

From the Office of the Sheriff:

”You can’t burn your way out of debt”

State Statute 943.02 is Arson of buildings, 943.03 Arson to property of another, and 943.04 is Arson with Intent to Defraud. These are serious felony offenses of which we take an aggressive investigative stance. We were successful over a year ago in the conviction of the perpetrator of the Charter Raceway arson and just recently received a guilty verdict in another. We are far from done as we have three more arson investigations on going from 2008. We have made arrests in two of these cases and are very close on the third. Financial gain is the predominant motive.

The housing slump and increase in foreclosures has a few home owners thinking of ways out of their debt. Arson is not the answer. The Dodge County Sheriff’s Department has several investigators trained in arson investigations, with Detective Robert Neuman as our main investigator. A veteran of numerous arson investigations, we usually team up with the State Dept. of Justice, Division of Criminal Investigation, and work with their arson investigators and K9’s.

An arson investigation may end with us but starts with the first firefighter on the scene or the witness that calls it in. The on-scene Fire Chief conducts an assessment and based upon his training and education identifies inconsistencies or things that just do not add up. He then makes the decision to contact law enforcement. Our first responsibility is to post a deputy at the site and secure it until investigators arrive. Photo’s, video, on-scene investigation, and interviews are part of each investigation.

One would think that a building that is completely destroyed by fire and then trampled by firefighters combating the blaze would limit the amount of available evidence of a crime? Not so. Fire science is the study of fire and the behavior of fire. Very few people have the opportunity to walk through a fire scene and have an expert explain what he sees. I have had that opportunity and was beyond amazed. Arson investigators are a breed of their own and possess a skill like no others. Arson investigators are not always looking to charge someone with a crime. Very often these investigations are in response to the rumor mill or local gossip and the investigator is called in to verify the property owner’s claims. To prove a fire is not arson is just as important as determining one that was. As with any crime, the criminal is always nervous, has assured himself he checked each and every box to avoid detection, and covered all his/her bases. Wrong.

As many of you know, with all the arrests and our high crime solving rates, nothing could be further from the truth. The criminal may take hours, days or even weeks to plan and plot his dirty deed but we have weeks, months, years, and science to conduct the investigation as well as training and expertise. I am proud of our efforts and have tremendous confidence in our team.

There are several people who have a vested interest in a prompt, thorough and professional investigation. This includes the property owner of course, the insurance company and in 99% of the cases the mortgage holder. We work to serve all parties and ensure an arsonist does not have an opportunity to commit his second offense. We like to lock them up after their first. Thanks for listening tnehl@co.dodge.wi.us