

3 Students Held in Arsons at Churches

Suspected of setting nine fires, the Alabama men started the spree as a 'joke,' investigators say.

By Richard Fausset

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — The church fires that lighted up the night skies of rural Alabama and spread fear and anxiety along its remote back roads were set by three Birmingham college students who started their spree as a joke, federal investigators said Wednesday.

The arrests of the men — the result of an extensive multi-agency investigation — were a balm for some members of the nine burned churches.

But there also was bitterness and bewilderment as churchgoers learned of their alleged motives — and that two suspects were students at Birmingham-Southern College.

The private liberal arts school, where tuition is \$21,000 a year, is associated with the United Methodist Church.

"You ought to be going to school to be intelligent," said Cleopatra Harris, 79, of Gainesville, Ala., the mother of the pastor at Spring Valley Baptist Church.

"I don't see why they'd think that was such a joke," said Bernice Brown, a member of the Morning Star Baptist Church near Boligee, Ala.

"It wasn't funny."

All three suspects were in federal custody Wednesday. Two of them — Benjamin Nathan Moseley, 19, and Russell DeBusk Jr., 19 — are Birmingham-Southern students who have been suspended and banned from campus awaiting further action from authorities, school President David Pollick said.

The third, Matthew Lee Cloyd, 20, is a former Birmingham-Southern student who transferred in the fall to the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The suspects were all apparently active in campus life. According to Birmingham-Southern's website, Moseley recently starred in two plays, a farce titled "Young Zombies in Love" and a "white-knuckle psychological thriller" called "Extremities."

DeBusk worked on a production of "Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

An archived website of Birmingham-Southern's Sigma Chi fraternity lists a "Matt Cloyd" as a member during the 2004-05 academic year.

Authorities said the men set fires that destroyed six churches and damaged three others.

James Cavanaugh, a special agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, said they apparently were originally inspired by "an excitement, thrill motive."

DeBusk and Moseley offered similar versions of the arson spree in interviews with authorities Wednesday morning, according to an ATF affidavit filed in federal court.

On the night of Feb. 2, the trio allegedly set off into the woods of Bibb County, in central Alabama, in Cloyd's Toyota 4Runner.

They shot deer, and Moseley said they also set fire to two churches, according to the affidavit.

When they saw firetrucks racing toward the scenes, Moseley said, they burned three more churches in acts he described as "spontaneous."

Four days later, Moseley said, Cloyd joined him in another trip to a few western Alabama counties near the Mississippi state line.

They burned four more churches there "to throw investigators off," the affidavit states.

Cloyd also told an unnamed witness that one of the fires was set as "a joke and it got out of hand," according to the document.

The three men have been charged with conspiracy to maliciously damage or destroy buildings by way of fire. A second count charges them with the destruction of Ashby Baptist Church in Bibb County. Each suspect could receive a minimum of five years in prison for each church burned, said U.S. Atty. Alice H. Martin, who added that other charges could come later.

The arrests, announced at a news conference in Tuscaloosa, Ala., ended weeks of nervous speculation in this conservative churchgoing state. Because all of the burned churches were Baptist, some had wondered whether the fires were specific attacks against that faith. Others wondered whether they were expressions of a more general anti-religious sentiment. In some areas, church members had begun keeping night watches over their houses of worship.

On Wednesday, however, Gov. Bob Riley assured Alabamans that the attacks were an "isolated instance."

"We don't think that there is any type of conspiracy against organized religion or against the Baptists," he said. "The faith-based community can rest a little easier."

"Ladies and gentlemen," he added, "this is a good day for Alabama."

More than 250 investigators helped the search for suspects. At the crime scenes, much of the evidence was reduced to ash. The suspects' motives were unclear, and the terrain was vast.

At times it seemed like they were chasing "a couple of ghosts rampaging around Alabama,"

Cavanaugh said.

The team pursued nearly 1,000 leads involving 500 vehicles and 1,300 people. Eyewitness accounts led them to look for two young white men in a dark SUV.

A key clue was recovered at six of the churches: matching tire tracks. Analysts concluded they were consistent with a particular brand of all-terrain specialty tire.

On Tuesday, two federal agents visited the Cahaba Tire store in Pelham, Ala., just south of Birmingham, and asked store manager Jim Collins to check whether he'd sold the tire to anyone lately. It was a special-order item, and Collins found a few receipts.

One indicated that a Kimberly Cloyd had purchased tires July 22 for a green Toyota 4Runner. According to the affidavit, Kimberly Cloyd told investigators that the Toyota's primary driver was her son, Matthew.

Investigators did not say Wednesday how they had narrowed their search to the Pelham tire shop. Alabama Atty. Gen. Troy King called the effort "good old-fashioned police work."

"Because of their work, what we have today is a reign of terror that has gripped rural Alabama, and that has riveted the eyes of the nation upon Alabama, coming to an end," he said.

Pollick, the Birmingham-Southern president, denounced the acts of arson in a prepared statement Wednesday. He said news of the arrests sent shock waves through the wooded, 192-acre campus west of downtown Birmingham.

"We see symptoms of a culture of personal license so powerfully magnified in the actions of these young men," he said. Pollick added that the college would help rebuild the churches "through our resources and our labor."

In western Alabama on Wednesday evening, Jacqueline Harris said the arrests had brought some solace to Spring Valley Baptist, where her husband, Glenn, is the preacher. The Spring Valley church, outside of Gainesville, Ala., was damaged the morning of Feb. 7 but did not burn down.

But Harris said that as a mother, she could not imagine what the suspects' parents were going through.

"We're grateful we have closure," she said, "but then yet we're moanin' with the families."

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Times researchers John Beckham in Chicago and Lynn Marshall in Seattle contributed to this report.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

Three college students were arrested on suspicion of setting Alabama churches on fire last month.

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Reported Feb. 3

Bibb County: 3 churches destroyed, 2 damaged

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Reported Feb. 7

Greene County: 1 destroyed

Sumter County: 1 destroyed,

1 damaged

Pickens County: 1 destroyed

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*Church fires**

2005 (114)

2004 (111)

2003 (127)

2002 (113)

2001 (133)

** Includes arson, accidental and undetermined causes*

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Sources: Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; the Associated Press, Times reporting

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