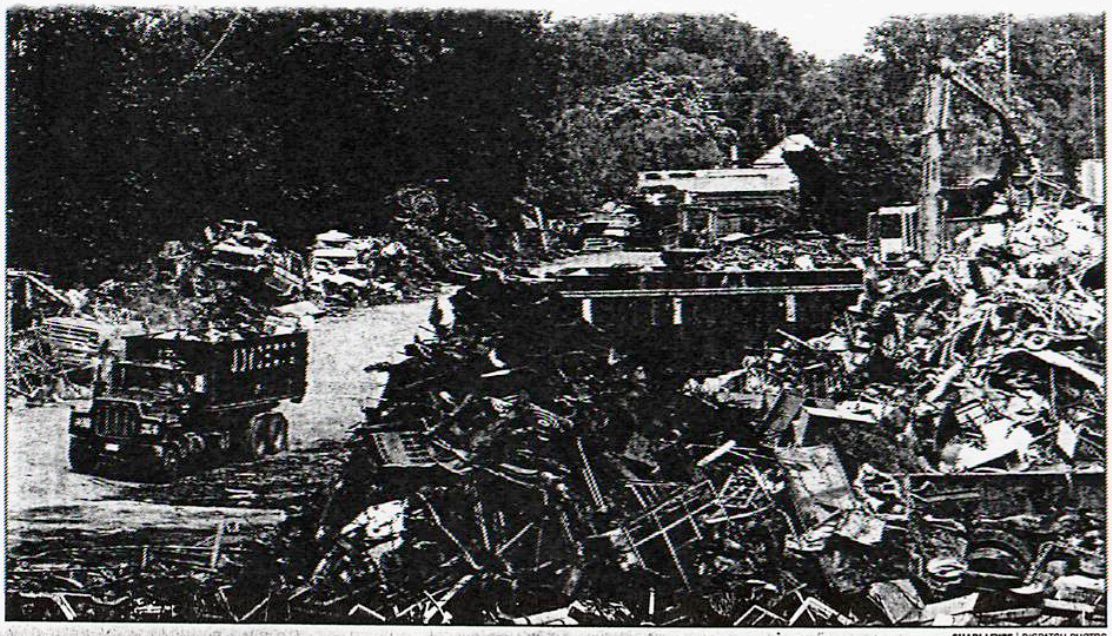

SHARI LEWIS | DISPATCH PHOTOS

Piles of scrap metal abound at the Joyce Iron & Metal Co. on the Northeast Side. Columbus police say some scrap dealers don't do enough to make sure they're not buying stolen metal; dealers deny that, saying they follow the law.

PRECIOUS METAL

Copper pipes and aluminum siding are gold to thieves, and the police are tired of it

By Dirk VanderHart
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

After losing three screen doors and two sets of copper water pipes, David Efaw decided to sell his property on the South Side.

The thieves would creep in during renovations or when the home was vacant, he said. They would take things they could sell to scrap yards and leave the place a shambles. Toward the end of his 15-year ownership of the home, Efaw thinks it was marked as an easy target.

"It's obviously somebody trying to make a couple bucks," the Bexley resident said. "I would have rather paid them $10 than have it ripped out."

Columbus police say theft of metal in the city has been a problem for some time and that weak, vague laws make deterring thieves difficult.

"Even if we enforce the laws, they're not well-enough put together to help us combat the enormous amount of scrap metal that's being sold or traded," said Columbus police detective Clyde Schulze. "I've been here for 37 years. There's always been this problem, and no one wants to address it."

On June 29, Kevin Amburgey was arrested after authorities say he broke into a town house on Sullivant Avenue to loot its basement of copper water pipes. After a natural-gas line was severed, officials say, a pilot light on a water heater ignited the gas, and the house exploded.

In another theft earlier this year, $10,000 worth of brass plaques were taken from Schiller

See **METAL** Page **C3**

Thomas Monroe of Monroe Hauling unloads a tub at the Joyce Avenue scrap yard. Dealers say it's hard to differentiate between legitimate sellers and thieves. Police want tighter laws.

METAL

FROM PAGE C1

Park in German Village.

Copper has reached record-high prices of about $1.25 per pound, which Columbus police Lt. Michael Broberg said is linked to a high demand for the metal in China. Other materials usually go for less than that.

"The people I run into are crackheads who are doing it to get money for their next rock," said police detective Carl Covey.

Imposing stiffer rules on scrap-metal yards is the key to quelling metal thefts, Schulze said, adding that the Police Division is looking into proposing tougher legislation to the Columbus City Council.

Ideally, he said, scrap yards would have to take measures similar to pawn shops, which are required to hold items for 15 to 30 days and report their purchases to police every day. Now, scrap dealers need only to take down the license plate number of someone selling metal and record the amount of each material they take in. According to Schulze, many of them don't do that adequately.

"They take anything they can take in: street signs, new ladders, siding off of houses," he said. "There's really no controls when you look at it."

Other items stolen include beer kegs, manhole covers, stop signs and grocery carts. Broberg went as far as saying scrap-metal yards would be out of business if thieves no longer took them materials.

Jacob Garrett, a manager at Joyce Iron & Metal Co. at 1283 Joyce Ave., said his company does everything it can to prevent buying stolen goods. In addition to videotaping customers, Joyce gets the name, address and signature of anyone who brings in metal.

"It's hard to differentiate between a guy who is a legitimate plumber or someone who is renovating and someone who may just have stolen it," Garrett said. "We follow the letter of the law, and if that doesn't make us a destination for stolen property, obviously I'm fine with that.

"I would just hope everyone who buys scrap metal takes the same precautions we do."

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