

THE RISE AND FALL OF A DRUG EMPIRE; [NORTH SPORTS FINAL, C Edition]

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Land of Opportunity

By William M. Adler

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If you knew the childhood Billy Joe Chambers left in rural Arkansas, you might understand the allure the drug trade held for him in Detroit.

There were the hard, sweaty days of picking cotton, the outdoor toilets, the bleak future for black men in Lee County--the sixth-poorest county in the nation.

The family was so poor, his brother Larry remembers waiting outside the homes of white neighbors at dinnertime: "We'd have a bucket and when they finished, they'd give what's left to us and we'd take it back home."

That changed when the Chambers brothers realized their own American dream in Detroit.

But instead of working in a car factory, as had so many Southerners before them, the Chamberses dealt crack--an illegal industry that gave short-term financial security to scores of workers.

And make no mistake about it: The Chambers brothers were workers, among the tops in their field in the mid-1980s on Detroit's lower east side. Their business acumen helped them gross an estimated \$55 million annually before four of them were sent to prison in 1989.

Relying on countless interviews since then, including interviews with the jailed brothers, William M. Adler offers not only an excellent chronicle of the rags-to-riches-to-prison-garb story of these particular entrepreneurs but also a cogent explanation of the social and economic conditions in this country that make dealing drugs an attractive career choice.

Perhaps what is most stunning and fascinating in "Land of Opportunity" is just how charming, ruthless and hardworking the Chambers brothers were--especially Billy Joe and Larry.

Billy Joe Chambers came to Detroit in late 1978 at age 16, following an older brother, Willie, who had made the sojourn north years before.

Later came Otis, who worked summers "in the business" while still in high school, and Larry, 12 years older than Billy Joe, who had spent several stints in prison for various felonies.

Billy Joe initially attended Kettering High School and worked part time as a janitor at the nearby Eastown Shoes. When family friends introduced him to the profits available by dealing marijuana, he opened his own dope houses. He began selling crack around 1984, as crack sales were starting to explode in Detroit.

Larry Chambers, who moved to Detroit in 1985, quickly gained his share of attention because of his business savvy and his ruthlessness. It was Larry who formed the "Wrecking Crew," a gang of enforcers who meted out physical punishment to opponents or thieving employees.

Of particular note was Larry's operation at the Broadmoor, a 52-unit apartment building. People bought and smoked crack at the four-story structure, bartering in sex, VCRs or cars.

"They were skilled entrepreneurs; they had every major business technique going for them," says William R. Coonce, then-chief of the Detroit office of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Eventually, a team of Detroit police and federal law enforcement personnel helped end the Chambers brothers' run. But Adler suggests that some of the team's tactics were possibly illegal, including the information placed on warrants.

One can't help but finish "Land of Opportunity" wondering what corporations the Chambers brothers could have headed had circumstances been different.

Sadly, they were that good.