Thefts across country in the millions of dollars

By Jan Schultz
The Imperial Republican

Blake Burnside has been in the Chase County Jail since late January, following a series of break-ins in Imperial.

Imperial police officers had no idea at the time what Burnside's arrest would lead to, after he was implicated in break-ins at Imperial's T.O. Haas store and Frenchman Valley Coop's wholesale plant on East Highway 6 and a tire storage building.

Thanks to Burnside's apparent cooperation with authorities the past six weeks, it appears the break-ins here are tied to a multi-state criminal enterprise whose thefts will total well over $1 million.

But, that's only an estimate at this point.

From police statements, it appears Burnside, 20, of Rensselaer, Ind., is part of a crime spree that has hit 15 states and probably more.

Tires, weapons, cash and snowmobiles are among the items allegedly stolen in the crime spree.

One community in Wisconsin alone lost 185 high-end tires for semi-truck trailers.

According to Police Chief Larry Browning and Sgt. Rob Browning, it appears six people allegedly in this ring were in Imperial the night of Jan. 22. They believe the alleged thieves fully intended to steal from several businesses here that night.

But, Police Officer Ryan Wisnieski most likely thwarted their plans.

As he was on patrol that night, Wisnieski spotted a vehicle stopped in the 21st Century Equipment parking lot on Highway 61. Three persons were inside the vehicle, indicating they were confused about their location, and were looking for the Imperial Inn.

After pointing out the motel, Wisnieski followed them in his police car, watching them pull into the motel under its awning. Wisnieski continued on west on 12th Street.

Intending to come back to the motel to get their license plate and do some investigating, Wisnieski met their vehicle on 12th Street.

Continuing on his patrol, he then spotted the vehicle at Kwik Stop. Keeping sights on their location there, Wisnieski said the vehicle eventually left the store, and evidently Imperial.

No one from that vehicle had checked into the Imperial Inn that night, Chief Browning said.

Two days later, Burnside was arrested in Ogallala, during an attempted break-in at the T.O. Haas store in that city. He was transferred to the Chase County Jail, where he has been held since on a $100,000 bond.

After several delays, he was scheduled for a preliminary hearing on Wednesday this week.

He is facing eight charges in Chase County, including three counts of burglary, three counts of first degree trespassing, a criminal mischief charge and possession of burglary tools, all felonies.

His attorney Joel Burke of Imperial said Tuesday he is attempting to negotiate a plea agreement for his client.

Officers don't know how big crime spree may be

Since Jan. 23, when Imperial police were called about the three Imperial business break-ins, Chief Browning said his office has been inundated with calls from other law enforcement

agencies across the country.

It was so much that the police department had to change its phone system to be able to handle the surge.

“We were getting at least 100 calls a day,” Chief Browning said.

Information from two search warrants Imperial police secured for Burnside’s phone and a GPS system, along with statements from Burnside himself, led local officers to make contact with other law enforcement agencies in several states.

“It seemed like every day we would find out about another place and the calls would start,” Browning said.

They’ve been in contact with multiple law enforcement agencies in Nebraska, Kansas, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Louisiana, Florida, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas, among others.

Officers in at least 15 states have requested information from Imperial police or have questioned Burnside, Browning said, concerning burglaries in their areas.

Officers from Kansas were in Imperial Tuesday and Wednesday with interest in the case.

Imperial is the only place local police are aware of that has tangible evidence “and a body in custody,” related to this apparent ring of thieves, Browning added. There may have been one arrest in Illinois related to this case, but police here were still gathering information.

There are several arrest warrants out in other states now. Some stolen material has been recovered, according to the local officers.

Apparently, Imperial survived what could have been a loss of potentially thousands of dollars in merchandise.

Chief Browning believes that while Wisnieski was making contact with the individuals in the vehicle on Highway 61, the rest of the group, in a large rental truck that was confirmed to be in town, was likely at one of the two co-op buildings ready to begin loading merchandise.

That contact may have spooked them, and they decided to leave town.

Browning said this case is easily the biggest one he’s been involved in during his nearly 30 years in law enforcement here.