

Damage suits continue in 1981 skywalk fall

United Press International
KANSAS CITY, Mo. — A settlement was reached Monday in a personal injury suit filed in federal court by a couple who witnessed the 1981 skywalks collapse at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

Arthur Stoop, an attorney for James and Deborah T. Jackson, said the settlement was in six figures, but he would not disclose the amount.

Opening arguments were set to begin Tuesday in a civil trial in Independence involving the deaths of Thomas and Romelia Henson. The Hensons, who lived in the eastern suburb of Kansas City, were among 114 people killed in the July 17, 1981 tragedy.

The jury, which was chosen Monday, will decide the amount of compensatory damages eight relatives of the Hensons should be awarded.

Rio, Texas, the parents of Romelia Henson.

Earlier this year, Mrs. Moreno lost a custody battle for Joshua. The boy now lives with James and Barbara Jones of Independence, who were not related to the Hensons. Mrs. Moreno, who speaks no English, has been granted visitation rights.

In another Kansas City courtroom, jury selection began in a personal injury suit filed by Betty Wintz and her husband, Francis. Mrs. Wintz was injured in the collapse. The suit seeks more than \$6 million in damages as compensation for the injuries and the resulting losses to the Leawood, Kan., couple. Among the defendants in the suits are Hallmark Cards Inc., the Hyatt Corp., and the Hyatt Hotel Corp.

The firms have admitted liability in the collapse.

The case was scheduled to go to trial Tuesday and was the last of the Hyatt cases that would have been tried in federal court.

Mrs. Jackson, who was among more than 200 people injured in the disaster, was chosen as class representative in a class action suit filed in federal court to determine liability and punitive damages. That suit was settled in January for \$10 million, with more than \$7 million going to local charities.

Seeking legislative help

School bank shut-down

United Press International
BOSTON — The 6th grade proprietors of a money-making school bank — shut down by state regulators for charging more than 300 percent annual interest on loans — have asked the Massachusetts Legislature for help.

Reeling off financial facts, the students Monday urged the legislative Banks and Banking Committee to pass a bill that would allow their lending institution to continue doing business at the Easton Middle School.

The students, addressing a standing-room-only public

hearing, defended their milk and-lunch-money loan operation which loaned 25 cents to 75 cents to students in need, as a "great educational experience."

State banking examiners in April shut down the bank, a class project, claiming it violated banking regulations, lacked a license and charter and charged excessive interest rates.

The problem with the bank's penny per day interest rate was it amounted to more than 300 percent a year. Massachusetts law limits annual interest rates to 23 percent.

"The legislation is designed to

ensure that this example of excessive regulation not be repeated, and that innovative educational programs be allowed to flourish," Rep. William B. Vernon, R-Mansfield, told the committee in explaining the proposal.

State Banking Commissioner Paul Bulman said his department "can live with the bill" because it stipulates that the bank's assets must not exceed \$500 in order to remain exempt from banking industry regulation.

"There's no question that the interest rate exceeds 300 percent a year, but the material sus-

pect amounted to pennies and can't see that there would be any problems except among parents who might take exception to the sort of rate," he said.

The students, part of the school's High Ability Learner program, sold shares in the bank at \$1 a share — and closed out the year with a \$1.20 return per share.

Chief loan officer Marc Geven, in a blue blazer and green pants, said the operation was successful until the state stepped in.

"We were doing so good in the bank we diversified and opened up a school store," he said.

Texas fugitive apprehended

United Press International
HUNTSVILLE, Ala. — An Idaho man who had been a fugitive from federal racketeering and criminal conspiracy charges for three years is in custody in Madison County after being caught on a "dry law" violation.

Authorities said Monday that Willard Allen Starks, 39, of Bon-

ners Ferry, Idaho was arrested by a Morgan County Sheriff's deputy Sunday after being found in his disabled car.

A computer check revealed the car to be stolen and further investigation showed Starks was wanted in Texas for drug trafficking and criminal conspiracy,

said Morgan County Chief Deputy Paul Cain.

Cain said Texas authorities told his deputies that the bodies of four of 19 state witnesses sub-

poenaed to testify against Starks in 1980 have been found and the other 15 are missing.

Lt. Darrell Johnson made the

arrest early Sunday after finding Starks' car stranded with flat tires south of Falkville near the Cullman Morgan County line, Cain said.

Cain said Starks was turned over to federal authorities Monday. He is scheduled to appear before a federal magistrate Tuesday.

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Four girls perish when house burns

United Press International
SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — A fire caused by a smoldering cigarette in a downstairs couch early Tuesday killed four girls aged 9 to 16 as they slept in two double beds in the same bedroom.

Fire Department spokesman George Placanio said the girls would have lived had there been smoke detectors in the home.

Police Capt. Frank Basile said an initial investigation found the fire was caused by a cigarette ash or butt that smoldered in a downstairs couch after the people in the house went to sleep.

"It would seem that the father is a smoker, and he had apparently been smoking before he went to bed," Basile said.

Killed were Heidi McCormick, 9, and Melissa McCormick, 14, who lived with their father and brother. Also killed were Lisa Laycock, 15, of Easthampton, a friend, and Christine Beaulieu, 16, of Schenectady, N.Y.

"The firemen really worked," said Placanio. "They knew the people were in there but they were gone before they even arrived."

Beaulieu was the niece of Louis Isham, 26, who also lived with the McCormicks. Isham suffered first and second degree burns on 10 percent of his body while trying to get to the girls who already were dead, Placanio said.

McCormick's son, 14, woke first and found the house engulfed in flames. He, Richard McCormick, 38, and Isham first tried to get to the girls and then jumped out second story windows.

Medical Examiner William Mosig ruled the four girls died of smoke inhalation.

"If they had smoke detectors they would have been alive today," said Placanio. "They would have been up earlier, and they (firefighters) would have been able to save these people."

Suspect being held in rape, murder

United Press International
FORT WORTH — Authorities were holding a California man for questioning in the strangulation and rape of an English girl, 11, whose nude body was found three weeks ago in a Tarrant County field.

The man was arrested for drunkenness at a bus terminal in Quana, authorities said. He confessed to the killing, but later denied it.

"Our dispatcher received a call that there was a drunk on the bus at the bus station," said Jean Nelson, police spokesperson in Quana, 80 miles west of Wichita Falls. "The officer found that the man was very intoxicated, and he stated he had killed a girl in Fort Worth."

He later denied the killing, but Fort Worth police were questioning him about the incident late Monday. No charges were filed.

The body of Julie Fuller was found June 28 in a field in east Fort Worth, 18 hours after she disappeared from a motor lodge in Arlington, where her family had been staying while looking for a home.

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