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## Fire takes homeless couple's shack

**By Marie P. Grady**

WEST SPRINGFIELD – Their names were scribbled in a charred notebook above a heart impaled by a lover's arrow.

In the background, the makeshift shack that had served as home to a middle-aged couple with no place to go was a blackened ruin. A singed phonograph tucked in the forest hideaway behind the General Electric Apparatus Service Shop on Union Street Extension was silent.

And after a blaze that gutted their home, Albert Richard Gurley and Shirley Jeanne Fenton were homeless again.

"It was really unbelievable," said Deputy Fire Chief Emil Polastri of the discovery people had been living in the shack that burned yesterday morning.

"They had been living there for about a year. Some of the businessmen in the area said they've seen them coming to get water from an outdoor faucet."

About eight firefighters, two pumpers, a ladder and a rescue vehicle responded to calls from businesses about black smoke coming from a wooded area behind Union Street Extension. It took minutes to control the 10:30 a.m. fire, but even less than that for it to decimate the shack the couple had fashioned out of scrap wood and aluminum.

Lt. Robert Norman said Fenton arrived just as the shack was going up in smoke. She told authorities that she had lived in the shack with Gurley.

"I wanted to see if we could get her to the Red Cross, or something, but she left before we were finished putting out the fire," Norman said.

Polastri said that Fenton told him she had left the shack at 8 a.m. and had turned off a propane cooker before she left.

"I don't know where they are now," said Polastri, adding that he may contact the Red Cross to offer the two shelter if they want it.

"Al's gotta be in his middle 40s," GE employee Tom Suffriti said. "He looks like an average guy."

"She gets her water (from an outdoor faucet) in front of our building," Suffriti said.

The couple, he said, collected cans and bottles, and redeemed them for the deposit money. "I was throwing my soda cans over the fence for them," Suffriti said.

The two also grew their own food. Two large gardens that were left untouched by the blaze were sprouting vegetable plants.

Other signs of their resourcefulness remain. A kitchen vanity over a pail of dirty water was a makeshift sink. A huge wooden spool, that probably held industrial wire, was a table.

Most ingenious though, said Suffriti, was the stereo charged by old car batteries. "He's (Gurley's) got some kind of converter to change 12 volts to 120 volts. The guy's not dumb. He had a rent-free house back there," Suffriti said.

Polastri has asked Building Inspector Raymond DiStefano to determine who owns the land.

*This story first appeared in 1987*