

## YOUTH FROM ARKANSAS SAW THE WORLD IN DIM LIGHT OF CRACK HOUSES

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MARIANNA, Ark. -- The battered mobile home with plywood over broken windows rests atop cinder blocks in a muddy lot on the edge of this hard-times Mississippi Delta town.

One steps carefully to the door, skirting a dog curled in the weeds and the mounds of crushed beer cans and sodden trash.

This is where a cocaine-covered road to riches has led David Gant.

Hard to believe that the man in the trailer once was part of a drug ring that sold so much so fast that its leaders romped before a video camera with laundry baskets full of cash, chanting, "Money, money, money!"

That was the chant that brought Gant to Detroit in the 1980s for a wild and furious ride with his cousins, Larry, Otis, Billie Joe and Willie, the **Chambers brothers** .

They were on their way to becoming Detroit's largest cocaine ring, running 300 crack houses with the ruthless efficiency of a fast-food chain and raking in so much cash that \$1 bills became a nuisance.

"Money, man, nice money," said Gant. "I had nice clothes, nice cars, nice girls."

In a recent interview at his trailer, Gant, 26, ate a lunch of saltine crackers and peanut butter. He gets by on welfare and disability, and wondered aloud if he had enough money to do his laundry.

A skinny kid hampered by the loss of his left leg in a childhood fire, Gant was one of the **Chambers brothers** ' many drones, laboring for 24 hours at a time in a locked crack house, slipping chips of cocaine through door slots for \$5 or \$10 bills.

He was one of many wretchedly poor young people from the brothers' hometown who were lured north when they visited with wads of cash and fleets of fancy cars.

It all crashed down in 1987 with a massive federal indictment. The four men and their top lieutenants went to prison. The workers who escaped charges were cast adrift. Some, like Gant, found their way home, the wreckage of an outlaw empire.

In 1991, an eastern Arkansas police task force arrested Gant for possession and delivery of drugs. He was convicted and given a suspended 10-year sentence that until 2001 makes him subject to immediate prison time for any violation of law.

Reflecting on his days in the drug trade, Gant said the **Chambers brothers** and their loyal employees were driven by a determination to escape the poverty and limited horizon of Marianna, and its cotton and rice fields.

"We were poor and we made a plan, and there you are," he said.

The Chambers plan included strict rules for employees, posted at each house along with a schedule of fines for violations. The rules included no flashy jewelry or clothes, no drugs and money carried together, no loud music when driving drugs around town and no squabbling with coworkers.

Gant said the employees were told that if they avoided parties and worked hard, rewards would roll their way. But he found the crack house duty sheer drudgery.

"You got nothing in there really," Gant said. "No TV, no windows to look out of, not really any lights. You're there working."

To disguise the operations from police patrols, steel security doors -- often a tip-off to a drug operation -- were installed behind the exterior wooden doors.

He said the houses usually were staffed with two people locked inside with the drugs. One person would service customers through a slot in the door while the other stood guard.

There was no fooling around or loafing, Gant said.

"You're there selling rock -- that's what you're doing. "You're working."

Gant said a shift would last as long as workers could take it. Runners came by to replenish stock and collect money. The couriers also made runs to carry-out restaurants, using the workers' \$10-a-day food allowance.

He said some sellers made straight salaries, others earned commissions. But anyone trying to pad their income by selling undersized rocks of crack was just buying trouble.

The brothers had a quality control system. Family members would visit their crack houses to check on product and service. Because of the slotted steel doors, the sellers often didn't see their customers.

At least one seller caught dishing out soap was severely beaten.

"Very serious business," Gant said. Ever-present were the threats of a police raid, a robbery or an attack by business rivals.

"I got beat up, I got shot at and I got run from the house," he said. "Listen, there's all kind of prices to pay for the money.

"It's hard in a way," Gant said. "But in a way, it's not really hard work, you know? What do you do? Just sitting in a house 24 hours selling rocks. Like here, man, I take off my leg and sit inside all day. What's the difference? Money.

"As long as you got money being made, you keep on," he said.

When he visited Marianna, Gant did some recruiting among local youths.

"How much did they make? Well, how much did they want to work -- that's the deal," Gant said. "You can make as much money as you want to work. . . . The money was there to be made."

Authorities estimated the Chambers operation peaked at about \$42 million in sales a year. Gant figures his share was about \$40,000 over several years, maybe more, but he's not really sure. The money was rolling in so fast, he didn't worry about it.

"I was spending all the money," he said. "Like I said, there's pretty girls in Detroit. I knew there was going to be an end. But it didn't worry me. I was making the money."

Gant said he knew the damage drugs could do, but never felt to blame for selling them.

"You know what rock does to you when you smoke it?" he demanded. "It makes you steal kill and rob. Man, you're a fiend. It makes you a fiend.

"But it's your decision to do what you're going to do," he said. "Nobody can tell you to use it, smoke it, sell it, whatever. That's your decision."

Yet he said he now tries to warn Marianna youngsters about the perilous world of dope dealing.

"I'm telling the kids don't be wasting your time," he said. "Get an education, get a job, go into the service, get a good career. Me? I followed my career. I took the hand I had and went with it."

Gant adamantly rejected the idea that he was a major criminal.

"I wasn't no gangster," he said hotly. "I was me."

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