

## Prison Inferno Plotted, Fire Survivors Testify

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MILTON, Fla. (AP) - Prisoners who survived a prison fire that killed 37 convicts testified at an inquest Monday it was set deliberately by three inmates who they said plotted in advance to "tear the place apart."

The convict witnesses testified the three men were among those killed when the blaze ran out of control inside the locked barracks building.

The convicts testified that it was approximately six minutes before a guard unlocked the door after the fire started. They said the plot was hatched jointly by two white convicts and a Negro.

Officials said previously the building was destroyed completely in eight minutes.

The inquest was held before County Judge [Mahlong?] McCall in the county seat of Santa Rosa County just 20 miles from the community of Jay near where the prison camp tragedy occurred.

Joseph C. Lewis, 30, an inmate who said he saved himself by ducking under a bunk and crawling to safety once the prison's exit was unlocked, testified: "I heard they were going to put the building out of commission."

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

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

The convicts were brought into court in their prison pants, blue and a white stripe down the side, and T-shirts charred by ashes and smoke. Some of the prisoners had no shirts and one was bandaged.

Six prisoners were injured and eight were unharmed in the blaze which struck about 10:40 p.m.

Sunday night, but 37 died. Most of the dead were huddled in two grim piles - 19 in the shower where they apparently sought refuge under the water and 16 at a window whose steel bars

blocked  
escape.

Two others escaped through a door unlocked by a guard but dropped dead on a lawn inside the  
barbed wire compound.

Louis Wainwright, director of the State Corrections Division, said, "The prison system had already  
planned to close Camp 12 where the fire struck. I guess it's shut down for good now."

Wainwright did not say why the camp was being closed but a similar camp, No. 9, about 20  
[continued on page 2] miles away was closed June 30 reportedly because of the high  
maintenance  
cost. An official prison commission had criticized conditions at Camp 9 before it was closed.

"It seemed like an eternity," testified prisoner Roy G. Regan at the inquest.

"I was in bed when the fire began", Regan said. "I heard the inmates screaming. I saw the fire  
come  
rolling down the ceiling. I just got under the bunk and crawled out when I heard the guard  
shouting,  
'The door is open! Come on out.' "

That guard, A. O. Lovett, went into the blazing building and herded at least five convicts  
through a  
curtain of flame when the prisoners apparently froze. He was burned but not seriously during  
the  
rescue.

Regan said, "If a man stood up in it, he would have lost consciousness from all the smoke and  
fire.  
When we got outside we took axes from the truck and cut a hole in the wall and pulled seven of  
them  
through."

## Convicts, Guards Tell Of Fatal Prison Fire

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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.

## Jury Charges Prison Fire Set By 3 Convicts

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MILTON, Fla. (UPI) - A coroner's jury Tuesday blamed three convicts for deliberately starting a prison road camp fire in which 37 prisoners burned to death Sunday night.

All three of the accused prisoners were among the victims of the flash fire at the prison camp at Berrydale, north of here. Only 14 convicts survived and six of these were critically burned.

Concluding two days of investigation, the jury also said it found "no signs of racial violence" on the part of the prisoners and found "no neglect on the part of the guards or prison officials."

The jury concluded the dead "met death at the hands of" prisoners Thomas Eugene Ard, Joseph Wynder and Earl Evans.

Testimony before the coroner's jury was to the effect that the three inmates started the fire, thinking they could force authorities to provide better and more up to date quarters than the old World War II barracks in which they were housed.

# Georgia Begins Prison Camp Investigations

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ATLANTA (UPI) - A team of inspectors from the State Fire Marshal's office has begun an investigation into possible fire hazards at Georgia prison camps.

State Comp. Gen. James L. Bentley Jr., who also serves as fire commissioner, said Tuesday the investigation was requested by the [as printed] State Corrections Department after a legislative committee showed several state work camps to be firetraps.

Bentley said the tragic fire that killed 37 inmates this week at a Florida work camp emphasized the "urgency" of the investigation.

The fire marshal's staff was sent to the field Tuesday morning and the comptroller general said he expected them to inspect eight or 12 camps Tuesday.

He said the investigation would receive a report includ- [broken wording as printed] and the Corrections Department would receive a report including a list of deficiencies, suggestions for improvement and other recommendations for a permanent fire safety program in the state prison system.

Bentley said his office would simply make recommendations and it would be up to the Corrections Department to take action.

## Charred Bars

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CHARRED BARS - Prison Guard C.B. Martin secures broken water spout inside of barred cage. The charred bars serve as stern evidence to the flash fire which witnesses say was set by three of the prisoners. (UPI Telephoto)

## Fiery Death Trap

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FIERY DEATH TRAP. - The prison guard will no longer need to sit in this chair overlooking the prison barracks at Jay, Fla. The charred remains stand in blackened shambles, surrounded by twisted bed frames after a fire took the lives of 37 men Sunday at this remote prison camp. (UPI Telephoto)