

Albert Zenner, suspected arsonist played by Donald Sutherland in 'Backdraft,' dies

BY FRANK MAIN AND DAN ROZEK

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A Chicago man suspected of setting scores of fires across the city decades ago, and who reportedly was the basis for a serial arsonist character in the movie "Backdraft," has died.

Albert Zenner was fixated by flames and would often stay nearby to watch firefighters battle the blazes he had started, veteran Chicago Fire Department investigators contended.

"He set a lot of fires," said Bill Cosgrove, a fire investigator who retired in 1996. "You would go to a fire and he'd be standing there, a block away."

Zenner died last week of natural causes at 67. Funeral services were held Friday.

The short, stocky North Sider — widely known to fire investigators as "Fat Albert" — was arrested repeatedly in the 1970s for allegedly setting fires in neighborhoods around the city.

But many of those charges later were reduced to lesser offenses, such as criminal damage to property.

During the 1970s, he frequently targeted garages and empty buildings that littered the city as businesses moved out and neighborhoods changed dramatically.

Zenner sometimes set several fires in a row, forcing firefighters to scramble to control the different blazes erupting at different points around a neighborhood, investigators said.

"He'd set a Dumpster on fire, then he'd set a fire at a warehouse next to the [empty] fire house to create chaos. He'd have 250 firefighters out on the job," Cosgrove recounted.

Ronald Bartel, a character in the 1991 film "Backdraft," which was shot in Chicago, was based on Zenner, Cosgrove said.

Cosgrove worked as a technical adviser for the movie and wrote a book about the experience.

At one point in the film, fire investigator Donald "Shadow" Rimgale — played by Robert De Niro — questioned Bartel about his fascination with fire.

"What about the world, Ronald?" Rimgale asks Bartel, who was played by Donald Sutherland.

Bartel responded: "Burn it all."

Director Ron Howard and De Niro wanted to meet Zenner for research, but fire officials rejected the idea.

Cosgrove couldn't say how many fires Fat Albert is suspected of setting, but he said the number likely was staggering.

"Hundreds?" Cosgrove estimated.