Fire investigation continues

"Due to the nature of the clientele of that business down there, we thought it was prudent to get an investigation."

— Hermiston Fire Chief Jim Stearns —

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Gil Gilliland and son, Michael, of Gilliland Construction of Hermiston, ride a crane basket to the roof of the Umatilla County Circuit Court building in Hermiston to remove hundreds of gallons of water after a fire destroyed the office early Monday morning.

ATF agents, dogs searching for clues

By ANDREW BINION
of the East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Fire Chief Jim Stearns told the City Council on Monday night there was no immediate evidence the fire that destroyed Umatilla County's Circuit Court facilities earlier that day was set intentionally.

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents and dogs trained to detect the presence of fire accelerants will search the remains of the Hermiston courthouse in the 200 block of East Main Street for evidence of arson today, he said.

"Due to the nature of the clientele of that business down there, we thought it was prudent to get an investigation," Stearns said.

The fire severely weakened roof supports, making it too dangerous for investigators to enter the premises. The fire caused smoke and some minor structural damage to adjacent buildings, but I.J. Gems and Andee's Boutique expect to be back in business soon.

Workers spent Monday afternoon stabilizing the court building by draining a 1,000-gallon pool of water from the roof left by the rain and the firefighting effort, Stearns said. After the draining, workers began making cuts in the roof when it collapsed.

Investigators will have more debris to dig through, but Stearns said he was glad people were kept out of the building.

Because the fire was at a courthouse, "red flags" went up, Oregon State Police arson investigator Dennis Wagner said, adding the investigation is proceeding like any other.

"We treat all fires as crime scenes until we know they are not," he said.

Hermiston Fire Marshal Tom Bohm said the court building sustained about $200,000 in damage, but noted it's too early to tell if the fire was arson.

"We're just going to have to dig through everything and find out," Bohm said.

Andee's Boutique lost all of it's inventory to smoke damage, said Jeremy Howard, whose wife, Brandy, owns the women's clothing store.

"Nobody is going to buy women's clothing that smells like smoke," Howard said.

The shop has fire insurance and Howard said it would reopen. Andee's had begun receiving its spring line of fashions and expected 20 to 30 more boxes this week, Howard said. The store had just opened in the new location in November.

Fire officials initially believed I.J. Gems avoided extensive damage, but owner Jacque Hill said the roof of the store also was damaged.

The awning on the building across from the court facility had started to catch fire when firefighters arrived just after 3 a.m. Monday.

"It's lucky we got here in time, it could have spread," said Lt. Scott Stanton. "It was a pretty good save."

Fire puts court cases on hold

HERMISTON — All court cases that were to be heard in the Hermiston Circuit Court will be delayed a minimum of two weeks, except for a half dozen that need immediate attention, said Trial Court Administrator Bill Jones.

All seven employees from the west-end courthouse, which was destroyed Monday in a fire, will work out of the Pendleton office until a new location can be found, Jones said.

The search is continuing for a substitute space that can be used until construction on the new courthouse is completed next year, he said.

Intentional

Investigators determine arsonist destroyed courthouse

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Wiloa, a 7-year-old female yellow lab, searches for fuel Tuesday that may have been used to start a fire that destroyed the Hermiston Circuit Courthouse. With the dog is her handler, Oregon State Police investigator Tom Hatch of Portland.

$5,000 reward offered by building's insurance company

By ANDREW BINION
of the East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Arson caused the blaze that destroyed the Hermiston Circuit Court building early Monday morning.

After combing through the charred remains of the building Tuesday, Dennis Wagner, a detective with the Oregon State Police, said the team of investigators from local, state and federal agencies concluded the fire was intentionally started.

"It was definitely a set fire," he said.

An OSP dog trained to sniff out fuel used to start fires was brought to the scene, but Wagner said physical evidence is what pointed investigators to arson.

There are no suspects at this time, he said.

Wagner would not say how the fire was started because the investigation is ongoing, but he credited the Hermiston Fire Department for its quick response to the blaze, which started just before 3 a.m. Monday.

"They knocked it down so quick there is a lot of building left and a lot of material to look at," he said.

Earlier in the day Wagner said a U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent and a Hermiston Police officer canvassed the area around the 200 block of East Main Street searching for witnesses. Officers are also reviewing security tapes from the area for clues.

"We're trying to cover all our bases," Wagner said.

Umatilla County District Attorney Chris Brauer said Oregon law does not make a distinction between arson on public and private property. And because human life was not endangered, if a person is convicted of setting the fire they would not be subject to stiffer penalties under voter-approved Measure 11.

A $5,000 reward is being offered by the building's insurance company for the arrest and conviction of those responsible. Wagner said he did not have statistics on the effectiveness of offering rewards in arson cases, but said it could help.

"Sometimes they are that little extra to make a case," he said.

Damage to the court facility has been estimated at about $200,000. The entire inventory of a clothing store next door was ruined by smoke and water.

In addition to three federal agents, members of the OSP Arson and Explosives Unit, Office of the State Fire Marshal, Hermiston Fire Department, Hermiston Police Department and Boardman Fire Department were on the scene Tuesday collecting evidence.

Assisting the investigation was Wiloa, a 7-year-old female yellow lab assigned to the OSP Arson and Explosives Section based in Portland.

> **"It was definitely a set fire."**
> Dennis Wagner
> Oregon State Police detective

Tip lines

- **Anyone with information about the arson should call the Hermiston Police Department at 969-8905, or OSP Det Dennis Wagner at 567-3215, Ext. 4914.**