

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."