

Investigators testify in case of church fire

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The Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE (AP) - A federal fire investigator says a Mormon church in Roswell was torched with gasoline last June by someone who climbed onto the roof and broke into the building through a chapel window with a pry bar.

Don Gillespie of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms testified Wednesday he and his National Response Team found marks left by poured gasoline on the wall below the window, pry marks on the windowsill and a 4-foot pry bar inside, below the window.

"This was an intentionally set fire by the use of an accelerant," Gillespie testified in the second week of trial for Walter Gene Grassie of Roswell.

Grassie is accused of burning the Roswell church and vandalizing three other southern New Mexico Mormon churches after the January 1998 breakup of his eight-year affair with Sharlene Jensen, a married woman who was the organist at the Roswell church. She and Grassie had been singing partners with the Pecos Valley Yodelers.

Chaves County sheriff's detective Sharon Berry testified Wednesday that deputies arrived at Grassie's home before 4 a.m. June 28, within 45 minutes of the fire being reported and while flames were still roaring inside the church. She acknowledged he was immediately a suspect based on previous incidents of vandalism and graffiti for which he had been investigated.

She said Grassie told deputies he had not driven anywhere near the church since about 2 p.m. June 27. She said he told officers he'd gone to a dance that night, helped his ex-wife, Martha, clean up a church in Dexter, went home, watered his garden around midnight and went to bed by 1:30 a.m.

Deputies asked Grassie why the motor was still warm on his pickup truck when they arrived.

Grassie then told investigators he failed to mention he went out late to get some sleeping medication, Berry testified.

The deputies searched his house with his permission and seized a black funnel from his

pickup truck bed, a box of rubber gloves from inside the truck and personal items investigators say Grassie told them had been Jensen's that he "kept as a souvenir."

They also seized four containers Berry said smelled of gasoline.

The ATF's Gillespie said samples taken from the burned church were tested by an ATF lab in California and were determined to have contained gasoline. He said about nine-tenths of a gallon to 2 gallons were estimated to have been used on the fire.

"Somebody got on the flat roof, got over by that ... window, pried it, poked it and poured gasoline through it," he said.

He theorized the arsonist lost his grip on the 25- to 30-pound pry bar and dropped it inside the chapel.

Gillespie estimated the fire started shortly before 3:15 a.m. June 28 and burned "well into the morning hours, the daylight."

But he acknowledged under cross-examination by defense attorney Richard Winterbottom that he does not know who started the fire or how many people might have been involved.

Gillespie said the arsonist might have used a ladder to reach the church's flat roof but - lacking a ladder - could have shinnied up a lightpole near the building. The arsonist could have thrown the gasoline container and pry bar onto the roof before climbing up, Gillespie said.

An ATF agent climbed that pole to get onto the roof during the investigation, he said.

No ladder shows in photographs of Grassie's truck taken when deputies arrived at his home while the fire still burned.

The heavysset, 49-year-old Grassie has denied having anything to do with burning or vandalizing churches. He has admitted writing on street signs that he loved Mrs. Jensen.

Grassie is charged with four federal arson counts - three relating to the June 28 church fire and the other in connection with the burning of an all-terrain vehicle owned by his former lover's son. He also is charged with six misdemeanor counts related to vandalizing the Roswell church and others in Alamogordo, Alto and Artesia.

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