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Guitar story sounded off-key, prompted fraud investigation

Poconos pastor allegedly claimed stolen instrument was a 1959 Gibson Les Paul.

April 15, 2010 | By Frank Warner | Of The Morning Call

A Poconos pastor has been charged with insurance fraud for allegedly claiming a 1959 Gibson Les Paul guitar worth \$235,000 was stolen last year from his church office.

██████████, pastor of ██████████ Church in ██████████ Township, falsely told police on April 1, 2009, that the 1959 model guitar was taken in a burglary a day earlier, according to the arrest affidavit.

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██████████ gave two insurance companies a photo of him with a guitar and another close-up photo of a guitar, police said. But the guitar he held in the picture was not a 1959 Gibson; it was a much less valuable 1970s model, police said.

The charges of insurance fraud, making a false police report and attempted theft were the result of nearly a year's investigation by state police at Fern Ridge and the Northeast Pennsylvania Insurance Fraud Theft Task Force, who consulted guitar experts their inquiry.

On Friday, ██████████ waived a preliminary hearing on the charges, which he now will face in Monroe County Court.

When police Investigator John Henry confronted the pastor in November with discrepancies in his claims, ██████████ admitted he never owned a 1959 Gibson, police said.

"When asked why he misrepresented the information, ██████████ stated that he was having financial difficulties and marital problems," the Feb. 24 arrest affidavit says.

According to the affidavit, ██████████ admitted ██████████...that he lied about having a 1959 Gibson Les Paul guitar. He related that he knew it was not a 1959 guitar and that the guitar in question was a mid-1970s guitar that he either purchased or traded back in the 1970s."

██████████, of ██████████, sought payment from Motorists Insurance Group, which covered him for up to \$104,370, and from Selective Insurance Company, which covered his church for up to \$5,000. Neither claim was paid.

He told the insurers that, in addition to the Gibson guitar, a burglar took a 1982 Fender Stratocaster guitar worth \$19,500, a 1985 Telecaster guitar worth \$2,500 and a 1996 Korg M-1 keyboard worth \$400, police said.

In their investigation, police consulted with George Gruhn and Walter Carter of Gruhn Guitars in Nashville, Tenn., who said ██████████ photos depicted two guitars, and the one ██████████ held was not the 1959 model. Police also referred to photos in the book "The Gibson Burst" by Jay Scott and Vic DaPra.

Police said they have determined that the 1959 Gibson with the serial number ██████████ claimed was never owned by ██████████ and currently is owned by a millionaire in New York state.

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