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BFD solves case; serial arsonist sentenced

Bartlesville Fire Department investigators recently saw the closure of a three-year ordeal that stretched from Bartlesville to California and back again — and ended with a 25-year prison sentence for a local man.

The crime spree started in Bartlesville in July 2017. Between that time and February 2018, BFD responded to 16 fires in the area south of 14th Street and between Santa Fe and Penn Avenue.

"The fires consisted of trash in an alley and two car fires, one of which was determined to be incendiary, or caused by arson," said BFD Investigator Capt. Jerry Berry. "Thirteen of the fires were structure fires and, of those, eight were determined to be an incendiary fire cause."

Known for his tenacity and methodical approach to solving cases, Berry served as the lead investigator on all 16 fires. During the investigation, he determined how the fires were being set and that the method also worked "as a time delay," giving the arsonist time to get away.

"The contents of aerosol cans were being used to set ordinary combustibles, such as clothing, on fire," he said.

Berry said a break in the case came after a Bartlesville Police Department officer discovered evidence that led investigators to a suspect.

"The Bartlesville Police Department was made aware of the fires and the manner in which the fires were being set, and officers increased patrol in the area," Berry said. "The officer attempted to make contact with a person riding a bicycle, but the person jumped off the bike and ran away. However, a sack containing an aerosol can was found on the handlebars of the bicycle. The sack had been prepped to be used to set a fire."

BFD recovered DNA from the bicycle, linking Michael Kevin Heneby to the bicycle. Berry said other information was gathered that helped confirm that Heneby had been setting the fires. But when Heneby was confronted with the information, he fled to California.

"Investigators in Antioch, Calif., began investigating a series of 47 exterior and vehicle fires in a one-and-a-half square mile area," Berry said. "Of these fires, Heneby confessed to setting five."

BFD was alerted to Heneby's whereabouts by California authorities.

"The fire investigator in California saw on NCIC (National Crime Information Center) that Heneby was wanted in Bartlesville for setting fires. They contacted us and Heneby was subsequently returned to Bartlesville," Berry said.

Heneby was charged with setting eight structures on fire, to which he pleaded guilty on Aug. 26. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison on charges of second degree arson.

Fire Chief John Banks said Berry's thorough investigatory work and collaboration with other agencies combined to resolve these cases that might otherwise have gone unsolved.

"Capt./Investigator Berry is a hardworking and dedicated employee who put in countless hours on this case, which started after a string of suspicious house fires and ran from July 2017 through February 2018," Banks said. "Because of Jerry's dedication and hard work, the firefighters and citizens of this community are much safer. Congratulations to Jerry for a job well done."