

Pen Fire Kills 37 - Big Spring Daily Herald, July 17, 1967, page 1

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.

Racial Clash

Pen Fire Kills 37

JAY, Fla. (AP) — Thirty-seven prisoners were killed Sunday night when fire triggered by a convict brawl swept a locked barracks at a recently integrated state prison road camp.

Fourteen of the 51 prisoners inside the burning building were rescued. Five were hospitalized with burns at nearby Century and one at Pensacola.

G. C. Mayne Jr., assistant warden, said the fire erupted when the battling prisoners broke a gas line and smashed a fluorescent lamp. A spark from the lamp started the blaze.

Guards Save 14 Cons

Mayne said guards ran for their weapons when the fighting broke out but returned in time to save the 14 survivors.

Pasco Rowells, a State Highway Department foreman who supervised the men at work, said the fight began between a Negro and a white man. He said there had been reports of racial trouble and fights between the 35 Negro prisoners and 16 whites since the camp was integrated last week.

The first fire alarm came at 10:42 p.m. Guard Cocker Nelson said the aging World War II style barracks was destroyed in eight minutes.

Two Drop Dead On Lawn

Rescue workers retrieved 35 bodies when the embers cooled several hours later. The other two victims ran from the burning building and dropped dead on a lawn.

"The whole room was wrapped up with fire," Santa Rosa sheriff's dispatcher H. C. Crawford quoted a surviving prisoner brought to the county jail at nearby Milton. All eight unharmed convicts were jailed there overnight.

"Somebody hollered 'fire,'" Gerold Milligan, the prisoner, was quoted as saying. Milligan said he was sitting on his bunk removing his shoes. Then, he said, the fire "swept the whole top of the building."

Light Ignites Gas

"They began to pass out," Milligan said. He said he ducked under beds and crawled toward the locked door holding his nose.

Just as he reached the door a guard opened it and Milligan escaped the flames with only his hair singed.

Chief Deputy Harwell Enginger confirmed Mayne's report that the fire flashed through the barracks when the fluorescent light, torn from the ceiling, touched off escaping gas. Enginger said the fight went from one end of the barracks to the other, but couldn't say how many persons were involved.

Curtain Of Flame

The victims worked on road crews during the day and were quartered at Road Camp 12 each night. The prison site is eight miles east of Jay, a farming community of about 5,000 located in the extreme northwestern tip of Florida's panhandle about 30 miles north of Pensacola at the Alabama state line.

Bars which prevented escape through the barracks windows lay in the glowing ashes.

A. O. Lovett, one of three guards on duty when the fire erupted, said some of the prisoners, apparently frightened by the curtain of flame separating them from the door, refused to come out.

"Lovett went in and brought five of them out, pushing them ahead of him through the door," said Louie Wainwright, director of the State Corrections Division.

Lovett was burned but did not require hospitalization.