

JANUARY 8, 1986 | MOUNT PLYMOUTH

Three teen-agers have been charged with setting the fire that destroyed most of the vacant Florida Central Academy on Monday.

Sheriff Noel E. Griffin Jr. said deputies arrested the three -- one 16 and two 13 year olds -- late Monday after residents reported that the boys told them they had set the fire.

Griffin said the teen-agers told investigators they carried wood to an upper floor of the 60-year-old building and set it afire to destroy the landmark.

They have been charged with burglary and arson and have been placed in a Health and Rehabilitative Services detention center in Ocala.

Firefighters, aided by a steady drizzle, continued to pour water on the smoldering remains Tuesday.

At least three firefighters were treated at the scene for smoke inhalation.

Mount Plymouth volunteer Eric Roach, 17, was treated at Waterman Medical Center in Eustis after a charred tree limb fell on his head and shoulder.

The building is owned by Dianne Seelie, a Chicago real estate broker. Her parents bought the structure in 1959 and leased it to the academy.

Two three-story wings were destroyed. A two-story south wing was saved, but Mount Plymouth Fire Chief Ed Spann said it was heavily damaged.

Seelie said she would have the rest of the building torn down but does not know what she will do with the 28-acre tract.

The wood-and-stucco building was built in 1926 as a 150-room resort hotel. Guests included such notables as gangster Al Capone, singer Kate Smith, baseball legend Connie Mack and President Theodore Roosevelt.

The hotel was converted in 1959 to Florida Central Academy, a private boarding school for boys. In 1971, the school became coeducational.

A bankruptcy judge ordered the school closed in June 1983. Four days later county health officials condemned the building as unfit for human habitation. The building has fallen prey to vandals. Plumbing has been ripped out, walls bashed in, windows broken and graffiti painted on walls.

The building and 28 surrounding acres have been for sale since last year. The asking price was \$650,000. Seelie said several people contacted her about purchasing and restoring the building.

"I've had so many people call me and express their regrets over what happened," she said. "It's a great loss to the community."

"Everybody expected this would happen sooner or later," said Griffin, 57, a lifelong Lake County resident.

In May 1983, a minor fire on the roof did about \$2,000 damage. It was ruled arson.

The sheriff said earlier this year his deputies arrested more than 40 people for trespassing on the property, 28 one night.

"It's a piece of history gone down the tubes," Griffin said. "I can remember when the roads out by there were clay. The building was elaborate. It had shiny floors, big fireplaces, big chandeliers. I went to several dances out there. It was fabulous."

Intense heat and lack of water hampered firefighters, who could only keep the fire from jumping to nearby houses and two vacant buildings.

Two water towers behind the building were empty.