

PONY DOWN GANG SUSPECT STARTED AS PETTY THIEF

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LeRoy Buttrom Willis, a ninth-grade dropout and onetime teenage troublemaker seen as lacking career skills, managed to confound his critics by organizing, managing and directing a thriving business in a highly competitive market -- or so a 49- count federal indictment charges.

Now being sought by federal authorities, Willis, through an alleged combination of guns and gumption, shaped a group of relatives and youths into the multimillion-dollar **Pony Down** heroin and cocaine **gang**, according to a federal grand jury indictment unsealed this week.

But the fancy cars, wads of cash, bulk narcotic shipments and tightly organized operation cited in the indictment seem a giant leap from the young **thief** whose early record was a tour through Michigan's **pettier** felonies.

At age 14, about the time he dropped out of ninth grade in Detroit's Durfee Junior High School, Willis was arrested for burglarizing a school.

Now, at 35, he has been the object of a two-year investigation involving the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the IRS, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Detroit police.

According to court records, Willis' first contact with juvenile authorities came in February 1964 for the school burglary and was followed in the next 25 months by eight other appearances on charges ranging from truancy to assault with intent to murder.

The assault and truancy charges did not stick, but court records show he served probation under the juvenile laws for auto theft, thefts from buildings and homes and an unarmed robbery.

Home supervision was minimal, according to court records, and young Willis was allowed to come and go as he pleased.

Discharged from juvenile probation in August 1966, he stayed out of the system for 3 1/2 years, until his arrest in February 1970 for assault with intent to commit armed robbery. That July, he was convicted and sentenced to serve four to five years in the State Prison of Southern Michigan at Jackson.

Paroled in 1973 after serving three years, Willis returned to Detroit and entered the home improvement business, earning up to \$20,000 a year, according to what he told probation officers. He was arrested that year for a narcotics violation, but the charge was dismissed.

In 1976, he was arrested again, this time in the city of Jackson for larceny from a person. He was convicted and sentenced to five years' probation.

In 1980 and 1981, he was arrested in Detroit and Southfield on concealed weapons charges and was sentenced to six months in the Detroit House of Correction.

While amassing this criminal record, Willis also was acquiring a string of nicknames and aliases. Leroy Buttrom, Leroy Thompson, Gunn, Peter Gunn, G-Man, Ike, Pete and Pee Wee are among those listed in the indictment.

HE ALSO MOVED to a quiet residential cul-de-sac in Farmington Hills. The neighbors wondered about the lanky man with a taste for DeLorean sports cars, fur coats and steel-barred windows and doors on his ranch-style house.

The cars pulling into Willis' attached garage day and night did little to soothe the neighbors' suspicions. At least one neighbor thought the house was a drive-in drug service.

In the pre-dawn hours of June 18, 1983, a task force of police stormed the house and ripped the bars down with a tow truck.

Willis was not at home during the police raid, but a friend, Patricia Ann Temple, was arrested for possession of cocaine after officers saw her hurriedly toss a cigaret case into her Cadillac.

Court officials pondering what to do with Willis after one of his adult convictions commented that his "strengths are somewhat difficult to pinpoint" because of his poor academic achievements and limited work record.

Willis, officials noted, was "seemingly" lacking the skills and education to compete in the job market.

The court report included the pessimistic comment that Willis and his long criminal record showed he "has not sought to change his behavior."

Instead, federal officials now charge, he just got bigger.

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