

Arson suspected in blast

Joseph Clegett is fire victim

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Investigators from both the Fire and Police Departments were listing as possible arson and homicide an explosion and fire Monday night which took one life and injured two other people at 3424 Olive St.

The dead man has been positively identified as Joseph Clegett, 36, of 102½ S. 17th St. He was burned to death.

Injured in a blast at the house were Linda Meade, 26, of that address, and Charles Tolliver, 21. She suffered burns over 50 percent of her body and was placed in the intensive care unit of Methodist Medical Center. Tolliver, admitted at the same hospital, had burns on his face and arms.

"If it's arson, it's homicide," said Police Information Officer Jim Connors. "Any death during the commission of a felony is considered a homicide."

Chief Fire Inspector Larry Waller said the blaze definitely was suspicious. He substantiated a report from Battalion Chief Robert Pettijohn that a considerable amount of gasoline was found on the premises when firefighters first arrived on the scene shortly before 10.30 p.m.

Fire Inspector Mike Johnson was the first Fire Department investigator called to the house and reported the body of a black male had been discovered on the living room floor. A belt buckle with the name "Joe" on it was found on the body and a loaded .38 caliber handgun was stuck in the waistband of the trousers.

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— Staff photo

Firefighter Steve Richey walks past charred window

Blast

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"Fire gutted the living room," Waller said, and there was heat damage upstairs. "The force of the explosion blew out the front wall of the house about four inches where the first and second floors met and destroyed the front porch."

Neighbors told police two people had been seen running from the house after the explosion but Detective Lt. Terry Boyer said they were the injured pair who went to the hospital. Boyer also reported that the owner of the house, Matt Cary, was not there at the time of the blast and fire but was interviewed later.

There were reports of comings and goings at the house before the fire. Detective Sgt. Otto Clayton, working at the scene with Waller and Inspectors Johnson and Dale Robbins, said there had been a buildup of fumes inside the house. Waller confirmed that a large jug of what appeared to be gasoline had been found in the kitchen.

The investigators were uncertain what ignited the fumes but indicated it might have been any kind of spark, although there was a report the gas in the house had been turned off. The center of the blast was in

the living room, Waller said, but adjoining rooms also were damaged by the resulting fire. He called the damage to the house "considerable."

Police kept guard over the house during the remainder of the night until detectives and inspectors could complete their search on Tuesday. Detective Lt. John Muehlenbacher and Detectives Jim Wright and Jon Kreiser were among other officers involved in the investigation.

Dr. York Silliman scheduled an autopsy for Tuesday morning at St. Joseph Hospital.