

Cons Testify Cellmates Set Deadly Blaze — Big Spring Daily Herald, July 18, 1967, page 12

Full item transcription. Original wording retained; paragraph wrapping reflowed. Square brackets identify editorial descriptions or uncertain readings. This text copy is separate from the source images.

Big Spring (Texas) Herald, Tuesday, July 18, 1967, page 12

Cons Testify Cellmates Set Deadly Blaze

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.

DOOR UNLOCKED

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.

SCREAMING

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."

TRIO NAMED

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.

BOOK SEIZED

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.

[End of selected article. Neighboring articles and advertisements on the preserved newspaper page are outside this transcription. Historical allegations and racial classifications above are the newspaper's wording, not independently established findings.]