

Phony tipsters rob father seeking runaway

By SALLIE JAMES
Staff Writer

FORT LAUDERDALE — A desperate father, following a tip that his runaway son was in Fort Lauderdale, flew from Oklahoma for a reunion only to be robbed hours after his arrival by the man who had called him with the bogus news, police said.

Thomas Lawson Sr., 43, left Fort Lauderdale on Saturday, without his

money and without his son, Tom, 16. What Lawson had hoped would be the end of his search for the missing boy — who disappeared on April 23 from Bethesda, Md., — had proved to be another dead end with a nasty twist.

"Obviously, if you look back, the whole thing didn't make sense, but with the emotion of looking for a child, you just don't think," Lawson said from his home in Tulsa. "I should have seen through it."

Lawson's ill-fated journey began on Friday, a day after he sent a flier with his son's picture via Federal Express to the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. Lawson had received a tip from a youth that his son was in Florida.

On Friday, a caller who identified himself as "Don Brown" phoned Lawson and said he could return the missing boy.

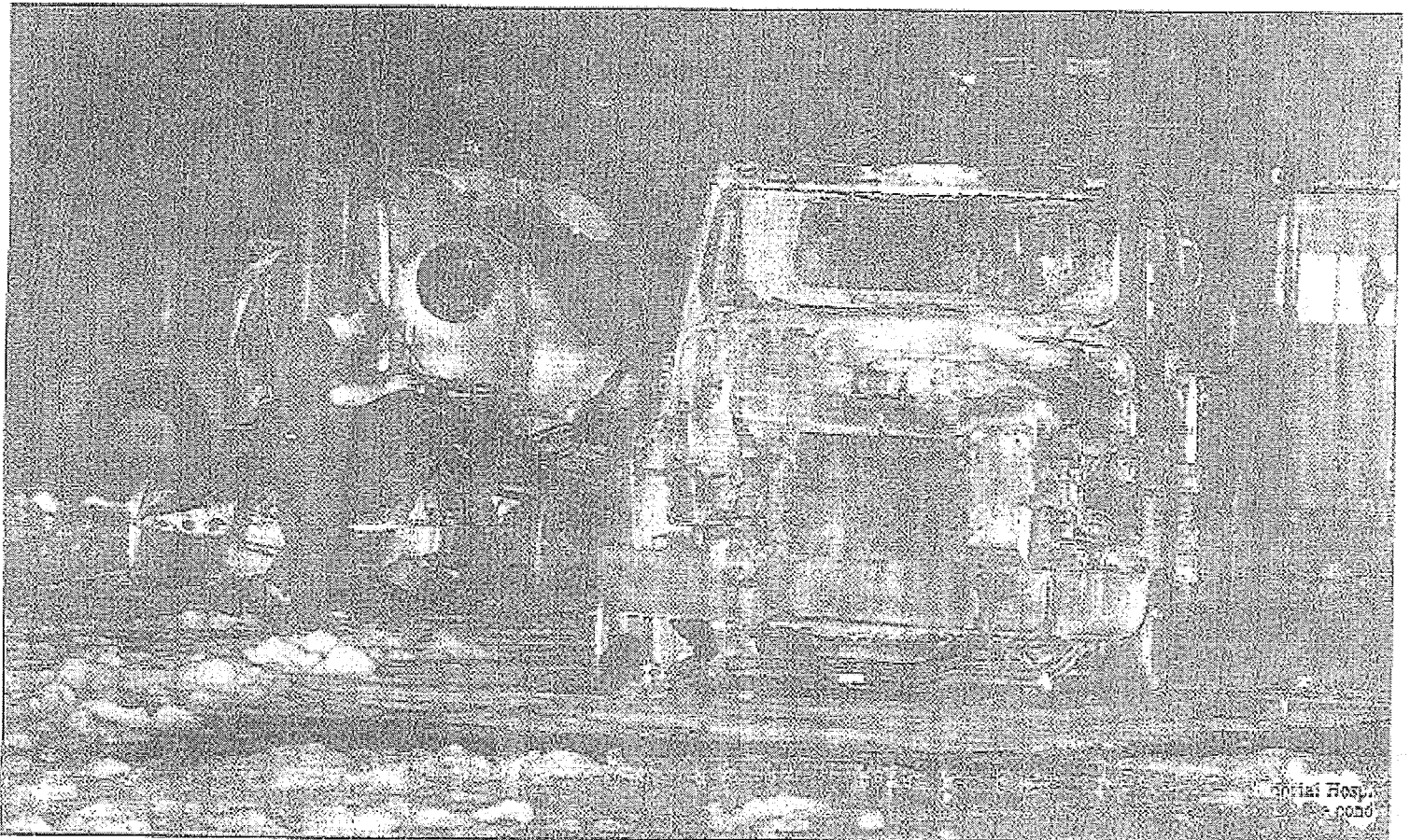
The man, who claimed to work at the Fort Lauderdale Boy's Club, said the

teen was staying with a former New York Jets football player named "Tony Johnson" and probably could be persuaded to go home if Lawson flew to Florida immediately.

Lawson immediately took a plane to Fort Lauderdale and checked into the Days Inn on West Broward Boulevard at Interstate 95, where Johnson told him to stay.

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Oil company site explodes



Staff photo/SEAN DOUGHERTY

A Fort Lauderdale fire marshal inspects petroleum tanker trucks that were melted by the fire at the Lank-Como Oil Co. storage yard.

Fires hit company's Lauderdale, Stuart yards

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FORT LAUDERDALE — A spectacular fire that followed a series of explosions raced through the Lank-Como Oil Co. warehouse and storage yard on McNab Road just east of Powerline Road late Saturday, sending flames 150 feet into the air and destroying three tanker trucks.

also was hit by a fire. The Fort Lauderdale fire was brought under control in about half an hour, but the fire in Stuart was still burning at midnight.

The Fort Lauderdale fire "is highly suspicious because of the magnitude and intensity and how quickly it started," said Fort Lauderdale Fire Department District Cmdr. Thomas O'Day. Fort Lauderdale fire officials posted a watch on the property on Saturday night because of the fire's suspicious nature.

Chris Wagoner was writing a traffic ticket nearby when the fire broke out. He said he saw the first tanker explode and "the flames leaped 150 feet in the air."

"We pulled out; we wanted to get clear," he said. "When the truck went up, it spread fire to the other trucks. They looked like melted mounds of metal. ... You could stand 150 feet away and you could feel the heat. It lit up the whole area; it was a real deep rolling flame."

Pompano Beach and Broward County battled the blaze for 30 minutes before they brought it under control.

"That's a long time for a fire this size," said Lt. Rich McCormick of the Fort Lauderdale Fire Department. McCormick said firefighters used two deluge guns that pump 800 gallons of water a minute for 30 minutes to help put it out.

The fire lit up the sky, according to witnesses.

Suspicious fire destroys trucks at oil company

"I was in my car at Copans Road and it shook the car. You could see a glow in the sky and you could see a big puff of smoke. It looked like a mushroom cloud," said Pompano Beach Police Officer John Hawkins.

Bill Lank, co-general manager of Lank-Como Oil Co., was "up at his business in Stuart" late on Saturday, his daughter said. He could not be reached for comment.

The Stuart fire erupted at 8 p.m. at Martin County Petroleum Co. in the Palm City Industrial Park, igniting 200 55-gallon drums of oil, said Bill Collins, assistant operations group chief for the Martin County Department of Public Safety.

The burning drums were stacked outside of a building in the 3500 block of Southwest Martin Highway, Collins said.

Martin County firefighters were struggling to keep the huge fire from spreading to several tanks — one possibly with a rupture — filled with about 120,000 gallons of gasoline.

No injuries were reported, Collins said.

"They are just letting the oil burn," he said.

Fire officials said no homes were endangered.

Lank-Como employee Raymond Garcia, at the McNab Road fire on Saturday night, said the companies had merged about five years ago. The company delivers diesel oil and gasoline to service stations and commercial sites, he said.

When informed that the company's Stuart operation also was on fire, he was stunned.

"I really don't know anybody who would want to do that," he said.

The McNab Road explosion shook buildings more than a mile away, according to witnesses.

Police ordered businesses in the area to close.

"They're kicking us out," said a woman who works at the Peachtree Lounge in the Peachtree Plaza on Powerline Road, about three blocks from the scene of the explosion and fire.

"They're closing everything down," she said.

Peachtree Lounge manager Robert Seip said police told him the area had to be evacuated because "it's a chemical fire of some sort."

