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**CRITERIA FOR DETECTION AND CONTROL
OF ARSONISTS****Val Beyer Satterfield**

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Among the habits of man there are many that have the common characteristics of being necessary for successful living yet of becoming dangerous to the unusual individual and to all of us if used as psychological playthings. The setting of fires, the telling of time, the cleansing of the body, checking of the veracity and honesty of self and of others and the exercising of the biological functions and the aggressive tendencies are a few of these habits that must be learned, then controlled and finally, only used with proper respect to time, place and person. These habits are considered measurements of maturity; and shame, fear, and moral values become attached to them. The young want to indulge themselves in a reckless way—like splashing the bath water—reciting the hours of the day—masturbating—running about like mad. Mad men may indulge in these acts most violently and inappropriately—hence the phrase—“like mad.” The social inadequates and the maladjusts often misuse these social habits as protest gestures by which they indicate their social insecurities and their resentments towards the order-giving, demanding, and punishing environment. Firesetting is loved and feared by all of us. When firesetting becomes pathological, the simple motif of the act becomes distorted by pride, fear or spite; and danger comes into the world whether the act is a simple deliberate setting of the fire too high under the coffee pot, a too hearty fire in the fireplace or furnace, or a flip of a lighted match through the open window of a factory. The fire and the burned food or coffee may be pathological manifestations. I hope to simplify the problem of pathological firesetting—a useful attitude for the law enforcement officer and the investigator.

Firesettings and the social problems that spring from man's use of fire for his various constructive and destructive purposes attracted my attention many years ago. As an incurable student of the classics, I was deeply impressed by the thread of fire that runs through the

religious and cultural history of the human race. This does not mean that I believe there has been any mystical or magical effect of fire upon the human race. I have not discovered evidence that the sexual and blood and fire symbolism so imaginatively described in some psychiatric literary efforts exists except in the minds of the authors. It is evident that fire like water impressed man with the heroic effects of loosened destructive forces—the small and trivial beginning—the progression to catastrophe. When fire was used against the ships or towns of an enemy, the fierce joy of anticipated release from danger and the exultation in the destructive and uncontrolled fury of the flame excited the victors to a delirium of emotion. Similar emotion can be seen in the attacks of unrestrained joy and anxiety induced by alcohol, marijuana, and other toxic deliriants. In addition to scientific interest in a phenomenon external to the body yet capable of loosening a joy-horror emotional coupling, I recognized that in firesetting we have the diffuse law enforcement problem, police problem and public safety problem that must be solved on the level of public education and mental hygiene.

My interests in criminology have grouped themselves about the careful education of the police and other investigating agencies and about the education of the public in social morality. A widespread public belief in inevitable detection and prosecution and a general acceptance of the necessity and justification for reorientation of our youth in social and family morality are most promising goals for those interested in crime prevention and public safety. I emphasize public safety because I consider pathological firesetting but one of the many similar dangerous anti-social protest demonstrations. I refer specifically to the discharge of firearms at trains, airplanes and houses, the turning on of water outlets in gardens, at new construction sites, in empty houses and churches, school and public buildings. Water no less than fire can be loosed in progressive destruction by clogging up drains and toilet bowls. Urination and dropping of water from windows and bridges are similar offenses. The strewing of nails on the street or highways, the blocking of railroad switches and signals, the slashing of upholstery in the bus or theatre, the deflating of tires in the parking lots, the locking up of animals or small children in isolated buildings or tight boxes, and the breaking off of wire in door locks arise from similar protests and vengeful needs and give rise to similar odd emotional gratification. There are many other expressions of protest and hate involving the willingness to do harm or damage. There are high school and college students who pick up and hide note books and text books of fellow students with special delight just before examination time. Some people

enjoy removing sales prices from objects in stores or mixing up merchandise on racks or in bins.

Firesetting and the offenses described above brings delight to the offender because he "knows what happened and who did it". He, or she, can enjoy seeing the dismay, sorrow, or futile anger of the victim. The offender may enjoy "helping" the victim. Firesetting occurs in this pattern in the damaging of new automobiles, new furniture, new houses, precious keepsakes, newly-decorated apartments, new clothing, and other human situations where malice can enjoy disappointment and sorrow. As you would expect, the satisfaction of having hurt someone can arouse the offender's appetite for food, drink, or sex adding zest and feelings of well-earned gratification to the fulfillment of the desire.

The malice-protest-gratification type of offense just described differs from the impulse-protest reaction which arises out of a period of sulkeness and hostility and takes the offender out into the street where a fire may be set—an unknown person brutally assaulted, or a senseless act of vandalism committed against a work of art or public building. Similarly the offender may feel relieved and go to a restaurant for food, a bar for drink, or a place convenient for sexual outlet where he will enjoy heightened pleasure and satisfaction. False alarms are pulled by some offenders of this type. The impulsive molestation of women and children, swearing, stealing, public lewdness, and fighting arise from the glowering, sulky, suppressed resentments of this sort of offender.

It is well to keep in mind that one-third of our fires are attributed to carelessness with matches, cigarettes and open flames. It is my belief that the "accidental" fires are "deliberate" rather than "careless". This distressing situation can be attributed to the ever-widening dissatisfaction and frustration that the exacting present day community forces upon the neurotic and less adequate members of our civilization. With the zoot suit, the jive talk, the indifference to the failed or dropped course in school and the lowering reverence for school and parents, goes the cigarette flipped into waste paper box or elevator shaft, the car rolled across the traffic stop and the immediate gratification of ordinary or variant sexual impulses. My own interviews reveal that the cigarette flipper always recognized the danger before the flip and fought down the urge to save the situation. Offenders describe the mixed feelings of hope and fear that fire will start, and the hope and fear that there will be no fire. Offenders have told me that sometimes they obtain greatest release to enjoy themselves in feelings of relief when fire did not start. On other occasions cigarettes and matches

must be flipped again and again to secure the mixture of hope and dread feelings that these people desire.

There must be many of us who enjoy burning autumn leaves in the street—or more timidly—in a safe wire device. Others burn paper in their ashpits and rather disapprove of the fascination of their small sons and daughters who “want to light just one”. You cannot fail to recall how anticipation and resolution to be careful run hand in hand and how you may have sulked if your wife did not let you have your fire. There is a little of the pathological in all pleasure-purposed play with fire or explosives and the recognition of this in yourselves can help you understand the joy with which the defective, the drunken, the neurotic, the angry, and the mad, release the only “chain reaction” that can be loosened with a free match and a handful of discarded combustibles.

As I said before, I do not believe that you should confuse your mind with the imaginative writing about magic and phallic symbols found in the various essays on this subject. The classics are full of more human and interesting psychological discussions of the use of fire, and I feel that in many instances the ancients were less morbid about fire and phenomena they did not understand than we are in this nuclear age, when the greatest flash of all is televised from coast to coast to millions of citizens. For what reason or useful purpose this modern fire-breathing dragon is displayed before all our eyes, I do not know. The troops and tanks and the general staging in a most recent atomic flash was reminiscent of the experience of Hercules with the fire-belching Cacus who overwhelmed houses with black smoke and maimed heifers and other small animals. A blow-by-blow account of this bout can be found in the *Aeneid* of Virgil. If you ever find yourself in the *Aeneid*, I recommend that you read Book V, where you will find a most valuable account of the attitudes of the ancients towards the use of fire, and especially arson. There is a passage of a few dozen lines describing an act of arson committed by the Trojan women. They had lost hope and are distressed that they had been wandering seven years on the way to found Rome. They are maddened by suggestions that they may have their own houses and city walls if they can remain where Aeneas is burning sacrifices to his dead father, Anchises. They strip the fires from the altars and with leaves and shrubs they fire the ships. Ascanius tries to express an understanding of their anxieties and purpose, but condemns the arson. “What is this new madness”, he said, “You do not burn the enemy, and the hostile camps of the Greeks, but your *own* hopes”. So burns the firebug his hopes.

The televised atomic explosions and fires may make up for the loss of the horse-drawn vertical engines and the distressed whistles of the engine low in coal supply. The red fire trucks, the ornate hats of the fire fighters, the sirens and the reckless dash to the scene are not more stimulating than the faces at the open windows of the houses and the people hurrying up the street to the confusion of trucks and hoses. In my clinical experience, I have not been able to find significant differences between the expectant moron or the impulsive neurotic who pulls the alarm and the morbid citizen who pulls on his pants and rushes out into the street smelling smoke and seeing glares in the sky. Not so different is the restless gentleman who tunes in on the police calls and reads his paper hoping that there will be a three or four-alarm fire, or at least a "good fire". I believe that the business of fire fighting is unnecessarily theatrical and over stimulates a few weak and defective personalities.

In a city of one million people 825 will become mentally deranged and require hospital care each year. 70,000 other people are neurotic, defective, and inadequate and less stable than the more fortunate members of the community. If we base our estimates on the St. Louis statistics, it seems that in the city of one million people there would be about 12,000 fire alarms per year, of which 1,300 would be false. Of the false alarms, 350 would be "still alarms". Only 50 persons would be apprehended for turning in false alarms. Of the 10,700 fires, about 600 would be "suspicious" and about 150 would be carefully investigated; 35 persons may have been arrested for arson and an equal number burned to death. About 450 fires would have been started by children playing with matches, especially by children who played with matches in the summer months.

There are no reliable and informative statistics on arson. This is due to the secrecy and detached nature of the offense and the oddities of intent and motivation. In my opinion the incidence of deliberate "careless" or "accidental" arson with motives of malicious damage, excitement or gain is very high in the minor damage loss category. It is interesting that the Uniform Crime Reports indicate that only somewhat over 1,100 individuals are arrested for arson each year. When the statistics on mental disease are correlated with statistics on arson, one can derive some satisfaction from the seemingly low incidence of arson, but as I have pointed out, the true frequency of arson is not apparent. The emotional defective and neurotic, fortunately for life and property, have many other less dangerous ways of expressing their protests or discharging tensions through compulsive acts against property and persons known or unknown to the offender.

About one and one-half million serious crimes are committed in this country each year, and there are at all times about one and one-half million delinquent children who would profit from mental care and proper social orientation. The number of alcoholics, drug addicts, and marijuana users in the United States is estimated to be three to four million at all times. These statistics indicate that we are very fortunate that all of the schizoid personalities, the defective delinquents, the morons, the impulsive neurotics, the more or less maladjusted criminals, the insane, the aggressive delinquent defective, the alcoholics and juveniles do not often indulge in pathological firesetting.

The *personality with schizoid traits* feels different from other people, feels rejected and unloved, and is unable to achieve satisfaction in work or in human contacts among whom he is self-conscious and suspicious. He is the "natural" protest offender and because of his disorders of thinking may resort to destructive and vengeful acts. No less a threat is the *alcoholic* who can slip through the door of alcohol shedding caution and fear—becoming free to do what he wants to do. When he possesses schizoid personality traits, the alcoholic becomes the most dangerous citizen we have. Sane, but more dangerous statistically than the insane, the *delinquent defective* and the *psychopathic offender*, as you may know them, are probably organic defects—sane but given to aggressions and protests because of anger, hatred, jealousies, and sense of social failure and injustice. They are sane but unpredictable and not reliable. They are all failure conscious and protest the real rejection and the fancied persecution that they find in the world of reality. It is possible that all the criminal population finds some position within these four categories and that most crime comes out of the social struggles of these bitter and dislocated defective personalities.

It must be evident that I have been avoiding the term pyromania. There is no such disease. As a descriptive term it might be applied to any fire lover who suffers from a neurosis or other mental or emotional expression. In the same way the term kleptomania would be used in a descriptive sense.

Investigation of a firesetting will be simplified if the investigator will accept a few working rules. The following generalizations can be made about the modus operandi and offender traits:

- 1) The individuals, sane or insane, who set fires for profit often indicate by their methods that they are mindful of, and respect in a restricted way, the social realities within which the crime is to be committed and try to avoid loss of human life. Although the act may be impulsive, elaborate preparation for success, secrecy, and escape from suspicion are the rule.

2) The individuals, sane or insane, who set fires for vengeance and "protest" indicate in their modus operandi, premeditation and the general, if not the exact, direction of their spite. They often are not mindful of danger to others because of their personality defects and the intensity of their emotional disorders. Most elaborate secrecy and preparation are the amusements of the paranoids, sane or insane. Any single offender may show total lack of desire for personal safety or freedom or for rational hope of success.

3) The individuals, sane or insane, who set fires for thrills, for appetite stimulation, for emotional release, for perverted sexual satisfactions, or for the purpose of suicide or family destruction, are not as a rule mindful of danger to others because of their emotional preoccupations at the time of the fire setting.

4) The common denominator of the motivation of all fire setters, sane or insane, is the *capacity to express their protest in a deliberate act against society*. The "accidental" fire is "desired" by the offender. The satisfaction of having struck out at the world has a special significance to the chronically frustrated person. To destroy substance, to frighten someone, to arouse and alarm, and to know secretly or proclaim publicly a capacity to "strike back", is the joy of the few and the fancy of the millions of frustrated maladjusts.

The application of this observation for the detection of offenders requires thoughtful scrutiny of three classes of members of the community. The first group are withdrawn, seclusive, sullen, irritable, belligerent, suspicious, alcoholic, and resentful and have been able to act out openly destructive impulses against property, animals, or human elements of society. The second group have the same personality traits but have not been able to express their protests except in omissions of social duties. This class includes the vagrants, the sexual perverts, the petty gamblers, parasites upon parents, wives, or children, beggars, bar flies, prostitutes, and those who borrow, write bad checks, use narcotics and fail to support wives and children. The third group are known to possess similar traits but they work, meet their obligations, work off their protests in hobbies, games, or club or religious activities and have not been known to have destroyed property or acted against animate elements of society.

5) The investigation of a firesetting or a bombing must follow the pattern of a homicide investigation. The psychological patterns are the same. The offender is aggressive. The victim in the firesetting or bombing may be a material substance yet no less a symbol of the social system than a living thing. Investigators should avoid prejudgments.

about the sanity or insanity of the act of murder or firesetting. If a fire is started with the crumbled papers of a Bible or a woman is bludgeoned to death with a crucifix, the investigator does not improve his position until the *modus operandi*, the visible scene, the motives, the damage, and the human participants in the offense drama have been unemotionally listed and described. It is not possible to proceed to a theory of psychological derangement until the all over picture of the incident can be studied.

In my opinion an understanding of the problem of the detection, control and management of the firesetter has not been facilitated by the romantic and imaginative attempts to couple crime with the oddities of psychology. All crimes of aggression are motivated by desire for protest and revenge—even those that seem to be defensive in part have similar motivation. When a person becomes frightened aggressive acts are precipitated by sanctioning rationalization and are accompanied by sadistic pleasure in inflicting damage or pain on the thing nor person who was the source of the real or imagined threat. These observations are true for the acts of the sane and the insane.

I have had the opportunity of working with eighty-six firesetters. Sane, or insane, these individuals became angry and attempted to injure or destroy objects such as their own trousers, the clothing of their mother, a cruiser, a church, a child's playpen, and a set of books. The anger and resentment represented in each instance is a surface manifestation of a diffuse anger at the world and the things and people in it. The anger could be at a thing—a playpen of a younger brother. The anger could be at a person and this person suffered the scorching of one of the tires on his new car. The anger could be at God and his nearest place of worship attacked. The anger could flare at the offender himself who burned his genitals, his hair, his hand—and his whole miserable frustrated existence. It is evident that the sane, or the insane, person must use fire against himself or his environment as a weapon of revenge and protest before his mental condition and acts come within the narrow sense of "pyromania". What we are interested in is the detection, isolation and correction of those individuals, sane or insane, who reach for the torch rather than for the knife, gun, or ax when they express hostility. The offender who works off his protest in a direct way is well represented by the following case: In this case an individual burned papers in a metal waste paper basket while he masturbated. The masturbation thrill was heightened by a phantasy that his wife (or his mother on occasions) would rush into the room before he could complete his act. He felt that, to quote him, "She (wife or mother) should have seen to it that a man was taken care of before

he knew he wanted it (sex)". There are many such masturbation patterns—such as being tensed by fear that the wall, the curtains, the bed, etc., may catch fire from a deliberately exposed flame. The important finding is the feeling on the part of the maladjusted, defective, or insane that they would not have to resort to shameful acts, and would not be forced to protest if their mothers, fathers, wives, sisters, neighborhood women or men, as the case may be, would have done what was necessary to procure for the firesetter a normal, satisfying social, economic, and sexual adjustment.

6) The interrogation of the arson suspect. The "protest" personality, sane or insane, is an immature, passive, or aggressive passive (dominating-clinging) person. He is latently or overtly hostile, tense and inadequate. He may display emotional dullness, emotional inappropriateness and unreasonable anger and resentment. He may show strong compulsions to confess in order to relieve his guilt or to increase and augment the extent of his crime for his own self-punishment or as a further offense against society. He may babble and confess extravagantly to seek sympathy, understanding, or forgiveness, or to acquire greater guilt and punishment from social shame and contemptuous treatment. He may have strong compulsions to resist and to deny. He may shout his contempt and hatred. He may recite his good moral concepts and qualities or become mute in protest against the "horrible and unfair" accusations. There is a strong tendency for the passive and the aggressive offenders to come apart at the seams if they are given time to talk and act out their guilt and defiance. The "weak" type should be treated in a kind sympathetic and expectant manner. The "strong" type requires mild heckling to keep him off balance. He may wish to brag but considers the "telling" a form of submission. Indifference and lack of sympathy will provoke outbursts and defiant confessions.

7) The sanity or insanity of the individual should be determined in a psychiatric institution *after interrogation* and at the order of the circuit attorney or the court. Responsibility must be determined by the ordinary legal tests. If the person understood the nature and quality of his acts and knew that he was doing wrong at the time he committed the offense, he was responsible. If he is insane it must be proved before he is considered not responsible, that there were present among the effects of the insanity, mental alterations that prevented his being aware of the nature and quality of his acts and prevented his being aware that what he was doing was wrong. A state of insanity could prevent arraignment, trial, and sentencing if the person could be proved to be suffering from such mental disease that he did not understand the nature of the charges or proceedings or was unable to assist properly in his defense.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

1) Experience indicates that firesetting is an expression of the social frustration of the personality with disabling schizoid traits.

2) The surface motives of firesetting are revenge, jealousy, spite, and destructiveness.

3) Firesetting is not considered as arising from mystical and obscure human atavisms but is considered experience—derived by an individual who finds in this method of retaliation a pleasure such as others find in assault, sexual perversion, stealing, or other passive or aggressive social conduct.

4) The blending of vices into patterns of social resistance or protest is the common habit of defense and retaliation of the delinquent defectives, the neurotics, the psychotics, and the character disorders.

5) Persistent criminals of all types, including firesetters develop stereotypy of offense patterns and as vandalism and firesetting can be committed by the deteriorated individual the long time persistence of the firesetter requires permanent commitment of the vagrant degenerated firesetter.

6) Manic-depressives are not apt to be firesetters. It is possible that the excited, delirious, exalted, manic patient might set fires under the same misconceptions that could possess the alcoholic, the senile, the toxic, or the schizophrenic tantrum, or the epileptic furor. The depressive might attempt the destruction of himself, his family, and his possessions by fire while laboring under the delusion that he and his family were damned and contaminated.

7) Firesetting is most common among the maladjusted schizoids under thirty and the schizoid older than fifty. So are the other secret revengeful protest reactions and displays.

8) The control of firesetting and firesetters depends upon the ability of society to facilitate the adjustment of schizoid personalities to the social system. In my opinion the great mass of arson, perhaps 95 percent occurs as deliberate "carelessness"—a protest against the frustration of life, aided and abetted by generous insurance coverage.

9) Fire fighting should be deglamorized and removed as far as possible from the category of the thrill and spectacle. There should be less opportunity for the public to participate in fires. The days of volunteer fire fighting are behind us—we hope—but the same evils can always arise from hobby and thrill and amateur participation.

10) The investigator should use the homicide method and pursue the investigation presuming—as is proper under the law—that the firesetter

is sane. If every firesetter would anticipate relentless investigation and prosecution, the hobby of firesetting would be given up by the fadists.

11) Statistics indicate that there can be no very close relationship between the insane and firesetting. The greater number of inadequate, neurotic, and defective personalities do not seem to care for firesetting or the world would be on fire. There is widespread carelessness in the exposure of combustibles, inflammables, and dried out buildings to the whim of the passer-by. The rare individual who discovers the spectacular effects of the public fire has opportunities to indulge his fancy that no other type of criminal enjoys. One might reasonably expect that we could develop a fire resistant world and could accept the responsibility for integrating fire protection into an orderly plan for the prevention of social delinquency.

12) The need for confinement and examination and treatment of all offenders is essential for the safety of the community and the enlightenment of the careless pathological firesetter. Exhausting investigations are justified and necessary for cases of firesetting for the same reasons that justify unrelentless pursuit in child molestation, street assault, treason, mail destruction and theft and kidnapping. These crimes have plus values in that the individual crime is a crime against the safety of all and the criminal is peculiarly motivated and sadistic and, consequently, peculiarly dangerous. Any person assumed to be guilty of social offense should be thoroughly examined by the police and remembered. The crime and the criminal may be childish and contemptible but the progression from breaking the legs of dogs to the necks of children and from fires at the corner newsstand to the crowded tenement should not be forgotten. Juveniles and adult firesetters should be held in therapeutic custody or in confinement until the individual becomes safe for society and himself. Open ended sentences in special prisons are advised for all types of habit crimes. The ordinary prison or mental institution is not able to protect itself or contribute anything substantial to the correction of the offender. It is my opinion that 95 percent or more of arson is deliberate and unrecognized arising from frequent impulses usually controlled. Among the small claims of the fire insurance companies are the clues and names that are important for the study of arson. A study of the fire prone individual could be very profitable to the fire insurance company and provide a broad base of study of the so called "normal" person who plays with fire for his, or her, small and secret and shameful reasons.