made up."

Mr. Taylor asked as to pencil notations on the statement and witness said they were not made by him. He would not swear that the document produced was the identical one he had made up, but it was similar to it. There was nothing on that particular document to indicate that he had ever seen it before. The statement had been made up on the basis of returns and other documents in the possession of the department and showed the names of the people to whom the potatoes had been sold, the quantity sold in each case, and the sum the province should receive from the transaction.

Mr. Taylor Objects.

Mr. Taylor objected to the statement being proven in that way, suggesting (Continued on Page Seven.)

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