

THE LABOR OF CONVICTS.

HOW IT INTERFERES WITH THE STOVE AND HAT MANUFACTURERS.

The Assembly Committee on State Prisons resumed its sessions yesterday at the Hotel Brunswick. Mr. J. L. Smyser, a stove manufacturer, of Louisville, Ky., was examined in regard to the effect of prison labor in the stove manufacturing business. Mr. Smyser said that before the introduction of the contract system in the prisons all the hollow ware had been manufactured in the large stove-ware foundries. Of late this ware had been extensively manufactured in prisons and, as a result, very little was now manufactured in the foundries. It could be bought from prison contractors at a cheaper price than foundrymen could manufacture it for. Mr. Smyser said a few men in Louisville had come from the Elmira Reformatory. In Louisville they could earn \$22 a week in making skillets and pots, while in the Reformatory, where of course they could make just as many articles in a day, their services were valued at 60 cents for a day's work. In regard to stoves, Mr. Smyser stated that he had at one time a large business in the South-east. This had been lost through the competition of Mr. Perry, who had the stove contracts with the New-York State prisons. "They were rattling down prices all over," he continued, "on account of prison labor. The firm with which Mr. Smyser was connected had been compelled often to cut prices. No one in Indianapolis or in the vicinity of Jeffersonville, Ind., could compete with Perrin, Gaff & Co., the prison contractors in that place." They had the whole swing of the market. Western stove manufacturers all agreed in the opinion that the stove market was largely over-stocked, and this, they believed, was due in a great part to the supply of prison-made goods. Prison labor was interfering with their business, and its effect was to lower the wages of their workmen. A prison contractor could employ 250 convicts for a day for \$150, while outside the same number of men would cost their employers \$300. He had lowered the wages in his foundry 1 cent per pot a short time ago. If he had not done so he would have been required to buy the articles from prison contractors.

"Can you state one instance in which you were deprived of trade by Perry & Co.?" asked Mr. Perry himself, the stove contractor.

"Well, you crowded us out in Charleston, S. C. They told us there that our prices were too high, and afterward bought of you."

"Yet you have some ex-convicts in your shop?"

"There was one, Daly by name. Two hours before I started East my foreman came running into the office and said that Daly had cleaned out the whole shop. I think he is going back to Elmira. I wrote to Mr. Brockway, the Superintendent then, that I did not want any more reformed men. The man had broken up \$200 worth of patterns in two minutes. I took an interest in that man and thought, as a good citizen I must help him all I could, morally and otherwise, but I don't want any more paroled prisoners."

Ex-Judge Fullerton was then called to testify as to the abuses of the visiting-room at Sing Sing and the general bad effects of the visiting system. He had often had occasion to visit Charles R. Beckwith, a client, who was confined there. On these visits he had never had an opportunity of conferring with this client without the presence of a third person, who in his opinion was there to listen to every word that was said. The interviews with his client had never been satisfactory, and he had been compelled to use idiomatic language which he hoped that Beckwith would be able to study out. His visits had been concerning some indictments against the prisoner and the business was important. It was clearly his duty to keep his client's secrets. He had advised Beckwith's wife not to visit her husband, as she could not have a satisfactory talk with him. Ex-Judge Fullerton also stated that he had reason to believe that letters sent to his client had been intercepted and the contents made known to the prosecutor of the prisoner Beckwith.

George J. Ferry, a fur hat manufacturer of Orange, N. J., testified as to the effect of prison contracts on his business. The whole fur hat business, he said, in the United States amounted to perhaps \$12,000,000. Fully 10 per cent. of the fur hats used were made in prisons. These convicts worked throughout the entire year and it caused an over-production.

"What would you have convicts do?" asked Chairman Keyes.

"I would have the ball and chain attached and set them to work cleaning the streets of New-York City," was the reply.

Lawrence T. Fell, also a hatter, corroborated Mr. Ferry's statement about the effect of convict labor in the hat business.

The committee will continue to hear testimony to-day.