

COVER STORY

BLACK CHURCH BURNINGS

WHY THEY DID IT

Young, poor, uneducated describes most arsonists

By Debbie Howlett

COLUMBIA, Tenn. -- They got blasted that weekend, the three of them. Six cases of beer and a fist full of Valium will do that.

The more they drank, the madder they got.

Robert Lee Johnson said he was being cheated in the back-room card game at the Sweety Peety, a black-owned juke joint. Michael Jett complained his daughter had run off to Knoxville with a black man -- a pimp, he called him. Mark Jett agreed: Blacks needed to be put in their place.

With their rage at full boil on Super Bowl Sunday night in 1995, the trio decided to soak an eight-foot pine cross in kerosene and burn it in front of the Sweety Peety. One thing led to another. By the time the sun rose, two rural black churches were charred from the Molotov cocktails the men had crafted from empty Budweiser beer bottles.

"It's a hard thing to explain," said Johnson, 33, sobered up and contrite before the federal judge about to sentence him to 37 months in prison. "I know I was in the wrong. I know that making crosses and bombs, that's a terrible thing to do. I dream bad dreams about that."

Johnson and the Jetts, who are cousins, are the first men convicted under federal civil rights law for one of the 66 suspicious fires at Southern black churches in the past 18 months.

On Friday, USA TODAY reported that there was no evidence of a national or regional conspiracy behind the arsons. Many fires are hate crimes, but many are not. Churches burn for a variety of reasons, including teen-age vandalism, derangement and insurance fraud. In one-third of the cases where arrests have been made, the suspect has been black.

Today, USA TODAY looks at the six cases of church fires in the 1990s in which federal charges of racially motivated arson have been brought or are being considered. The six cases involve 14 men -- all white -- and the burning of 11 churches dating back to 1991. Twelve of those men have been convicted under the 1968 federal civil rights law. The other two are in jail awaiting trial on state arson charges while federal prosecutors prepare civil rights charges against them. The men have no known connections to each other. They are all white, but there is no conspiracy here. Only background, prejudice and circumstance link them. The men's stories bear striking similarities -- tales of hard lives and simmering resentments, of rage and flames in the night. And in some cases, contrition and shame.

Arson defendants young, white and poor

USA TODAY visited the hometowns of the convicted and accused arsonists, examined court records in every case and interviewed family members, police, prosecutors and defense lawyers. From this, a clear pattern emerges. The arson defendants were:

- Less educated. Only four of the 14 had graduated from high school.
- Poor. Half were unemployed. The others held low-paying jobs such as working in a fish market or doing unskilled construction work.
- Young. Ten of the 14 were 17 to 23 at the time of the church burning. Half of the 14 lived at home.
- Rural residents. Most lived in very rural areas, generally close to the churches they targeted.
- Not career criminals. None had previous felony convictions, although a few had misdemeanor arrests or run-ins with authorities as juveniles. Three cases had links to racist groups; three did not.
- Drunk. Most were drinking alcohol heavily on the night the churches burned. Several had been taking drugs, mostly marijuana.

“They'd been drinking, but that's no excuse,” says the Rev. Alvin Anderson, pastor of the Friendship Baptist Church, one of the two churches burned by Johnson and the Jetts. “Sometimes drinking just makes us brave enough to do what we've already got in our hearts to do.”

It's not easy to understand what is in each of these men's hearts. All 14 refused to be interviewed.

Twelve are still in custody. Some of them, as well as prison officials, expressed concern about possible retaliation from black inmates if their crimes became known.

“My utmost concern now is to let this all die down in order to survive in this place,” Mark Jett told USA TODAY in a short, hand-written letter from federal prison in Beckley, W.Va. “I would like to `set the record straight' but to do it now is like signing my last will and testament. Maybe you can understand?”

USA TODAY informed the U.S. Bureau of Prisons that this story would appear today. The bureau said it would take precautions to ensure the safety of the inmates.

The two men who have completed their sentences have found jobs and married since being released 13 months ago. Kenneth Coats and Perry Moore were convicted of burning three black churches near Watson, Ark., in 1991: Oak Grove Baptist, St. James Baptist and Love Rest Baptist.

“I just want to put it all behind me,” said Coats, a tall man who has opened a fish market in Dumas, Ark. He declined to say more.

Still it was possible to glean insight from the men's own words in trial records and interviews with those who knew them best.

High school hate: The white supremacists

John Jason Bakenhus was a cast-off in Clarksville, Tenn.

He didn't fit in at Clarksville High School. So he and a friend, Charles Neblett, formed a supremacist group, Aryan Faction, and recruited middle school and high school students as members.

“Most of the kids that were in the group were just, you know, all a bunch of, I guess, loners. . . . I guess I was the head kid,” Bakenhus said in court. “Everybody was alone and didn't have anyone to, you know, have a fun time with.”

At first, Aryan Faction members spray painted graffiti on buildings. Then they escalated to assaults on black neighbors' homes, firing birdshot from a shotgun at one home and lobbing Molotov cocktails made from Jim Beam whiskey bottles at another family whose children were schoolmates of Neblett's.

On Aug. 18, 1994, they set fire to Benevolent Lodge #210, a meeting hall in nearby Adams often used for Baptist services by blacks. They spray painted “AF strikes again” and “Niggers leave or die” on the walls before dousing the place with kerosene. After torching it, they ran away, whooping and hollering.

Three days later, Bakenhus was arrested. His car reeked of kerosene, police said.

Neblett, then 18, was a lanky pitcher who was supposed to start college on a baseball scholarship the day after his arrest. He drove a truck that the men used in two attacks.

Bakenhus, then 21, had no real plans for the coming year. He was unemployed and living at home, driving a 1968 Chevy Impala. A \$700 TV was his most prized possession.

He'd been beaten repeatedly by his 6-foot-5, 300-pound father, John Francis Bakenhus, who testified that "I can throw a tantrum that scares the hell out of people."

The elder Bakenhus taught his son that using racial slurs was no big deal. He testified that calling someone a "nigger" was the same as calling him a "fathead."

The younger Bakenhus said he feared his father and retreated into drug abuse. He smoked marijuana at age 12 and tried every other drug he could put his hands on by age 16. He said he took LSD once at age 16 and chased a friend with an ax, believing the boy was "possessed by demons." Bakenhus eventually dropped out of high school and worked sporadically at odd jobs.

Forming Aryan Faction was the biggest accomplishment in his young life. He kept the group's roster, regulations and oath in a briefcase next to his bomb-making manuals.

In court, he apologized. "I can't express the guilt that I feel and I know it's hard to believe. I really did feel guilt. I really do feel like slime."

Bakenhus and Neblett were sentenced to 33 months in federal prison and ordered to pay restitution of \$97,246.

Ku Klux Klan: At work in some arsons

Ernest Pierce claims to be an Imperial Wizard in the Ku Klux Klan. The 53-year-old farmer was convicted of ordering 21-year-old Brian Tackett to torch the Barren River Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Ky., on Dec. 6, 1991. Pierce reportedly was upset by anti-Klan comments by the pastor, Larry Craig.

Tackett stole a car in Tennessee, picked up four cans of camping fuel from his mother, Linda Tackett, picked up his girlfriend, Kim Patton, and a friend, Jerry Gann, and headed out to burn the church around 5:30 a.m. Patton and Gann testified for the prosecution and charges against them weren't pursued.

Defense lawyers and prosecutors declined to talk about the case because Pierce and Tackett are appealing their convictions.

Pierce was sentenced to 51 months in federal prison for conspiracy. Tackett was given 115 months for conspiracy, arson and auto theft.

The Klan appears to be a player in two South Carolina fires as well. There, Tim Welch and Gary Cox attended Ku Klux Klan meetings together, and prosecutors say they also burned two black churches in June.

The men are now in jail awaiting trial on state arson charges. Federal prosecutors are preparing federal civil rights charges against them.

Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal of Greeleyville was burglarized, set ablaze and destroyed at 5 a.m. on June 20, 1992. Two nights later, the same happened to Macedonia Baptist Church in Bloomville.

Welch was carrying a Klan membership card in his wallet when Clarendon County sheriff's deputies arrested him on charges of burning two black churches.

In a double-wide trailer where Cox lived, the deputies found guns and a hooded white robe.

“Those boys felt they had the blessing of the Klan,” Welch's mother, Wanda Mitchum, told *The State* newspaper in Columbia, S.C. “They take these young country boys who don't really know a lot and have never been out in the world, and they corrupt them.”

Welch was a lifelong resident of the area and an unemployed 23-year-old at the time of the fire. He lived with his mother.

Cox, then 22, had come to South Carolina from Virginia seeking construction work after Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

He lived in a trailer with a Klan buddy, Arthur Haley, and worked only rarely as a day laborer.

Cox and Welch are also charged with beating and stabbing a mentally handicapped black man they found waiting for a bus near a Wal-Mart. The victim survived the attack.

South Carolina has moved the suspects to four jails because they've been beaten by other inmates.

Martin Luther King: A time for arsons

To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., three teen-agers torched two churches 20 miles apart near Summit, Miss.

Late on Sunday, April 5, 1993, after a day of drinking beer and smoking pot, Charles McGehee, Jerome Bellelo and Roy McGovern piled into McGovern's car, picked up a 15-year-old girl and went to burglarize the Springhill Freewill Missionary Baptist Church, two miles down a dirt road near McGehee's home.

When they found nothing worth stealing in the church, they piled plastic floral arrangements and hymnals in a pew and started a fire. The church burned to the ground.

They then drove toward McGovern's house. But on the way, they stopped at Rocky Point Missionary Baptist Church and set it ablaze. They drove away shouting: “Burn, nigger, burn!”

They spent the night at McGovern's house, watching the church burn less than a mile away.

“These young boys are not racist,” says Guy Rogers, lawyer for McGovern. “They got a little drunk and a little crazy. I know the types who do this sort of thing with malice in their hearts and these boys are not that type. . . . It was a lark.”

While McGehee graduated from high school, worked in construction and lived in a comfortable home, Bellelo and McGovern came from less fortunate circumstances.

McGovern, then an 18-year-old dropout, worked for a tree-trimming service. At the time of his arrest, he was on probation for aggravated assault of an acquaintance in a dispute over a stolen car stereo.

Bellelo, then 17 and a freshman in high school, is one of nine children and lived in Franklinton, La. He had been staying with his grandmother, Norma Bellelo, in Summit, where he had been in one minor scrape with the law for breaking into a newspaper vending machine. His grandmother turned him in to police.

After the sentencing hearing, his father, Duris Bellelo, approached the Rev. Maultee Brown Sr. of Springhill Freewill and shook hands. He told him that he would like to help pay to rebuild the church, but that he had no money. Then he introduced Jerome to the pastor, who accepted his apology.

Although Bellelo didn't speak in open court, McGehee and McGovern turned to face church members. “I'd like to tell the members of both churches that I am sorry for what happened,” McGehee said.

Said McGovern, “I'd like to apologize to the members of both churches. I'm sorry this happened.”

McGehee and Bellelo were sentenced to 37 months. McGovern got 46 months because of an earlier conviction as a juvenile. The three were ordered to pay \$138,000 in restitution, perform 384 hours of community service each over the next 14 years and, on their release, submit 10-page research reports on the history of the civil rights movement.

After Arkansas fires: Trying to rebuild lives

Kenneth Coats and Perry Moore are fishmongers in the Mississippi River flood plain. It's honest but unpleasant work, wearing rubber aprons smeared with entrails while gutting and filleting catfish to sell wholesale in small shops.

But both men have found a measure of peace after serving their time for destroying three black churches in Watson, Ark., on May 17, 1992.

Some speculated that the arsons were a response to the riots three weeks earlier in South Central Los Angeles following the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. But both men have denied that.

The churches were insured, and all three have been rebuilt. Now the men want to rebuild their lives.

Moore, then 23, is a burly redhaired man who lives with his family in a trailer next to the fish market where he works. He has a second job at an auto garage in nearby Dumas.

On a humid evening last week, he glowered at a visitor and said virtually nothing. He and his mother and father sat in lawn chairs.

Coats, then 23, lives in a rough-looking, double-wide trailer with a new satellite dish in the yard. On a recent visit, Moore's older brother, working at a fish market set up behind the trailer, chased a reporter off the property.

Married less than a month, Coats is starting his own fish market and restaurant in prosperous Dumas.

In his tidy place, just opened Wednesday, Coats, his wife and his mother sat in plastic patio chairs, smoking Winstons and railing about inaccurate media accounts regarding the new wave of arsons.

Despite his wife and mother's best efforts to cajole him into talking, Coats declined, saying he just doesn't want any more trouble.

Both men were released from prison in May 1995 after serving 32 1/2 months of a 37-month sentence.

The Super Bowl fires: 'A purpose and a plan'

The burning rage on Super Bowl Sunday 1995 began with a burning cross and the firebombing of the Sweet Peety tavern in Columbia, Tenn. Then Robert Johnson and Michael Jett jumped into Mark Jett's pickup and did the same to Friendship Missionary Baptist Church in the next county.

They drove back to Johnson's house, switched to Johnson's 1977 Pontiac Bonneville and returned to the church to watch the fire. Members of the congregation who were fighting the fire saw the drunken white men and chased them away.

The trio then drove to Canaan African Methodist Episcopal Church and threw a Molotov cocktail through a window. The bomb broke a plastic water pipe that doused the fire. Neither church was destroyed, although fire did \$20,000 worth of damage to Friendship Missionary.

Patricia Jett, wife of Mark Jett, says the crimes were not part of any organized effort despite public perceptions. "They are not the racists everyone makes them out to be," she says. "They are not bad people. They were just drunk. That's all it was. These boys just made a terrible mistake and they are paying the price."

A self-employed painter, Johnson claimed income of \$11,000 in 1994 after being fired from his job as a Kroger's grocery clerk.

"I hope God forgets what we've done," Johnson said before he was sentenced in February.

Despite their expressions of remorse, U.S. District Judge Thomas Higgins said "these men set out to ride the roads at night. They had a purpose and a plan."

"It's no accident that two African-American congregations were singled out," Higgins said.

All three men were sentenced to 37 months in prison and ordered to pay restitution of \$20,087.

While tough sentences salve some of the public outrage over church burnings, those who have been harmed the most appear to be the quickest to forgive.

In McComb, the small congregation of Rocky Point Missionary Baptist Church elected not to rebuild and gave \$12,000 in donations to help Springhill rebuild instead.

The Springhill Freewill Baptist Church stands at the end of a two-mile dirt road, its tall white steeple pristine in the fading evening sun.

Deacon Carl Young says the new church is better than the old one, largely because of the generosity of spirit of both whites and blacks in Amite County who joined forces to help rebuild.

The three young men who burned the old church will be welcomed back when their time is up a few months from now.

"I'd be glad for them to come back to the community," Young says. "I don't feel hatred toward them. They're serving their time. They told us they were sorry. That's all they can do."

Contributing: Gary Fields and Deborah Sharp

IN COURT

John Bakenhus, founder of the white supremacist group Aryan Faction, speaking in court on why he burned a black church:

"The main reason, Your Honor, was (the) racial element. Your Honor, it was the main reason. But also, Your Honor, I love to see things burn. I always have. Almost burned down our garage at one point in my life. I burned down many things. Small things. I burned my toys, my G.I. Joe men, I used to try to burn them, see if I could make the plastic melt. I have always loved to see things burn. I don't know if -- I do get aroused by it, and I always have, and I hope to God maybe I can get cured and I want to get to that point where I won't enjoy seeing things burn with fire.

"In religious practices speaking, you know, fire is purifying. And I always figured if something burns away and goes to ashes, then it exists too -- or I figured that, you know. I don't know that. I don't know. I just think fire purifies things. I don't know what incident in my life led to that.

"And we have a wood stove at the house and I used to love to load it up and light it during the wintertime. I guess my father caught on to that, but I used to love to put wood in and light it all the time and wonder -- I guess he thought I was being his son, but I was enjoying seeing the fire burn. Used to get on me because it used to get the fire alarm to go off because I would leave the fire open on the wood stove. I watched it burn for so long the smoke would come out and set the alarm off.

"I just need help, you know. I'd like to have help."

Robert Lee Johnson apologizes in court for burning two black churches:

"I hope God forgets what we've done. I didn't intend to hurt nobody . . . I'm ready to accept my time. And I have learned a lot about racism, you know. It's a little bit in everybody, I reckon, and I also know if I hadn't been drinking that night and somebody mentioning something like that I would have turned around and went the other way."

About this series

Today is the second part of USA TODAY's three-day look at church arsons in the South. The newspaper's two-month investigation included 500 interviews, visits to 45 arson scenes and the first comparison of arsons at white and black churches.

FRIDAY -- The newspaper found:

- Sixty-four black church arsons in the South since Jan. 1, 1995, 18 more than federal authorities reported. Two more fires were reported over the weekend.
- No conspiracy to burn black churches. But it uncovered two clusters of arsons -- in Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi, and in the Carolinas -- that could be the result of serial arsonists.

These clusters are behind the recent jump in arsons since 1995; otherwise, arsons would be at near-normal levels.

- That racism is a major factor in black church arsons, but is not the only motive. Fires at black churches are also started by teen-age vandals, drunks and the mentally ill and for insurance and other frauds.
- Of 30 people arrested on various arson charges in the South, 20 are white, 10 black.
- White churches are burning at a similar pace: 61 since the start of 1995.

TUESDAY -- Solutions.

SUBJECT

ARSON: BLACKS: CHURCH: SERIES

SECTION

NEWS

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ARTWORK

GRAPHIC,B/W,Kevin Rechin,USA TODAY,Sources:Court records,USA TODAY research; PHOTO, Color,Bowling Green Daily News; PHOTOS, B/W,The Daily Record(3); PHOTO, B/W,The Enterprise Journal; PHOTO, B/W,Amy Klerzek,The Item

CATEGORY

COVER STORY

EDITION

FINAL

DLINE

COLUMBIA, Tenn.

NOTES

USA TODAY INVESTIGATION; Why are churches burning? A USA TODAY SPECIAL REPORT; Drinking a factor; it can help us `do what we've already got in our hearts'; See related story: 04A; Text of chart unavailable for database -- please see microfiche

CUTLINE

Ernest Pierce: Farmer, 53, reported upset by pastor's anti-Klan comments
Robert Johnson: Painter 33, said he was cheated at blacked-owned juke joint
Mark Jett: Used beer bottles from drinking binge to make Molotov cocktails

Roy McGovern: Hymnals were fuel for fire that began as burglary attempt

Michael Jett: Complained his daughter had run off to Knoxville with black man

Awaiting trial: Tim Welch, left, and Gary Cox are in jail on charges of burning two black churches.