

# Man charged with murder in Iowa fire that killed 3

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A Mount Pleasant man set the fire that killed a family of three in a Mount Pleasant apartment house last weekend, then sipped beer and ate pickles on a nearby roof while watching the blaze spread, according to an affidavit filed Thursday.



Orville Richard Luke, 25, was arrested late Wednesday night at the Mount Pleasant Police Department and charged with arson and murder in the deaths of an unemployed Fairfield mechanic, his wife and baby daughter.

Luke, who was released from the Iowa State Penitentiary in Fort Madison in February 1981 after serving 2½ years years for fraud, had lived in the apartment house earlier this year with his sister, Mary. He apparently was upset that his sister was evicted after she had disputes with some tenants, according to Henry County Attorney Michael Riepe.

## Friend Stunned

Alan Nichols, one of Luke's best friends, was living in the apartment house and escaped the fire by jumping from a second-floor porch.

"I just couldn't believe it when I found out the police said he set the fire," Nichols said Thursday. "We were pretty close, like brothers, and I just can't believe he'd do that while I was living there."

The Fairfield couple who died in the fire, Frank and Shirley Adler, had been living in their station wagon until Nichols and his wife, Connie, invited them into their apartment about two weeks ago. "I don't think [Luke] even knew them," said

Nichols. "He must have had it in for the landlord."

Nichols said Luke's sister was evicted from the apartment house in January or February. She now lives with her family at 903 North Broadway in Mount Pleasant, where Luke was also staying, officials said.

The breakthrough in the case came Wednesday when a friend of Luke's, Terry Vorhies, told an investigator for the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation that he was with Luke last weekend when the fire was set.

## Affidavit on File

According to the affidavit filed Thursday by County Attorney Riepe, Vorhies said he was walking down a Mount Pleasant street early Saturday morning with Luke when his friend ducked into an apartment house at 206 Main St. where Nichols and the Adlers were living.

"Luke then came out of the building and caught up with Vorhies. Vorhies asked Luke what he did and Luke replied, 'I set fire to the place,' " the affidavit says.

The two men then went to a nearby residence, at 405 North Broadway, and walked up the stairs to the roof, where they drank Budweiser beer, ate pickles and watched the apartment burn, Riepe said. "Luke became excited while he watched the fire," he said.

Riepe noted in the affidavit that Luke had been involved with arson before. "In 1978, [he] admitted to setting a fire in the closet at a school in Salem, Ia."

Frank Adler apparently died of smoke inhalation while trying to

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rescue his 8-month-old daughter, Anita. Their bodies were found on the bedroom floor, while Shirley Adler's body was found on a bed in the same room.

Riepe said that while Luke was watching the fire, "[he] told Vorhies he was going to burn something else." Riepe said Vorhies then left and a fire was set at 405 North Broadway, the building from which they had watched the other blaze. The tenants were able to escape to safety in their night clothes.

No charges have been filed in connection with that fire.

Luke was arrested at 11:13 p.m. Wednesday. About an hour earlier, Nichols said he ran into Luke, who was on his way to the Mount Pleasant Police Department. "He was acting kind of funny, kind of scared," Luke said. "He didn't say much and he usually talks a lot. He said he had to talk to an agent about a coat covered with gasoline under a bunch of boxes."

Nichols said Luke had been living a rather unorganized life. "He was always running the street late at night. He didn't have any place to go. His family locked the doors at 11 p.m. I've seen him many, many times just sleeping on some steps somewhere, just anywhere around town."

Nichols said: "Luke said he liked it down in Fort Madison. He said it wasn't that bad." Officials at the Iowa State Penitentiary said Luke was "disciplined several times" for various incidents at the prison, but they did not know the details.

Luke was arraigned Thursday morning in Henry County Magistrate Court and charged with three counts of first-degree murder and one count of arson. Magistrate Cynthia Danielson set bond at \$650,000.

Mount Pleasant Police Chief Jerry Richenberger said his staff is still investigating the fires, especially to see if they may be connected to two similar fires in Mount Pleasant in January. He declined to comment when asked if charges would be filed in connection with the fire at the apartment complex located at 405 North Broadway.

Richenberger also declined to comment when asked about the whereabouts of Vorhies and whether charges against him are anticipated. Nichols said Vorhies "left town the day after the fire" and went to Texas. County Attorney Riepe was in court and couldn't be reached for comment Thursday afternoon.