

Brown said detectives were interviewing witnesses Saturday night to determine exactly what happened. None of them de-
street.

Secrecy pervades fatal firebombing of Salem house

The house on Court Street is the scene of violence, racial tensions, and then a fiery chaos in which eight people scramble for their lives, and two fail to make it

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SALEM — Eddie Keel remembers the glass breaking. Then the boom and an explosion of flame.

A rug and some curtains in the apartment caught fire. Sprinklers spit water, but were overpowered by the fierce flames.

Eight people, some of them awakened from sleep, scrambled for their lives.

Beyond that, Keel doesn't have much to say. "I was too hysterical," he said of events just moments after a firebomb was hurled through the window of a Salem basement apartment.

Minutes later, one person was dead. A second died the next day. Within a few days, four people were under arrest, two of them documented Skinheads. And shortly after that, charges would be filed that suggest the crime was motivated by hatred — hate for blacks, hate for homosexuals, or both.

The case has yet to go to trial, and authorities have sealed tight virtually all of the pertinent documents. Many of those who have testified before the grand jury are reluctant to talk to reporters.

Friends of Skinheads Yolanda Cotton, 19, and Philip Wilson Jr., 21, refused to talk to a reporter for The Oregonian after testifying before the grand jury. One said the story had been blown out of proportion.

Others on the street said that while the two held racist beliefs, the firebombing wasn't something they would do. The deaths, they said, must have been accidental.

Authorities say they still don't know the whole story.

"We don't know for sure all of the motivation

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of these people," said Deputy District Attorney David Kramer.

But other interviews and information paint this picture of what happened early on Sept. 26, hours before firefighters pulled two people — one dead, the other dying — from a burning basement.

In the hours before the fire, the house, on Court Street, just blocks away from the Capitol, had attracted a basement full of teen-agers. Some were troubled youths, some were runaways.

All were friends or relatives of 29-year-old Hattie Mae Cohens.

The teens had attended part of a football game at North Salem High School earlier. It was their plan to spend the night in the one-room apartment Cohens shared with 45-year-old Brian Mock and another man, who was away that night.

Neighbors considered 1410 1/2 Court Street a house of horrors. Loud parties were routine, as well as fights with guns, knives and baseball bats, drinking, foul language and suspected drug deals.

Neighbors repeatedly contacted Salem police, the Portland owners of the house and just about anyone else who would listen. From January 1989 to July 1992, police were called to the house more than 150 times.

Mock was college-educated but a mental disability kept him from holding a regular job. Friends had urged him to leave the house because he was the victim of anti-gay threats by some tenants and visitors. Mock was a large, burly man, but he never retaliated.

Cohens, a black lesbian, was a friend of Mock's. Released from prison about a year ago after serving six years for burglary and assault, she moved in with Mock and his companion some months back.

A husky woman, Cohens was widely known as a protector. Friends say she was always willing to help anyone, even strangers.

"Everybody liked her."

Kenneth Finley was in the apartment the evening of Sept. 25, a few hours before the firebombing. His stepfather is a cousin of Cohens, and he considered her family.

"Everybody liked her," the 18-year-old Finley said. "She was a nice person. She always cared about people."

He remembers hanging around at the apartment after the game. Friends came and went, speaking in whispers because Mock was asleep.

At one point, Finley said, a tenant known as "Little Dave" began yelling at him. Weeks later, he doesn't remember what prompted the outburst.

Little Dave had been evicted months before because of violent behavior. He was to have moved out of the house in July but was still living in the basement.

Finley asked Hattie Cohens to talk with the man.

According to Finley, Little Dave was threatening to kill the people in the basement and blow up the house.

Cohens finally pushed Little Dave inside his apartment. She wasn't the only one who would try to deal with him that night.

Later, Keel and several of the



BRIAN MOCK



HATTIE MAE COHENS

teen-agers still in Mock's apartment heard racist remarks coming through the open door of Little Dave's place. Keel and three of his companions are black.

"We went over to confront them and tell them to knock it off," Keel said.

Inside the apartment, Little Dave was drinking beer with Sean Edwards. Edwards, 21, drew a knife.

"I hit Sean in the mouth and said, 'Don't ever think of stabbing me,'" Keel recalled.

Cohens stepped in and calmed things down once again, Keel said.

An hour later, about 2 a.m., at an AM/PM Mini Market on Commercial and Mission streets in southeast Salem, Edwards and another man were spotted buying gasoline.

A customer, Eric Rund, recognized Edwards and knew him by name. Rund, 24, saw Edwards in line at the market. He said Edwards was accompanied by a dark-haired man.

One of the suspects has dark hair — Leon Tucker, 22. Formerly of Sweet Home, Tucker was then being sought on a Benton County warrant for allegedly stealing boughs from U.S. Forest Service trees.

Sometime soon after the gasoline purchase, the two allegedly met with Cotton and Wilson.

Both are known to police as Skinheads, associated with the American Front group, once among the largest racist Skinhead groups on the West Coast. The two had met at a Job Corps Center in Reno, Nev., where Cotton was enrolled in the program from September 1989 through mid-

April 1990.

This May, they were part of a group that spray painted white supremacist slogans at Silver Falls State Park, east of Salem. Wilson in July pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of criminal mischief.

He was assigned by the court to write an essay titled, "Racism: Is It Destroying the U.S.?" Cotton was never charged with a crime.

At the time of the firebombing, Wilson worked as an assistant to a veterinarian. Wilson told one neighbor that he and Cotton were "punk rock skateboard radicals."

Conflicting reports

By about 3:15 a.m. on Sept. 26, two Molotov cocktails were ready. Police believe Edwards and Tucker threw the gasoline bombs through the basement window of Mock's apartment. Police haven't said what the roles of Cotton and Wilson were in the incident. There are conflicting reports as to where they were when the firebombs were thrown.

Salem police later arrested Cotton and Wilson at their apartment, just blocks from the firebombing. Investigators dusted the Wilson-Cotton place for fingerprints and confiscated dozens of objects, including a bayonet and an ashtray. The search warrant describing what they expected to find has been sealed by the Marion County district attorney.

Edwards was arrested at the Salem Police Department after an interview. Tucker had fled Salem that night and was arrested five days later, on Oct. 1, after he was spotted walking along a road between Newport and Toledo.

The indictments charge all four suspects with aggravated murder, arson, assault and intimidation. They are being held without bail in the Marion County Jail.

Chaos

At the time the first Molotov cocktail sailed through the window, some of those in the apartment were asleep. Not Keel.

He yelled. And in the chaos that followed, Willie Cohens, who is related to Hattie Cohens, broke a window. Eddie Keel, another relative, went out, followed by several others.

Hattie Cohens, who earlier tried to soothe tempers, died in the basement of smoke inhalation.

Mock, the gentle giant who slept through much of the evening, died the next day in a Portland hospital of skin burns and smoke and heat inhalation.

In the end, the two people who died may not have been the intended victims, at least not of Edwards' animosity.

Edwards reportedly considered both Mock and Cohens to be his friends and has expressed remorse to police.

The house on Court Street withstood the fire and looms as a vivid reminder of the violence and hate that apparently spawned the episode.

More than one neighbor said they warned repeatedly of a tragedy in the making. They fear it could happen again.

Said resident and landlord Ralph

Taylor, "That fire didn't start at 1410, but it scorched every house in the neighborhood."