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Monday, November 23, 2009

Two men sentenced in "Little Lamb" arson case



John Rousseau, left, looks on as his co-defendant, Michael Dreslinski talks to his lawyer during sentencing today. (T&G staff photos/CHRIS CHRISTO)

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WORCESTER — Two Clinton men were sentenced to state prison today for their roles in a 2007 arson spree that extended from Central Massachusetts to the western end of the state.

Saying they acted with a "sense of impunity" and a total disregard for the consequences of their actions, Judge John S. McCann sentenced John Rousseau and Michael P. Dreslinski to 14 1/2 years to 15 years and a day in state prison with 30 years of probation that will begin immediately and keep the two longtime friends, both 30 years old, under the court's supervision until they reach age 60.

Mr. Rousseau, of 266 Wilson St., Clinton, and Mr. Dreslinski, of 60 Water St., Clinton, were convicted after separate Worcester Superior Court trials of setting



Members of several Central Massachusetts fire departments listen carefully during the sentencing of Michael Dreslinski and John Rousseau.

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four fires, including an Aug. 13, 2007, blaze that destroyed a historic landmark in Sterling and one the next day that heavily damaged a hay-filled barn in Holden.

The first of the two local fires destroyed the 18th-century homestead of Mary Elizabeth Sawyer, the so-called "Mary Had a Little Lamb House," at 108 Maple St., Sterling, which was on the National Register of Historic Places.

The barn fire occurred the next day at the former Sandstrom dairy farm at 106 Bond Road in the Jefferson section of Holden. While animals and equipment inside were saved, hay that was stored in the barn was completely lost, according to Cheryl Duval, the daughter of farm owner John Sandstrom.

Mr. Rousseau and Mr. Dreslinski also were found guilty of vandalizing a railroad bungalow in the Western Massachusetts town of Florida and setting a fire in the structure July 29, 2007, and of torching the former Usher paper mill off Route 2 in Erving several hours later.

The cases were tried separately because of statements Mr. Dreslinski made to law-enforcement authorities implicating Mr. Rousseau, according to prosecutors.

Evidence against the two suspects included data from a global positioning system tracking device surreptitiously attached to Mr. Dreslinski's pickup truck by state police that placed the vehicle at the scenes of all four fires.

Firefighters and police officers from several communities attended today's sentencing hearing.

Noting that both defendants had adult criminal records dating back to 1996 that included breaking and entering convictions and arson-related crimes, Judge McCann said neither had shown "a propensity for rehabilitation.

"Their swath of destruction has grown wider each year and brought us to the present," the judge said in a sentencing memorandum.

He called the setting of the fires two years ago "random, reckless and unnerved acts of evil evolving over a one-month period of time." He said the crimes jeopardized the lives of the property owners, their neighbors, firefighters and, in the case of the Florida fire, railroad workers whose communication system was temporarily shut down.

In addition to the personal losses suffered by the fire victims, the costs to the 46 communities whose fire departments responded was in excess of \$245,000, according to the judge.

"The sense of impunity to which these two defendants cling clearly establishes that they have no sense of human dignity or respect for the lives or property of others," Judge McCann said.

Assistant Attorney General Eileen M. O'Brien, who prosecuted the cases along with Assistant Attorney General Matthew J. Shea, recommended that both men be sentenced to 18 to 20 years with 30 years of probation.

Mr. Dreslinski's lawyer, Sean M. McGinty, whose motion for a new trial was denied today by the judge, recommended a prison term of 5 to 7 years for his client with 5 years of probation to follow.

Lawyer Christopher P. LoConto, representing Mr. Rousseau, asked Judge McCann to consider a sentence of 7 to 10 years and probation.

Conditions of probation imposed by the judge included GPS monitoring with 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfews once the defendants are released from prison, restitution for any uninsured losses to the victims and mental health evaluations and any related treatment recommended by the probation department.

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