

points of view

Fire sparked emotional highs and lows

IT WAS, literally, a fight for his life and his freedom. One that he lost.

Although the defense plans an appeal, at least a portion of the fight for James Arnold Edwards — known as "Arnie" to friends and family — ended Feb. 25 with a guilty verdict. The jury said he killed his wife Marlene.

He sat motionless as the guilty verdict was read Feb. 25, convicting him of murder and arson. It had been 2½ years since his wife was found in their burned house on Rhonwood, and he was no longer free. Oakland County Sheriff's deputies came and took him away.



Casey Hanks

The former Farmington Hills man faces a lengthy prison term, where he will have more than enough time to dwell on his situation, his life, and the tribulations that have beset him and his family.

Emotions ran high after the fire occurred in October 1985. We received a letter, signed by students,

teachers and administrators from Farmington High School, chastising our coverage. Theirs was a letter of support, both of the Edwards children attended school there.

THE PAST several weeks were equally emotional. Some friends, acquaintances and relatives cried quietly as the verdict was read. Edwards received a goodbye hug from his brother's wife as deputies took him into custody.

Several ex-neighbors from the Meadowbrook Hills subdivision attended the trial just to watch; others were subpoenaed to testify for the prosecution.

About eight women followed the trial from start to finish, spending their days in the court of Oakland County Circuit Judge Francis X. O'Brien, which one woman labeled "our courtroom."

Most avoided "official" comment on the verdict. But they offered special insight about the case, the man, their memories of a woman remembered for her strength, and mostly their compassion for the couple's two teenage daughters.

According to testimony and comments from friends, Arnie and Marlene Edwards liked to socialize, loved their two daughters and had been married for nearly 25 years before Marlene died.

They both loved the house they designed and built. They also enjoyed time at the Edwards family cottage at Lakeport, north of Port Huron, which had been in the family for some 43 years.

ONE FRIEND recalled the couple's travels out of the country, where Marlene figured money exchange rates in her head, without a calculator. Those were the good times, she said.

Another friend had memories of standing up in the couple's wedding almost a quarter of a century ago. Edward's sister-in-law, his brother's wife, talked about how dif-

ficult the whole situation had been for the family and said maybe now they could make a "fresh start." She stayed strong throughout the trial, and said she had not read even one news account of the situation since Marlene's death in October 1985.

For Marlene's sister, the five-week trial appeared to be the last chapter in her sister's life.

Even with the serious charges of murder and arson, some good did come from the trial. Neighbors met neighbors, friends met friends, and everyone had a chance to share their memories and remember Marlene.

Only Arnie Edwards can tell us what may have gone wrong.

Dems primed to seek county post

ON PAPER Oakland County is only marginally Republican — less than 55 percent. Republican chiefs admit it. Democratic leaders know it, too, and frequently lick their lips in anticipation of a takeover in Michigan's second largest county (pop. 1.1 million).

In the 1960s and early '70s, Democrats held the office of prosecutor a couple of times. They held the sheriff's office from 1972 to 1984. Gov. James Blanchard, a Democrat, has done well in his home county. Judicial candidates by known Democratic histories have been electable.

And yet in the last run for county-wide offices, the Grand Old Party scored a series of 2-1 victories and held 2-1 control of the county board. That was in 1984, when Ronald Reagan carried 49 states.

It wasn't a mere coastal victory for the GOP, however, because its county ticket was especially strong compared to the Democrats'. Except for Johannes Spreen, who was having problems of his own, the Democratic ticket was a pack of inexperienced unknowns.

THIS YEAR, the Democrats have the scent of blood in their nostrils. Reagan is leaving, and maybe the nation's mood is changing.

But more importantly, county prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson — a towering presence in Oakland — even if he has had luck with statewide efforts — is considering leaving.

It's no secret. Those 16 years in office, three statewide races and ef-



Tim Richard

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forts at ballot proposals have cost a lot of evenings away from home. And then there's his securities business on the side.

TO GRASP the political significance, you have to know how Democrats have operated in recent years. Their ticket is not just a collection of independent decisions by ambitious folks to seek county office. It's put together centrally. Candidates are recruited, screened and given commitments. The slate is revealed at the filing deadline in May.

Now, a capable person running for (say) county executive won't take a risk for the party of Jefferson and Jackson if other candidates are union functionaries playing sacrificial

lamb or nebulosities.

But if Patterson drops out, the rules change. A prominent Democratic lawyer might be willing to take a shot at that office. A Democratic city or township clerk and finance officer might be willing to risk a run for county clerk and treasurer. A proven administrator might be willing to run for executive. Names are floating around like wildfire in the rumor mill.

Some donors may be willing to invest extra bucks. The Blanchard administration may support the effort by promising a job to a competent candidate who loses but runs well.

THIS IS NOT to suggest the end of the Republican world if Patterson opts for private life or a role in the Bush campaign/administration.

Oakland Republican chairman Larry Dickerson inherited an efficient operation and has kept it purring. And those Kemp people are some of the slickest pros this newsman has ever seen in any party, in any election.

Patterson has an heir apparent on his staff, with other potential successors on the outside.

But it is to suggest there could be a genuine battle; that Republicans may be unable to take fat majorities for granted; that they will have to raise more bucks this year, and try to heal the scars left by the Robertson dogfight.

It's just possible that 1988 in Oakland County won't be the same kind of yawner 1984 was.

Buying the message too big a price

THINGS I WISH I would have said.

You know those times. You get in a discussion with somebody and only afterwards do you come up with the pithy phrases that would have made psychological mincemeat out of your opponent.

Or after speaking at a forum, while driving home in the car, you have this insatiable urge to turn around, run back in the auditorium and tell the audience, long since gone, the most important part of your message.

It happens to us all. And most of the time, we never have the opportunity to say, "This is really the most important thing to remember."

It happened to me this weekend. But luckily, being a columnist, I at least have an opportunity to symbolically turn around the car and say "Hey, now listen."

IT'S ESPECIALLY important because I was asked to be on this panel by a former student of mine, Tim Johnson, who now works at a public relations firm. But you do kind of build up a loyalty toward old students.

Tim's a good guy, and I wouldn't or couldn't say no. But I didn't say all that I meant to say.

So there I sat in the Southfield Hilton, panelist at Communications 88, slated to speak about the relationship between the public relations in-



Steve Barnaby

The American newspaper reader is in danger of being consumed by a multibillion-dollar public relations industry, which is spoon feeding information to the news media, which, in turn, is lapping it up like thirsty dogs.

dust and the newspaper business.

Six "experts," three from each discipline, faced an audience of mostly fledgling PR types who were looking for guidance.

Historically, the relationship between news folks and those in public

relations has been known to be less than perfect.

In reality, the relationship is pretty good. Almost too good. The panel discussion reflected that.

And for some reason on that Saturday morning I was feeling far less combative than usual. Uncharacteristically, I just kind of went along with the discussion.

But driving home, I began to think about this whole thing.

SO HERE Tim and the other things I should have said.

The American newspaper reader is in danger of being consumed by a multibillion-dollar public relations industry, which is spoon feeding information to the news media, which, in turn, is lapping it up like thirsty dogs.

Because the newspaper industry has become so heavily dependent on public relations firms to get it information, the reader is getting a narrower view of the world.

Private industry spends billions to get its message out to the consumer through public relations firms. Newspapers print it, too many times unquestioningly.

Newspapers, whose mission it is to provide a forum for public debate, are cutting themselves off from those who are unable to afford to participate in this very expensive debate.

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