

Man called 'Free' sits in prison **By Bryan Denson , *The Oregonian*, September 25, 2001**

Jeff Luers' heart pounded as he and his accomplice, Craig Marshall, drove toward their target: A row of gleaming new pickup trucks under the lights of Eugene's Romania Chevrolet. The two anarchists parked their borrowed car on a quiet side street and carried two firebombs down a darkened bike path. They scouted nearby buildings and streets for signs of life. Then, shortly after midnight on June 16, 2000, they placed the incendiaries -- gallon milk jugs full of Coleman fuel, with wicks of synthetic sponge -- beneath the trucks.

"We had an abortive plan," Luers said. "We had a list of guidelines that we were trying to follow -- number one of which was we were going to see that no life was injured. Going in, we agreed that if for any reason we couldn't meet that requirement that we were going to back out."

The two men ignited their incendiaries with Bic lighters and walked away as nonchalantly as any two terrified people can. plainclothes police, tailing Luers since his release from jail earlier that day on a disorderly conduct charge, had hoped to follow him to a party that would climax an anarchist conference called the "Seven Week Revolt." But they lost sight of Luers, who went by the name "Free," and Marshall, known as "Critter," a half- block from the dealership. Police located them 10 minutes later, when Springfield officers stopped them for a traffic violation. By then, flames had destroyed one pickup and damaged two others, causing \$40,000 in losses. No one was hurt.

The sabotage, as Luers explained it, was intended as a blow against gas-guzzling vehicles. They struck Romania because it sold full- size pickups and sport-utility vehicles that belched a disproportionate amount of air pollution. Luers drew a 22-year, 8-month sentence -- the stiffest punishment ever delivered to an eco-terrorist in the United States. At 22, he faces another lifetime behind bars.

He recalled in phone interviews with *The Oregonian* how a young man's benign environmental crusade -- mailing letters to politicians, going door-to-door for the Sierra Club and sitting in trees to prevent logging - had ended in disillusionment and arson. "It was an escalation to a level I'd never gone before and I could never live down," he said from the Two Rivers Correctional institution in Umatilla. "At that point, for me, I could no longer say I was an activist. In my mind, I'd taken it to the next level." Sentence in a gray area Luers called his crime an act of revolution. Authorities labeled his crime first-degree arson. They pointed out that a judge in June had found him guilty of two acts of sabotage - - setting the Romania fire and attempting to ignite a gasoline tanker at Eugene's Tyree Oil Co. in May 2000. While Luers acknowledged setting the Romania fire, he claimed no involvement at Tyree.

Circuit Judge Lyle Velure imposed the sentence in Eugene, where anarchists had mounted a revolt against police, government and the nature of authority. Luers' punishment fell in what one Oregon sentencing expert called a legal gray area -- harsh for a first- time offender, but lenient for, say, a serial arsonist. Rodney Coronado, in comparison, was convicted of waging a multi- state arson campaign against the fur industry, which began in Oregon in 1991. He drew a sentence just under 5 years. And brothers Josh and Colby Ellerman, who blew up a Utah fur breeders' cooperative with pipe bombs in 1997, each got less than six years.

And Luers' accomplice Marshall pleaded guilty in November in exchange for 5 1/2 years, a sentence more in line with other eco- terrorism convictions. But unlike them, Luers rolled the dice. Rather than plead guilty in exchange for a possibly lighter sentence, he agreed to be tried without a jury. He argued that burning the pickups was not so much arson as criminal mischief. Luers said he expected to draw a sentence of at least 15 years. But the gravity of his sentence did not strike him, he said, until he lay on a prison bunk one day realizing his parents might die before he is freed. Disillusioned adolescent Luers spent his formative years in the Los Angeles suburbs disturbed by the money devoted to space travel and the military as people went without food. He wrote letters to politicians, but tired of the exercise when he got form-letter responses. Disillusioned at 16, he began to identify with anarchists, who believed Americans had chained themselves to greedy corporations that were busily razing the planet. He also became a punk rocker, piercing an eyebrow and wearing a mohawk.

Still punked out at 18, he went to work as a door-to-door canvasser for the Sierra Club. But he quit after his sales pitch began to feel like a lie. He told people the bulk of their money went to environmental programs, but he earned \$45 for every \$90 he collected. Luers moved to Eugene, where he watched a slide show one night at a coffee shop that changed his life. He saw images of logging activists who had camped on a road in the Willamette National Forest for a year, sometimes weathering high snowdrifts, to prevent logging at Warner Creek. The government canceled the project. "I was like, 'Wow -- here's people that are getting out there and they're actually stopping logging. They're not lobbying about stopping logging,' which is what I'd just been doing for the last seven months. And I was like, 'I want to do that -- that's cool.' "

In February 1998, he climbed 200 feet up a Douglas fir at Fall Creek, in the Willamette National Forest, and lived on a platform - - once suffering hypothermia -- to prevent logging of ancient trees. There and on the ground, he lived in the grubby glory of nature for the better part of 18 months. His companions included banana slugs, deer and hawks swooping in and out of the dark woods. Luers saw himself and the animals as interconnected. "From the smallest to the largest thing," he said. "From the top of the food chain all the way down." But he felt more and more powerless to protect Earth's creatures. In summer 1999, Luers and some friends were scheduled to meet with a staffer of U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio to discuss environmental issues. But when they rallied outside the congressman's Eugene office, police blocked access to the building. Luers began to think democracy didn't exist for everyone.

Activists who slip underground to commit crimes such as the Romania blaze often communicate their motives through a network of above-ground publicists. Most claim responsibility on behalf of the Earth Liberation Front or Animal Liberation Front, which the FBI classifies as domestic terrorist organizations. But Luers said he and his accomplice made no such plans: "Simply by mentioning the ELF or the ALF, the FBI automatically gets involved."

As Luers awaited trial in the county jail last March, saboteurs rigged several clock-timed incendiaries at Romania Chevrolet and began a \$1 million conflagration that destroyed 26 sport-utility vehicles and damaged nine others. "We can no longer allow the rich to parade around in their armored existence, leaving a wasteland behind in their tracks," the arsonists wrote to the ELF press office in Portland.

Luers applauded: "According to Worldwatch Institute figures, there's currently 532 million passenger vehicles worldwide -- half of those are in America. We only account for 5 percent of the population of the world, and we contribute 25 percent of the world's air pollution. Our lifestyle affects the rest of the world. It affects the poor. It affects the ecosystems." Yet he knew his arson made no dent in the pollution he abhors. "You don't go out and torch a couple of cars and go, 'Hey, now the world's changed -- yay!' I'm not that naive," he said. "It's an overwhelming act of frustration when everything else that you've tried fails."

Luers still supports sabotage on behalf of the natural world. But it's unclear whether he will hold to these politics as the years pile up and the public forgets his crime. If he fails to win his appeal, he won't leave prison until he's middle-aged. By then, two of the pickups he torched -- fixed and sold by the dealership -- will probably sit in junkyards. Prison authorities moved Luers from Umatilla to the Oregon State Penitentiary in Salem last week after he was involved in a fight, making him ineligible for additional interviews. Before the move, he described how his old life on the outside had given way to his new life inside, even in dreams.

He described his confines in Umatilla as a big concrete bunker, its windows angled heavenward so that his only view of the outside world was the Southern sky. On clear days, the man named Free sat and watched. Sometimes, hawks floated by. You can reach Bryan Denson at 503-294-7614 or by e-mail at bryandenson@news.oregonian.com