

Serial arsonist sentenced to 24 years in prison

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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CLEARLAKE – A Clearlake man could spend the rest of his life in prison after receiving a 24-year sentence on Friday for a series of arsons – some of which claimed historic local buildings – that he was convicted of late last year.

Norman Ralph Henderson, 62, received the upper term of 24 years in prison from Judge Richard Martin for 10 arson fires he intentionally set between April 25, 2007, and April 10, 2008, in Lake County, according to a Sunday report from Chief Deputy District Attorney Richard Hinchcliff. Defense attorney Jeremy Dzubay represented Henderson.

Henderson also has a long history of setting fires that goes back decades, according to officials.

Hinchcliff said that, because the convictions include what are termed “violent felonies,” Henderson is subject to credit limitations so he will have to serve 85 percent of his sentence before being eligible for parole.

Martin also ordered Henderson – who will be 82 years old before being eligible for parole – to pay restitution to his victims in the amount of \$543,046.25, Hinchcliff said.

On Oct. 3, 2008, Henderson pleaded guilty to starting the fires in the eastern Lake County areas of Bartlett Springs Road and Indian Valley Reservoir, according to Hinchcliff.

The fires Henderson was convicted of starting involved two motor homes, two inhabited vacation residences, a Yolo County Flood Control District cabin, two water bottling and purifying facilities owned by Arrowhead Mountain Spring Water that had been shut down, and two wildland fires.

Beginning in the spring of 2007, a series of suspicious fires began to hit vacation homes and other buildings in the Bartlett Springs area, as Lake County News has reported.

Two of the fires in particular claimed the old Bartlett Springs Lodge and the lodge's rebuilt gazebo, along with water bottling facilities that are part of the former Bartlett Springs Resort property now owned by Nestle Waters North America, the parent company of Arrowhead.

Because of their remote locations, the fires usually were well under way before firefighters could respond. That, along with the fact that by the time they arrived there was no one on scene, had left fire investigators with few leads as to who was responsible, according to previous interviews Lake County News conducted at the time with local officials.

But an important break came the way of Lake County Arson Task Force investigators when, in April of 2008, Henderson was arrested for setting fire to a fruit stand on Highway 20 just west of Williams in Colusa County, said Hinchcliff.

That case came to the attention of the task force when Williams Fire Chief Jeff Gilbert called Northshore Fire Protection Chief Jim Robbins and told him, “We may have your guy,” as Lake County News reported last May.

Lake County Arson Task Force members – including Sheriff's Investigator Corey Paulich, Cal Fire Investigator Chris Vallerga and Lake County Fire Protection District Investigator Brice Trask – were able to connect Henderson to the Lake County fires, said Hinchcliff, who is the District Attorney's Office's arson prosecutor.

Hinchcliff said Henderson's guilty plea in October was part of an agreement reached with the District Attorney's Office which agreed not to charge Henderson with prior “strikes” for previous arson conditions in Nevada and Butte County.

Henderson's background investigation, Hinchcliff said, revealed a conviction for setting fire to a barn in Butte County in 1969. Then, in 1991, Henderson went to prison after threatening a 73-year-old Las Vegas woman. That same year he also reportedly set fire to the Nugget Casino in Fallon, Nev.

Even after spending time in prison, Henderson's series of arsons continued. Hinchcliff said that Henderson set ablaze an unoccupied building in Fallon, Nev., in 1994.

Hinchcliff said Henderson is still facing charges related to the Colusa County fire. Although the Williams fruit stand fire was quickly extinguished with little damage as a result, Henderson currently has an outstanding Colusa County warrant for that case.

Henderson, who has done yard work for a living according to his booking sheet, currently is in the Lake County Jail for the local arson cases and the outside agency warrants, according to jail records.

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