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Trailside suspect takes up cause of fellow inmates

By JAMIE MARKS

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Trailside murder suspect David Carpenter — who's earned a reputation here as a "jailhouse lawyer" — has taken up the cause of three inmates at the County Jail who claim their legal materials were destroyed in the wake of a fire Oct. 20 in their housing section.

Carpenter is now in Los Angeles awaiting trial Oct. 11 on multiple murder charges. Last week he wrote the Sentinel and Register-Pajaronian to complain about the actions of the detention officers following the fire.

"I've seen a lot of things happen during my 28 months here in Santa Cruz and have experienced a number of them myself," wrote Carpenter. "However last night's episode was the most flagrant of them all, which is why I'm writing this letter."

Carpenter has written a dozen or more letters on behalf of inmates. In this case, he was chosen to write the letter to the media informing them of the event.

According to authorities, a newspaper was set on fire at the door to the jail, just as the guard shift was changing.

Deputy Chief Al Stevens said, "Quite a bit of smoke developed. We put out the fire, moved the inmates out and got the area evacuated. Then we did a general shakedown, removing a lot of trash that was sitting around the cells."

In dispute is what was seized.

Trash, garbage, old newspapers and extra jail issue (blankets, clothes, shoes) were the only things taken, said Stevens.

"There may have been scraps of paper in the corners that were swept up, but all the inmates were taken in and asked to look for anything that was missing," said

Stevens. There were no complaints. But the next day we had a few."

Two attorneys claim legal pads, personal letters and notes with names of potential witnesses were seized in the shakedown.

They and an inmate representing himself say they will file motions today seeking to have criminal charges dismissed.

Attorney John Bohrer, on behalf of Robert "Mad Mike" Daniels, said, "There are two issues here. One is the destruction of evidence. The other is the interference with the lawyer-client relationship."

Bohrer will ask that kidnapping-for-ransom charges be dropped against Daniels.

Deputy Public Defender Jeff Hancock said a legal pad he had given his client, Darryl Cash, was missing when he went to investigate the day after the fire.

"It's obvious things are gone," he said. "All the notes inter-related to his defense are missing, essentially everything we talked about."

The third inmate, Morris Paul Abrams, had similar gripes, said the attorneys.

Deputy Chief Stevens said the allegations are unfounded and that there's "no substance" to Carpenter's letter.

"We don't do a regular, daily shakedown," he said. "Consequently when we have an incident like this fire, we find all sorts of stuff in the cells."

"But we don't fool around with legal materials."

Some officials say the inmates may have flushed the evidence down the toilets in order to pin the blame on the jailers and create an issue for their defense.

But the attorneys hotly contest that, saying such a charge is ludicrous.