

April 3, 1997

Man Imprisoned in Patent Fight Finishes Term

Petr Taborsky, a former chemistry student convicted of grand theft during a patent dispute with the University of South Florida, was released from state custody on Tuesday after serving out his sentence.

Convicted in 1990 of grand theft and theft of trade secrets, Mr. Taborsky was sentenced to a year's house arrest and 15 years' probation, but because he continued to pursue patent applications, he was found guilty of violating probation and sentenced to three and a half years in state prison when he refused to sign over his first patent to the university.

After spending eight weeks on a chain gang at a maximum-security prison, he was transferred to a work release center in Tampa last June, after Gov. Lawton Chiles learned about his case. Mr. Chiles promised to consider granting him clemency, but Mr. Taborsky declined, saying he preferred to work toward proving his innocence in court, even if it meant spending time in detention.

Yesterday, Mr. Taborsky, a citizen of the Czech Republic, said after he was released: "I'm still trying to absorb the fact I've been released. But I know I have to get back to work."

Mr. Taborsky, now 35, said he needed to earn enough money to pay court charges for his latest legal battle, a motion asking the court to vacate his conviction, which he must file by May 1.

His case began almost 10 years ago, when he was a student earning \$8.50 an hour doing research with Clinoptilolite, a clay the engineering lab was testing for a subsidiary of the Florida Progress Corporation.

Mr. Taborsky says he experimented with leftovers after the three-month project ended, trying to understand its chemical properties. Months later, he found a way to heat it past 850 degrees without destroying it. The discovery was important because it made the clay similar to that used in cat litter better able to absorb ammonium, transforming it into a cheap way to treat sewage.

But Mr. Taborsky's professor told him the invention belonged to the university and Florida Progress because it grew out of their original project. When he refused to hand over his research, the university had him arrested on theft charges.

In dispute were research notebooks that the university said he took from a laboratory, in violation of a confidentiality agreement with the university. Mr. Taborsky said they were his notebooks, which he bought at a campus bookstore and took home almost every night. And he said he never signed an agreement with the school, just with the company. Mr. Taborsky said he would consider settling the case and several civil lawsuits with the university over the two patents he has been granted if it made a "sincere offer."

A university spokesman, Harry Battson, said a settlement might be possible. "We're certainly willing and anxious to sit down with Mr. Taborsky and try to reach that," he said on Tuesday.