



Man guilty of torching house for gain

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It took a Superior Court jury about a day to convict 67-year-old Ray Pearle of setting his Northwood home on fire in March 1996 to reap insurance payoffs.

The conviction was handed down Dec. 10 in Judge Frank Fasel's courtroom, according to Irvine Police investigator Gary Cain who spent more than a year on the case. Pearle faces sentencing late next month and could receive three to four years in state prison, Cain said.

The case took Cain and fellow investigator through so many twists it was the stuff of "who done it" movies.

"It was the most unusual case I've ever had, and I really learned a lot from it," said Cain, a veteran investigator.

The sequence of events unfolded in the early morning hours of March, 18, 1996. A newspaper delivery person noticed the house at 42 Grant engulfed in flames. Neighbors could hear windows breaking on the house as the interior heated up.

It took 18 firefighters 20 minutes to extinguish the blaze. Fire and police investigators immediately deemed the fire as arson and it appeared the fire was set during a burglary. The owner of the home was reportedly in Denver, Colo. on business at the time.

A few days following the fire, Cain said he was walking through the damaged home with fellow investigator Dave Stoermer and his cap's instinct led him to believe the event was staged.

"Something just didn't set tight," Cain said. "It took me a while to track down the property owner. His truck was

parked in the driveway of his girlfriend's house, also in Irvine."

Cain said he finally called Pearle in Denver to notify him about the fire and during the conversation it struck returned to Denver on March 18, immediately after the fire.

In an effort to show that Pearle had been in Irvine at the time of the fire, Cain started calling taxi cab companies to determine if any driver was dispatched to the girlfriend's house. And he contacted airlines with flight between Denver and John Wayne Airport to obtain passenger manifests.

Cain said the second taxi company he contacted confirmed there was a car dispatched to the girlfriend's house 4:45 a.m. March 18.

He didn't find Pearle's name on any of the airline passenger manifests, but did find two names similar to each other on flight for March 17 and March 18. The names were Vantelz and Vanpelz. Cain said the airlines checked passenger information on those names in their computers.

"The person making those flights refused to provide any address information, but the one called Vanpelz gave an office number I recognized as Pearle's" Cain said. Convinced he was building a solid case against Pearle, Cain got passenger information on the people sitting next to "Vanpelz" and Vantelz" and sent photos from Pearle's drivers license to the police departments in either where those passengers live.

"We had one person from Goshen, Ind., who was able to identify Pearle's sitting next to him on a flight out of John Wayne on March 18 at 6:45 a.m.," Cain said.

Convinced he had a case, Cain contacted the District Attorney's office and Deputy District Attorney Mike Fell, a specialist to arson cases, was given the assignment.



Cain and Fell got search warrants for a house in Tustin where Pearle was living temporarily as well as for his truck and for a boat he had stored at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard.

“We found items Pearle told the insurance company he had lost, and on the boat, we found identification and passport in the name of Vanpelz, an additional driver’s license in that name and a credit card,” Cain said. “Then we found a jacket that had a boarding pass under the name of Pearle for John Wayne to Denver on March 15 and another boarding pass for the morning of March 18 to Denver.”

Using credit card information, Cain said he notified a Bank of Americas close to Pearle’s Northwood home and asked to see records for automatic teller machine use.

“We found there was ATM use for the morning of the fire at 2:22 a.m., before the fire was reported,” Cain said. “Since it was a drive-up machine, the camera showed the back and front of Pearle’s truck and a person that appeared to be Pearle leaning out of the window using the machine.”

Pearle was arrested on suspicion of arson, Cain said. He provided as an alibi witness, a 25-year-old woman who had been the girlfriends of Pearle’s deceased son. Cain said investigators interviewed the woman and found inconsistencies in her elaborate story of switching cars at Pearle’s girlfriend’s house and driving him to the airport and about time they supposedly spent on his boat.

“The times were way off,” he said. Cain said the trial took a little more than four weeks, during which Cain and Fell presented their findings.

“The report on this case is around a thousand pages thick,” Cain said, adding that he’s glad to have it behind him.