

Pennsylvania farm family loses seven children to fire

Phyllis Scherrer, Andrea Peters
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Late Tuesday evening a fire engulfed the house on a family farm in Blain, Pennsylvania, killing seven of eight children. The blaze completely destroyed the structure owned by the Clouse family, which was located off a rural road about 25 miles north of the state capital.

The fire began after 10 p.m. when the children's mother was performing the evening chore of milking the cows and their father was at work. The Clouse's three-year-old daughter ran to the barn to get her mother, Janelle, who first tried to get into the house but was unable to. She then went to a neighbor's home to call 911, but discovered they were not home and had to go to another neighbor's place farther down the road.

Janelle then ran to alert her husband. Ted Clouse, who was out on his truck picking up milk from local farms for delivery to stores the next morning, had nodded off while waiting for a farmer to turn over his product. He was parked about a mile down the road from their house.

Janelle woke him up, and the two ran back to the home. But the distances, as is typical in farm country, were too great. By the time the Clouses got back to the house their seven children—girls ages 11, 9, 6, 4, 2 and 7 months and a 7-year-old boy—had died of smoke inhalation.

According to the Associated Press, friends and family gathered outside the gutted home on Wednesday morning to offer support, helping milk the cows and doing other chores. The children's grandfather told the AP that the parents were talking and meeting with people, trying to find ways to cope with the tragedy.

Initial reports have emphasized the fact that the children were alone at the time of the blaze. In a crude effort to vilify the parents and stoke up bigotry against rural people, an MSNBC article was headlined, "7 kids

die in fire as mom milks cow, dad naps." Other press reports have carried titles such as, "7 children killed in farm house fire as 'father sleeps in truck' in Pennsylvania." Making clear that the crudity of the American press is not a national phenomenon, one British newspaper advertised the story as, "Seven kids killed in blaze as mum milked cows."

Many MSNBC readers commented about the gross insensitivity of the news service's title, pointing out the difficult and long hours involved in running a dairy farm, and rejecting the idea that the Clouses were negligent towards their children. They expressed sympathy for the Clouse family's unimaginable loss. MSNBC ultimately changed the headline of their article, but only after it was picked up by other media outlets.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation. The grandfather of the dead children, Noah Sauder, told the *Patriot News* that it could have started in the kitchen, where a propane heater is used to warm the home.

As was noted in an inquiry into deadly house fires in Detroit last year by the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs, portable propane and electric heaters are one of the leading causes of lethal blazes in homes. Many people, either urban residents who cannot afford their utility payments or rural families who have no other options, are forced to resort to these unsafe heating methods during cold weather.



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