

A crack company // Family made huge profits from drugs; [CITY Edition]

ISABEL WILKERSON. St. Petersburg Times. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Dec 18, 1988. pg. 1.A

DETROIT - Crack cocaine was their business. They knew it well.

A company known as the Chambers Brothers Organization came to control half the crack houses in Detroit with sales of at least \$1-million a day. How? Billy Jo, Larry, Otis and Willie Lee Chambers ran their company by strict rules:

The brothers used marketing techniques such as discount coupons and two-for-one sales to lure buyers to the highly addictive drug.

To motivate their workers, the brothers held sales competitions among the hundreds of crack houses run or franchised by the group.

Supervisors, conscious of the need for quality control, would go to the crack houses posing as buyers.

``They didn't want to lose customers because someone was ripping them off,`` said Lawrence Bunting, an assistant U.S. attorney.

Recently the brothers were convicted of conspiracy along with eight associates in a trial that offered a rare glimpse into the phenomenal rise and inner workings of a drug organization whose scope law enforcement officials are still trying to measure.

With hundreds of employees, the ring dominated the drug trade in entire areas of the city and became the ``largest crack distribution network successfully prosecuted anywhere,`` said Roy Hayes, the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, who handled the case himself to emphasize the severity of the drug problem in Detroit.

When crack, the potent smokable form of cocaine, came to Detroit two years ago, the brothers ``got in on the ground floor,`` said William Coonce, a special agent of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

They had as many as 500 employees, so many that they began issuing identification cards with snapshots to keep track of them, law enforcement officials said.

Employees were warned never to carry drugs and proceeds at the same time. Strict guidelines set out ways to be inconspicuous: stay within speed limits and never wear gold chains or flashy sneakers while dropping off drugs or picking up money.

Brutal demands were made of the employees, many of them high school students who were paid \$100 a day. They were expected to be available around the clock.

Many of them skipped school to work 12-hour shifts selling or making crack. They were docked, dismissed or beaten for being late or for coming up short in either crack or cash.

One former employee, Felicia Gilchrist, who is 19, testified that she took her week-old baby with her to the crack house where she sold crack through a hole in a wall. She sat at her post 24 hours a day, sleeping ``when the traffic would slow down,`` she said, and taking turns on busy days with her 14-year-old sister, Alicia.

Like all of the former employees of the organization who testified at the trial under grants of immunity, she has been offered assistance in the federal witness relocation program.

The organization amassed great wealth in its brief reign before the brothers were arrested in February after an 18-month investigation.

Officials from the DEA and the Detroit Police Department seized \$1-million in cash and jewelry, 68 automobiles and 250 weapons. The authorities also confiscated six kilograms of cocaine that they said had a street value of \$2.5-million.

As the empire grew, the brothers bought vacation property in Jamaica and were planning to expand the business to Flint, Mich., Toledo, Ohio, and elsewhere in the Midwest.

Now the brothers and the eight others convicted are facing prison terms of up to life when they are sentenced later this month.

But while the ring's leadership has been toppled, the authorities say they fear that hundreds of former employees of the Chambers brothers are trying to fill the void.

Three key lieutenants are still at large. A fourth, Carl Young, was arrested in California recently and charged with conspiracy in Michigan. Opening arguments in the trial are scheduled for Monday.

Dr. Carl Taylor, an adjunct professor of criminal justice at Michigan State University, has studied youth gangs in Detroit, and he divides gangs into two categories, scavenger and corporate.

The Chambers organization, he said, was clearly corporate. ``These kids were not using drugs as consumers but as capitalists,`` Taylor said.

Crude charts of the organization's structure and handwritten bylaws found on the walls of several crack houses reflected rigorous discipline and a misguided work ethic.

The employers' guiding principles followed the workers everywhere. ``One will be promoted and graded according to his work and conduct,`` the policy read.

``If you are planning on getting rich you must forget about your girlfriends and family. You will not have too much time for parties and concerts. With hard work and dedication, we will all be rich within 12 months.``

``What you have is four guys coming up from Arkansas who wander around and decide to take over the dope business in Detroit,`` Bunting said.

The brothers came here in 1983 after the eldest, Willie Lee, got a job as a mail carrier. From legitimate jobs they moved into their first joint venture in the drug trade: selling marijuana out of a convenience store.

To ensure cheap, dependable labor, the brothers lured scores of young people from the cotton fields of their hometown, Marianna, Ark., in a twist on earlier migrations of rural Southerners looking for work in northern cities.

``They were like slave traders, bringing kids up from the South and locking them in these crack houses,`` Taylor said.

``They had kids out there almost auditioning for them. It's like an alternative to Little League.``

Everyone in Marianna knew when the brothers were in town recruiting.

``The Chambers brothers came down here with fancy cars and fancy clothes and girlfriends and drugs and jewelry and offered these kids a lifestyle they couldn't get in Marianna,`` said Police Chief Mark Birchler of Marianna.

One of those who responded to the lure was Terry Colbert. At 17, he was on a fast track in the organization, making \$3,000 a week selling crack on the east side of Detroit.

But the good times quickly turned ugly when he was beaten and shot in a quarrel with Otis Chambers over money.

``I was standing in the corner,`` Colbert recalled, ``and Otis and my uncle was arguing and Otis looked at me and said, 'You know, I don't like you no way,' and that's when the guy, Karate, started swinging the bat on me.``

A shoot-out began. Colbert testified that he jumped out of a window, followed by Otis Chambers, who told his security men: ``There he goes, right there - shoot him.``

Rivalries often developed between the southern recruits and the Detroit workers, bickering over favoritism and turf. It led to shootings and at least four murders, officials said.

The brothers themselves were brutal in their dealings with competitors. One witness testified that he saw a gang leader put the body of a rival drug dealer into a dumpster.

Some of the killings were not part of the the federal trial and are still under investigation. ``We couldn't prove who did the murders,`` Bunting said.

``It was hard to sort things out because so many people did so many things.``

In time, the brothers became so arrogant that they made home videotapes of themselves, counting stacks of money and showing off the gold faucets in their bathrooms and other trappings of their wealth.

The videotapes were confiscated by Detroit police officers in a raid of one of the organization's crack houses and later broadcast on Detroit television stations.

In a key tape, a top officer of the organization who is still at large is seen surveying stacks of bills in the kitchen.

``Money, money, money,`` he says, gleefully. ``Fifty thousand here. Ain't no telling how much is up there. I'm going to buy me three cars tomorrow - and a jeep.``

Someone else on the tape asks, in jest, what should be done with all the money.

``I tell you what we can do,`` Larry Chambers says wryly. ``We can give it to the poor.``

Credit: New York Times