



E24 “We Didn’t Start This Fire” — Understanding What Caused the Fire That Killed Twin Boys

Matthew C. Wietbrock, BS, 629 N 6th Street, Lafayette, IN 47909*

After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the details surrounding a devastating house fire, set under suspicious circumstances, which claimed the lives of 3-year-old twin brothers in April 2014. Attendees will also learn the value of a multidisciplinary approach to such investigation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by detailing forensic tasks, which occurred as part of the criminal investigation, as well as the crime scene investigative strategies which were employed. A review of this investigation will demonstrate to attendees the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and effective teamwork to ensure a complete and accurate investigation.

At 11:01 a.m. on April 5, 2014, the Tippecanoe County Dispatch Center was advised of a working house fire in progress in rural Tippecanoe County, IN. County sheriff deputies, the fire department, and ambulances were dispatched to the area.

Upon arrival, first responding officers found the adult occupants of the home outside, with visible burns. The male was distraught screaming that “his babies” were still in the home. Deputies attempted to enter the house, and after several failed attempts to locate a point of entry, located a window covered on the exterior by black plastic. Upon removing the covering, the deputies saw, through the smoke, one of the boys lying on a bed, then immediately saw his brother on the floor. They smashed open the window, resolving to rescue the children. While his partner held onto his feet, a deputy dove into the burning house, pulled both boys out, and rushed them to the waiting ambulances. Both children died upon reaching separate area hospitals.

After the blaze was extinguished, the questions asked were: how did this fire start and what were the contributing factors? The father would later claim that he believed that his boys, perhaps playing with a lighter, had set the house on fire.

Also in question was what the actions of the adult occupants of the house were after the fire began. Witnesses claimed that they observed the father bringing items out of the residence, prior to first responders arriving. Perhaps he even made several trips. All the while, his sons were still inside the home. How did the adult occupants find their way out of the blaze, while the children were left behind? Was the fire set in conjunction with some other criminal enterprise? Also needing to be answered was the question of how to identify the twin brothers and tell them apart from each other for post mortem identification.

A complete scene investigation was critical to answering these questions and, as it turned out, one visit to the scene would not be enough for investigators. With determination and a willingness to question their assumptions, investigators were able to place blame upon the person responsible and, perhaps what is more important, deflect the blame from two innocent victims.

This presentation details those efforts, as well as the eventual conviction of the father of the deceased boys. This conviction would never have happened without a team-oriented, multidisciplinary approach on the part of the Fire Marshal’s Office, the Tippecanoe County Sheriff’s Department, the pathologist, the Tippecanoe County Prosecutors Office, and the Tippecanoe County Coroner’s Office.

Fatal Fire, Multidisciplinary, Neglect