

Man arrested for burning down Alabama high school

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — The son of a black protest leader was arrested Thursday on charges of burning down a high school where a white principal's stand against mixed-race dating had caused months of racial turmoil.

Christopher Lynn Johnson, 25, of Ashland, was charged with setting the Aug. 6 fire at Randolph County High School in Wedowee.

Before the blaze, Johnson's father, Emmett, had helped form a "Freedom School" for black students boycotting classes. He also formed a group he called a Black Panther Militia, saying it was for self-defense.

A federal grand jury indicted the younger Johnson on charges of arson and possessing a destructive device — a paper bag containing kerosene-soaked matchbooks and soil. He could get up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

U.S. attorney Redding Pitt would not say what led investigators to Johnson, a

worker at a chicken processing plant. The indictment was delayed until after May 25, the end of the school year, so as not to disrupt classes, Pitt said.

Emmett Johnson said the high school at Wedowee, in rural eastern Alabama about 80 miles from Birmingham, represented an "era of racism" and should have been burned down. But he said his son was the victim of a frame-up.

"I know he didn't do it," said Emmett Johnson, outside the courthouse after the son's appearance before a magistrate. "Why would he do it?"

Wedowee Mayor Terry Graham said the arrest "will go a long way to bringing this to a resolution. We're ready to rebuild and this will be a good step toward getting everything going in the right direction."

Pitt said the investigation is continuing. He would not say whether more arrests are expected.

The arrest marked the latest turn in a

racial saga that began Feb. 24, 1994, when the high school's principal, Hulond Humphries, threatened to cancel the prom if interracial couples planned to attend. He was also accused of calling a mixed-race student "a mistake."

The prom eventually took place — along with an alternative dance for protesting students — but protests continued as the school board balked at disciplining Humphries, who had been principal for 25 years.

Humphries said he was concerned about student safety when he spoke against mixed-race dating. He also denied making the "mistake" remark, but the school board settled a lawsuit over the alleged comment, by paying the student \$25,000.

After the fire, the school board removed Humphries as principal and put him in charge of the rebuilding. The U.S. Justice Department helped arrange a settlement that restricted Humphries' contact with students.

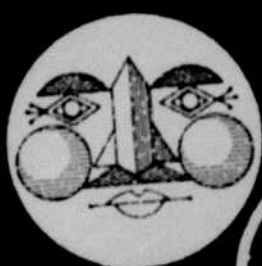
Federal prosecutors, who claimed jurisdiction in the arson case because the high school received federal funds, planned to ask at a hearing Friday the younger Johnson be in jail without bail.

Humphries said in a statement the fire "demonstrates the terrible tactics that some people were willing to use to accomplish their agenda. I hope the small group of people will not continue to teach hate and division."

A black 10th-grader at the school, Terrence Smith, 16, expressed surprise at the arrest of Johnson, who lived down the street from him.

"I didn't think he'd do anything like that," Smith said. "I didn't think somebody black would do something that stupid."

Still, he suggested the arrest could lead to more violence, saying, "Something is going to happen. That's how this little town is."



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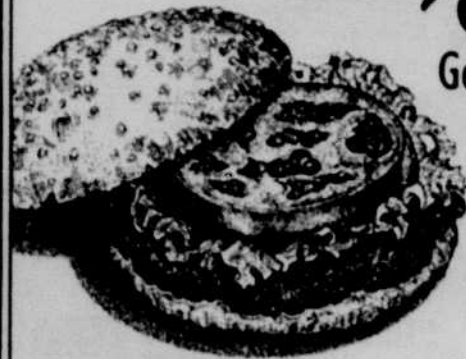
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