

Arson suspect jailed

Written by By Babette Herrmann Sun Editor
Friday, 30 June 2017 08:40



A homeless man faces two counts of arson for allegedly setting fires around Gallup earlier this month.

Leo Ray Vermillion, 49, was arrested June 20 for setting a car and two abandoned buildings ablaze. He was charged with one count of improper handling of fire, and arson over \$500, but not more than \$2,500. Gallup Police Department Det. John Yearly led the investigation.

According to the arrest warrant, Yearly responded to the first fire at 502 S. Second St., near the

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old post office June 17, where fire and police officials initially suspected, based on evidence, that the fire was deliberately set.

Two days later, on June 20, Yearly responded to the scene of an abandoned white sedan on fire near the Rex Museum, 220 Highway 66. Yearly suspected foul play, as the windshield was broken out and a cigarette butt looked as if it was purposely placed on a seat, partially melting it. Plus, other flammable debris was found in the car.

Yearly also found a can of black spray paint, some small tree wood limbs, strips of paper, and snack food debris – all items that make excellent fuel for a fire. Under the car, Yearly found a large trash bag filled with household trash and cans, and a jelly jar.

“(Yearly) believed that the rock found was used to break the windshield in order to gain entry into the vehicle,” the warrant states. “Once access was gained, strips of paper, maybe other paper trash, possible snack debris, dry wooden sticks were placed onto the seat and was lit by an open flame starting the fire.”

While at the scene of the car fire, Yearly contacted Kerry Smith, an off-duty Community Service Aid for the Gallup Police Department. She told him that through her daily contacts with “street people,” the suspect was “a white guy who hangs around the old post office” and may go by the name of “Tony.”

Smith also told him that the suspect, Vermillion, rubs ashes on his face; always has sticks with him, using them like swords; and he always has a sack of trash with him.

After finishing up at the car fire scene, Yearly and another detective headed to the scene where the arson fire occurred three days earlier on Second Street. There they found items similar to items used in the car fire. The fire-starting items also matched what Smith had told Yearly about the suspect.

“Affiant noted two propane lighters with no fuel, I noted a lot of domestic trash, and a stick very similar to the sticks I had found in the burnt car,” Yearly stated in his report.

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The two detectives set out to search for the suspect, but they didn't have to search for long.

At about 1 pm, Gallup Fire Department responded to a brush fire near Bubany Lumber Company.

"... The suspect was running around the area wearing only shorts," the warrant states.

The detectives located Vermillion and began following him. Yearly noted in the warrant that the suspect was a white male with ashes on his face, arms, hands and body, as CSA Smith had indicated from her conversations with sources.

Vermillion gave Yearly information about the car fire that no one would know about, except a suspect. However, the conversation with him quickly digressed.

"(Yearly) could not get any other information from Vermillion because he would go into bizarre rants that made no sense and appeared to take on different identities including one who is gay and female like, one who is a (hardcore) biker, one who speaks with a Mexican accent, and talks Spanish, and that is very mean and aggressive," the warrant states.

Vermillion remained in custody as of June 29 on a \$2,500 bond. He has a preliminary hearing with Magistrate Court Judge Cynthia Sanders July 5.

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