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The John Orr Effect:

Twenty Years Later He's Still Screwing Up Arson Investigations

by Det. Ed Nordskog

Twenty years ago, John Leonard Orr became the most famous convicted serial arsonist, ever. He maintains that title to this day, and will likely carry it for many years into the future. His case is one of the most unique in the annals of known crime in the United States, and absolutely the most compelling in the arson community worldwide. His legacy is a blight on the fire service in general, and the fire investigation profession in particular. The ripples caused by his deviant behavior continue to negatively impact fire investigations and training to this very day.

Orr is easily the most notorious serial arsonist ever identified. He did not kill the most people during his fires, that title is held by England's Peter Dinsdale, who murdered twenty-three people during his years as a serial arsonist. Orr's known murder total was four, in one event. Orr likely didn't set the most fires either. The highest reasonable estimates of his fire-setting activity range from 1,200 to 2,000 fires. David Berkowitz, aka "Son of Sam" was much more prolific and set that many fires in a three year period alone. Berkowitz is believed to have set between 5,000 and 10,000 fires during his lifetime of fire activity. Orr was not the first firefighter arsonist either. There were hundreds before him, and dozens, if not hundreds more after him.

Orr does not earn his lofty title for the quantity or the results of his fires. His well-deserved reputation is derived from the scope, quality, cunning, scheming, and sheer audacity of his fire events. He is one of the very rare serial arsonists who actually wanted to be a famous serial arsonist. He is the very rare criminal known as an "organized offender". Orr also has an evil streak not often seen in fire setters. He lit dozens of fires in occupied buildings for several years after he murdered four people in the "Ole's" fire. His final major fire event was a devastating brush fire that endangered the lives of hundreds of people. His need for recognition and excitement far outweighed his concern for his fellow citizens.

John Orr was a firefighter and then a fire investigator for the City of Glendale, California, a Los Angeles suburb of just under 200,000 people. It is nestled in hilly terrain, just north and east of downtown Los Angeles. It is a modern city with skyscrapers, wealthy neighborhoods, large home tracts, apartments, colleges and a large amount of brush land.

I will not re-hash the entire John Orr saga here. It's too lengthy and has been done brilliantly before by Joseph Wambaugh in his book *"Fire Lover"*. I also synopsisized it with a few added inside morsels of information in my own book about serial arsonists titled, *"Torched Minds-Case Histories of Notorious Serial Arsonists"*. The John Orr case history should be required reading for any arson investigator, criminal investigator of any type, behavioral analyst (profiler) and any persons within the fields of psychiatry and forensic psychology. Additionally, there are some valuable lessons in his case for fire administrators and others involved in the recruitment, training, and supervision of firefighters.

In retrospect, the Orr case looks very simple with the clarity of twenty years of hindsight. He looks so obvious now. From the day he was hired until the day he was incarcerated, Glendale and the surrounding areas were besieged with arson events. In the '80's dozens of arson brush fires erupted in the nearby hills. This unsolved series was noteworthy in that several delay incendiary devices were located after the fires. The unknown suspect was given the name "Foothill Arsonist". Indeed, John Orr was a leader in this investigation through a group known as FIRST, or Fire Investigators Regional Strike Team. John Orr himself was quite adept at finding these devices as he was famous in the region for arriving at scenes after many investigators, and ceremoniously marching out to a spot and "finding" a device where other investigators had missed it. There are several photos still available where Orr is proudly holding up devices (with his bare hands) to the eager media cameras that followed him around. Because of this unique talent, Orr became a lecturer to local agencies and colleges on arsonists, serial arsonists, and the use of delay incendiary devices.

During the same era, unique delay incendiary devices were cropping up in a many places. Nearby North Hollywood and areas within Los Angeles had fires within home-building stores where an arsonist was placing a device inside bins of foam materials. LA City arson guys dubbed this person the "Poly Foam Arsonist". The Los Angeles Sheriff's arson investigators were finding delay incendiary devices in foam materials in linen and clothing stores from Los Angeles, down the coast through the South Bay cities. The Sheriff's dubbed their guy the "Pillow Pyro Arsonist". Still, another offender was hitting convenience stores all through the regions surrounding Glendale. He was putting delay incendiary

Legal Updates

The updates listed here can all be found in their entirety at www.interfire.com or in the members only section at www.arson.org

Massachusetts Microwave Fire Case Can Proceed to Trial

In *Massachusetts Property, et al v. LG Electronics, U.S. Dist. Ct Mass (Oct. 22, 2012)*, <http://www.leagle.com/xmlResult.aspx?xmlDoc=In%20FD%20C%2020121023B56.xml&docbase=CSLWAR3-2007-CURR>, the court denied the manufacturer's motion for summary judgment permitting the microwave fire claim to proceed to trial.

Propane Radiant Heater Death Claim permitted to proceed

In *Dowdy v. Coleman, Case No. 1:11CV45DAK, U.S. Dist. Ct Utah (Sept. 12, 2012)*, <http://www.leagle.com/xmlResult.aspx?xmlDoc=In%20FD%20C%2020120913989.xml&docbase=CSLWAR3-2007-CURR>, Judge Kimball reviewed several motions related to a product liability death claim involving a propane radiant heater: (1) The Coleman Company, Inc.'s Motion for Summary Judgment (2) The Coleman Company, Inc.'s Motion to Strike the Testimony and Opinions of Robert Engert; (3) The Coleman Company, Inc.'s Motion to Strike the Testimony and Opinions of Gary Hutter; (4) Plaintiffs' Motion to Strike the Testimony and Opinions of Marchica and Deppa; (5) Plaintiffs' Motion to Strike the Testimony and Opinions of Richard J. Roby; and (6) Defendant's Motion to Strike Plaintiffs' Irrelevant and Inadmissible Exhibits Offered in Response to the Coleman Company, Inc.'s Motion for Summary Judgment and In opposition to The Coleman Company, Inc.'s Motions to Strike the Testimony and Opinions of Robert Engberg and Gary Hutter. On August 1, 2012, the court held a hearing on the motions. The court considered the pleadings, memoranda, and exhibits submitted by the parties, as well as the law and facts relevant to the motions. Now being fully advised, the court rendered the following Memorandum Decision and Order.

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devices in racks of potato chips. He was dubbed the "Potato Chip Arsonist". There were some troubling similarities. All of these fires occurred within businesses that were "open" and occupied, which is actually quite rare and extremely dangerous. A common suspect was developed in that it was a white male, 30-40 years old, somewhat average in all qualities.

In the late 1980's a serial arsonist was identified using a similar device in a string of business fires in the Central Valley towns over a hundred miles north of Los Angeles. This guy was dubbed the "Highway 99 Arsonist". Similarly, two years later a second spree of these fires occurred in the Central Coast towns above Santa Barbara. This suspect was glossed the "Highway 101 Arsonist". Oddly, both of these series were in conjunction with the nearby seminars hosted by the state's arson investigators. By 1990, perhaps the most serious fires within the area occurred during a major Santa Ana "red flag" condition in the hills of Glendale. An arsonist set multiple fires amidst the urban/wildland interface during the worst possible conditions which endangered the lives of thousands of people and caused the destruction of sixty-three homes. This event was called the "College Hills" fire and was later linked to the Warner Brothers studio fire and several others in the following weeks.

After a monumental investigation by several agencies, every one of these events would be linked to John Orr, and he was all of these arsonists. While it is true he has never, ever admitted guilt to any criminal act, he did plead guilty to several of these incidents during various plea bargains. Additionally, he fought several others in jury trials and was convicted by one jury for a series of arson fires, and another jury for an arson fire at a South Pasadena home improvement store where four persons were murdered. Although Orr did beat a few charges in court, in the end he was convicted for fires from four different arson series, the massive "College Hills" blaze, and a quadruple murder/arson. He spanned the gamut of the serial arsonist profile. He was a wildland serial arsonist. He was an urban serial arsonist. He targeted businesses, homes, trash in alleys, and vegetation. He struck targets during the day and at night. He accessed targets via foot and via automobile. He wore disguises, stood around and posed as a photographer, interacted with the crowd and engaged people in conversation while watching his fires burn. At other times he lit his fire, and then returned shortly afterward as the investigator to examine the fire scene. He selected some targets up to a year in advance, recorded the events on video, and maintained records of the fires after the events. He even committed bold, daytime arson attacks while on "stakeout" with other arson investigators.

What also stands out about Orr is that, during this entire decade of activity, he continuously told the media, other investigators and firefighters that there was a serial arsonist running amok in his city. He sought out reporters and gave them lurid details of arson fires set in Glendale. Any competent investigator can read those news reports today in the archives that show Orr "showboating" and giving out way too much information that would normally be considered "case sensitive". He told anyone who would listen about secretive devices, their description, where they were found, ignition scenarios, etc. He stupidly demonstrated to the press time and again his mishandling of forensic evidence while professing to be a foremost expert in the field. More than anything else, Orr wanted attention.

All of the people who chased, investigated and prosecuted John Orr agree that he was likely a serial arsonist way before he became a firefighter or fire investigator. He was not a strong, brave, heroic firefighter who through his years of work in the trenches of saving lives and "facing the beast" at massive conflagrations, eventually cracked under the pressure and turned to this aberrant life of crime. No, in reality he was, like many serial offenders, a weakling, a coward and a born loser. He attempted to become a police officer more than once and was turned down for employment due to his failure on psychological exams. He eventually made it to a large fire department's academy, only to quickly "wash out" due to his poor physical abilities and other issues. He was relegated to a series of less than glamorous jobs at fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and finally as a security guard and loss prevention agent. When he eventually made it on the Glendale Fire Department, he was not known as a "team player" and was not well accepted by his mates on the fire engine. In the world of firefighting, which is known for its extremely tight camaraderie and physical fitness, John Orr was a real outsider. On his best day, he was never physically fit. He was somewhat of an outcast on his own engine and soon began to apply for the solitary positions of fire patrol, fire prevention and fire investigation.

Orr wanted to be a cop much more than he wanted to be a firefighter and fought hard to get into the arson investigations unit. As soon as he could, he pushed for more police-like powers such as driving a detective looking sedan, carrying a badge more like a cop than a firefighter and most of all, carrying a gun. He took his cues from legendary TV lawman Barney Fife. To Orr, every crime was a major offense on a par with a murder investigation. He was well known to over-hype even the most minor of fire crimes, to be overly officious in manner, and to treat every homeless person with a warming fire or juvenile with a lighter as someone akin to John Dillinger. Orr had the ultimate "Dirty Harry" complex and was known to talk overly tough and strut around with a multitude of high caliber handguns.

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John Orr's parting gift to the fire investigation field was to teach a whole generation of investigators to believe and do stupid things. He believed, and passed down through his training to other investigators and trainers, that all serial arsonists use intricate delay incendiary devices. Orr himself, during his many lectures, training seminars and teaching events showed a multitude of people from firefighters, police officers, college students, cadets, to probably Boy Scouts and Kiwanis Club members how to build and use "common incendiary delay devices". Since his incarceration, I personally have seen many fire investigators do the same thing. This sort of training in exotic delay incendiary devices continues to occur in the majority of fire academies, junior college level arson courses and most state fire and arson training. In reality, the use of delay incendiary devices is extraordinarily rare. They are most often found (if ever) during exotically staged arson-for-profit schemes, arson-extremism case (ALF/ELF), and during a few wildland serial arson investigations. The use of an exotic device quite often points to a suspect who has some training in that sort of thing, like John Orr had. Serial arsonists seldom use devices of any sort.

The idea that we would devote more than a five minute discussion to this topic in a basic fire academy is ridiculous at best. The fact that some instructors continue to provide up to eight hours of this training to include construction, test burns, etc., to college students, fire and police cadets, forestry workers and the like is borderline criminal. It is akin to teaching security guards and police recruits the finer points of poisoning or strangling someone. The construction and testing of incendiary delay devices should only be done in the most advanced arson schools, where credentials are verified (i.e. National Fire Academy or ATF Advanced Arson Course). It should be a serious crime for anyone other than an active public agency arson investigator to possess, train with, construct, or manufacture any form of incendiary device. I'm well aware that the information on how to make these is readily available on the internet, but let the bad guys research it themselves, so that it gives us something to find during search warrants. Like bomb technicians, we as professionals don't need to teach non-arson investigators how to build these types of devices.

John Orr was also a proponent of conducting surveillance operations or going undercover. Indeed, many arson schools still offer a bloc of instruction on surveillance operations. Surveillance is one of the most expensive, time-consuming, boring, and possibly dangerous of all police operations. In the arson and murder world, it is also the least productive. Yet, John Orr and all the other "wannabe's" in this profession can't wait to get out on the street and look for arsonists. In truth, we seldom catch an arsonist in the act. Almost all great cases are solved via basic investigative work; scene processing, interviews, exploitation of forensics, analysis, and case management. Think about it. Homicide investigators convict murderers on a daily basis, yet I've never heard of one homicide guy who caught the killer while in the act of committing murder. For some reason, arson investigators since Orr have long believed that is the only way to catch an arsonist. Not true at all. Every major serial arson case, including Orr's was solved by forensics and interviews.

A surveillance operation is something that is done at the correct juncture in a case where a subject, specific trend, or specific target is identified. It is usually one of the last steps in any investigation. If you have an important case (as all serial cases are), then it must be done by professionals! It takes months or years of specific training and unique equipment to be a surveillance expert. We in the arson investigation world generally lack the proper skills, training, radios, vehicles, air assets, and sometimes the police powers to properly conduct surveillances, "stop and frisk" operations or arrests. If you have a big case, call in a team of narcs, or major crimes specialists who do this as a profession. It is not a job for amateurs.

Another quirk Orr had, (I've heard other investigators since him talk about doing this) was to "go undercover" to get tips or leads on arsonists. Orr would occasionally, while on duty hang out and drink in bars, mining the patrons for information and tips. If this wasn't true, it would really be comical. Any experienced arson investigator knows that arson is, most often, a "loner crime" and that most arsonists are anti-social and have few friends. Additionally, most arsonists are insecure, quiet people not given to bragging in public about their deeds. The odds of getting an arson tip in a bar are something far more remote than winning a lottery. Yet, I'm aware of several investigators who, during a serial arson investigation, somehow get their foolish boss to pay them to "work the bars" for information. This is unprofessional and another horrible waste of time and resources.

Another nasty habit stemming from the Orr era is the lack of information security during a major investigation. Orr was exceedingly unprofessional in his "leaks" to the press, to undoubtedly bring attention and praise to himself. He frequently called up his favorite reporters, tipped them off to secret operations, and routinely provided

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