

ARSON: THE BURNING OF RHODE ISLAND



PAINFUL MEMORIES: Four years after a November, 1981, arson that destroyed the River Vue Casino in Warwick, members gathered in the vacant lot found charred timber.

The night a part of River Vue died

Warwick 'casino' was neighborhood center until vandals struck

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WARWICK — When two arsonists torched the River Vue Casino, they destroyed the heart of a suburban neighborhood.

Since 1893, neighbors in the River Vue section south of Conimicut Point on Narragansett Bay had been linked by the "casino," a long, shingled bungalow on MillCove Road.

In summer, children and adult bowling leagues played on lanes transplanted from a long-gone alley. Through the year, the casino was home to holiday celebrations — harvest and New Year's dinner dances, Labor Day picnics.

On the night of Nov. 22, 1981, John J. Manfredi, 20, a city laborer, and a 17-year-old juvenile piled leaves under the building, lighted them and then ran to the juvenile's home to wait for the fire trucks.

The fire didn't catch, so they returned to the building, soaked some rags with gasoline and lighted them. A passing motorist saw one of them fleeing the building just before the fire was reported, Family Court records show.

FIREFIGHTERS "were there for a good hour or so and they worked hard at it, but the building was old and it just went up," says John O'Shea, president of the River Vue Association.

It "was like an old match stick. When we went in the next day, the overhead beams were all burnt," he said.

O'Shea estimated replacement costs at \$100,000 to \$150,000.

A year before the fire, the association had dropped its fire insurance. Membership was down, they needed money to pay for a sewer hookup.

After the fire, "we didn't have the money to rebuild, so we decided to tear it down," O'Shea said.

FOR THE OLDER residents of the neighborhood, the fire destroyed the symbol of a past when roads were made of crushed quahog and oyster shells, and boys and girls who were courting danced on floors waxed with cornstarch.

"The senseless burning of the casino... caused many others to be deprived of the pleasures we all enjoyed in our growing-up years," Robert Deering, who came to River Vue in 1914, wrote in a recollection.

THREE DAYS after the fire, police arrested Manfredi and charged him with first-degree arson. The juvenile was also arrested, and his case was referred to Family Court.

While O'Shea was pleased that an arrest was made, he was upset that authorities did not keep the association informed.

"We're the owners of the building... we had a stake in it. I think they could have called me up and told me, 'We made an arrest.'"

It wasn't until last summer, when a *Journal-Bulletin* reporter informed him of the disposition of the case, that O'Shea learned what happened to the pair who destroyed the casino.

On April 14, 1982, Manfredi pleaded no contest to the charge, which carries a penalty of up to 20

years in prison and a fine of up to \$2,500. Superior Court Judge John P. Bourcier gave him a five-year suspended sentence with five years' probation. In an interview, Bourcier said he gave a less-than-jail sentence because of information he heard in his chambers during plea negotiations. The judge said he couldn't disclose that information.

The juvenile was referred to Family Court which ordered him to make \$200 restitution.

O'Shea was "amazed" by the suspended sentence. "To cause that much damage and you wind up with that... I just don't think that's sufficient punishment."

As for the juvenile, "he's got to pay \$200 for torching a building. It's not a bad deal."

SOON AFTER the fire, the River Vue Association cleared the casino wreckage and disbanded.

The association had always been nonprofit and, as such, tax-free. About a year after the fire, however, the group received a property tax bill from the city for the first time, on the vacant lot.

"We went to the tax assessor, the councilman and the mayor... but they basically said, (since) we don't have a building, we don't have an association, so we're not nonprofit anymore," O'Shea said. The annual bill is about \$300.

But it isn't the tax bill that continues to bother O'Shea.

"I miss the socializing with the neighbors... the comradeship. It killed that. A lot of memories went down the drain," he said.

"There's a lot of people I don't know anymore."

worked for 30 years and to see it all go up in smoke," she said. "It's a hard thing to take."

AFTER THE FIRE, Mort Kosch retired from the dry-cleaning business. Today he drives a school bus in Portsmouth.

He sold the vacant lot where his business stood. A commercial building now stands on the site, home to a fish and tackle shop, a surfboard store, a caterer and a plumber.

Kosch was a regular visitor when the building was under construction on the land where his business stood for more than a quarter of a century.

"I used to be there almost every day," he said. "I just felt it was a part of me."

What motivates an arsonist?

Robert Papa wanted to put a competitor out of business.

Maurice Beausoleil hoped his landlord would give him a new apartment.

Michael Andreati thought he could cover up a burglary.

Michael Brown was angry because there was no hot water in his uncle's house.

Cyrille LaLiberte was mad at his girlfriend. Linda Ranki's car was a lemon.

Keith Burns and Paul Phansteil did it on a dare. Raymond DuMont did it for the insurance money.

Lawrence DeLuca did it for \$200.

John Diforio wanted to have "a couple of laughs."

Edward Miner heard voices.

Edward Mancone just liked to watch fire trucks. There is no shortage of motives for arson, as these Rhode Islanders sentenced on arson charges demonstrate.

"There are probably as many motives for firesetting as there are firesetters," says Anthony O. Rider, the FBI's expert on the psychology of firesetting.

"Motive frequently plays a crucial role in determining the cause of a fire, as well as the identity of the person or persons responsible for setting it," Rider says in a 1980 study, "The Firesetter: A Psychological Profile."

But scientific study of firesetting behavior is "scattered and incomplete," Rider says. "Though arson has always represented a formidable threat to society, very little interest has been generated in understanding the arsonist as a type of offender."

"We know the most about the least successful arsonists," agrees Bernard Levin of the Federal Center for Fire Research in a 1976 study. "Unfortunately, our knowledge about the psychopathology of firesetters is limited to those arsonists who are caught or give themselves up."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has identified 24 "brands of arson," each with its own characteristics and motivations. Seventeen motives or types of firesetters were identified in the *Journal-Bulletin's* computer study of arson cases prosecuted in Rhode Island between 1978 and 1982.

What follows is a catalogue of motives and firesetters drawn from the newspaper's study and the FEMA list.

Investigators and neighborhood activists suspect that most, if not all, of these scenarios play a role in the state's arson problem.

But whatever the individual motive, most arsonists set fires to profit — economically or emotionally.

ARSON FOR EMOTIONAL PROFIT

Pyromania. Persons suffering severe emotional problems set fires under delusional influences. The most misunderstood cause of arson, pyromania is characterized by a lack of motive. While the "pyro" or "firebug" has achieved mythical status, authorities believe they set the minority of fires.

Emotional or psychological problems. Not every emotionally disturbed arsonist is a pyromaniac. Rejection, stress and failure can trigger firesetting, researchers say. In December, 1981, a West Warwick woman, 21, described as "depressed," set a fire in her apartment "hoping it would end all her problems."

Revenge. Adults motivated by revenge, spite or jealousy "get" their opponents by burning a dwelling or personal property. About one-third of Rhode Island's arson defendants were motivated by a desire for vengeance.

Revenge fires are often set by estranged spouses. "Revenge seems to run like a thread throughout all malicious incendiarism," Rider says.

Teenagers. Teenagers are motivated by curiosity, peer pressure or "dares" by others to set fires. Paul Phansteil and Keith Burns, two Cranston teenagers convicted of setting the July 4, 1977, fire that destroyed the Rhodes-on-the-Pawtuxet annex in Cranston set it on a dare, court records show.

Children. Children are motivated by curiosity or by emotional problems to play with matches and set fires. Nina Smith, 4, of West Warwick burned to death last October when her 5-year-old brother put a lit candle on her crib "to give her a birthday present." Since 1981, 169 building fires in Providence were caused by children playing with matches.

Retarded. James McKenna, described as borderline retarded, set a 1982 fire that heavily damaged the Narragansett group home where he lived. Transferred to the Joseph H. Ladd Center in Exeter, he set two more fires there, court records show. Since 1983, he has been held in the Forensic Unit of the Institute of Mental Health.

Drinking or drugs. In several Rhode Island cases, while motivation was difficult to determine, alcohol or drug use appeared to trigger the arson. One study found that 35 percent of pyromaniacs examined were drunk when they set the fires. Psychiatrists who treat firesetters believe alcohol releases pent-up anger and hostility.

Vanity. The arsonist sets a fire and then turns in the alarm or rescues building occupants to attract attention.

When authorities asked Robert Robar why he set a fire in a friend's apartment in West Warwick in July, 1981, that drove six families into the street and heavily damaged their building, he replied, "I just wanted to help them out after the fire." He was sentenced to two years in prison.

Firefighters. Firefighter arsonists are "probably more common than we realize," says John Barracato, a former New York City fire marshal who heads Aetna Life & Casualty's arson unit.

Since 1979, more than dozen volunteer firefighters in Bristol, Burrillville, South Kingstown, Coventry, North Providence and Westerly have been charged with arson, court records show.

According to court records, a group of North Providence part-time call firefighters set fire to a vacant garage in May, 1981.

"Everybody was getting restless and we needed a run," one of them, Alan J. O'Haire, told police. O'Haire also said one of the defendants, Thomas J. Cerbarano,

made O'Haire and other would-be volunteers turn in false alarms.

"Cerbarano threatened... that if we didn't pull boxes, we would not become fireman," O'Haire said. To prove it was done, "he gave me beer bottles to put on the bottom of every box." O'Haire, who agreed to testify against Cerbarano, and Richard Colson, another firefighter, pleaded to reduced charges and were sentenced to probation. Judge William M. Mackenzie granted a defense motion to drop the charges against Cerbarano.

ARSON FOR ECONOMIC PROFIT

Stop loss. Restaurants, retailers, car dealers and supermarkets use arson to stop business losses and pay off debts. "We were out so much money, there didn't seem any other way to get it back other than having a fire and getting the insurance company to pay us for it," Aldo Caparco, owner of a financially troubled East Providence restaurant, told state fire marshals after a 1979 arson. Caparco, who later changed his story, was acquitted by a Superior Court jury and charges were dropped against his brother and the alleged torch, Joseph H. Rossi.

Inventory depletion. A fire is set to lower up missing inventory, often as part of a bankruptcy fraud. This was the motive behind a 1977 fire arranged by West Warwick businessman Eugene Roberts who hired a torch, Francis Davis of Johnston, to set fire to his toy business and paid West Warwick Battalion Chief Al Parente to delay the fire trucks. The scheme collapsed, and all three men were convicted and sentenced to prison.

Anti-preservation. Buildings that cannot be torn down due to historic preservation restrictions are torched to provide justification for demolition.

Cover crime. Fires are often set to destroy evidence of another crime, often burglary. David Schiller, 19, wiped out a commercial block in North Kingstown in January, 1981, when he set a fire to cover a break.

Gentrification. Low-income tenants are "evicted" through a series of small fires which permit the landlord to collect insurance money to rehabilitate the property for high-income ("gentry") tenants who will pay higher rents.

Insurance fraud. The owner sets a fire or hires a torch to burn the building to collect insurance money. Raymond DuMont of Woonsocket planned to collect \$30,000 when he set fire to his house in February, 1981, until his girlfriend revealed the scheme to police. DuMont got 15 years in prison instead.

Modernization. Businessmen with outmoded machinery modernize their plants with the proceeds from an arson fire.

Blockbusting. Arson is used to remove stable tenants to permit speculators to purchase housing at low cost and to justify rehabilitation support money.

Burn competitor's business. The week before the Norwood Inn of Warwick was set to open, a fire broke out. Robert J. Papa, whose family owned the nearby Greenwood Inn, was convicted of paying two men \$1,000 to set the September, 1979, fire. One of the torches, Richard Martin, testified Papa was afraid of new competition. Papa was sentenced to five years.

Over-insurance. A property's value is artificially inflated by trading the building among a ring of associates. Little cash changes hands, but the value of the building increases on paper and insurance is written for each "paper" increase. Suspected in numerous inner-city fires in Providence, officials say.

Strippers. To get at wiring, plumbing and fixtures in buildings under renovation, "strippers" set fires that force firefighters to expose the plumbing and wiring.

Parcel clearance. Arson is used to destroy a building to create land for a new building or to expand an existing building adjacent to the parcel.

Extortion. Arson is used for extortion, business takeover and terror, often by organized crime figures. Extortion was the motive behind the March, 1981, firebombing that destroyed a social club, laundry and bingo supplies business on Smith Street in North Providence, said Charles M. Nystedt, the state's arson prosecutor. Nystedt said the "brains" behind the firebombing was Edward Lato, described during a 1984 U.S. District Court trial as an enforcer for a loan shark racket controlled by Nicholas L. Bianco, a major organized crime figure. A Superior Court jury convicted Lato's accomplice, Lawrence Coppola, 25, of Providence, but couldn't reach a verdict on Lato and a mistrial was declared. Coppola was sentenced to 15 years.

Loansharking. The loan shark gives a mortgage expecting that the client won't be able to pay. When payments can't be made, the client is put in touch with a "fire repair" construction company which arranges a series of arson fires to collect insurance money. The money is used to pay the loan shark at a rate higher than the original agreement.

Relocation. Arson makes the "victim" of the fire eligible for emergency public housing and welfare relocation benefits.

Automobile. Automobile arson is used to pay off debts, finance a new car or cover a theft. Fire chiefs around the state say vehicle arson is very common, but only 20 adults were prosecuted for such schemes in five years and just one was sentenced to jail.

Redecorating. Law enforcement officials and insurance investigators believe this type of arson is extremely common. These include smoky grease fires or fires started by thawing frozen pipes which cause little structural damage but enough cosmetic damage to collect insurance money to finance redecoration.

"It happens a lot," said Thomas Haynes, a deputy chief in Western Coventry, echoing comments from several Rhode Island chiefs. Haynes estimates that more than half of the state's "accidental" kitchen fires were set by homeowners "who get the kitchen remodeled for nothing."

Cleaners

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Chief Gibson. "You burn down a building, you should go to jail."

MICHAEL VIERRA hung up on a reporter who asked to talk to him about the fire. "That's a dead issue," Vierra's father said.

Douglas Castle didn't respond to a request for an interview. "I don't think he'd want to talk to you about that," his wife said. "He don't want that opened back up in his life. He's doing very well now and he doesn't want that brought back up."

MORTON AND Lillian Kosch never knew what happened to the three young men who burned their business until last summer when the *Journal-Bulletin* contacted them. "When did all of this happen?" Kosch said.

"They never told us the outcome... No communication. That's what bothered us," his wife said. "We never heard anything."

"That's a fine justice, for putting all those people out of work," Mrs. Kosch said. "It's an unbelievable society. These kids needed to be, I don't say put away, but they needed to be taught a lesson. They needed to be punished for what they did... ruining peoples lives the way they did."

"To lose everything that you've

ARSON: MYTHS AND FACTS

MYTH: Pyromaniacs are responsible for most arson fires.

FACT: Vandalism, revenge and profit are the motives behind most arsons, according to U.S. Fire Administration estimates.

Pyromania, or a motiveless compulsion to set fires, is believed to be behind as little as six percent of all arsons.

COMING

TUESDAY—Read about what arson cost the neighborhood of Elmwood — boarded-up buildings, vacant lots, shattered hopes.

WEDNESDAY—A computer tracks Providence landlords with arson troubles. A West Warwick man tells why he paid to burn his business, and what went wrong.

THURSDAY—Why children set fires and why Rhode Island isn't giving them the help they need.

FRIDAY—How the arsonists who are caught get through the court system without going to jail.

