



This Week—August 18, 2010
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Fire Investigation

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Next Week—August 25, 2010
Outbound Youth Exchange
Presentation

Fire Investigation

Part detective, scientist, engineer, and law enforcer, the fire investigator represents the collusion of multiple careers rolled into one. It is the fire investigator who must explore, determine, and document the origin and cause of the fire, establish what human actions were responsible for it, then bring authoritative testimony to the courtroom to win a conviction in cases of arson.

"This isn't a job for a lazy man," says Paul Horgan, accelerant detection canine handler and state trooper assigned to the Office of the Massachusetts State Fire Marshal. "You have to be conscientious and have a mind that likes to figure things out. You really can't take shortcuts. You must take your own photographs, collect the evidence, do follow up investigations. In instances of incendiary fires, you must find the criminal."

Although many people use the terms "fire investigator" and "arson investigator" interchangeably, they are not one and the same, says Special Agent Steve Carman, CFI in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) Sacramento field office. An arson investigator will try to determine who is responsible for setting a fire; a fire investigator will attempt to determine the cause and origin of a fire. Most of the time, fire investigators are also arson investigators, says Agent Carman, who was an ATF arson investigator for four years prior to becoming a fire investigator and serving on ATF's Western National Response Team for nine years. "Frequently arson investigators might be a police officer or ATF agent who doesn't have the background to perform a fire investigation - an area that is becoming increasingly grounded in the science and engineering of fire behavior," says Special Agent Carman. The job of fire investigation is complex, challenging and intriguing - and requires a wide range of skills to perform it effectively. Every fire investigator has a personal perspective on what skills are needed most.

"A background in mechanical, electrical, civil, and even chemical engineering plays a big role," says Robert Duval, a senior fire investigator with the National Fire Protection Association. "You are looking at something that was destroyed and you have to be able to put it back together again either in your mind or physically to determine the origin and cause. Technical training plays a role in determining a lot of the factors in terms of fire behavior and how it attacked the structure you are looking at, whether it be an appliance, piece of equipment, or building."

This technical aspect of the job requires knowledge of building construction and materials and the effects of fire upon those materials. Evidence preservation methods, the effects of fire suppression, fire behavior and burn patterns are also important technical aspects. Search techniques must also be learned so that fire cause evidence and ignition sources are preserved during the investigation.

Yet it is important not to become mired in the technical aspects of the investigation at the expense of the human component, suggests fire investigator Paul Zipper, who works in the Office of the State Fire Marshall in Massachusetts. "I have made 300 to 400 arrests of people who have set fires. Typically, there's a fight, an incident, and it's the interviewing that will tell you what happened. That's how you solve cases."

PROPOSED MEMBERS—

Three new proposed members are Robert Eugene Klippel from UW Stout was proposed by Chris Smith and Scott Girnau from Superior Auto Body was proposed by Bryan Kneeland. Christine Stratton from Menomonie School District has been proposed for Membership by Bryan LaVoy. If you have any comments, contact Shelley Stewart, Secretary.

THE FOUR-WAY TEST

Of the things we think, say or do:

1. Is it the TRUTH?
2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?
3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?
4. Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

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