

Police investigating cross-burning

By Nicole Robertson STAFF WRITER

A retired black couple living in Howell were the victims of racist vandalism Friday night when someone lit a six-foot wooden cross on their lawn.

"I'm quite upset about it, but there's not much you can do about it—just deal with it," said Henry Griffin, 62, who is ill with cancer.

No witnesses have come forward, and the Griffins didn't see the cross until the next morning as it stood in a small patch of charred grass.

The FBI has become involved in the investigation because it is a civil rights violation, said Lt. Larry Kelly of the sheriff's department. "We really are at sort of a dead end," said FBI agent Gene Ward. "We're going to keep this case pending." He said it was "definitely not Klan-oriented."

Henry Griffin and his wife, Shirley, who have lived on Chilson Road for the last four years, say friends and neighbors have been extremely supportive and outraged by the racist act, which is historically a trademark of the Ku Klux Klan as a warning to blacks to leave town or fear for their lives.

Robert Miles of Cohoctah, the former Grand Dragon of the Michigan Ku Klux Klan, bristled at the idea that he may have been involved in the incident.

"I'm not aware of it," Miles said Monday. "I haven't seen or heard anything about it... I hadn't seen

anything like that in the area lately." Detectives aren't ruling out followers of the KKK, but think it was an isolated prank.

The Griffins have asked for police protection just in case.

Sheriff's detective Al Perry said he didn't believe there was any real danger to blacks in the area, but he hasn't developed any suspects yet.

"That doesn't mean this is going to lay down and die..." he said. "It can blow up into something uncontrollable and we're going to stop it right now."

"The community of Howell itself does not look at this incident as condoning it. We're not going to tolerate it up here." Regardless of who did it, the Griffins say they would like to have the matter resolved.

Shirley Griffin and her brother, Lincoln Cowan, who was visiting from Los Angeles at the time of the cross-burning, were born in Howell and graduated from Howell High School. "We're more germane to the community than a lot of people around here," she said.

Shirley moved back to Howell from Detroit when she retired from a federal government job. Henry worked for the state in the mental health field.

Carol Koivu, a good friend of the Griffins who has bowled with Shirley, said she wants to get a group together to "let the people who did this know good people are behind



Photo by SCOTT PIPER

Shirley Griffin ponders why a cross was burned on her lawn

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