

Six missing following Oklahoma hotel fire

United Press International
SHAWNEE, Okla. — Six persons are missing and feared dead in a pre-dawn fire at the historic Broadway Hotel Thursday. Fourteen survivors fled into the snow and 14-degree temperatures.

A police sergeant who discovered the fire at 4:15 a.m. led the occupants to safety from the two-story frame structure, which mainly housed low-income elderly residents. Smoke and flames prevented him from going back into the rear of the building.

Twenty people were registered at the hotel. The six missing occupants include one who was confined to a wheelchair and a couple and their 12-year-old son, civil defense Director Tom McCalip said.

"We suspect at this point there are possibly six fatalities," McCalip said. "That is a conservative estimate."

Firefighters hosed down the ruins before trying to search for bodies in the shell of the building. Hearses stood by near the building, which looked as if a bomb had ripped through it. "We are trying to get the walls down, so they won't fall in on us when we go in," battalion fire chief Hershel Coomer said.

McCalip said: "The ground is covered with solid sheet of ice and firefighters were covered with ice."

No injuries were reported among the rescued occupants or firefighters, who brought the blaze under control by 8 a.m. Most of the survivors lived near Shawnee and were picked up by relatives, McCalip said.

"The fire is under control but we have quite a bit of smoke and ice," McCalip said. "The old structure was wood. It's burned to the ground."

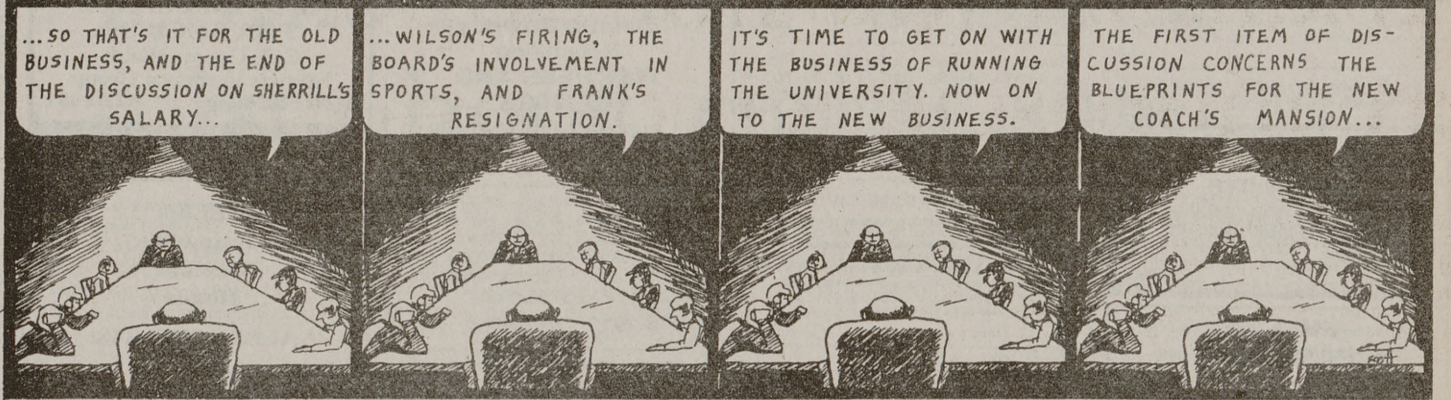
McCalip said the hotel was considered a historical building in Shawnee, a city of 26,000 about 40 miles east of Oklahoma City.

"It's basically a landmark," he said. "I'd guess its 40 to 50 years old."

Sgt. Victor Lee saw flames spewing from the hotel as he returned to City Hall, which is in the same block, McCalip said. The fire also engulfed two neighboring businesses.

Witnesses said firefighters climbed to the roof of the nearby county courthouse and watered down its roof to reduce the danger from flying embers.

Warped



By Scott McCullar

Exec invents kidnapping story after disappearing for a week

United Press International
LAS CRUCES, N.M. — An aerospace company security executive says job pressures prompted him to disappear for a week and then invent a kidnapping and robbery story to explain his absence.

Thomas G. Gehrts, 26, said after returning, that he resigned as security director for Space Communications Co. of Gaithersburg, Md., and intends to return to college to study business administration.

Gehrts late Wednesday returned to Las Cruces, where he disappeared, for questioning by local police.

Gehrts said he acted on his

own and did not mean any harm. He said his life was one filled with pressure and numerous deadlines.

Gehrts failed to show up Jan. 25 for a scheduled business meeting at his firm's office at NASA's White Sands Missile

Range. His company immediately began an all-out search for him, employing a private investigator.

Doctor with MS battles Dallas County for job

United Press International
DALLAS — A doctor suffering from multiple sclerosis has successfully battled the bureaucracy to keep his job at the Dallas County Health Department, but the reward for his success is an office, a desk and nothing to do. In the four years Dr. Donald Balaban has suffered from MS, he has been fired by health directors three times. Each time, he was reinstated by state and federal commissions who found he had been harassed and that his working conditions violated federal standards for the handicapped.

And unless the county installs facilities to accommodate Balaban, the federal Department of Health and Human Services threatens to withdraw financing for county health projects.

Meanwhile, Balaban, who is bedridden, sits in his office at the Woodlawn jail, drawing a \$1,200 per month salary and is told to do nothing.

He sits in virtual isolation in a barren office marked by a cardboard sign on the door. The cafeteria is on the third floor, but the elevator does not work. So, the health department has been required by federal officials to give Balaban fresh coffee and water daily in lieu of lunch. The pitchers in his office have not been cleaned for two weeks and are growing mold.

Balaban, 41, said he only wants the job he had before — answering medical telephone inquiries from the public and professional. He was bounced out of that job three years ago when health director Dr. Elliot Salenger was hired.

"Intellectually, I'm relatively intact," Balaban said. "I can't see and feel, but I can think. For the most part, that's what a physician does is think."

The county health department has only one concern, Salenger said.

"Is he capable of practicing medicine?" Salenger said. "His condition has deteriorated since I've been here. No one feels that he's capable of making any medical decisions."

Salenger said he questions whether Balaban is even capable of handling phone information.

"He doesn't have any of the training in the job he was originally assigned to," Salenger said. "We need coverage in our jail facilities, and we want to know if he's capable as a physician, not a telephone operator."

In August, Salenger asked the state Board of Medical Examiners to evaluate Balaban's competency. The board is still investigating the case.

Salenger also said he would not subject patients to Balaban's treatment because multiple sclerosis has caused the doctor to deteriorate mentally.

Nancy Walters, who is a registered nurse and executive director of the Tarrant County Multiple Sclerosis Association Inc., disagrees.

"MS affects the sensory and coordination skills and not his

(Balaban's) cognizant abilities at all," she said. "He would be able to give advice as well as any doctor with his training."

Balaban said he continues the struggle to stay with the county because he needs the insurance benefits more than his \$1,200 monthly part-time salary.

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