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ARSON INVESTIGATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

It is a pleasure for me to be a part of your graduation exercises. I always welcome the opportunity to speak to a group of public servants, for I believe that such service to your fellow man is a worthwhile and rewarding profession.

Tonight I would like to share with you some information on arson investigations in our State and in particular those investigations being made by our State arson investigators.

First, let me give you a little of the history of our arson investigators. Today they are a part of the State Bureau of Investigation, but this was not the case until very recently. Before the first of this month they were assigned to the Department of Insurance.

In 1967, the Senate of the General Assembly adopted a resolution directing the Legislative Research Commission to study the advisability of

creating a Department of Public Safety. The Committee did not, as it turned out, suggest that the Legislative Research Commission recommend to the incoming 1969 General Assembly the adoption of such a Department.

The Committee did recommend, however, that the arson investigative function of the Department of Insurance be moved to the State Bureau of Investigation. ~~The General Assembly agreed and~~ this move to the SBI was completed on October 1. The transfer from the Department of Insurance took place on the same day as other departments in State government were reorganized, but also after the SBI was improved with the addition of more men, better equipment and, more importantly, more space. The SBI now, for the first time in its existence, has a building of its own.

As you see, even before the adoption by the people of the Reorganization of State Govt. amendments this move was suggested by the LRC

We now have the arson investigators in the most logical and effective branch of State government.

As you are all aware, arson investigation is a most difficult and disagreeable area of law enforcement. The physical evidence is most often consumed, therefore requiring a specialized type of investigation with a particular knowledge of investigative techniques necessary.

While there have been no great breakthroughs in arson investigation techniques in recent years, it is nonetheless remarkable what can be determined once a fire has been extinguished. Arson investigators can recover things like wood or other absorbant objects and take from them minute amounts of flammable fluids. By using instruments available in the SBI lab, it can be determined from these minute amounts of fluids, not only the identity of the fluid itself, but in some instances where gasoline is involved, even the type and manufacturer of the gasoline.

The three basic principals of investigatory technique still employed with success today are: 1. manually searching for physical evidence with related scientific investigation, 2. interviewing and working with informants, and 3. using polygraph tests - or lie detectors.

The use of polygraph tests has recently become more prevalent. In an answer to this and in an effort to become more effective in this area, the SBI has 3 agents newly trained in polygraph work.

The major value of polygraph tests is for use in investigation leads. That is to say they are used

to determine whether interest in a suspect is warranted or whether the investigators need to be looking elsewhere.

Of course, the use of polygraph is totally voluntary on the part of the suspect. It is, however, a valuable tool in ascertaining whether the suspect tested actually set the fire and if not whether he has any knowledge of who did set the fire.

Along with the use of the polygraph, the investigators are always interested in the background of any suspect. Such information as prior insurance claims or any past history of associations with fires is invaluable.

There are presently 7 arson investigators assigned to the SBI working throughout the State. A suspected arson case is reported first to one of the 97 local SBI agents for preliminary investigation. If he determines the need for a specialist, he can request that an arson investigator be assigned to the case. The specialist, arson investigator, then enters the case and works with the regular agent, or in some instances takes sole charge of the case.

While the arson investigators assigned to the SBI are available for use throughout the State, they are not in practice employed very often in the larger cities. This is because these cities have investigators of their own. This situation leaves the SBI investigators for use mainly in the smaller communities and the rural areas.

Since October 1st the arson specialist of the SBI have already undertaken to investigate 40 cases. Due to the assistance of local fire and police officials, many of these 40 cases have already had indictments issued for the suspected criminals involved.

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