

Arson Enjoys Epidemic Popularity

ARSON is a cowardly crime. Sneakiness and desire to damage property or injure persons anonymously are innate characteristics.

In many cases, fires are deliberately set by persons hoping to collect insurance but probably just as frequently with no prospect of profit or even recognition. Hatred and revenge sometimes are motives for arson.

In recent weeks, arson has been cited as cause of fires in the courthouse of Ardmore, the high school at Purcell and an Oklahoma City community counseling and guidance center. Losses were heavy and apparently none benefitted from the burnouts.

Arson is not a localized problem. Such fires frequently occur in series as potential arsonists are encouraged by another "success." Fires often destroy proof of arson.

Outbreaks of arson have been occurring with alarming frequency around the country. A few months ago, arsonists fired the Museum of

Aviation and Space in Balboa Park, San Diego, destroying irreplaceable historic relics. No one knows why.

Seattle has had so many incidents of arson that an eight agency campaign was launched to combat it two years ago. Chicago has organized projects to curb neighborhood arson problems. Arson is increasing in Detroit, Boston, Houston and other cities.

According to a recent report, arson may have accounted for one-fourth of all fires in the country last year, for about half of the \$4.1 billion fire loss and for at least 750 deaths. Human lives are at stake in most big fires and in many small ones.

Progress has been made in structural design and materials, but few buildings or homes could be classified as "fire-proof." Modern glass-and-steel skyscrapers are regarded by some authorities as being especially vulnerable to fire.

Arson is not confined to cities, either. Barns and crops have been

burned in many rural feuds. Careless travellers and fishermen, or hunters have set numerous grass and forest fires.

This writer once observed a carload of young people gaily driving down an Oklahoma highway tossing burning objects onto dry grass to start roadside blazes.

They never stopped to see the results of their thoughtlessness. They probably never realized that their "fun" had cost landowners hundreds or thousands of dollars in fences destroyed, barns burned and pastures damaged.

The epidemic of arson is more evidence of lack of respect for the rights of property of others. Arson is the work of careless, dishonest or irresponsible individuals.

Arson is a crime and should be treated as such. The root cause is erosion of personal responsibility and pride in our country. Arsonists may not care what happens to anybody else, and may even take secret pride in their cowardly devilment.