

# Nightmare On Lime Street

## How a ghastly Jacksonville fire forever changed arson science in America

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**T**he first call came from Jacksonville Sheriff's Officer G.A. McHale. Driving west on I-10, he saw flames surging in the night sky and called headquarters to report a fire. By the time he reached 527 Lime St., smoke and flames were pouring out of the windows and front door. Gerald Lewis, 35, stood in his front yard, holding his 3-year-old son Geramiah in what McHale later described as "a bear hug." Lewis screamed that someone was still inside; he heard them crying for help. McHale didn't hear anyone inside, but he ran to the back of the house. It didn't appear to be on fire, but he couldn't get in. The windows were blocked by burglar bars. Two minutes after McHale reported the fire, the first firetruck arrived. Firefighter Steve Gerbert beat back flames on the front porch and battled his way into the front hall, where he fell in a hole that had burned through the floor. Firefighter Randy Wyse kicked in the rear door and saw flames overhead and on the stairway. As the flames reached the tops of tall oak trees in the front yard and roared from the rafters, Lewis cried out, "They're all dead. They're all dead."

By the time the fire was brought under control in the wee hours of Oct. 16, 1990, the interior was charcoal. Furniture was reduced to blackened heaps. Metal window frames had melted, glass panes had exploded.

But there was far worse. Near the top of the stairs, firefighters found the body of a small child. Three feet away lay two more children and two women, one pregnant. Another child was found in what was left of the bedroom. Burned beyond recognition, the bodies no longer had any hands or feet.

## A Holocaust

Randy Wyse was just 22 years old when the house on Lime Street burned. Today, he's president of the Jacksonville firefighters union, but he still thinks of that fire almost every day. Lime Street is just blocks from union headquarters on Stockton Street, and each time he drives past, he remembers that night.

The fire was a holocaust, but the memory that haunts Wyse most is the death of 12-year-old Lakendra Marsh, Carolyn Lewis' daughter. Wyse found her kneeling against a bed, which had burned to the box springs.

"I still vividly remember that child, in a praying posture over the bed," Wyse says. "I've been to thousands of fires and seen many, hundreds, of deaths. But every time I ride by Lime Street, I remember it."

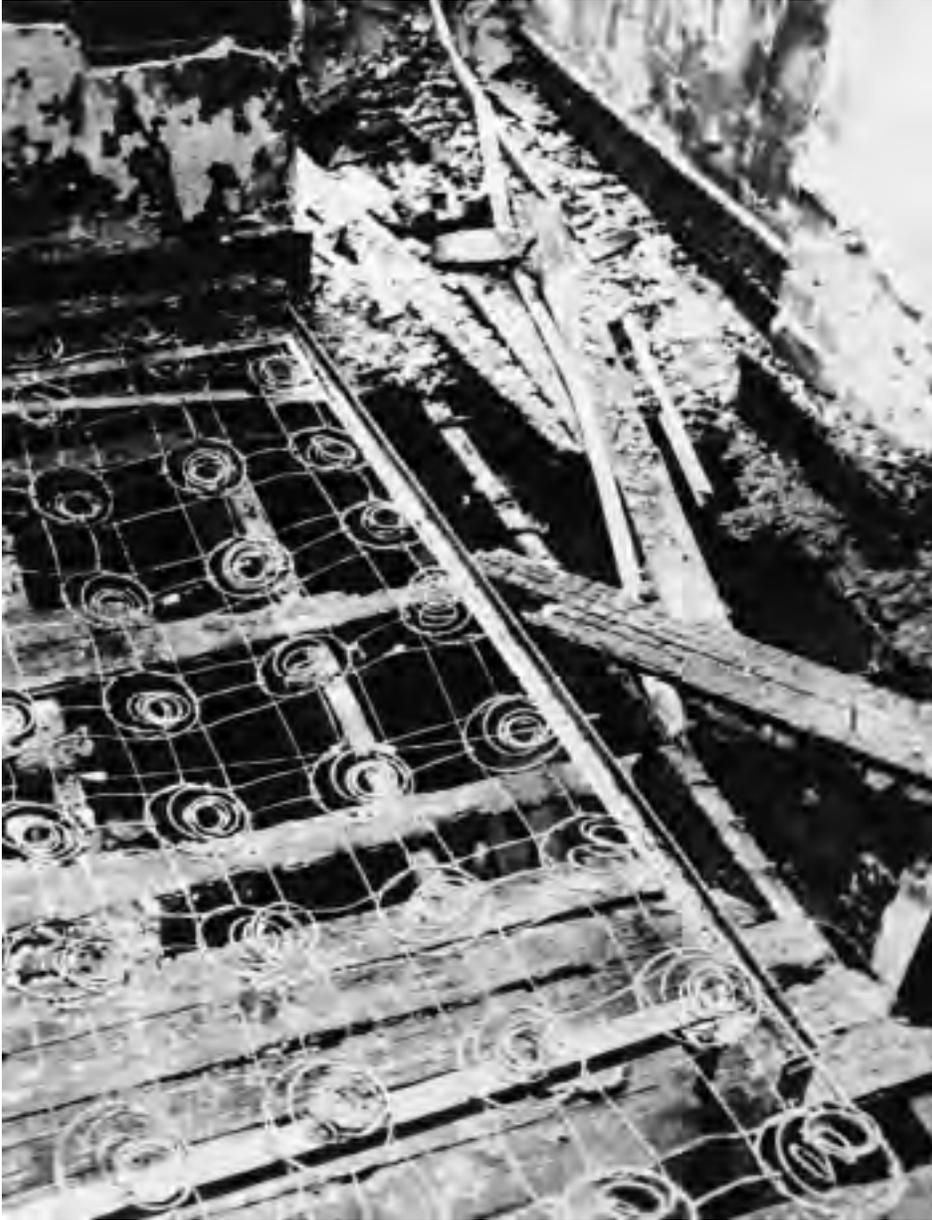
Even a grizzled homicide detective like R.E. Smith, who'd been with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office for 14 years at the time of the fire, was deeply affected. "I've never been to Hell before, but that's what I'd associate it with," he told the Times-Union. "It was the worst thing I've seen in my entire police career."

The aftermath of the fire included a grim parade, recorded on videotape by the fire department. In it, employees of the Medical Examiner's Office carry out the six victims, one by one, in blue body bags. The red lights from four firetrucks pulse in the darkness, casting everything in a red wash. Throughout the exhumation, Gerald Lewis can be seen in the background, out on Lime Street, pacing. There is no audio on the recording, but Lewis — a tall, angular African-American man — looks like he's arguing with someone. He shakes his head, throws his hands in the air, shakes his head again. At the distance of 20 years and the remove of archived videotape, his behavior reads mostly like incredulity.

The dead included Lewis' wife, Carolyn, 35, her 12-year-old daughter Lakendra Marsh, Carolyn's pregnant sister Victoria Marsh and her three children: Chris, 5, Jackie, 4, and Danielle, 2. The only survivor besides Gerald Lewis was his 3-year-old son, Geramiah.

As investigators from the Sheriff's Office, the fire department, the State Attorney's Office and the fire marshal arrived on the scene, they all asked Lewis what happened. All would ultimately give contradictory reports about Lewis' reaction.





**Fire investigator photographs capture the aftermath of the 1990 Lime Street fire, in which four women and four children died. The only survivors were Gerald Lewis and his son, Geramiah, 3.**

Officer McHale described him as agitated. Another said that when firefighters arrived, Lewis was standing in front of the house, watching it burn. Det. Smith noted he hadn't called 911 or asked

any of his neighbors to call. And he reported that although Lewis said he'd banged on a neighbor's door, the house was abandoned and looked like it had been for a long time. Lewis himself offered contradictory accounts. He told one investigator that he and his wife had fought over money and bills. He told another they hadn't fought. But he told both that he had drunk a couple of beers, and his wife didn't want him in the house when he'd been drinking. He told police that Carolyn had taken out a restraining order against him in August 1990 for domestic violence. (Police later learned Lewis had threatened to burn her house down.) The order stipulated that Lewis was allowed into Carolyn's home, but only at her invitation. Because Lewis was unemployed, she would occasionally let him sleep in her car. But the marriage was over. The couple's divorce hearing was scheduled for Oct. 18 — three days after the fire.

Lewis told police that when Carolyn asked him to leave that night, he climbed into a green Mazda coupe parked by the house, drank a beer and went to asleep. He awoke about 20 minutes later, he told investigators, and spotted flames through the living room window. He said he rushed to the house, past Carolyn, who was trying to get a garden hose to work. Lewis ran inside, where his sister-in-law handed him a pot full of water to douse the flames.

At that point, he said, the fire wasn't big — just a single cushion of the sofa was burning — but it was generating a lot of smoke. Lewis poured the pot of water on the fire while his wife and sister ran upstairs to the children. He told police he tried to follow, but the smoke was intense, the fire had grown and the room felt hot. He turned around and saw that his son, Geramiah, was following him up the stairs, so Lewis grabbed him and ran outside. When he stepped off the porch, Lewis told investigators, he heard a loud "whoosh," and the entire house was engulfed in flames. Police asked how much time had passed from the time he got out of the car to the "whoosh." Lewis said about three to five minutes.

As fire investigators combed through the scene, they noted classic signs of arson. They found a bleach bottle partially full of gasoline on the floorboard of the Mazda in which Lewis was sleeping. They noted that a sofa fire would smolder, not combust. They observed that the glass blown out of the windows

wasn't smoke-stained the way it would be in a slow-burning fire. They pointed to the burn marks on the walls and the "alligatoring" pattern of raised ridges on the wooden floorboards that indicated the fire was most intense by the floor. They spotted "pour patterns" in the hallway — burn patterns that appear to follow a liquid accelerant. They determined the fire was fast-moving, suggesting an accelerant like gasoline had been used.

As the evidence mounted, investigators developed a theory. Lewis had taken his only son out of the house (the other children were Carolyn's and Victoria's) and poured gasoline as he exited — in the living room, hallway and front porch. Standing outside, he lit the fire.

Homicide detectives took Lewis to the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office that night and charged him with one count of arson, six counts of first-degree murder and one count of manslaughter (for the 7-month-old fetus Victoria Marsh was carrying). The State Attorney's Office planned to seek the death penalty. When informed of the charges, detective R.E. Smith said that Lewis responded, "I think I need a lawyer." Detectives ended their interview and left the room. Lewis lay across two chairs and fell asleep.

## **"I guess he had a hell of a defense attorney."**

Five months after he was charged with killing his family, news crews filmed Lewis walking out of the Duval County jail, his possessions stuffed in two grocery bags. His attorney, Public Defender Pat McGuinness, trailed behind. In March 1991, the State Attorney's Office announced it was dropping all charges. Then-Chief Assistant State Attorney John Delaney appeared before Circuit Court Judge Hudson Oliff to say that prosecutors

# Fire pattern consistent with arson

## *Investigators file affidavits in house fire that killed 6*

By Paul Pinkham

Staff writer

Although no fuels showed up in lab tests of debris in a Jacksonville house fire that killed six people,

insufficient evidence and have asked Circuit Judge Lawrence P. Haddock to release Lewis without bond.

At the request of defense law-

But Powell said in his affidavit that burn patterns and the intensity and acceleration of the blaze point to the use of a liquid accelerant, such as gasoline found in a jug in a

now thought Lewis' version of events was more credible than the prosecution's version. Employees at the Public Defender's Office took up a collection for Lewis, and he used it to buy a one-way bus ticket back to his family in Shreveport, La.

Fire Department spokesman Glenn Domen told the Times-Union, "I guess he had a hell of a defense attorney."

In an interview with the Times-Union before he left town, Lewis said that even though the charges had been dropped, he didn't come out ahead. He'd lost his wife and family. He'd been vilified by the media, and abused in jail by inmates who thought he was guilty.

"I've been treated like a monster," he told the newspaper. "Some people will still think that."

Although Lewis was never brought to trial, his case proved pivotal in future fire investigations. By the time the charges against him were dropped, the prosecution team had debunked many widely held beliefs about arson scenes. Even today, the Lime Street fire remains a seminal case, one that helped to transform arson investigations from a blend of lore and instinct into a science.

It wasn't an easy transformation. Traditional theories about how fires burn had been developed over generations by firefighters who'd observed thousands of fire scenes. It wasn't quantifiable theory, more a set of beliefs rooted in experience. But it carried the weight of fact. And as with any tradition in the close fraternity of firefighters, it was honored for the very fact that it represented the

wisdom of veterans.

The Lime Street fire, and the groundbreaking investigation that followed, resoundingly disproved generations of arson theory. It also provided a model for how to apply science to arson investigations and introduced an era of replicating fires to understand what happens when something burns.

John Lentini, a Florida-based fire researcher who has since become an expert witness in arson cases and inspected more than 2,000 fire scenes, was called in by Duval County prosecutors to assist in the Lime Street investigation.

When he first looked over the incident reports, he agreed that it seemed like arson: There were pour patterns, the fire was hot and fast-moving, and the victims hadn't died from smoke inhalation, but from heat and flames.

"Going in, I thought I was going to send Gerald Lewis to Raiford to get a shot of electricity," recalls Lentini from his office on Florida's Gulf Coast. "I thought I was sending him to the electric chair."

But the case against Lewis, initially unassailable, had actually begun to unravel the day he was arrested. Public Defender Pat McGuinness was assigned the case, and he'd learned a few things about arson investigations from his work on the Palms Hotel fire, a landmark 1983 arson case at a downtown rooming house.

"I knew the scene had to be gone though as quickly as possible and evidence preserved," says McGuinness. Although the Lime Street fire happened over the weekend and his bosses were out of town, McGuinness called in two fire investigators from Tampa to begin digging through the rubble. With a sly smile, he admits it put the Public Defender's Office "on the hook for a couple thousand dollars."

It proved a smart move: As investigators picked through the scene, they found Lewis' story checked out right from the start. Melted pots and pans were in the hallway, as if they'd been used to douse flames. Bits of melted garden hose were found beneath the porch. The kitchen sink faucet had melted in the "on" position. The wood samples taken from the house showed

no trace of accelerants.

As for the gasoline-filled bleach bottle in the Mazda, Lewis said it was there because he'd mowed his wife's lawn. McGuinness photographed piles of grass clippings that remained the back yard and sampled the gas in the mower's tank, which he says matched the gas in the bleach bottle perfectly.

Witnesses' stories also proved less substantial than they had first appeared. Contrary to police reports that he didn't seek help, Lewis said that he had gone to Edison Street and waved a car down. He begged the woman driving to call 911, but she said she was late for work at the Times-Union and didn't have time to stop (in the pre-cell phone era) to make the call.

The Public Defender's Office staked out the night lunchroom at the Times-Union building and finally found Karen Budget. She said Lewis had jumped in front of her car while she was driving down Edison Avenue — she almost hit him and Geramiah — and that Lewis pleaded with her to call the police and fire departments.

The public defender shared his discoveries with the prosecutors, with the desired affect. "The state was becoming increasingly worried about their case," McGuinness says. "Any time you have a high-profile case with dead children, there is a whole public outcry. They want somebody to pay for it."

Former Assistant State Attorney Frank Ashton acknowledges the pressures of the case, but says the evidence unearthed by the Public Defender's Office could not be ignored. Meanwhile, some of the prosecution's evidence evaporated. A state fire marshal's report that initially found the presence of accelerants on Lewis' clothes and shoes proved false when the items were retested. "It was one of those cases where it starts out circumstantially as a strong case," says Ashton, now in private practice in Duval County, "and then you find out pieces of evidence that you thought existed aren't there."

## Up In Flames

Though Ashton was worried about the case, he still believed that Lewis was guilty of arson. So he and his co-counsel, George Bateh, suggested to State Attorney Ed Austin and Chief Assistant State Attorney Delaney that they bolster their theory of

how the fire started.

The team hired fire investigator John Lentini and got the state of California to lend arson expert John DeHaan from the California Department of Justice. It was DeHaan who first noticed that the house next door to the Lewis place was nearly identical, and suggested they test Lewis' story by staging a fire there. Delaney allowed them to spend up to \$20,000 to set up a test burn — one of the first re-enactments in arson investigation history.



**The blaze that firefighters staged next door to the original fire revolutionized arson science in America. It also destroyed the prosecution's case against Gerald Lewis.**

Prosecutors were exacting in recreating the Lime Street house. They contacted the furniture company where Lewis had rented her furniture, and when they discovered the company no longer carried the couch, they tracked down a family who had bought the same model, and they bought their sofa. Inmates from the Duval County jail installed new drywall in the condemned house,

replaced broken windows and laid carpeting similar to what had been in the Lewis home. They bought a coffee table and a television and arranged them like they had been in the Lewis home. They even placed bags of clothes in the hallway, as there had been the night of the fire. Neighbors and family members confirmed the setup looked exactly like Carolyn Lewis' home.

DeHaan and Lentini then put temperature and carbon monoxide monitors throughout the house and connected them to equipment placed on a long table outside. When the house was ready, a firefighter touched the sofa with a small flame. Everyone expected the fire would smolder, then sputter out, says Ashton. They didn't realize that the couch's oil-based polyurethane cushions were highly combustible. In a video of the test burn, the flame gains steadily on the first of three cushions, a small fire about 12 inches wide and 2 feet tall. By the time the fire spreads to the second cushion, a wall of black smoke has lifted from the sofa, pushing toward the ceiling. As the heat reaches the ceiling, the smoke appears to sink, and the air turns from black to superheated red. In a flash, the entire room explodes into raging fire. Smoke pours out of the living room and sweeps up the stairs, chased by a long tongue of fire. At that point, firefighters race in and extinguish the blaze. In Lentini's microphone, a firefighter can be heard to say, "We may have just proved the defendant's case." From the time the firefighter lit the sofa to the moment house exploded in flames, four minutes had passed.

"I was amazed at how quickly the house went up," recalls Ashton. "I don't think even the professionals realized what an enormous fuel load that couch had and how combustible those fumes were going to be once they collected in that relatively enclosed place.

"There was enormous heat, unbelievable amounts of heat," Ashton continues. "Everything caught on fire. You saw flames coursing out of that room and up the stairs. Nobody knows whether those folks upstairs had any chance to get out. You just don't know."

The team then staged a second fire — one to test the theory of arson. They put new furnishings in the living rooms, made repairs to the structure, then poured the exact amount of gasoline that was missing from the bleach bottle in the Mazda on the

floors. A firefighter lit the gasoline from outside the house. That fire also combusted in the living room and flew up the stairs, but it took about a minute longer than in the first scenario.

After the test, Lentini told prosecutors he could no longer say that the case was definitively arson. For one, he'd found trail marks in the wood after the first re-enactment — the very kind arson investigators considered proof of arson, even though the first reenactment was supposed to represent an accidental fire. It was also clear that not only arsons produced hot, fast-moving fires. And Lentini said the fire pattern that appeared to burn from the floor up could apparently also be caused by “flashover” — when a room becomes so hot that everything bursts into flame at once.

Before the Lime Street fire, Lentini says, assumptions about arson were merely assumptions. “It was witchcraft, really,” he says — and the International Association of Arson Investigators fought to keep it that way. As recently as 1997, the group filed a brief in a Florida case saying that fire investigation is not a science and therefore should not be subject to the rigorous requirements imposed on scientific disciplines in court, such as a need for verifiable results. Arson findings, the group said, were based on experience.

A federal appeals court rejected the argument, and since then, the 9,000-member association has begun to embrace the idea of scientific inquiry. Today, there is more science than ever: The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives fire science laboratory in Beltsville, Md., and the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Md., do full-scale re-enactments of fires, much in the same way Lime Street prosecutors did two decades ago.

But despite the advances, many arson investigators still cleave to the “witchcraft.” Many suspects have been and are still charged with arson based upon the same faulty notions that investigators cited in the Lime Street fire: Fires that burn hot and fast indicate arson, the use of accelerants causes fires to burn from the floor up, patterns are created because accelerants have been poured.

Those very presumptions — though not borne out by science — helped convict Cameron Todd Willingham in Texas for the

deaths of his three children in a house fire. On Feb. 17, 2005, Willingham was executed by lethal injection. Closer to home, Florahome resident Randy Seal was accused of setting a fire that killed his girlfriend, Tscharna Hampton. Although Lentini testified that pour marks can be created by accidental fires, and that there was no evidence Hampton had been splashed with gasoline, Seal was convicted of murder in 2007 and sentenced to life in prison.

The Lime Street case had a different outcome. Ashton and Bateh agreed they couldn't take the case to trial. They hadn't proved that Lewis was innocent, but they had shown that his story was plausible — more plausible than the theory that gasoline was used to set the house ablaze.

“This was a horrific situation,” says Ashton. “Six people were dead. And if somebody set a fire intentionally to kill those people, it is a horrible, horrible crime. But on the other hand, if the fire were accidentally set by a child in the house, or somebody else in the house, it is equally horrible to take somebody who is totally innocent and to try them for a crime because there is some circumstantial evidence that they might be guilty, and convict them of it and send them to Death Row.”

Some people criticized the state attorney for dropping the charges against Lewis, saying prosecutors should have let a jury decide. But Ashton believes prosecutors had a moral obligation. Given the attention to the case, and its horrific outcome, he believes Lewis would have been found guilty, no matter what the test fire showed.

“Most jurors tend to believe [the prosecutors'] case,” said Ashton. “The defendant has two strikes against him. The police have arrested him and the State Attorney's Office is prosecuting him. So you run a great risk of having an innocent man convicted.”

## This Boy's Life

When Gerald Lewis left Jacksonville for Shreveport in March 1991, he promised to return. As soon as he got on his feet, he told the Times-Union, he was going to return to Jacksonville to get custody of little Geramiah. He never did. Instead, Geramiah continued to live with his aunt, Mary Sue Cary, who'd been granted custody after the fire

and who never doubted that Lewis murdered her sister. In a 1991 interview with the Times-Union, Cary said that her sister had loved Lewis despite his repeated violence toward her. He was out of work, Cary explained, and Carolyn would see him roaming the streets and take pity. Once she found him sleeping under the I-10 overpass. Cary returned to Shreveport, too, to be near Geramiah's grandmother, who helped raise him. Geramiah saw little of his father. Cary wouldn't allow Gerald Lewis in her home. But when Geramiah stayed with his grandmother, Mittie Marsh, his father would sometimes visit.

On these occasions, Geramiah told Folio Weekly in a recent interview, his father would offer encouraging words. "He told me to go to school, be the first one in the family to go to college," recalls Geramiah. "And he told me he loved my mother with all his heart. And he said it wasn't supposed to be like this at all."

Growing up, Geramiah says his mother's family didn't want to discuss the fire. Sometimes, when he had dreams about riding on a Big Wheel or chasing caterpillars, his aunts would laugh and tell him that he was dreaming about his yard in Jacksonville. But there were big gaps in his memory. He knew his mother died in a fire, but little else. He had found one newspaper clipping about the fire when he was a child, but when he tried to talk to his aunts and grandmother about it, they'd start crying.

"It was too emotional for them," he says. "I didn't want to cause anybody a problem. Then after awhile I didn't want to see people cry, so I just didn't ask about it."

But when he turned 13, Geramiah started having recurring nightmares. In them, he is supposed to be asleep, but instead he lights something on fire and throws it behind a couch. He still has the dreams, and they evoke familiar feelings of guilt and uncertainty. According to news accounts at the time of the fire, Geramiah initially told investigators his father set the fire. After receiving "psychological counseling," the paper said, he admitted, "that it really was his fault." Geramiah, now 22, likely won't ever know the truth. Former Prosecutor Frank Ashton says it's impossible to rely on a 3-year-old's version of events; their minds are too malleable, and too intimate with fantasy.

Geramiah didn't even learn the full story of the fire until after his grandmother died, when he found a folder of newspaper clippings. Over the years, his aunts told him little things about his mother Carolyn — she was a good cook, he says, and she looked like Rosie O'Donnell, if you darkened Rosie's skin a little. But the anecdotes didn't begin to substitute for family, and Geramiah is acutely aware of what the fire cost him.

"I had to come up alone," he says. "I didn't have anybody ... to say, 'Watch out for those speed bumps.' I had to cross the speed bumps as they came."

Still, he's thankful that he had family to raise him. "I thank my grandmother to this day for raising me to be a man," he says.

"She'd say, 'You don't let anything break you, let it make you stronger.' Everybody got their excuses, but my grandmother didn't let me have one." Having served in the National Guard, Geramiah says he's applying to enter active duty in the U.S. Army.

As for Gerald Lewis, he declined to discuss the fire, his arrest or eventual release. "Not to be rude," he told Folio Weekly when we contacted him in Shreveport, "but I wish you'd leave it alone. A lot of time has passed by."

When asked what he thought about how his case had helped to free people who'd been wrongly accused of arson, he declined to engage. "Just leave it alone," he said, "all right?" \_