



Photographs by Bill Hagen/The State Journal-Register

Rob Flesher, co-owner of Pease's Candy Shop, surveys the damage to the storage area of the candy shop. The area contained a large stock of Easter candy that had to be destroyed.

Fire and heist: Holdups may be linked

Candy shop blaze fits into a pattern

By KEVIN McDERMOTT
STAFF WRITER

Springfield police believe three bizarre holdups recently could be the work of the same robber — a man whose weapon is fire and whose motives may go beyond money.

A man robbed Pease's Candy Shop late Thursday, threatening two clerks with a flammable liquid and setting the store on fire as he fled. A few hours later, a man set a hotel clerk's pants on fire with a flammable liquid before taking cash and fleeing.

The same hotel — the Best Western at 3090 Stevenson Drive — was robbed less than two weeks earlier by a man who threatened to light what police believe was a homemade incendiary device.

There is "a good possibility" all three robberies were committed by the same man, Jim Cimarossa, assistant deputy chief of investigations for the Springfield Police Department, said Friday.

"We don't really know if he's a pyro, or if he just thinks this is an



The fire damaged bonbons awaiting packaging.

effective method (of robbery)," Cimarossa said Friday. "This is obviously something unusual — it's something we haven't seen before.

"You've got a victim who was actually set afire. We're talking attempt-

ed murder here," Cimarossa added.

Springfield Fire Marshal Cliff Garst, whose office also is investigating, said there are standard psychological characteristics common to most arsonists. But he said this one is

unusual because the arson was used in conjunction with robbery.

"I wouldn't want to speculate on his motives" for using fire instead of some other weapon, Garst said. "I've never run into this situation before, an arsonist who uses fire as a weapon in a robbery."

The Best Western was robbed about 10 p.m. Feb. 18, when a man entered carrying a can of liquid and a piece of paper and threatened to ignite it. When the man demanded money and the clerk laughed, the man jumped over the desk at the clerk and implied he also had a gun, police say.

The robber got an unknown amount of money and fled. He was described as black, 5 feet, 6 inches tall, 150 pounds, with short black hair and a mustache. He was wearing a faded jean jacket and dark pants.

About 7:14 p.m. Thursday, a man entered Pease's Candy Shop, 1701 S. State St., and asked a clerk for cashews. As the clerk went behind the counter, the man followed her, began splashing a clear liquid at her from a cup, and announced a robbery.

The man took an undetermined amount of money from the cash reg-

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ister, then began to leave.

"As he's walking out, he's splashing (the liquid) around," said Cimarossa, summarizing the witness accounts. "He threw something on the ground, and that's when it flashed and went up."

The two employees working at the store escaped the resulting blaze. The fire caused an estimated \$5,000 damage to the store and \$5,000 to equipment in the store, according to the Springfield Fire Department.

The store's owners say \$50,000 to \$60,000 in inventory — much of it candy — was also lost.

The clerks described the suspect as black, about 30 years old, 5 feet, 8 inches tall, wearing green pants and a green, long-sleeved shirt. The liquid the man used to light the fire, they said, smelled like kerosene.

About five hours later, just after midnight Thursday, a man entered the Best Western through an unlocked office door. A hotel employee

would later report feeling something on his leg.

"He turned and saw a man standing there trying to light something," said Cimarossa. "It immediately burst into flames, lighting the clerk's leg," which apparently had been splashed with a flammable liquid.

Cimarossa said the robber was carrying a plastic soft-drink cup of liquid and a wooden baseball bat. As the employee put out the fire on his leg, the man took an undetermined amount of cash and fled, leaving behind the bat.

The employee didn't require hospitalization. A Best Western spokesman said neither the employee nor the hotel would comment on the robbery.

"It is pretty apparent (the liquid) was kerosene," based on the smell of it, Cimarossa said.

The robber in the latest incident was described as a black male in his mid-20s, with a mustache, short hair and a thin build, wearing an orange or red shirt and dark jeans.

Despite minor differences in the descriptions of the suspects, Cimarossa said, the unusual method of opera-

tion makes it likely the same man committed all three robberies.

Similarities, he said, include "the cup (of liquid), the way he went about doing things, the words he used to announce the robbery."

All three robberies remain under investigation. Garst said samples of the accelerant used in the robberies are being analyzed to determine what it is.

Bob Flesher, co-owner of Pease's said the store will set up shop temporarily at the former Black & Company Hardware location at 1614 MacArthur Blvd., starting March 9 and continuing through April 9.

He said repairs to the Pease's store, which sustained mostly interior damage, are expected to be complete within a month, and the business then will return to its original location.