

Agencies in 17 states looking into similar incidents in their areas



By Jan Schultz

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It was a small ceremony at the Chase County Courthouse last Thursday.

Chase County Sheriff Tim Sutherland presented Imperial Police Sgt. Rob Browning with a Distinguished Service Award, the second highest award the sheriff can give.

While the ceremony was small, the burglary and theft investigation Browning has headed up, and was recognized for last week, is much, much larger.

As of this week, thefts and burglaries in 17 states totaling millions of dollars likely have ties to a ring of burglars who were in Imperial in January.

On the morning of Jan. 23, Imperial police were notified of three break-ins at Frenchman Valley Coop., and T.O. Haas Tire. Nothing was stolen, however.

Blake Burnside, 20, of Rensselaer, Ind., who was arrested in Ogallala on Jan. 24 on a similar break-in there, was transferred back to Chase County, when a picture of a much larger theft ring began to emerge.

In presentation of the plaque last week, Sheriff Sutherland said Browning knew the case was much larger than just the break-ins here.

Once Burnside began cooperating and giving details, Browning obtained search warrants for Burnside's cell phone and its GPS data. The case began to grow of multi-state thefts and burglaries.

"Rob was instrumental in breaking up the nationwide theft ring," Sutherland said.

"I appreciate good police work, no matter where it comes from. Rob went far above and beyond in this case," he said.

Sutherland has presented only two other Distinguished Service Awards during his tenure here.

As of this week, law enforcement agencies in 17 states have contacted the Imperial Police Department about the local case and its ties to thefts and burglaries in their areas.

Browning said Tuesday they continue to get calls each day from officers in other states, who have learned of Burnside's arrest here.

Burnside is currently in Comanche County, Kan., where he was transferred and jailed March 4 on two Level 4 burglary of a building felonies.

He pled guilty to reduced charges in Chase County, and was released to Kansas officers after serving 37 days in jail here.

He reportedly is cooperating now with Kansas authorities, Browning said.

And, a long line of other agencies is waiting in the wings, Browning said.

And, Rector apparently was in Imperial before, when a major tire theft did occur.

Rector, according to Burnside's statements, recalled breaking into the same Frenchman Valley Coop. metal tire building here six years ago. He made the comment this January, as they

cut into the same building, west of the coop.'s main offices.

In May, 2003, 90 to 100 new semi-truck/trailer tires were stolen from that coop. building, valued at \$30,000. No one was ever arrested in that theft.

Burnside told police he's only been involved with the group of thieves since last fall, when he and Rector met up on a construction job.

Browning said Rector also allegedly kidnapped Burnside's girlfriend in Indiana, once he learned that Burnside was arrested here and cooperating with police.

Other details are unfolding as the calls from other agencies continue, Browning said.

"As far as we know now, six people are involved in this theft ring," Browning said.

High-end truck tires appear to be at the top of the ring's "wish list," Browning noted, but firearms, snowmobiles, trailers, drugs and tools have also been stolen in other states.

A call to Imperial police on Monday this week from officers in Sterling, Ohio, reported the theft of 200 high-end tires in January of this year.

The FBI may be involved in the investigation of thefts in Kansas and Wisconsin, as information continues to unfold.

Even though Chase County is through with Burnside's case here, Browning doesn't see an end soon to their involvement.

"I'm still anticipating a lot of hours to be spent yet on this case," Browning said.

Another alleged thief is jailed

Another man, allegedly part of this multi-state theft ring, has been arrested in Jasper County, Tenn., Browning said Tuesday.

Scott Rector is being held there on a parole violation warrant from Indiana. Evidence is being gathered on burglaries and thefts in other states and Rector's alleged involvement with them, Browning said.

Burnside talked a lot about Rector as he cooperated with police here.