

Fire Investigated As Arson



A fire that caused substantial damage to a one-story brick house at the northern end of 10th Street in North Wilkesboro late Sunday night is being investigated as an arson case, said North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Niki Hamby, who also is the Wilkes Sheriff's Department's fire investigator.

"We're treating it as a suspicious, possibly set fire," said Hamby.

Hamby said he and a State Bureau of Investigation arson investigator, using an SBI dog trained to detect fire accelerants, would be on the scene today.

The North Wilkesboro Fire Department was dispatched to the fire about 11:30 p.m. Sunday. Flames were shooting out of the house when firefighters arrived, but they rapidly brought it under control.

The house had been converted into a duplex but was unoccupied. The owner, Larry Sale of North Wilkesboro, was notified about the fire and came to the scene.

Authorities said people who rented the two units had both recently been charged with criminal offenses and at least one of them was still in custody.

Hamby said the fire started in the apartment on the left side of the house and most of the fire damage was there. The right side of the house had smoke damage and also was damaged from where firefighters had to pull the ceiling away to reach the fire.

Hamby said the house possibly could be repaired, depending on insurance coverage.

North Wilkesboro firefighter Jimmy Martin, among the first on the scene, was overcome by smoke and was transported by Wilkes Emergency Medical Services to Wilkes Regional Medical Center. Another firefighter said Martin was already suffering from bronchitis.

The Moravian Falls Fire Department assisted North Wilkesboro with a fire truck, equipment for refilling air tanks and personnel. North Wilkesboro police also were there.