

DRUG TRIAL MAY PROBE MAJOR RING

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Author: JOCELYNE ZABLIT Free Press Staff Writer

During five years of running one of the largest drug rings in Detroit history, the **Chambers Brothers** built an empire on the back of their impoverished hometown of Marianna, Ark., according to the federal case against them that goes to trial today in U.S. District Court.

They amassed a substantial fortune, a fleet of fancy cars, a small army of youths imported from Marianna and a reputation that federal investigators say was surpassed only by their predecessors in the Young Boys Inc. drug ring.

The four brothers and 12 other people facing trial today are among 22 people who were indicted in March on a variety of drug and racketeering charges.

Two members of the drug ring already have pleaded guilty in the case and four remain fugitives.

"It was probably the most significant crack organization that was ever taken off (the streets) in Detroit," said William Coonce, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Detroit.

More than 100 search warrants netted federal officials slightly more than 22 pounds of cocaine in various stages of processing, a half million dollars in cash, 46 cars, 200 weapons and other assets totaling more than \$1 million.

A seized videotape shows alleged members of the organization counting what the brothers bragged was a half million dollars and placing it in a laundry basket. Another segment of the tape shows Larry Chambers, also known as Rambo, giving a tour of one of his houses in Detroit and pointing to what he says are 24-karat gold-plated faucets in his bathroom.

Federal officials would not discuss details of the case but court records and about 50 motions filed by more than a dozen attorneys provide a glimpse of what could be an explosive trial.

Adding a twist to the scenario is U.S. Attorney Roy Hayes, who will be prosecuting his first federal case since he was appointed three years ago, and U.S. District Judge Richard Suhrheinrich, who has a reputation of being one of the least tolerant and most short-fused members of the bench.

Hayes, who previously directed the Wayne County Organized Crime Task Force and was Charlevoix County prosecutor, said he chose to prosecute this case with Assistant U.S. Attorney Lawrence Bunting "to focus the attention of narcotics as a law enforcement priority and, secondly, because I like to try cases."

Assistant Wayne County Prosecutor Walter Gibbs said: "He'll keep them guessing. They'll know they've been in a trial by the time he's done." Gibbs, with Hayes, tried the infamous 10th Precinct conspiracy case when he was the chief trial attorney in the organized crime task force.

The 10th Precinct case, which was the longest -- 210 days -- and costliest -- \$2 million -- criminal trial in Michigan history, involved 10 Detroit police officers and six civilians charged with operating a massive heroin trafficking ring on the city's west side. A police sergeant, two other officers and five civilians were convicted.

"Hayes is very hard working and very diligent," Gibbs said. "We worked six, seven days a week for a couple years in preparation for that trial."

Eighth (Northwest) Precinct Cmdr. Daniel McKane, who was in charge of investigators while Hayes was in the organized crime task force, described Hayes as "an excellent administrator and effective trial attorney."

Brian Legghio, a former assistant U.S. Attorney now in private practice, said, "Roy Hayes has an excellent courtroom presence and has a skillful ability to marshal the facts and present them in a persuasive fashion to the jury, and I think he owes that skill to his long years as a prosecutor and having had the opportunity to do criminal defense work."

Federal officials said courtroom security throughout the six-week trial will be tight because of the nature of the charges and fear of reprisal against some of the more than 50 government witnesses.

Coonce said his office is "taking great steps" to provide added protection for about 20 witnesses.

Although details about the organization contained in court records are sketchy, enough is included to provide a glimpse of what is described as a cruel and merciless world in which the **Chambers Brothers** operated.

The organization, said federal officials, was founded by Billy Joe Chambers in 1983 soon after the infamous Young Boys Inc. drug ring was smashed by a series of indictments beginning in 1982.

The **Chambers Brothers** quickly moved to claim the crown vacated by YBI and soon controlled 50 percent of the crack houses in Detroit, the documents allege.

Authorities suspect the group had as many as 400 employees who operated as many as 300 crack houses while supplying many more. At its peak in 1987, the organization sold up to \$3 million worth of cocaine a day.

The empire was built by recruiting the majority of employees, many of them under age 16, from the Chambers' impoverished hometown. While tempting the youths from Arkansas with the lure of fast money and glory, the brothers dealt ruthlessly with anyone who crossed them, investigators say.

In April 1987, for example, Billy Joe and Larry Chambers reportedly beat two of their female employees with a TV set and lamp after some cocaine was found missing.

Otis Chambers is accused of running the organization's "wrecking crew," which would kidnap, threaten, assault and, in four known cases, kill victims.

Willie Lee Chambers, a U.S. Postal Service employee, is accused of transporting in 1986 \$150,000 in cash to Marianna for redistribution to Texas and offshore banks.

If convicted of conspiracy with intent to distribute controlled substances, all the defendants face up to 20 years in prison. Billy Joe and Larry Chambers face a maximum of life in prison if convicted of running the operation.

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