

SOUTHERN YOUTHS FIND LIFE IN DETROIT CAN BE FAST-AND SHORT; [FINAL EDITION, C]

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In this threadbare Mississippi Delta farming community, it was hard to just say no.

Not when the Chambers brothers flashed fat rolls of cash and stoked the fantasies of rural teenagers with visions of fine clothes, fast cars and easy money in Detroit.

The brothers-Larry, Billy Joe, Willie Lee and Otis-were local boys who had moved up North and carved out a big chunk of Detroit's lucrative crack trade for themselves, according to police.

Then they enticed scores of Marianna teenagers to come to work for them, and turned what had been a small, quiet Arkansas town into one scarred by fear, bitterness and big-city drug problems.

At their peak, according to indictments against them, the Chambers brothers operated about 200 Detroit crack houses and supplied about 500 others. Detroit police, who broke up their empire earlier this year, estimate that they once controlled about half the city's crack market and pulled in as much as \$3 million a week.

A home videotape seized by law officers told it best. It showed a kitchen table piled high with currency. "Money, money, money," giggled a gang member clad only in shorts as he gleefully scooped up fistfuls of bills and let them flutter to the floor.

Larry, the oldest brother at 38, allegedly was the leader of the organization. After spending nine years in prison for shooting an Arkansas state trooper, he moved to Detroit in 1979. One by one, the other brothers followed.

The Chambers family homestead in Marianna, population 6,220, is a run- down trailer on a weed-strewn lot. When the brothers returned for a visit, they made a point of flaunting their newly acquired wealth. People here still talk about the three chauffeured limousines that brought the family to Otis' 1986 high school graduation.

"We knew they weren't doctors and lawyers," one parent recalled.

A key element in the operation was the pipeline of Marianna teens eager to earn up to \$2,000 a month working in Detroit, which ranks second only to New York in the severity of its crack epidemic, police said.

"It's pretty easy to understand what was going on here," said Marianna Police Chief Mark Birchler. "You can drive through town and see high unemployment, high teen pregnancies and high illiteracy, especially among blacks."

Marianna is in Lee County, which has the second highest unemployment rate in Arkansas. Birchler says the jobless rate among black teens easily exceeds 50 percent. He estimates that as many as 150 youths from Marianna were lured to Detroit by the Chambers brothers over a three-year period.

Some worked as runners, dropping off drugs at crack houses and picking up money. Others worked in "factories," houses where cocaine powder was cooked into "rocks" of crack. A few worked as enforcers.

For the Marianna youngsters, life in Detroit was far from glamorous. They were kept in servitude for months at a time, living in squalid houses with bars on the windows and chains on the doors, Detroit law officers say. Since few had ever traveled much beyond Marianna's limited horizons, their survival in the big city was totally dependent on their loyalty to the brothers.

James Ray Farris, 18, was a typical recruit. He was a marginal student at Lee High School, but "basically a good kid, certainly not a criminal," Birchler said.

Problems at home prompted him to move in with Rev. Lee Eggerson and his wife, a couple well known for their willingness to open their home to troubled youngsters. Last June, after school was out, the boy headed for Detroit.

"He told us he had some friends up there who could get him work. It didn't dawn on me then that it was the Chamberses," Rev. Eggerson said.

In October the Eggersons received a call from the Detroit medical examiner. Could they identify James Ray's bullet-riddled body? The slaying remains unsolved, and it hangs over this clannish community of churches and cotton rows like a dark storm cloud.

The Chambers brothers' alleged operation was hardly a secret in Marianna.

"Suddenly they come back with these fancy clothes and jewelry, you put two and two together," a teenager said.

But it appears that many local people were willing to look the other way when young gang members showed up at the high school parking lot wearing thick gold chains and driving BMW autos with Michigan plates.

"We'd get these reports of missing young people, and then a few weeks later the parents would come in and tell me, 'Hey, I found out my child is in Detroit,' " Birchler said. "Most of them were just embarrassed. They're good, hard-working people."

The Chambers brothers and about a dozen other members of their organization were arrested earlier this year in Detroit. They are scheduled for trial in September, and two of the brothers-Larry and Billy Joe-face possible life imprisonment. Most of the others could receive up to 20 years in prison.

But the arrests did not end Marianna's ordeal. Youths who reportedly worked for the brothers have drifted back to town, hardened by their experiences up North.

"The ones who are coming back, we're finding they're really a lot more violent, more likely to carry a weapon, more likely to resist arrest," said Birchler. "I'll pick them up for something, and now all of a sudden they've got the money to pay a \$400 or \$500 fine. I've also observed a lot more crack and cocaine than I'd ever seen before."

Marianna used to be a place where no one bothered to lock the door. But no more. Some of the 22 people named in Detroit indictments are still at large, and residents who cooperated with investigators have received threats.

"People used to think drugs were just on TV. Now they know that drugs are killing our children," said Delores Eggeron.

CAPTION:

MAP: (Location of Detroit, Michigan and Marianna, Arkansas.) Chicago Tribune Map. (Published on page 5 in City Edition.)

PHOTO: The farming community of Marianna, Ark., has a population of 6,220-and the state's second-highest unemployment rate. Photo for The Tribune by Todd Lillard. (Published on page 5 in the City Edition.)

[Illustration]
PHOTO MAP