

ST. AUBIN'S HOUR OF CARNAGE IT STARTED AS A ROBBERY, ENDED WITH 6 PEOPLE SLAIN

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Sunday, September 2, 1990

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A winding flight of 13 worn gray wooden steps leads to the second story of 17850 St. Aubin Street, a creamy yellow bungalow with brown trim. It was up there that five men were stretched out on the floor and shot.

Down another flight of 13 steps from the first floor to the basement, a crusted black stain marks where another man was put on the floor face-down and killed.

It is a small house -- so small it is hard to imagine how at least 13 people were packed inside April 4, crowded by fear, desperation and systematic death.

In Detroit Recorder's Court on Tuesday, the law will begin to sort out what happened during that hour of death five months ago in the crack house on St. Aubin. Two young men and a woman will stand trial on first-degree murder charges. A third young man is to stand trial later.

According to interviews, investigators, witnesses, and confessions, the mass killing was small-time crime gone malignant. Without the staggering body count, it might have remained a chump-change dope rip-off.

The take, investigators estimate, was less than \$2,000 in cash, perhaps 3 1/2 ounces of cocaine, some clothes and electronic equipment. Gold jewelry, other drugs and more than \$700 were left behind.

The following account of Detroit's worst mass killing in nearly 20 years is drawn from interviews, court records and testimony, investigative, medical and laboratory reports and confessions by three of the suspects.

Some survivors' names have been omitted because of potential danger to their lives.

The plan was to 'hit a lick'

The series of actions resulting in the fatal convergence on St. Aubin began taking shape about 3:30 p.m. when car thief, police informant and crack dealer Steve Owens visited his new girlfriend at her home in another neighborhood.

The young woman, identified only by her nickname Janet because of threats against her, seemed an unlikely match for Owens.

At 32 years old and 6-feet-1 1/2 and 200 pounds, Owens looked more like his petite girlfriend's father or uncle. Although 20, Janet, with her slight build and tiny voice, could easily pass for a child just edging into her teens.

After visiting friends, the couple decided to go roller skating. But first, Owens wanted to go to his home on St. Aubin to shave and clean up.

Meanwhile, police believe, a former girlfriend was laying her own plans for an evening with Owens.

Tamara Marie Marshall -- friends call her Honey -- was with Marc Caison, a bookish-looking 19-year-old. Caison told police he picked up Marshall in his mother's new black Taurus near 9 Mile and Lahser in Southfield at about 6 p.m.

Marshall and Caison seemed another unlikely pairing. Caison, with the look of a youngster on his way to the library or church, had no criminal record. Marshall, at 18, had several brushes with the law and her family had been involved in a fatal shoot-out at a motorcycle club.

Caison drove to the home of Mark Bell on American near Tireman. At the house, where **Jamal** Latif **Biggs** waited, talk turned to getting money. **Biggs** and Caison later told police it was Marshall who suggested robbing Owens.

"Tamara said she wanted to go to Steve's house to hit a lick," Caison told police, explaining that meant pulling a robbery. He said he had known her only two months, and knew she sometimes carried a gun.

Biggs told police Marshall laid it all out: She would get them inside Owens' door and they'd let Bell in later.

Marshall's version to police was different -- she said she took **Biggs** and Bell to Owens' house to buy drugs. What eventually happened, she told police, took her by surprise.

Whether seeking drugs or a rip-off, the four people left in two cars, Marshall and Caison in the Taurus and Bell and **Biggs** following in a white coupe. The caravan parked around the corner from the St. Aubin home, near I-75 and E. McNichols, and Marshall walked up St. Aubin past the block's carefully tended homes.

There was no time to run. At 9:30 p.m., Owens and Janet arrived at the house just as Marshall walked up. Janet went inside, leaving Owens and Marshall talking outside.

Janet said she did not know Marshall, but said Owens had spoken of her. She testified that Owens said Marshall set up people and robbed them.

Inside the house were Carl Williams, 21, an unemployed grocery store worker, and Bobby Lee Frazier, 16, who was staying at the house.

Five minutes later, Marshall and Owens went inside. Marshall stayed about 10 more minutes chatting with Frazier and Owens.

After Marshall left, Janet went upstairs to watch a videotape while Owens got ready for roller skating.

Caison told police Marshall returned to the cars to collect **Biggs** and Bell. The three returned to the house while Caison waited in the car. **Biggs** and Marshall went to the door and Bell waited outside, Caison said.

Janet testified she didn't know Marshall had returned until she heard her shouting out for Owens. It took three calls before Owens went downstairs to see what she wanted, Janet testified.

There was nothing to distract her from the movie she was watching, Janet said, until Marshall walked into the bedroom and pulled a pistol.

Janet thought it was a joke until Marshall quickly corrected her.

"You must think you're really bad. You don't think I'll really shoot you," Marshall said, recalled Janet.

Marshall searched Janet's purse, Janet said, then ordered her downstairs. There was a shove at the foot of the stairs, Janet said.

The stairway led into the dining room. There Janet saw Owens, Frazier, Williams and a man she didn't recognize -- later identified as 15-year-old Robert Hill -- seated on the dining room floor along the wall.

Over them, Janet said, two men with guns stood and barked orders.

Death awaited

Precisely how the killing started might never be clear. The confessions by **Biggs**, Caison and Marshall have been characterized by authorities as conflicting and self-serving. Bell -- who is also awaiting trial in another murder case in which a man was killed in a robbery that netted \$2.70 -- refused to speak with police.

Despite the many contradictions, a basic scenario can be pieced together from confessions, evidence, investigators' reconstructions and the survivors' accounts.

With four people held at gunpoint in the dining room, the situation began to unravel as people kept coming to the door.

Biggs told police he got rid of one group by saying the house was out of dope. He said another group spotted the hostages lined up on the floor and took off running. Something had to be done, **Biggs** told police.

One by one, the captives were herded up the 13 stairs and distributed among the three small bedrooms. Janet was last in line.

Janet said Marshall showed her a blend of compassion and callousness.

Although Marshall took her rings and necklace, Janet said she let her keep her earrings. Janet later wore them to court as she testified against Marshall.

Marshall's kind gesture was fleeting, Janet said. When one of the gunmen asked what to with her, Janet said that Marshall shrugged her off.

"I don't know nothing about the bitch," Janet quoted Marshall. "Go ahead and kill her. I don't know her."

Upstairs, Bell asked Janet her age. She lied, saying she was 14.

This apparently enraged Bell, who began kicking Owens in the head, demanding how a 32-year-old man could be involved with such a young girl.

The victims were face-down on the floor. Owens was stretched lengthwise across the doorway of the north bedroom.

Across the narrow hall, Frazier, Williams and Hill were in the south bedroom. Hill, next to a bed, was facing away from the door, while Williams and Frazier were lying with their heads toward the hall.

Janet was ordered face-down in the central bedroom by herself. She was quickly joined on the floor by Rodney Lewis, a close friend of Owens, and by a man named Ivan.

Ivan, by all accounts, was extremely drunk or high.

The gunmen kept shooting

Events began to move more quickly. Janet, her head down, listened to frantic running up and down the stairs. Then it started.

"One of the guys said 'Keep shooting them,' and I heard them walking from room to room just shooting," Janet said.

It would not take long; the hallway can be covered in three paces.

The shots came closer, Janet said, until, "They shoot the person next to me."

In all, seven shots were fired upstairs. Each man was shot in the head -- Owens three times. The guns -- two .25-caliber pistols, according to the police laboratory -- were fired close enough to blast gunpowder into the scalps of the victims. Footsteps clattered down the stairs again, Janet said.

More bullets and bloodshed

Another deadly episode was beginning just outside the house.

Two teenagers -- Levon Robinson and a friend -- cut through a vacant lot to Owens' backdoor.

The teenagers were going to the crack house, testified the survivor, "just to be over there -- tripping out . . . capping jokes, having fun."

As the teenagers neared the back door, a woman, apparently a crack user, joined them. When no one answered their knocks, the three walked to the front.

Through the wide open front door, they saw the ransacked living room. Turning, they saw **Biggs** approaching from the street.

"We asked him what happened," the survivor testified. "And he said that somebody had run up in that house and somebody stuck it up."

Biggs followed the survivor, Robinson and the woman into the house. As they looked around the ransacked first floor, Bell came down the stairs and the mood went deadly serious.

"He told me to get my hands out of my pocket," the teenager said. "And close our eyes."

The teenager said he obeyed the order, but "I thought it was a joke. And my friend Levon -- he dropped the movie he had in his hands and started crying and telling the man not to kill him, we haven't even saw him."

"Shut up," said Bell, testified the teenager.

The teenager said **Biggs** put a gun to his head and Bell put a gun to Robinson's head. The three newcomers were ordered on the floor, he said.

"Me and Levon and the lady, we all started crying," the teenager said. "And then they said they were going to take us in the basement."

Bell pulled the teenager's hood over his head and put his foot on the back of his neck, the teenager testified.

Robinson was taken to the basement, the teenager said.

Bell took his foot off his neck and headed toward the basement, the teenager said. Robinson was sobbing and pleading, the teenager said.

"I heard a gunshot," he said. "And then I started crying."

When the teenager heard footsteps going out of the house, he waited a moment and bolted for the front door. **Biggs** was on the porch, he said.

Biggs hollered "Freeze! Where do you think you're going?" the teenager said. He said he answered by slamming **Biggs** against the wall. The teenager said he punched **Biggs** in the jaw, jumped from the porch and ran for home.

In the basement, Robinson was face-down at the foot of the steps. A .357-Magnum slug had ripped through the top of his head.

She was the only one left

Back upstairs, Janet said she heard the shot followed by more footsteps and "rumbling around." Then, she said, Bell entered the room and sat on the bed.

"He is telling me that he is not going to kill me because I was 14, I was young," she testified.

She then said he warned her not to inform on him: "He is telling me don't say anything about what happened or he can catch a case."

More feet pounded up the stairs, she said, and Bell left as Marshall urged the others "to hurry up, and that she did this too many times to get caught." In the last-minute confusion, the female crack user and Ivan, the inebriated man, escaped the house unnoticed and unharmed.

Outside, according to his confession, Caison waited as his companions loaded the trunks of the two cars. The four drove off.

He said they went to a west side Detroit motel, where the goods were divided. He said his share was \$400 and \$130 worth of rock cocaine. He said he kept the money and threw away the drugs after driving Marshall home.

Back on St. Aubin street, the small house was quiet after nearly an hour filled with running, slamming doors, shouts, tears and gunshots. Waiting a few minutes, Janet opened a window and crawled onto the roof and began screaming.

"They shot them all," she cried into the night.

Caption: Photo JOHN LUKE, JOHN COLLIER Diagram MARTHA THIERRY

: Inside the house at 17850 St. Aubin, six men were fatally shot in what allegedly started as a robbery. From left are Tamara Marie Marshall, Marc Caison, Mark Lamond Bell and **Jamal Latiff Biggs**, at their April 9 arraignment in 36th District Court. They were jailed without bond in the killings of six people at a crack house on Detroit's northeast side. The clothes and boxes strewn about are a grim reminder of the carnage. Three of those charged with first-degree murder go on trial Tuesday in Detroit Recorder's Court. A fourth faces trial later. Bedrooms on the second floor where five victims were taken one at a time and made to lay face down on the floor. The gunmen went from one room to another shooting each victim in the head at close range.

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: COM

Page: 1F

Index Terms: SHOOTING ; DRUG ; DETROIT ; DEATH ; MULTIPLE ; MAJOR STORY ; MURDER

Record Number: 9002020963

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