

Convicts, Guards Tell Of Fatal Prison Fire

Full text from the existing archival transcription. Original uncertainty flags retained; line wrapping and typography reflowed. The separate Image PDF contains all source-view pages from the earlier combined edition. This does not expand an excerpt into a complete issue or volume.

MILTON, Fla. (AP) - Convicts under shotgun guard have testified that three cellmates deliberately set the prison fire that burned 37 inmates to death.

Among those who died were the three accused of setting the blaze.

As the formal inquest into the Sunday night fire at State Prison Road Camp 12 at Jay, Fla., started in Santa Rosa County Courthouse, 22 bodies sacked in olive drab body bags lay outside the old county jail awaiting positive identification.

The coroner's inquest will decide if criminal negligence or homicide was involved in the tragedy.

On the table before County Judge Mahlon McCall Monday were the prison files of all 51 men who had been in the locked and barred barracks at Camp 12. Of the 51, eight were in the county jail unharmed, six were in hospitals with burns and 37 had perished.

The convicts testified that it was about six minutes after the fire started before guard A. O. Lovett unlocked the barred "cage door" and a solid wooden door to let them flee.

Lovett took the stand and testified that a smashing, shouting disturbance broke out first and he ran to toss the keys over a high barbed-wire fence to guard Richard E. Cobb, who used them to unlock the prison arsenal.

"We had to get longer guns," Lovett said.

When he saw the fire and returned, Lovett said, "I made four passes before I could open the door. It was so hot I had trouble seeing."

Convict Roy G. Regan, 26, said, "I heard the screaming. That's when I looked up and saw the whole wall was afire and it started to roll down the ceiling at me."

Regan and the other prisoner witnesses, some of whom came to court shirtless, others with T-shirts marked by ash and smoke, called the names of the three men who they said turned the 40-by

90-foot wooden barracks into a funeral pyre.

The trio who allegedly set the tragic blaze was identified to the coroner's jury as Joseph Earl Wynder, a Negro, and Thomas E. Ard and Earl Evans, both white men. All were from the Pensacola area.

Wynder was sentenced to prison from Calhoun County for grand larceny and burglary. Information on convictions of Ard and Evans was not immediately available.

The convict witnesses said Wynder, Ard and Evans used newspapers and toilet tissue to start their fires after a television set and fluorescent lights were smashed.

But Lovett said the resentment began when a pornographic book was confiscated from Ard.

Lovett, 49, who has been a prison guard for a year, entered the burning building and herded five frightened men outside. He was burned in the rescue but not severely.

One by one the witnesses described the horror inside Camp 12.

"Someone jumped on the bed and started beating the lights out," said Gary A. Powell, 19. "The guard told us to put out the fire. He said he didn't have the key."

Powell testified, "I jumped under a bunk and laid there for four or five minutes. Everybody crowded around the door. I felt four or five people stepping on me."

James Clyde Donaldson Jr., 25, said, "I heard something fall, something explode. I didn't know what it was. I seen fire start going over at the top of the ceiling. It happened so quick."

Camp cook Henry W. Lambert, also a prisoner, said, "I saw somebody turn the television off and then smash it. Then they were whacking at the fluorescent lights making them pop."

All of the eight convicts said Lovett finally opened the door and said, "the door is open, boys. Come on out."

Afterward 19 bodies were found huddled four high in the shower room where they apparently sought cool safety from the flames. Sixteen were stacked beneath a barred window.

A prison inspector reported on the condition of Camp 12 on June 6 and said the prison was "good" to "very good" in all categories.

“This old wooden prison has received good maintenance and the buildings and equipment are at present in good shape,” said inspector R. B. Gramling.

Louie Wainwright, director of the State Corrections Division, said however, the prison system had already planned to close Camp 12.

The massive investigation included probers from the state fire marshall’s office, private investigators assigned by Gov. Claude Kirk who also ordered safety checks at the 13 other road camps with similar buildings, and a formal investigation by the state attorney’s office.