

## Homeless man faces charges for starting fire

Thursday, August 26, 2010

If you are a regular Bi-Mart shopper, chances are you've seen John David Thiry holding a cardboard sign near the entrance to the store's parking lot in south Ashland.

And if you work in one of the many stores and gas stations in the area, odds are Thiry has frequented your business and has been escorted out by the police at least once.

"We've dealt with him on a number of occasions," said Ashland police Sgt. Bob Smith. "We have (ushered) him out of many stores for various reasons."

A number of people approached for this story said they recognized Thiry from his mug shot broadcast in various media outlets since his arrest Wednesday morning.

Thiry is suspected of accidentally starting the fire that destroyed 11 homes on Oak Knoll Drive and damaged a handful of others. The fire prompted a large-scale evacuation of the Ashland neighborhood and shut down traffic in town and on Interstate 5 for several hours Tuesday afternoon. No injuries were reported.

Thiry remains in the Jackson County Jail on \$500,000 bail. He was arraigned Wednesday afternoon on 10 counts of reckless endangering and 14 counts of reckless burning.

Thiry is known around Ashland for his bizarre and erratic behavior that could be the result of mental illness.

Witnesses said Thiry often appeared disheveled and would randomly yell and scream to himself.

Johnny Marler, 50, has known Thiry for six years. Both live on the street and have spoken at various times over the years.

"John's a good dude, but he can change in a minute," Marler said. "Sometimes he could get violent with people. He wasn't afraid of anyone."

Marler was relaxing in his hammock strung up between two trees when the fire started Tuesday. Marler had stored his belongings in the old barn along Washington Street when it caught fire and burned to the ground within minutes.

He said Thiry was in the Washington Street area and had most likely started the fire on accident.

"I know John wouldn't start this on purpose," Marler said. "He probably dropped a cigarette or something."

Marler said he saw Thiry trying desperately to put out the flames as the blaze rushed through the dry grass along Washington Street.

"Eventually, he just gave up and ran through the Arco parking lot and disappeared," Marler said.

Marler said Thiry might suffer from schizophrenia or some other serious mental illness.

"He would do things like tear out his hair and just yell all the time," Marler said. "You never knew what he would do from one minute to the next."

Thiry never spoke much about his past, but Marler heard rumors he might have family in the area.

"He would get angry if you asked him about his life," Marler said.

Workers in the area have had run-ins with Thiry over the years.

"He has caused a lot of trouble around here," said Cody Wills, who works at the Arco gas station on Ashland Street. "We've called the police on him."

Wills said the store stopped selling Thiry beer after he challenged a manager to a fight.

Wills said Marler and other homeless people living in the area mostly keep to themselves and don't cause a ruckus.

"Mostly they just hang out like that," Wills said, pointing to a spot behind Arco where Marler and a friend were sitting.

Other workers and business owners in the south Ashland area have a tougher view of transients.

Barbara McGowan, a manager at the Goodwill store on Tolman Creek Road, said vagrants are no longer allowed in the store because of problems in the past.

Bruce Rexus, a mechanic at Bounds 66 Service, said the business has had difficulty with vagrants.

"They'd come down here and take stuff," he said. "They'd break into cars and sleep here."

Marler said Tuesday's incident should not reflect on the homeless population as a whole, and people should not be too quick to judge Thiry based on his past actions.

"He's always been courteous to me," Marler said.