

Jury Awards Temple Couple \$22 Million

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BELTON — A jury in 169th District Court on Friday awarded a Temple couple a record \$22 million in damages in their negligence with malice lawsuit against Lone Star Gas Co., a division of Enserch Corp.

The suit stemmed from an explosion and fire April 17, 1988, at Mr. D's Quick Stop, a gasoline station-convenience store at 2410 S. General Bruce Drive in Temple.

Store owner Johnnie Lee Davis was burned over 19 percent of his body and lost both
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hands in the blast, according to testimony in a three-week hearing of the case in Judge Stan Pemberton's court.

Davis and his wife, Sherry Davis, filed the lawsuit in April 1990, claiming Lone Star Gas was to blame for the explosion and ensuing fire. Davis further alleged the gas company acted with malice by failing to repair numerous gas line leaks in the area he had reported before the explosion. He originally sought \$43 million in damages.

Attorneys for Lone Star Gas and Enserch contended Davis set the fire himself to collect insurance on the business.

According to trial testimony, Davis closed his store about 11 p.m. on the night of the explosion, remaining outside talking with a friend for about an hour. Before leaving, Davis pulled on the front door of the concrete-block building to make sure it was locked and the building blew up. Firefighters fought the ensu-

ing fire for about six hours.

"We're very pleased with the verdict," said Vic Feazell of Austin, who represented the Davises along with Gary Richardson of Tulsa, Okla.

Richardson said he had been told that \$22 million is the largest amount ever awarded by a jury in Bell County, eclipsing a previous high of about \$200,000.

Feazell and Richardson gained notoriety about two years ago when the duo won a record multimillion-dollar jury award for libel in a suit Feazell filed against a Dallas television station for news reports in the wake of serial killer Henry Lee Lucas' recanting of confessions to more than 100 murders.

Dusty Filmore of Fort Worth represented Lone Star Gas in the hearing, aided by Max Hedrick, in-house counsel for Enserch, and local counsel, Temple lawyer Bob Burleson. The three were unavailable for comment.