

Behind bars, Melvin Williams still a ghetto legend: 'Avenue' hustler ...

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Behind bars, Melvin Williams still a ghetto legend

'Avenue' hustler called heroin czar

By David Simon

He was West Baltimore's man-child, quick-witted and calculating, a prodigy from the Pennsylvania Ave-



Melvin Williams, in Lewisburg prison, says his appeal will succeed.

THE SUN/EDWIN H. REMSBERG

'EASY MONEY' ANATOMY OF A DRUG EMPIRE

First of five parts

nue pool halls and juke joints, where the hustler's game was played night after night.

"Scraps," they called him — a reference to his sawed-off appearance and a willingness to fight that made up for it. But Melvin Douglas Williams acquired another title, one that held fast during his 30-year war with the police and prosecutors of Baltimore.

Ask beat cops and detectives about Little Melvin and they'll speak of a man who revolutionized Baltimore's drug culture in the 1960s, marketing heroin in vast quantities, seeding an industry that now grosses more than \$1 million a day in heroin sales alone and is thought to be responsible for 25 percent to

30 percent of the city's homicides.

It is Melvin Williams, they will tell you, whose reputation and authority cross state lines, who has set the standard for West Baltimore's narcotics traffickers. In New York, authorities contend, Williams' word on behalf of a Baltimore buyer can open doors to the narcotics importers who supply the East Coast.

But speak of Little Melvin to the man's friends and supporters — or to Williams himself, who staunchly maintains his innocence from behind the walls of a federal penitentiary — and you will hear the story of a self-made survivor, a shrewd gambler and businessman who created power and money in a ghetto where neither existed.

It was Williams' wealth and success, they contend — his ability to pay his bills "too fast and too far in advance" — that first earned him the enmity of white prosecutors and police officers, as well as the unwelcome mantle of Baltimore's archetypical underworld figure.

And still the law pursues him, even as Williams, 45, marks time on a 34-year sentence for a third narcotics conviction and parole violation. For two years, federal prosecutors here have conducted a lengthy investigation of Williams' alleged

See **WILLIAMS**, 14A, Col. 1

Imprisoned 'Little Melvin' remains a ghetto legend

WILLIAMS, from 1A

drug connections and financial empire. Prompted in part by suspicions that Williams may still be controlling his organization from prison, that investigation, although repeatedly stalled by manpower problems, remains open in the hope that Williams' assets can be seized and more time added to his sentence, according to federal law enforcement sources.

Court files, police records, the yellowed pages of old newspapers — residue of a life spent in unwavering pursuit of an easy dollar — are littered with conflicting images of the same man:

Little Melvin the Gambler, a teen-age shark, playing the angles to perfection in the Avenue pool halls, clearing rack after rack against older, more experienced players. Or Little Melvin the Gangster, allegedly waving a machine gun in a Mount Street bar and threatening, like Cagney on the screen, to shoot everyone in the joint.

And yet only days prior to that incident, he was hailed as Little Melvin the Citizen, speaking at the request of National Guard officials during the 1968 riots, urging a restless crowd to go home. In later years, he would recast himself as a successful businessman and realty investor who rolled through westside streets in a \$52,000 Maserati and took private lessons on a \$17,000 plane.

It is legend rooted in an appalling reality, according to drug enforcement officials who struggle in a city deluged with an estimated 25,000 heroin addicts and perhaps three times that number of cocaine users. To them, the saga of Melvin Williams is a recurring nightmare.

As early as 1968, a Baltimore judge called him "a big fish in the nefarious traffic of slow death," sentencing him to a 12-year prison term in a drug case in which evidence may well have been fabricated by officers frustrated at their inability to bring Williams down. Seven years later, a federal judge said some equally unkind things and handed him a 15-year sentence.

But that was preamble. By the government's account, Williams spent the first half of this decade constructing one of this city's most sophisticated drug rings. He was insulated — a step above the wiretaps, the government informants, the surveillance that had ensnared him in the past, authorities contend.

Williams had mastered the lessons of his earlier convictions, according to detectives, who saw their arsenal reduced to unlimited patience and occasional good luck as they worked their way through the lower rungs of an elaborate organization. It would be nearly two years before they would reach Williams' doorstep, armed with warrants, in December 1984.

"We're tired of him," says John N. Prevas, a city judge who until recently directed the narcotics unit of the state's attorney's office. "That's why we want life without parole."

During lengthy interviews at the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., Williams denied the government's accusations, predicting a successful appeal of his recent conviction and the collapse of the government's continuing probe.

"Not even in any remote sense do I adhere to being involved" in narcotics, Williams says. "I'm not ducking and hiding and vacillating about it."

But Williams declined to respond publicly in any further detail while the government's probe remains open, saying simply that his defense would be made in court, and that newspaper accounts had never served him well.

An imperious, intelligent man who chooses words with care, Melvin Williams refuses to be stereotyped. Street sales of narcotics were routinely punctuated by murderous violence, but Williams was a family man, devoted to an 11-year marriage and two young daughters.

He kept a well-furnished Reservoir Hill home, where he dabbled with Apple and Commodore computers, or a large-screen television fed from a satellite dish in the back yard. And as a vegetarian and health enthusiast, Williams had no use for the drugs he is alleged to have sold.

"I've never seen him with even a beer," said Tim Conway, a longtime friend. "He's very proud of his body and his health."

Friends and neighbors stand by him, speaking of a man unaffected by wealth, a man who kept close to his community, who cared for his elderly mother and was a light touch when someone needed rent money or groceries. There are people who will tell you about gifts of Thanksgiving turkeys, or city playgrounds outfitted with new lights or basketball nets.

"I'll tell you," says Edward Colbert, a bail bondsman and friend for 20 years. "If Melvin Williams had a nickel for all the times he's helped people out, he'd be a wealthy man."

Wealthier, perhaps. Internal Revenue Service agents have already uncovered \$500,000 of Williams' assets that they say represents laundered narcotics profits — and that figure, based only on unreported income that agents were able to document, is believed to be the iceberg's tip. Williams' financial empire includes, among other assets, more than \$600,000 in real estate, an Edmondson Avenue nightclub and an auto towing firm — all owned by a company allegedly controlled by Williams.

Among the expenditures probed by federal authorities: a contract indicating an alleged \$50,000 down payment to former state Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell III, who was involved in an effort to secure a government loan for Williams' company.

Although Mr. Mitchell has told a federal grand jury that he received only \$5,000 from Williams' company for legitimate consulting work — a statement that Williams says is accurate — the discovery of the contract has prompted a lengthy spinoff investigation of the former legislator.

Still, most of Williams' money — conservative estimates range in the millions of dollars — has eluded authorities: "It could be in a bank account, or out of the country,"

muses Baltimore City Detective Edward Burns. "For all we know, it might be buried somewhere up on Park Avenue."

In five articles beginning today, *The Sun* looks at Melvin Williams, his alleged role in Baltimore's lucrative drug trade and the extraordinary investigative effort that returned him to a federal penitentiary.

In addition to conversations with Williams, these articles were compiled from court records, police reports, financial statements and other documents dating from the late 1950s to the present, as well as nearly 100 interviews with law enforcement officials, attorneys, community leaders, friends and acquaintances of Melvin Williams.

"He always wins"

He couldn't have been older than 13 or 14 when Tim Conway first met him. It was a weekend dance at the YMCA on Druid Hill Avenue, and the hall was crowded. Before long, someone shoved someone else and two older boys were squaring off.

"And this tiny thing came out of nowhere, he couldn't have been more than 4 feet," recalled Mr. Conway, a supervisor with the city's Urban Services Agency who has known Williams for 30 years. "He got between these two kids who were both twice his size, talking fast, cracking jokes. . . ."

Mr. Conway expected to see the runt punched senseless, but in minutes, both combatants were laughing and shaking hands.

"It was a real performance," added Mr. Conway, who remembers asking someone for the younger boy's name. "Everyone already knew him. He was already Little Melvin."

Melvin Douglas Williams was born Dec. 14, 1941, the son of a cabdriver and a hospital nursing aide. His childhood was ordinary enough — stable home, capable student — hardly the makings of an inveterate heroin dealer.

"He wasn't bad in school, better than average," said Howard J. Gittings, a city police officer and classmate at the old Garnet Elementary School on Division Street. "I've always thought he could have done anything he put his mind to."

Williams even mustered into the old Western Police Boys Club. An organizer at the recreation hall, Sgt. James Dixon, remembered that "like every other kid, Melvin paid his 50 cents and got a junior police badge."

But other influences were stronger. Williams' family lived on the second floor of a red-brick rowhouse in the 1400 block of Madison Avenue — four blocks from the neon strip that was the economic and cultural pulse of Baltimore's black community in the 1950s and '60s.

Pennsylvania Avenue was a natural temptation for Williams, and the pool parlors and taverns clustered in the 1400 and 1500 blocks became his playground. Undersized and underaged, he was soon hustling his elders in billiard games and back-alley crap shoots.

"I must have seen him play a hundred times in those pool halls," recalled retired city police Lt. Joseph Judd, who spent much of his career working vice and gambling on the Avenue. "I never saw him lose."

Another retired officer, Col. James H. Watkins, remembered pulling Williams from an Avenue pool hall and dragging him home. Then a sergeant, Mr. Watkins pulled a wad of cash from the boy's pocket and asked Dorothy Williams if she knew her son was betting large amounts of money.

"She told me, 'I give him money to play. He always wins,'" Mr. Watkins said.

By all accounts, the youth absorbed and perfected every hustle offered by the Avenue regulars — street-sharpened men with names like "Cherry Reds" Franklin or "Proposition Joe" Johnson. They taught him how to move loaded dice in and out of backroom crap shoots, or how to anticipate a series of shots in a game of one-pocket.

These were valuable lessons in a community largely ignored by the city's legitimate economy. West Baltimore, then as now, was poor and predominantly black, a row house ghetto in a segregated city. In such surroundings, many of the men who displayed any wealth at all were those who lived beyond the law, and the Avenue was home to a growing fraternity of numbers backers, gamblers, narcotics brokers, pimps and holdup men.

A minor vice in comparison, the sportsman's life provided Williams with steady cash — friends say he could earn thousands in a single night. The money and reputation also brought a following.

"He was like the Pied Piper," said Andre Street, a Baltimore police sergeant who as a boy knew the older Williams. "He had money and style and the kids looked up to him. It was always, 'Did you hear what Little Melvin did today?'"

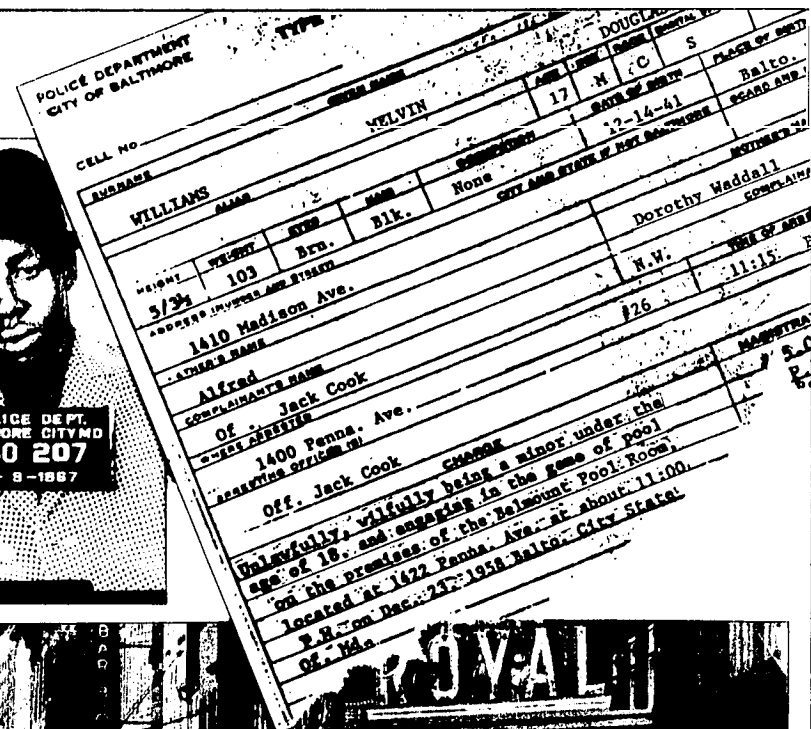
But there was a darker side. Although Williams was transferred from Douglass High School to City College because of his aptitude, he dropped out of the 11th grade. At 21, he had been arrested 10 times on charges including disorderly conduct, auto theft, assault and handgun violations. Most of the cases were dismissed or resulted in probation and, in all, the young Williams spent less than two months in jail, according to arrest reports.

"He was a little thug," said one West Baltimore resident, a 62-year-old city employee who asked not to be identified. "He and his buddies would ride around in cars looking for fights. They were like gangsters."

The woman recalled a March 1959 incident in which her 17-year-old son was beaten by Williams and his friends after refusing to turn over some phonograph records as tribute. Williams later was found guilty of the assault and received a two-month suspended sentence, although the conviction was overturned on appeal, according to court records.

"His father came over and yelled at me for pressing charges against his boy," the woman recalled. "I told him, 'Mister, your son is

Melvin Williams: a scrapbook



Flotsam and jetsam from a career (from upper left): The 26-year-old Williams as a dapper Avenue sportsman in a 1967 police portrait; a 1959 arrest report charging an underaged and undersized Williams with hanging in an Avenue pool hall; Pennsylvania Avenue in 1969, at the end of its heyday as the economic pulse of West Baltimore's black community; Williams at the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., where he is currently serving a 34-year sentence for narcotics charges and a parole violation.

going down as far as he can go."

A "talked-about figure"

The photo file is something of a relic now, the mug shots dated by porkpie hats, tab collars and an occasional neon-luminous sports jacket, two-tone perhaps, with thin lapels. The faces are arranged like a yearbook, alphabetically, starting from brittle pages with sullen, practiced indifference.

Pennsylvania Avenue. The Class of '64. It took only a few short years for cheap Turkish heroin, once a jazzman's exotic vice, to course its way through the nation's cities, fusing with the rage and hopelessness of urban slums, creating new legions of inner-city addicts.

By the late 1960s, city prosecutors and narcotics detectives were simply lost in the flood, and this, their intelligence file, remains as a portrait study of the disaster. These were the men who gambled, or pimped, or wrote numbers, then turned to the new industry, nurturing it with \$5 caps of heroin, changing the city forever.

Every picture tells a story. Broad-faced Charlie Burman was halted by a lengthy prison term. So were "Gangster" Webster and "Big Lucille" Wescott, a former prostitute whose 250-pound carriage was peaked by a garish blond wig. Walter Kidd was shot down in a crowded Avenue bar, and Butch Stamford followed him a few months later. Execution-style slayings later claimed Elijah Davis and Charles "Squeaky" Jordan. Just as gunfire ended the lives of "Proposition Joe" Johnson and Joe Perry — the former a consummate gambler who once tutored Little Melvin, the latter a boyhood friend of Williams regarded by police as his most devoted lieutenant.

Williams' photograph appears in the last pages of the file, the lapels of his sportcoat tight against his shoulders, a stylish black brim balanced loosely on his head, black eyes glaring outward. A survivor.

At 22, Little Melvin had become a misnomer. According to police reports, Williams was 5 feet 11, having picked up 5 inches

and 50 pounds since his 18th birthday. He had married a svelte 15-year-old schoolgirl, Katie Bigelow, who lived on nearby Calhoun Street.

Most important, according to the detectives, Williams had earned a place in their photo file, establishing himself among the early pioneers in the westside drug trade.

Prosecutors would later claim that Williams was the first local dealer to establish direct ties to the legendary Frank "Pee Wee" Matthews, New York's largest heroin importer, whose flash and style were said to inspire the 1972 counterculture film "Superfly."

DEA agents believed Matthews to be the first black narcotics dealer to establish ties to overseas heroin sources independent of New York's Cosa Nostra families. Melvin Williams, in turn, became "the man with the New York connection," according to federal prosecutors here.

Williams' supporters deny that he was directly involved in narcotics, conceding only that his sorties as a gambler brought him into contact with a cast of characters worthy of indictment. Nonetheless, they contend that Williams himself had no need for drug money.

"As good a gambler as he was," asks Mr. Colbert, the bail bondsman, "why would he need to get involved with all that?"

By that argument, the attention Williams received from the city's drug squad stemmed not from criminal behavior, but from his money and style. Police officers, long retired, still recall routine rousts in which they would find \$5,000 or more in Williams' pockets.

"He could be arrogant," recalled one former federal narcotics agent, who asked not to be identified. "It used to burn the cops up, the way he behaved sometimes."

Williams had indeed arrived. Described by the Baltimore *Afro-American* as "the most talked-about Avenue figure in years," he dressed sharp, drove a new Cadillac and alternately identified himself on police reports as a nightclub owner or vice president of a Wilmington, Del., construction firm — impressive titles for a man with no reported income or apparent hours

of employment. He was partial to full-length fur coats and a custom-made ring that featured 15 large diamonds, positioned like billiard balls inside a table rack.

Williams' friends, as well as police, recall one pivotal night when Little Melvin hit the number on a \$100 ticket — a bet that paid more than \$60,000. Williams immediately called Julius "The Lord" Salsbury, a protégé of New York underworld figure Meyer Lansky, who had bequeathed Salsbury the Baltimore rackets. Williams wanted his money.

By some accounts, Salsbury balked, and Williams and two gunmen drove down to The Block and charged into Salsbury's Oasis Club, where they were greeted by four or five of the Lord's lieutenants, berated by Salsbury, and forced to leave Baltimore Street without the money.

But others say that the confrontation has been exaggerated, that the debt was paid in time, and that Williams and Salsbury — still a fugitive after fleeing the country and a 15-year racketeering sentence in 1970 — began a lasting friendship.

Police have always believed the alliance with Salsbury went deeper. Following his success with the lottery, investigators believe, Williams acquired knowledge about money laundering and finances, and IRS agents involved in the current probe have discovered Williams still has financial ties to former Salsbury associates.

Into the courts

On a summer afternoon in August 1966, a gunman walked up to a 35-year-old narcotics addict, Danny Jacobs, on a crowded Avenue corner and demanded money owed to him. Before Jacobs could answer, he was shot. The gunman then walked away.

Police Commissioner Bishop L. Robinson, then a sergeant with the narcotics squad, interviewed an uncooperative Jacobs at Provident Hospital. After repeated questioning, the victim named Melvin Williams as the assailant. "But he told me then that he didn't think he would get to court to testify,"

See WILLIAMS, 15A, Col. 1

SUN GRAPHICS

'Little Melvin' pursued even behind bars for suspected heroin-empire millions

WILLIAMS, from 14A

Mr. Robinson recalled. "He thought he'd be killed."

Jacobs did make it to the District Court arraignment, where he promptly declared that Melvin Williams was not the man who shot him. Charges were dismissed, although the incident was one of several that established Williams' reputation as a dangerous man — a reputation that remains largely unproven.

Similar efforts to substantiate Williams' ties to the narcotics trade met with less success.

Williams was not a drug user and he was shrewd enough to keep the merchandise at arm's length, detectives contended, believing instead that loyal lieutenants, many of them boyhood friends, handled the heroin. Telephone taps and body wires — soon common to drug investigations — were cumbersome and rarely used two decades ago.

It wasn't until March 1967 that authorities, using a New York informant to make an alleged hand-to-hand heroin buy from Williams, were able to construct a case — a case that many police officers and Avenue regulars believed was manufactured by frustrated narcotics detectives. (See related article.)

Nonetheless, Williams was returned to the Avenue on bail, with his gambler's luck and reputation seemingly intact. In April 1968, as rioters were burning the inner city after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., he provided a glimpse of his prestige.

At the request of civil defense officials, Williams stood on a bench at Pennsylvania Avenue and Mosher Street and told a restless crowd to go home: "It's all over with. There will be no more rioting," Williams said, adding that "there are certain individuals who aren't doctors or lawyers, but they can tell the kids what to do."

Williams' declarations were applauded and the crowd began to break up. The next day, Williams appeared with National Guard Gen. George Gelston in a front-page photo in the *News American*. "Members of Negro community offer to quell disorder in the inner city," read the caption.

But again, a darker side: Williams is charged eight days later with terrorizing patrons of a Mount Street bar with a submachine gun, an incident stemming from a dispute between Williams and one customer, according to the account of an off-duty police officer who was among those threatened.

"Are you looking for trouble? 'I'll kill you too," Williams told the officer, who intervened when Williams and three others allegedly returned to the bar with a Thompson submachine gun, according to police reports.

An enraged Williams was convinced to leave the bar by companions, and he surrendered the next day, according to reports. Again he made bail, and court records indicate that witnesses became reluctant to testify. The legal war resumed.

In July 1968, a city judge found Williams guilty of the 1967 drug charges, but bail was extended while the case was appealed. The following March, he was charged with the

Showers

The News  American

101

Curfew Now 10 PM-4 AM As City Remains Quiet

Alies Launch Biggest Drive Of Viet War

U.S. Awaits New Word From Ho

Responsible Negroes Help

City Area Liquor Ban To Continue



GEN. GEORGE GELSTON AND HIS NEW ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS

News American, April 10, 1968: Williams, after calming a riotous crowd, stands next to National Guard Gen. George Gelston.

hand-to-hand sale of narcotics to a police informant in an arrest that occurred as Williams enjoyed a front-row seat to a National Basketball Association championship game at the Civic Center, now the Baltimore Arena.

As in the machine gun case, the charges in the high-profile Civic Center arrest were eventually dropped, and Williams' attorneys contended in court papers that the later charges were again fabricated by police officers who wanted to see Williams' bail revoked.

If that was the intent, it worked. Bail was denied in March 1969 and the earlier drug case was upheld the following month. Williams was ordered to begin his 12-year sentence.

"At that point, I thought we were done with him," recalled James B. Dudley, the assistant state's attorney who prosecuted the case. "I couldn't believe that once we had finally made a case against him, they would let him back on the street."

But Williams was in the Maryland Penitentiary for only 20 months before a state corrections official approved his transfer first to the House of Correction, and then to a pre-release camp two months later. In 1971, he passed the high-school equivalency test with the top grade in his test group, and

was recommended as "a promising candidate for vocational rehabilitation."

By June 1972, Williams was in a work-release program. In April 1973, he was paroled.

"Undoubtedly a leader"

Audis Wells remembers standing outside an Edmondson Avenue pool hall in the summer of 1974, trying to look bored as a federal informant assured Melvin Williams that Wells could be trusted.

A federal narcotics agent then assigned to Baltimore, Agent Wells says he remembers part of that conversation distinctly.

"The informant was saying he had brought me along because I was okay," recalled the agent, who still serves with the Drug Enforcement Administration. Williams looked at Wells, then back at the informant.

"You shouldn't bring strangers down here," Williams said, according to Agent Wells. "If something goes wrong, they got to be killed."

Williams was 31 when he emerged from prison. Self-controlled and cautious, he was on the surface a changed man, less inclined to claim the gangster-like reputation that had brought him so much attention on the

Avenue. He no longer wished to be known as Little Melvin, a name he regarded as demeaning, according to friends.

Instead, those he knew him called him "Slim" or "Black," the latter a reference to a self-imposed dress code that often used only one shade. He bought a pool hall in the 2100 block of Edmondson Avenue and that, too, was painted black. Using an old nickname, he chartered a corporation to operate the pool hall: Scrapp Investment Corporation Inc.

Williams' wife, Katie, had divorced him in 1970 and was living with Bernard "Big Head Brother" Lee, an arrangement, prosecutors claimed, that provided Lee with the New York pipeline to Frank Matthews. Lee became Baltimore's largest dealer overnight.

It wasn't until early 1973 that Matthews left center stage, jumping a \$325,000 bail and reportedly leaving the country with millions in cash. In Baltimore, Brother Lee and his flashy understudy, John E. "Liddle" Jones, soon found themselves targets of a new federal strike force.

Melvin Williams had been paroled into an empty marketplace.

In July 1973, he gathered a dozen younger dealers together in a Reisterstown Road motel room to organize a new heroin ring, according to court records. As always, detec-

tives contend. Williams distanced himself from the drugs, and would discuss narcotics only with members of his own ring. Police later discovered that deliveries were made by lieutenants, who would leave the heroin on a ledge atop city phone booths.

But by January 1974, the agents had made cases against two street dealers and turned them into informants. Agent Wells gained the confidence of 22-year-old Glen M. Hawkins, a man later described as Williams' chief lieutenant and enforcer, by attending a YMCA karate class taught by Hawkins.

Agent Wells and the informants made 10 purchases from Hawkins and others totaling four kilograms of heroin, according to court records. But efforts to get close to Williams ended when Agent Wells allegedly heard Williams talk about killing interlopers.

Implicated through taped conversations with the informants, Williams was charged along with seven underlings in a September 1974 indictment.

The informants themselves were terrified — one almost broke down when told he was to enter the pool hall wearing a body wire. DEA Agent William Miller recalled. And as Williams' trial date approached, one key witness fled rather than testify.

But Williams, facing a possible 120-year sentence, accepted a plea bargain against the advice of his attorney, according to court records. The agreement in February 1975 dropped some of the charges in exchange for a no-contest plea, and required prosecutors to arrange a marriage ceremony at the City Jail for Williams and Mary S. Rogers, a 31-year-old teacher's aide.

In March 1975, Williams was sentenced to 15 years, and Hawkins to nine years. Four others received lesser sentences.

"You are undoubtedly a leader," U.S. Judge Alexander Harvey II told Williams, "and I only hope that when you come out of prison, you will use your leadership qualities" for legitimate purposes.

Williams went to prison cells in Lewisburg and Atlanta before returning to Baltimore in November 1979, having served five years of his sentence. Those who saw him after the parole were told that the game was over.

"He said he had learned his lesson and that he had nothing more to do with drugs," said Officer Gittings, who ran into his old classmate at an Edmondson Avenue auto garage. "He said he was doing well with his club and his [tow] trucks."

But law enforcement officials were unimpressed, and the decision of the federal parole commission — whose deliberations remain secret because of federal privacy statutes — is still a sore point.

"No one has adequately explained to me why he was released," said Judge Prevas. "I've always believed there was something wrong there."

Tomorrow in *The Sun*: The war continues. Police and prosecutors contend that Williams learned the lessons of his earlier arrests and used trusted lieutenants, sophisticated communications and fraudulent finances to insulate himself in the drug trade — allegations that Williams would later deny in court.

Doubts persist about Williams' 1967 drug bust

By David Simon

George Shaheen remembers pulling the .38-caliber Smith & Wesson from beneath the passenger seat. He remembers Melvin Williams handcuffed by the side of the car. He remembers watching Baltimore police Sgt. Lawrence Wineke push his hand into Williams' coat pocket and come out with 16 capsules of heroin.

"Right then, he started yelling that the drugs were planted," recalled Mr. Shaheen, a former federal narcotics agent now with the Internal Revenue Service. "He got mad and started fighting and we had to get him under control."

Mr. Shaheen said he was standing next to Sergeant Wineke when the search began at Brunt and McMechen streets, and "the way I remember, [the sergeant's] hands were clean when they went in and dirty when they came out."

Others aren't as sure.

From interviews with surviving participants in the case, a second scenario emerges — one in which narcotics detectives, frustrated at their inability to make a case against a suspected drug dealer, fabricated evidence.

Most of the federal agents and prosecutors involved in the 1967 arrest of Melvin Williams call it a good bust, although they say they can recall few details of the case.

But at least one of the agents involved concedes — 19 years later — that investigators were never sure of the evidence that provided the probable cause to arrest Williams. In addition, a second source involved with the case also provided details that raise questions about the arrest itself.

The former narcotics agent, who requested anonymity, also said that the heroin produced by Sergeant Wineke during his search of Williams was, to his knowledge, planted to ensure the success of the case.

"What you have to understand is how bad the Baltimore police wanted that boy," the former agent said. "He was young, and he was pretty brazen. The attitude was, if he was doing bad, he was going to pay the price."

□ The arrest of Melvin Williams on April 13, 1967, marked the first time police were able to bring drug charges against a man who had achieved almost mythic status among the hustlers, dopers and gamblers who inhabited the 1400 and 1500 blocks of Pennsylvania Avenue.

The difference was a man named Joseph Miles.

Joe Miles, alias Joe Murray, was a 36-year-old professional informant facing charges in a New York narcotics case. Miles had contacts in several cities and, in exchange for his freedom, offered to work with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (predecessor to the Drug Enforcement Administration) to set up some Baltimore dealers.

On March 8, 1967, at the bar of the Avenue Musical Lounge, Miles proved true to his word. He sat on a stool next to Melvin Williams and supposedly exchanged \$700 for 22 grams of heroin.

Using a pay phone in the lounge, Miles had called Williams twice at a pool hall a block away and asked him to come by the bar. Williams showed up a short time later and an undercover agent sitting on the other side of the bar purportedly saw Williams pass a white paper envelope or package to Miles, according to court testimony.

Williams then left the bar by the front door. An undercover agent watched Miles walk out a side door, where he handed the envelope unopened to a waiting agent, according to testimony. Although Williams allegedly received \$700 in marked money, he was not stopped as he left the bar.

The incident provided agents with probable cause to obtain warrants that were executed that April afternoon when Williams was driving his Cadillac near his home.

In addition to the gun recovered by Agent Shaheen and the capsules allegedly discovered in Williams' pocket during the arrest, Sergeant Wineke reached under the driver's seat of the car and emerged with a little more than nine grams of heroin.

By that version, the case against Little Melvin was textbook drug enforcement. And when Judge Anselm Sodaro considered the case, he believed that account, sentencing the 26-year-old Williams to a 12-year prison term.

But consider:

□ An FBI lab report indicates that the only fingerprints found on the heroin allegedly sold to Miles in the Avenue bar were those of Miles himself. Moreover, those prints were lifted from two glassine envelopes that were inside the sealed white envelope that Miles had allegedly handed unopened to a federal agent, according to testimony.

"How did Joe Miles' prints get in the interior of that envelope unless he himself packed it?" asked one source involved in the case.

□ The arresting officer, Sergeant Wineke, was not called to testify by the government during the circuit court trial in July 1968. By that time, Lawrence Wineke had already been barred from the witness stand by at least one Baltimore judge because of fraudulent testimony.

Moreover, the sergeant was under investigation by a grand jury looking into police corruption. On Jan. 27, 1969, just before he was to testify before a grand jury, he shot and killed himself.

In addition, a second federal narcotics agent involved in the Williams case was later transferred to New York and subsequently convicted of threatening to fabricate evidence against a narcotics suspect unless he received a cash payment.

□ Joe Miles also did not appear to testify

at the trial, and only the federal agent who allegedly witnessed the transaction testified that the heroin Miles brought out of the bar came from Williams.

But now that same agent, who asked not to be identified, concedes that he never saw the white envelope actually change hands.

"We searched [Miles] when he went in and we searched him when he came out," the agent recalled. "He had \$700 when he went in, he met with Melvin, and he had the package when he came out."

But, added the agent, "if you're asking if Miles could have had the dope under the bar or under a stool, the answer is yes. It might have come from Melvin . . . he walked down there and met the man. Then again, Miles was a snake who was getting paid to make the case."

□ According to both Williams and an independent source involved in the case, Williams called his attorney, Milton B. Allen, several days before the April arrest and indicated that a police source had warned him that a warrant had been issued for his arrest. More importantly, the source said, Williams called Mr. Allen on April 13 about an hour before the arrest and search by Sergeant Wineke.

Williams told his attorney that he had looked out a window at his home in the 1400 block of Madison Avenue and spotted men he knew as narcotics agents about a block away. Williams and the source both recalled.

The source said that Mr. Allen asked if Williams had any narcotics in his possession, or in his house or automobile. His client told him he did not. A short time later, Williams left his home and drove two or three blocks before being stopped and arrested.

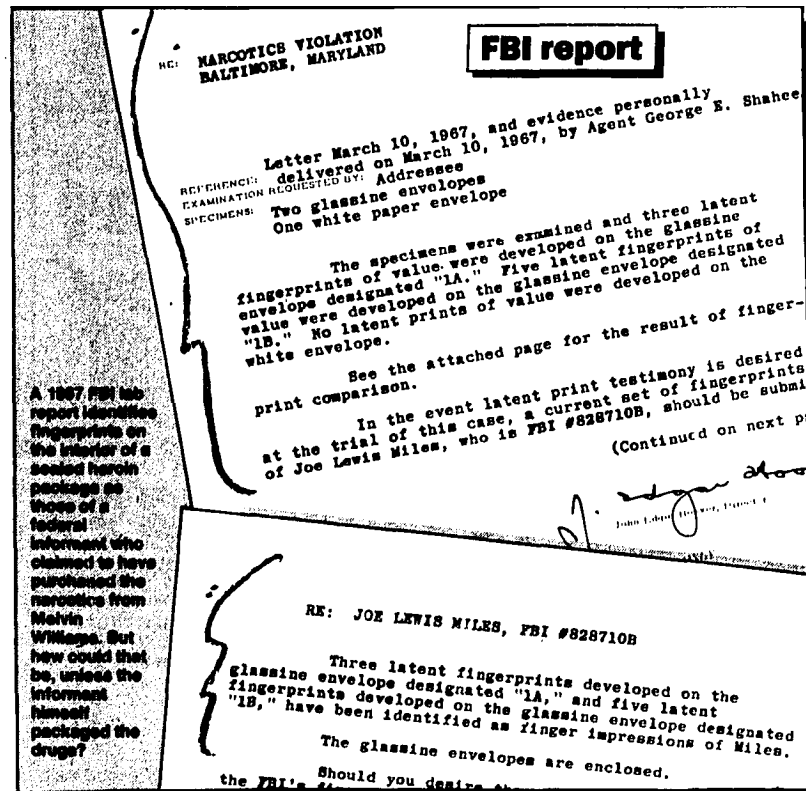
"Now if he made that call, why would he go out of his house holding heroin?" asked the source, who requested anonymity.

Narcotics detectives who worked on Pennsylvania Avenue during the late 1960s concede privately that there was some skepticism about the case against Little Melvin.

"It was pretty well known along the Avenue that Melvin didn't carry drugs himself, that his lieutenants would do that," said one former detective. And because electronic surveillance had not yet been perfected as an investigative tool, "He was always a step ahead."

Moreover, there has never been any indication that Williams ever used narcotics himself, and therefore no reason that he would be holding 16 caps of heroin in his coat pocket — a rather paltry amount for someone alleged to be a large dealer.

"There was just a lot of bad stuff going on back then," said another former detective, now a high-ranking police official. "Lots of arrests where the report would say that a bag of heroin was found on the sidewalk next to the suspect, if you know what I mean."



SUN GRAPHICS

For his part, Williams testified at trial that on the day of his arrest, Sergeant Wineke walked up to him, put a fist in Williams' left jacket pocket and came out with the capsules. The sergeant, Williams claimed, didn't even bother to check his other pockets. As for Joe Miles, Williams testified that he knew him to be an informant as early as 1964.

Mr. Allen, Williams' attorney who later served as city state's attorney and recently retired as a circuit court judge, declined to comment publicly on the 1967 charges against Williams.

Joe Miles is unavailable for comment. His career, which included 22 arrests in 20 years, ended in a drug-related double slaying in a New Orleans apartment building Sept. 6, 1973.

One final note: According to a source close to the case, Williams' attorney, Mr. Allen, repeatedly urged his client to seek trial by a jury, which might be more easily swayed by the FBI fingerprint report and Williams' testimony about prior knowledge of the warrant. But Williams insisted that the verdict be made by a judge, the source recalled.

On the afternoon of July 3, 1968, as Judge Sodaro considered the evidence and

prepared the verdict, a confident Melvin Williams passed out cigars to celebrate an expected victory. When the guilty verdict was announced, "Melvin was stunned. He just stood there trying to take it in," said the source, who was present in the packed courtroom.

The source claimed that a sadder-but-wiser Williams later told him that he had given \$6,500 to Robert "Fifi" London, a local bail bondsman and numbers kingpin who died several years ago. Williams said London was going to set the case right for him, the source said.

Judge Sodaro, now retired, said he was never approached by anyone attempting to influence his decision in the Williams case.

Indeed, Fifi London probably had no plans to bribe a judge. As a betting man, London would have simply been wagering that Williams would beat the charge and that the payment could be pocketed. After the verdict, Williams told the source, the \$6,500 was returned without complaint.

In retrospect, perhaps the Fifi London story is meant to be apocryphal. After all, if the case against Williams was indeed a frame, then the tale provides a perfect moral:

One good fix deserved another.

Loyal underlings insulated Williams

Ring members called him 'Dad,' police say

By David Simon

Any good gambler understands this mathematical certainty: No matter how high you stack the odds in your favor, no matter how well you master the game, if you play long enough — letting your money ride — you will eventually lose.

Melvin Williams, in the minds of those pursuing him, could not walk away from the table.

□

Heroin and cocaine arrive in Baltimore in kilos, south by plane or car from New York and New Jersey, or

'EASY MONEY' ANATOMY OF A DRUG EMPIRE

Second of five parts

north from Florida and other Gulf points. Some slips through local airports, concealed in cigarette cartons or hollowed-out boot heels.

The couriers — "mules" — are well-paid veterans unlikely to deal with authorities if arrested. And if a courier does cooperate, he or she can often provide police with nothing more than an address or nickname of a low-level contact.

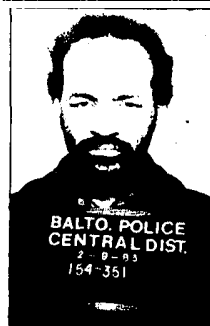
Drug enforcement officials contend that for the first half of this decade, many of those mules ended their journey in motel rooms or cheap apartments, in the company of men who served Melvin Williams.

In court affidavits and testimony during detention hearings, authorities describe a narcotics organization so large — detectives identified more than 200 street dealers allegedly supplied by various lieutenants — that it was purchasing narcotics from several importers and con-

Cat and mouse



Surveillance photo, October 12, 1984 (above): Detectives wait and watch from the north side of East North Avenue as Lamont "Chin" Farmer and a female companion wait for a call at a Guilford Avenue phone booth (arrow). Identified by police as one of Melvin Williams' top lieutenants, Farmer (right) used an elaborate system of pay phones, contact beepers and organizational codes to avoid court-ordered wiretaps and keep federal agents at bay.



SUN GRAPHICS

stantly looking for new, more lucrative connections.

Wholesale exchanges of narcotics were carefully controlled, according to detectives, with Williams represented by tested lieutenants such as Glen Hawkins or Kenny "Bird" Jackson — men identified in court papers as Williams' most trusted surrogates, men who allegedly had the authority and knowledge to carry large amounts of cash and make purchases without being cheated.

The loyalty of such lieutenants was unquestioned, and Williams' authority was absolute, detectives say. Hawkins, in particular, had gone to prison with Williams in 1975 and was once described by a government informant as Williams' "right arm and legs," according to court records.

When Hawkins was sentenced a second time in March 1985, a defense attorney would declare that his 33-year-old client viewed Williams as "the only real father-figure he ever knew." Hawkins, who was acquitted on a 1974 murder charge and later served time on federal weapons charges, was known by many as "Young-un," a nickname bestowed by Williams.

Some subordinates regarded themselves as members of an extended family, according to detectives, with rank-and-file members adopting Williams' all-black dress code. Late in their investigation, police were startled to hear even senior members of the ring referring to Williams as "Dad."

See **WILLIAMS**, 6A, Col. 1

Melvin Williams stakes future on legal appeals

WILLIAMS, from 1A

Such devotion allowed Williams to keep his distance, police contend.

He never discussed business on his home or nightclub phones, relying instead on telephone contact beepers and pay phones to avoid wiretaps while communicating with lieutenants. On one occasion, police say, Williams became enraged when a mid-level narcotics broker — who was then serving time at a Jessup prison — called him at home to discuss business.

Surveillance was also a problem. Detective Harry Edgerton recalls one fall 1984 stakeout in which he was behind the wheel of an unmarked car, more than a block from Williams' Edmondson Avenue nightclub.

"And out comes Melvin, talking with somebody," the detective says. "He doesn't know me at all, and I'm way up the block. But he takes a quick look at me, and his antennas go up . . . like he can smell police."

Detectives believe there was no reason for Williams to go near the narcotics. After purchase, the uncut product was brought to a stash house — a row house basement, a vacant apartment — then cut with mannitol, procaine or other diluents and sent to the street in small quantities to meet demand.

"That way," explained Detective Edward Burns, "if someone gets picked up by police or ripped off by a holdup man, you only lose one or two packages."

The money came back through the lieutenants, who made regular collections from street-level dealers, ensuring that no one messed up the money or product. When Hawkins was finally arrested in December 1984, police found more than \$5,000 in his wallet. The bills had been manicured — stacked by denomination and held by rubber bands.

"Like he was ready to turn in the day's receipts," said Detective Edgerton.

They were the biggest obstacles, as far as police were concerned, these men who stood between Williams and the street: Hawkins, Jackson and a 33-year-old innovator named Lamont "Chin" Farmer.

Farmer represented a new generation of narcotics dealers in this city. His older brother, Elwood, had been a contemporary of Williams, a heroin user with a police record. The younger Lamont, however, was unknown to authorities.

And yet since 1979, Chin Farmer had been selling heroin and cocaine, according to detectives, and the profits had made him part-owner of an East North Avenue print shop and an auto towing firm.

Among the street-learned West Baltimore dealers, Farmer was something of a scholar, who had been attending business courses at an area college and doing well. At one point, police taped a phone conversation in which a dazed Elwood Farmer was lectured by his younger brother on such heady concepts as free-market forces and maximized profits.

Cautious and deliberate, Farmer subscribed to legal journals that kept him up-to-date on recent court decisions in criminal law. And when conducting business, he would drive for miles, changing directions repeatedly to prevent surveillance.

"I'll tell you something else, man, I had over 100,000 miles on my car from '80," Farmer told a government informant during a late 1984 drug buy. "And most of it he doing this here."

On one occasion, detectives trailed Farmer to a location where they believed he was to pick up a drug shipment. But as Farmer finished a conversation in a pay phone, the police helicopter, responding to an unrelated call, appeared overhead for a few moments.

That was enough for Farmer: "He looked up, got back in his car and was gone," said Detective Edgerton.

It was Farmer who developed the complex communications system that used contact beepers and pay phones to conduct business in a way that would avoid telephone wiretaps.

"Melvin's genius was that he recognized how sharp Chin Farmer was," said Detective Burns. "I think he saw this guy as the coming thing, and he grabbed him."

Farmer had his own sources of supply for New York heroin, and police later discovered his ties to a small, but well-connected Baltimore drug ring operated by Louis "Cookie" Savage, a dealer with cocaine ties reaching directly to Miami and the Dominican Republic. Savage had been selling cocaine since the late 1970s, and his name had surfaced as a suspect in a 1979 drug murder, but no drug enforcement agency had a file on him.

"Everyone knows Melvin," said Detective Burns. "But with Farmer and Savage, they could be on the corner in a group of guys, and you wouldn't be able to pick them out as major drug dealers. They weren't flashy."

Farmer was branching out as well. With his friend Savage, he was exploring the idea of investment in the construction of a sports complex in Nigeria, authorities learned. And with another narcotics suspect, Farmer had purchased and outfitted a Miami charter boat in an attempt to secure a direct connection to the unsurpassed moneymaker in the drug market — Latin American cocaine.

"We found that they were three separate organizations — Williams, Farmer and Savage — that spiraled together," explained John N. Prevas, a city judge who until recently headed the narcotics unit of the state's attorney's office. "They would have separate ventures and then pool their money and resources on other deals."

Melvin Williams has been a resident of the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., for almost two years, and yet with every passing day, he appears stronger, almost younger. There are few distractions here, and much of the day is spent lifting weights in the exercise room or running in the yard.

With muscles tight against his drab brown prison garb, Williams looks every bit the health enthusiast who can bench-press 300, who takes pride in being able to run faster and longer than younger inmates who arrive at the gates of the old stone facility in the Susquehanna Valley.

He reads, he sleeps, he eats within the strict confines of his vegetarian diet. Once a week, his family arrives from Baltimore. And with the hours and hours that remain, Melvin Williams learns the law.

It is the law to which Williams has staked his future.

There will be no negotiations, no deals. Police and prosecutors believe that Williams, with his long history, could bring down much of Baltimore's underworld if he decided to cooperate, and yet they haven't approached him.

In New York, in Baltimore, inside the penitentiary in Lewisburg, Melvin Williams is known and respected for his word, and even his detractors will concede that Williams has disciplined his life to an uncompromised code of conduct: You do your time; you don't testify against others.

Once in 1977, Williams was visited in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta by a Baltimore narcotics detective and a representative of the state's attorney's office, who wanted Williams' testimony in a police corruption case. Williams was looking at the lion's share of a 15-year sentence, and cooperation could have meant early parole, but the conversation was short.

"That man's never done anything to me, and I'm not doing anything to him," Williams told the detective.

Instead, Williams has turned his extraordinary self-discipline to the details of his criminal appeal and the civil court petitions that seek the return of seized property. His legal arguments, which are still being pursued, portray a government willing to bend the law to keep him in prison.

One civil action seeks to recover furs and jewelry seized by authorities, then later used to depict Williams' way of life as that of a drug dealer. And yet, the legal papers contend, many of those items were purchased years before the narcotics conspiracy is alleged to have occurred.

The federal agents also took the car — the \$52,000 Maserati seized by federal agents and reserved for the occasional use of city Police Commissioner Bishop L. Robinson. And again, the Scrup Investment Corporation Inc. is seeking the car's return through a court petition, arguing that prosecutors provided no proof that the car was anything but a legal corporate purchase.

But far more important is the criminal appeal of Williams' February 1985 trial in Alexandria, Va., filed by Howard L. Cardin, Williams' attorney for more than a decade.

In his appeal brief, Mr. Cardin cites the federal judge for repeatedly interrupting the defense attorney's cross-examination, for prohibiting as evidence a polygraph exam that would have damaged the testimony of the key witness in the trial. The appeal also objects to the judge's decision to allow 12 citizens to be picked from an all-white pool of jurors, and then to allow that jury to sit in judgment of a black defendant.

In addition, Mr. Cardin argues that prosecutors improperly introduced into evidence two handguns confiscated from Williams' home — weapons that had no direct bearing on the charges against Williams and were seized, Mr. Cardin contends, under a faulty search warrant.

With the continuing federal probe still pending, Williams declines to defend himself publicly beyond those legal arguments.

And yet federal prosecutors have already introduced much of their evidence in the successful Virginia prosecution against Williams and Hawkins, which resulted from an attempted cocaine buy at a Rosslyn, Va., hotel. It is for that conviction that Williams is serving his 34-year sentence — a sentence that has already been affirmed once by a federal appeals court.

Beyond that, the extended probe of Williams' organization remains open, and authorities readily agree that they would like to see Williams' sentence extended, and more of his assets confiscated as narcotics profits.

While federal prosecutors have declined to comment publicly about the Williams probe, law enforcement sources note that the two prosecutors originally assigned to the investigation — John Prevas and William Quarles — have resigned to become a city judge and a private attorney, respectively.

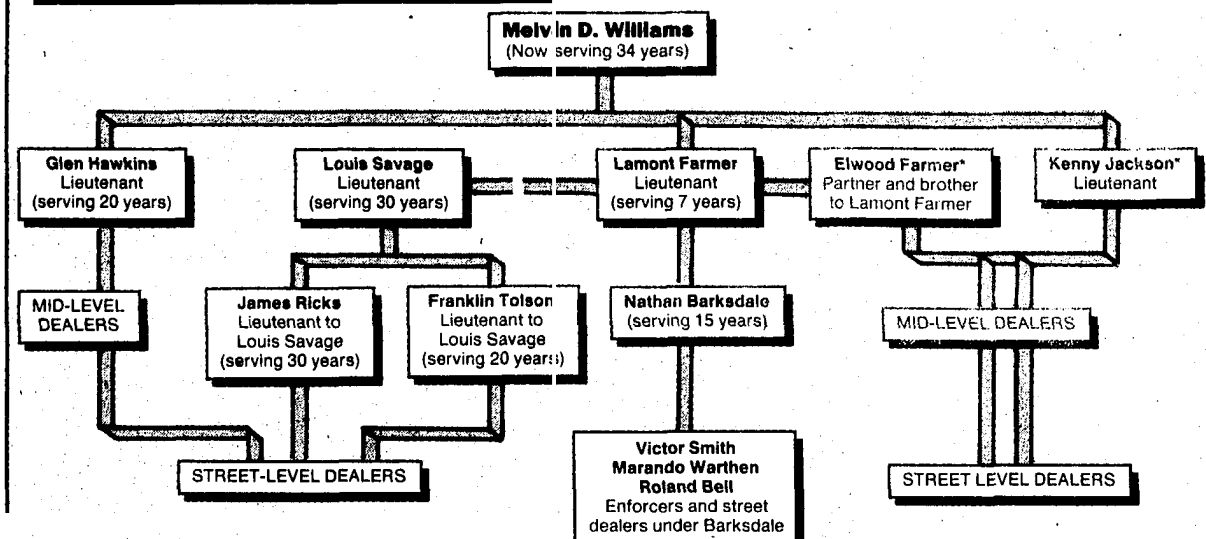
With the Federal Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force down to four prosecutors, and with the U.S. Attorney's Office as a whole short six positions, authorities contend that delays in the Williams investigation have resulted from manpower concerns.

"We're so backed up with drug cases that we haven't been able to get the case to court," said one federal source. "But the feeling is that he got a lot of time in the Virginia case, and he's not going to be going anywhere."

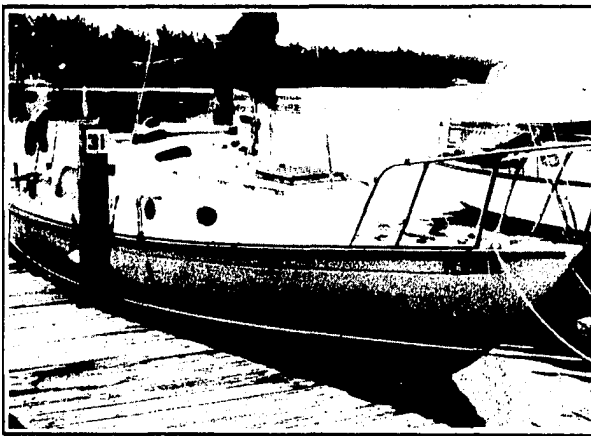
The profits were enormous, according to police, who estimate the group amassed millions of dollars. Investigators for the Internal Revenue Service contend that Wil-

The Melvin Williams organization: 1980 — '84

As alleged by police and prosecutors

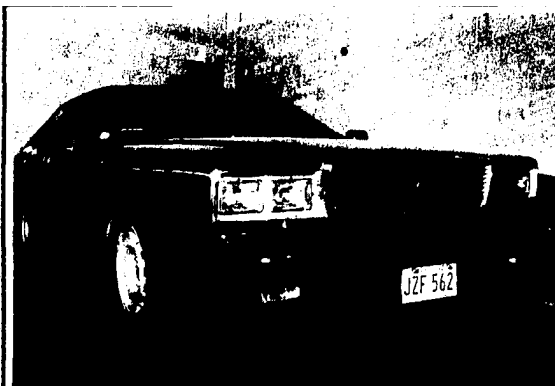


*not indicted but named in court affidavits



Clockwise from upper left:

A Miami-based sailboat traced to Lamont Farmer, Williams' alleged lieutenant, who is believed to have invested in the craft as a means of importing Latin American cocaine; The Scrup investment-owned Underground nightclub on Edmondson Avenue; Williams' state's Reservoir Hill home; Williams' \$52,000 Maserati sedan, also purchased by the Scrup firm; parked at city police headquarters.



iams and his accountants relied on creative bookkeeping and sophisticated money-laundering schemes to justify new and sudden wealth.

In 1980, Melvin Williams was a model parolee, living in a Lennox Street town house with his wife and her sister's family of six, according to federal parole records. He had a declared income of \$8,000 as a dues-paying member of the International Longshoremen's Association. His Scrup Investment company showed a \$4,000 loss from the Edmondson Avenue pool hall, according to tax returns filed in court.

Four years later, the same man declared income of \$110,000 and had paid cash for a three-story Park Avenue home now valued at \$100,000. The house contained another \$100,000 in furnishings, furs and jewelry. Parked out front was a \$52,000 Maserati and a \$34,000 BMW sedan.

The Scrup firm had acquired 11 west side real estate properties valued at more than \$700,000, and it was negotiating for the \$800,000 purchase of a Reservoir Hill apartment building, according to court records. The Scrup portfolio also included four tow trucks approved for 24-hour road service by the Automobile Association of America.

Even the pool hall had changed. It was now The Underground, a well-furnished nightclub valued at \$105,000, according to real estate appraisals.

"It's not hard to be a good businessman when your business runs on drug money," said Maj. Joseph Newman, who until recently directed the city narcotics squad. "When you're pulling in millions tax-free, you're going to show a profit."

IRS investigators later determined that Williams held no personal checking accounts and had apparently paid for all purchases — house, cars, furniture, jewelry, furs — in cash. In addition, investigators contend that the Scrup firm, through such cash businesses as the Underground nightclub and the auto towing service, could simply report more legitimate income than really existed.

Although Williams' personal tax returns didn't begin to reflect the money coming in, according to investigators, they were nonetheless creative in their explanation of assets. For example, Williams' 1984 filing reported \$30,000 earned by Williams as a manager for his Scrup firm and, in apparent reference to his skill as a gambler, another \$80,000 in "chance winnings."

Other explanations for Williams' wealth were simply surreal, investigators contend.

According to documents later confiscated by authorities, Williams' accountant was told that Dorothy Williams left her son \$100,000 in cash savings. But over their entire lives, according to Social Security records, Alfred and Dorothy Williams' earnings were no more than \$110,000.

Balance statements and tax filings for the Scrup company showed a steady accumulation of wealth. By 1984, the company was reporting assets of more than \$320,000, and income from rental properties supposedly accounted for more than \$100,000 annually.

Moreover, those financial statements represented the Scrup firm's chief liability as loans payable to stockholders — an amount that had reached \$230,000 in 1984. But Williams is listed on earlier tax returns as the owner of 100 percent of the corporation's stock, according to investigators, who allege that he was, in effect, laundering cash by lending it to himself.

By rooting through documents confiscated from Williams' home, nightclub and accountant's office, IRS agents have been able to document \$500,000 in unreported income between 1980 and 1984, and they have advised federal prosecutors to seek tax evasion charges against Williams.

But that figure, based only on Williams' known expenditures and those of the Scrup firm, represents only a small share of the profits actually laundered, investigators say.

Authorities learned that Williams, through one intermediary, deposited more than \$300,000 in cash at a Pennsylvania Avenue bank branch alone between the summer of 1982 and late 1984, using a bank teller who was willing to accept the large cash deposits without filing the requisite report to banking authorities.

In civil actions, Scrup Investment has challenged the government's accounting of Williams' wealth by distancing itself as a corporation from Melvin Williams. And although Williams appears on earlier corporate records as a vice president of the firm, his name was removed from state corporate charter documents last year.

Instead, Scrup Investment is operated by Williams' wife, Mary, and his father-in-law, James E. Rogers, who are the only listed directors. Other court papers identify Melvin Williams only as a manager for the Scrup firm, and argue that Williams' alleged narcotics activities are unrelated to Scrup's assets.

In addition, Williams' supporters argue — and some investigators agree — that the

Scrup company was legitimately successful. The towing company, the rental properties and the Underground nightclub were all profitable.

"You can go into the Underground any night and find people spending money there," said Tim Conway, a longtime friend of the Williams family. "Melvin Williams is a successful businessman. Just because you're black and ride around in a Maserati doesn't mean you deal drugs."

Others close to Williams point to his expertise as a gambler, and to a certain extent, court records support that argument.

For example, a federal informant told detectives about an August 1983 crap game attended by the movers and shakers in the west side narcotics trade. Police were told that Williams, in his old Avenue form, had walked out of an after-hours club with \$200,000 of William E. "Little Will" Franklin's money, according to court affidavits, which name Franklin as the target of an ongoing federal narcotics investigation.

While authorities contend that gambling and legitimate ventures do not explain the greater portion of Williams' income, detectives were indeed concerned that Williams, and Lamont Farmer as well, could reach a point where their businesses provided enough legitimate income to completely insulate themselves.

Williams had certainly accumulated enough wealth to take himself out of the game. More to the point, Melvin Williams was a family man, with a wife and two young daughters. He had reached middle age in good health and considerable wealth.

Life was good, and as a two-time loser on narcotics charges, Williams could be certain that narcotics detectives and federal agents were looking hard at him. If they tagged him a third time, it would be a lengthy sentence.

But in the minds of the detectives, Melvin Williams, for all his power and cunning, had never really succeeded in outgrowing Little Melvin.

"He just couldn't walk away from it," said Major Newman. "These guys never can. No matter how much money they make, they just can't walk away from one more deal."

Tomorrow: If Williams returned to the upper ranks of the drug trade, as authorities contend, he did so with discretion. But those alleged to have sold heroin and cocaine for his organization in the streets of West Baltimore built their careers on numbing, repetitive violence.

Heroin trade enlists ever-younger killers for reign by bloodletting

Simon, David

The Sun (1837-1987); Jan 13, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987)

pg. 1B

Heroin trade enlists ever-younger killers for reign by bloodletting

By David Simon

From the top it seems so clean, so professional — contacts made and shipments delivered. They are businessmen, with accountants and corporate titles and legitimate ventures funded with less-than-legitimate capital. The heroin and cocaine they market could just as well be pork futures, or machine parts, or widgets.

'EASY MONEY'

ANATOMY OF A DRUG EMPIRE

Third of five parts

But at bottom, it is war.

Nineteen-year-olds killing 20-year-olds for a fraction of a kilo. Children making \$200 a week as lookouts, or \$500 a week as runners. Teen-age sociopaths walking the streets of West Baltimore with .357-caliber cannons pushed into the waistbands of their sweat pants.

By the accounts of police and prosecutors, generations had passed since Melvin Williams' name had been linked with the street corner



Three members (left) of the police Special Tactical Operations Patrol check a man for drugs at the Lexington Terrace playground in West Baltimore. After questioning he was allowed to go on his way.

THE SUN/FRANK W. PHILLIPS JR.

violence so common to the drug trade. Court affidavits filed in the Virginia prosecution and federal detention proceedings portray Williams as a man who lived above the escalating bloodshed, who took as his servants the Nathan Barksdales of the world.

Crippled at age 11 and a drug user at 13, Nathan "Bodie" Barksdale headed only one of several dozen street-level drug rings that police say were supplied through the Williams organization. Barksdale and his men were preferred customers who controlled some of the most lucrative territory in the city — west-side public housing projects such as the Lexington Terrace apartments and the George B. Murphy Homes.

Theirs was a three-year reign of terror, punctuated by five homicides and four attempted murders — including the prolonged torture of three people in an 11th-floor apartment at the Murphy Homes.

And that, concedes homicide Detective Ed Burns, "is just what we know about."

See **VIOLENCE**, 2B, Col. 1

Heroin trade taps young for rule by guns

VIOLENCE, from 1B

At its peak, the violence attributable to Barksdale and other dealers became a daily occurrence in the high-rise projects, where residents retreated to their apartments as stairwells, hallways — even courtyard playgrounds — became war zones.

Detectives recalled that security officers, intimidated by the armed dealers, would routinely look the other way as elevators and stairwells were requisitioned for narcotics transactions and tenants waited in the lobby, packages in hand.

The west side high-rises had become Baltimore's 24-hour supermarket for heroin and cocaine — a natural habitat for Nathan Barksdale, who liked to count Adolf Hitler and Niccolo Machiavelli among his heroes.

Even Lamont Farmer, who supplied the drugs sold by Barksdale, tended to regard Bodie's ruthlessness with distanced awe. Detectives at one point overheard Farmer tell a friend that when he dealt with Barksdale, he kept one hand on his gun.

By late 1982, according to court affidavits, Barksdale and his group were receiving a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of heroin — with a wholesale value of about \$100,000 and a retail worth of perhaps five times that amount — every week from Farmer, who is identified by investigators in court records as Williams' chief lieutenant and ally.

And police later uncovered information that at least one of the slayings attributed to Barksdale and his men was, in fact, a contract killing performed at Farmer's request, according to court papers.

Police and prosecutors contend that Melvin Williams was insulated from street sales and had little, if any, contact with dealers such as Barksdale. But in detention hearings held after Williams' arrest, prosecutors cited the Farmer-Barksdale tie as evidence that Williams, through his connections, could be a danger to the community if released.

In court hearings, Williams has consistently denied any ties to Nathan Barksdale or any of the violence attributed to such street dealers. Howard L. Cardin, Williams' attorney, argued during the detention hearings that linking Williams to Farmer and Barksdale was tenuous at best, and that there was never any indication that Williams intended to bring "any kind of harm to anybody."

But police maintain that the narcotics allegedly marketed by Williams and his organization was the carrier of the disease: "You'd never see Melvin down at the projects. Maybe once in a while, he'd ride by in that big car of his," said Detective John Hailey, of the city's Special Tactical Operations Patrol (STOP), which works high-crime areas including the housing projects. "But it's his dope that was being sold."

Added Detective Burnis: "One dealer might get shot because he was selling from another guy's corner. But both of them could have been supplied with heroin that ultimately came from Melvin."

And it is only getting worse. "The kids running drugs are getting younger and younger," said Detective William Matthews, of the STOP squad. "They will kill you for a \$5 debt, or just for looking at them the wrong way. They just don't care."

Police Commissioner Bishop L. Robinson, who served as a narcotics detective in the 1960s when Williams was a young man living off the street, suggests that the current level of drug-related violence makes it unlikely that the streets will again produce someone as durable as Melvin Williams.

"If Melvin were coming up today," Mr. Robinson speculated, "he wouldn't live to be 21."

City homicide detectives, as well as STOP squad officers working in the high-rises, were introduced to Barksdale and his childhood friend, Marando Warthen, six years ago, when the two were pushing their way into the crowded drug market at the west side projects.

Barksdale was then 17, Warthen a year older. The two had grown up in the high-rises, accumulating a dozen juvenile arrests for petty crimes for which probation was the inevitable penalty, according to court records.

As appearances go, they were hardly impressive. Thin and gangly, Barksdale had lost a foot as a child when a truck backed him against a wall, and in 1983, the leg was amputated to the knee. With the use of a cane, Barksdale could still move extremely fast, although during court hearings he would appear as a wheelchair-bound invalid.

Warthen was the son of a former Baltimore police officer who lived with his mother in their North Ellamont Street home. Marando was tall, but slight of frame, with a boyish face and soft voice. His manner was shy and detached.

Both Barksdale and Warthen were tutored as lookouts and runners by older drug traffickers, and the lessons were often harsh, according to detectives. Police were told of an incident in which Barksdale was punished by his mentor, Frank Harper, for failing to turn over all of the profits. Harper locked the boy in a row house basement with an angry German shepherd.

But Nathan Barksdale endured, and STOP squad detectives watched his reputation grow.

In March 1981, he fatally wounded a



Evidence photos (above) show the aftermath of the prolonged torture of three people in a high-rise apartment by Barksdale and others; Frank Harper's store (above right) on the night of his murder; Barksdale and three of his enforcers (right).



Nathan Barksdale

Marando Warthen

Roland Bell

Victor Smith

man during an argument at the high-rise at 1058 Argyle Ave. He was charged with homicide, but the only witness recanted. Barksdale ultimately received a suspended sentence on a manslaughter charge.

Barksdale himself was shot later that year in a drug-related dispute in a George Street high-rise. It was the second, and most serious, of four instances in which Bodie would be wounded by gunfire, according to court records.

Hospitalized with six gunshot wounds, Barksdale identified his assailant for detectives. When the case finally came to trial in July 1982, however, he refused to testify.

Instead, Barksdale waited until the man who tried to kill him was led into the courtroom by sheriff's deputies. Barksdale then stepped to the aisle and knocked the man unconscious with a blow to the head from his metal cane. He later served 30 days for the assault.

More milestones: In August 1982, Barksdale was charged in the July murder of Frank Harper, the drug trafficker who had been his mentor. Harper's death gave Barksdale a monopoly on some of the most lucrative territory in the projects, according to detectives. Warthen was identified by a witness as an accomplice in the killing.

But a Baltimore Circuit Court jury acquitted Barksdale after three hours of deliberation, refusing to believe that the wheelchair-bound defendant could have carried out Harper's murder, according to comments attributed to jurors after the verdict.

Barksdale, Warthen and a third member of their group, Andre "Jim" Hart, 24, were also charged with the August 1982 murder of John Bailey, 30, who was killed in retaliation for the robbery of Louis Savage, a cocaine dealer allied with Lamont Farmer, at a west side stash house, according to detectives.

Detectives later heard from an informant that Bailey, after learning of Savage's stature, tried to make amends by returning a wristwatch that he had taken during the robbery. Savage accepted the watch, according to the informant, but Bailey's bullet-riddled body was found in a third-floor hallway at the Lexington Terrace high-rise.

The state's chief witness in both the Harper and Bailey murders was Patrick Battle, 17, a pusher and runner for Barksdale, who told police his story only after Barksdale allegedly attempted to have him killed as well. But Battle had lied when police had questioned him earlier about the Bailey mur-

der, discrediting himself as a witness.

Following the March 1983 acquittal in the Harper case, the charges in the Bailey murder were dismissed.

Barksdale, Hart and three other members of the group — including Barksdale's older brother, Ronald — were also charged with the kidnapping and attempted murder of Patrick Battle three days after the Bailey murder.

Although Battle lied about Bailey's death when questioned by police, Barksdale, suspecting otherwise, ordered the youth killed. The other four defendants drove Battle to Leakin Park and propped him against a tree. A handgun was aimed at his head, according to police and court records.

Battle later told police that he was told to get on his knees, and the gun was cocked. Battle ducked, and the first shot went singing over his head.

Dodging bullets, the boy ran through the park and dove through the living room window of a nearby Edmondson Village home, where the occupant called police. Battle then told detectives a different story about the Bailey and Harper murders.

The charges in this incident, however, were also dropped, because Battle's earlier statements to police undermined his credibility in court.

"It was frustrating," said one detective involved in the case. "Barksdale just slipped through the cracks."

By spring 1983, prosecutors had closed the case files, and Nathan Barksdale was consolidating territory in the high-rises. In addition to Warthen, Hart and his brother, Ronald, Bodie had acquired the services of Roland E. "Ronnie Mo" Bell, according to STOP squad detectives, who recall that Bell routinely carried at least two handguns and once went so far as to tell several STOP squad officers that in the projects: "I'm the law."

Another enforcer working for Barksdale was 16-year-old Victor Smith, who sold Barksdale's cocaine in the Murphy Homes and was all of 15 when he first came to the attention of homicide detectives in connection with several drug-related shootings in the high-rises.

Years later, when he appeared as a witness in a city court trial, Victor Smith would be asked by a prosecutor whether he would kill someone who had identified him or his friends as drug dealers.

"I probably would," the teen-ager replied. "You would hold a gun to a person's head and blow that person's head off, wouldn't

Reign of terror

Murphy Homes high-rises when they spotted a woman they knew as an acquaintance of Michael Stewart.

The woman, Myra Tyson, was in the company of two men who were unfamiliar to the group, and Barksdale feared that the threesome had come to the projects seeking revenge for the Stewart murder, according to statements made to police after the incident.

One by one, Ms. Tyson and her escorts — who had come to the projects to purchase cocaine — were forced at gunpoint by Roland Bell and Barksdale to an 11th-floor apartment, where they were beaten and tortured by the gang, according to court testimony. Ms. Tyson was first.

Barksdale forced her to disrobe and began burning her with cigarettes and beating her with gun butts. After that, Barksdale and his men used a curling iron to burn her face and stabbed her breasts with a knife, according to court records.

The second victim, Timothy Franklin, was then taken to the apartment by Bell and beaten. At one point, Barksdale attempted to saw his ear off using a serrated steak knife, according to court records.

"It was an incredible scene," said prosecutor Brian J. Murphy. "Barksdale was sitting there like some sort of Mengele, asking his buddies to hand him the curling iron or the steak knife while he tortured these people."

Michael Stokes was soon dragged into the apartment and all three victims were herded into a bathroom, according to court records. The three were asked how they wanted to die.

Timothy Franklin said he wanted to die while high on drugs and Bodie fixed a speedball, a potent mixture of cocaine and heroin. He found a vein in Myra Tyson's hand and within minutes she was barely conscious. The woman was then dragged around the apartment by a cord tied to her neck.

After several hours, Barksdale and his men then began an academic debate on how to dispose of the bodies, according to Mr. Murphy, the prosecutor. They considered throwing all three victims off the balcony but decided a triple-suicide might be less than credible. They discussed setting the apartment on fire, but decided that might reflect badly on the tenant, Barry Smith, Victor's 20-year-old brother, who was one of Barksdale's apprentices that night.

Michael Stokes, the third victim, didn't wait for a consensus. While being held in a bathroom, he grabbed a gun from Victor Smith, and began shooting. Smith was hit four times, and Barksdale was shot once in the arm.

Stokes kept running until he found a police officer. Police arrived and found bleeding and drugged bodies — all of them still breathing — throughout the high-rise. The apartment itself was littered with weapons, blood and narcotics.

Unable to sort it all out, the patrol officers initially charged everyone involved.

Following an investigation, Barksdale was indicted along with Roland Bell, Victor and Barry Smith, and 18-year-old Seth McMillan. The victims were terrified of testifying, but their fear that Barksdale might be released from the City Jail was greater, and they took the stand, prosecutors said.

In December 1984, Marando Warthen, 22, received a 103-year sentence following his conviction for the Club Chandelier murders. Circuit Court Judge Edward J. Angeletti called him "a paid assassin."

Two months later, Barksdale and three of his co-defendants accepted a plea agreement in connection with the Murphy Homes torture incident. Victor and Barry Smith were sentenced to four and two years, respectively, while Seth McMillan received a three-year sentence. Barksdale's plea bought him 15 years.

Roland Bell maintained in court that he was not at the projects the night of the torture incident and elected to take the charges against him to trial.

But in a statement to detectives made after his arrest, Bell claimed that he "tried to talk Bodie out of killing" the three, but Barksdale was "super-paranoid because he thought they had a contract out on him" because of the Stewart murder.

"I don't give up family," Bell told the detectives, explaining that he wouldn't talk about the role of others in the incident.

"And," bragged the project enforcer, who was arrested only after a lengthy gun battle with pursuing police officers. "I don't give up my guns. You got one of my guns, but you don't have the rest of them. I've got seven guns, but you'll never find them."

Bell was convicted in May 1985 and sentenced to a 100-year prison term. While Barksdale did not respond to a request for an interview, and Warthen declined such a request, Bell met with a reporter at the Maryland Penitentiary and maintained his innocence. Contending that he did not work as an enforcer in the projects and only knew of Nathan Barksdale in passing, Bell claimed that he had been singled out because he had earned the enmity of certain police officers.

"Bodie is Bodie," said Bell. "But he's much younger, and I didn't have that much to do with him. The people down in the projects know me. They'll tell you Ronnie Mo never hurt no one."

Perhaps the most fitting epilogue for the Barksdale contingent is provided in a presentence report on Bodie prepared by the state parole and probation division. In an elegant understatement, it noted that Barksdale's history "indicates that [his] only problem under supervision was his continual arrest for violent offenses."

Tomorrow: The drug-related murder of a young graduate student begins a two-year investigation that takes city detectives through the ranks of a sophisticated drug ring and to the door of Melvin Williams' home.

Woman's death leads to beeper codes, Little Melvin: Caught in the act

Simon, David

The Sun (1837-1987); Jan 14, 1987; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987)

pg. 1B

Woman's death leads to beeper codes, Little Melvin

By David Simon

It begins with the body of an attractive graduate student on the kitchen floor of her apartment. One .38-caliber wound to the chest and a bullet hole in a rear window. No motive or suspect.

The victim, Dessera C. Press, 27, was stooping toward the window when the gunman fired through the glass. She saw or heard something outside, perhaps, and was shot when she leaned over to look.

'EASY MONEY' ANATOMY OF A DRUG EMPIRE

Fourth of five parts

Homicide detectives Edward Burns and Richard Falteich were assigned the case. On a January evening in 1983, they stood in the kitchen of 2805 Gatehouse Drive, on Baltimore's western edge, sorting details of a seemingly senseless crime.

They weren't looking for cocaine, or heroin, or Melvin Williams.

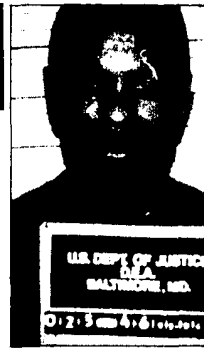
And yet the Press murder case would grow. Detective Burns and his partner, Harry Edgerton, would be reassigned as federal agents and the investigation would begin its long journey, snaking through one of Baltimore's largest and most sophisticated drug rings.

The events chronicled here are compiled from court records, affidavits, police reports and interviews with investigators.

Caught in the act



August 7, 1984: Louis "Cookie" Savage (back to camera) and four others crowd the dining room of a Pimlico apartment used as a cutting house. A video camera hidden behind a thin layer of drywall recorded the group as they began diluting and packaging an estimated \$1 million in narcotics. Identified by authorities as another Williams lieutenant, Savage (insert) was arrested when detectives broke through the apartment door — seconds after this scene was recorded.



SUN GRAPHICS

There were no car chases, no gunfights, no dangerous undercover assignments. The case was two

years of exacting, often aggravating police work — most of it in parked cars, sipping 7-Eleven coffee, or in cluttered city offices, checking tax records or monitoring phone calls

from a government-issue desk.

In the end, they found themselves at the door of a Reservoir Hill home, holding a warrant for a man that authorities contend is one of this city's most powerful and durable drug traffickers, a man known to generations of Baltimore police as Little Melvin.

"Kurt Schmoke's hit list"

The people who knew Dessera Press were terrified, and would talk only after being promised anonymity. They told police that the victim had dated Louis E. "Cookie" Savage.

Two witnesses recalled Ms. Press describing Savage as a cocaine dealer who paid her expenses. And, police were told, Savage had brought large amounts of cocaine to parties at Ms. Press' home.

But Savage, 33, ended the affair the fall of 1982, when Ms. Press became jealous of other women involved with Savage — one of them a neighbor who lived at 2801 Gatehouse Drive, Bitter, Ms. Press repeatedly told people she would put Savage "on Kurt Schmoke's hit list," an apparent reference to the state's attorney's promise to prosecute drug dealers.

Detective Burns checked with the state's attorney's office, but there was no communication from Dessera Press. The city narcotics squad,

See **WILLIAMS**, 2B, Col. 1

Huge drug profits lure eager successors to Williams

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Huge drug profits lure eager successors to Williams

"The underworld lives by performing the services which convention may condemn and the law prohibit, but which nevertheless, human appetites crave."

— Walter Lippman

By David Simon

In April 1950, Baltimore police officials proudly announced the arrest of one Levi "Crips" Acton, a 50-year-old poolroom operator described as "the No. 1 dope peddler on the East Coast." The heroin trade in this city was said to be in disarray.

'EASY MONEY' ANATOMY OF A DRUG EMPIRE

Last of five parts

The following year, the chief federal narcotics agent in Baltimore told city officials that the creation of a full-time police narcotics squad of two or three detectives, accompanied by an appropriation of no more than \$10,000, could "wipe out" the city's drug trade.

No one talks like that anymore.

Drug-enforcement officials no longer speak of the No. 1 narcotics



THE SUN/WILLIAM G. HOTZ SR

A discarded syringe lies in alley behind Argyle Avenue high-rises.

dealer, because the market has been saturated by independent operators with varied sources of supply. And they no longer predict impending victory in a city where an estimated \$1 million in heroin — and perhaps three times that amount of cocaine — is retailed daily.

"We can't stop the distribution of drugs," concedes Thomas O'Grady, who until recently headed the Drug Enforcement Administration offices here. "The best that enforcement can do is keep the lid on it."

Against that background, law-enforcement officials portray the departure of Melvin Williams — as large a dealer as they allege him to have been — as nothing more than a changing of the guard, an opportunity for some younger dealers to acquire a larger share of the market.

Says Bill Colombell, who heads the narcotics squad of the FBI's Baltimore office: "As long as there are people who want the drugs, there will be people to sell them. It's a war without an end, but I don't see any alternative to fighting it."

Fight it, they have.

In the year that followed Williams' arrest in 1984, city detectives and federal agents dismantled nar-

See **WILLIAMS**, 6B, Col. 1

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Huge profits in drug trade ensure plentiful supply of eager successors to Williams

WILLIAMS, from 1B

cotics organizations headed by two prominent west side dealers: Charles Lee Butler and Phillip "Ghost" Kane, the former a federal fugitive captured only last month after 19 months on the run, the latter a longtime Williams friend who was close to tears when a federal judge early last year sentenced him to a 30-year term.

In East Baltimore, federal narcotics agents brought down Clarence "Yo" Meredith, who went underground after his 1983 indictment and then returned to Baltimore to rebuild the multimillion-dollar drug ring that once belonged to Maurice "Peanut" King.

In the local courts, a state police investigation resulted in indictments of Walter Ingram and James "Prospect" Wescott, two longstanding members of the west-side narcotics fraternity. That case — as well as a spate of murder and attempted murder charges against Timmiror Stanfield and Marlow Bates, a Westport pair who took over the same high-rise projects that once housed Nathan Barksdale's gang — are now being pursued in city Circuit Court.

"But enforcement is only part of the answer," says Maj. Joseph Newman, a veteran of the city narcotics squad. "We're very good at taking dealers off the street, but that only leads to other dealers filling the vacuum."

Law-enforcement officials are unanimous in their call for increased



Baltimore Police Sgt. Andre Street (center) conducts a drug search in front of the Lexington-Poe Homes.

drug education and treatment programs, while some go so far as to argue for the prosecution of drug users in an attempt to reduce demand. Others call for an increased emphasis on financial or tax investigations of large-scale narcotics dealers — a tactic intended to separate wholesalers from their profits.

"We've got to do much more on

the financial side of things," says Baltimore Police Commissioner Bishop L. Robinson, who was among the early proponents of his police department's financial investigations team, a new unit of the narcotics squad that worked the money side of the Melvin Williams investigation.

"A lot of dealers are willing to go to prison, knowing that when they

get out, the money is going to be where they left it." Commissioner Robinson explains. "We have to take that away from them, take the profit out of drugs."

Still, many of the rank-and-file narcotics agents and detectives privately express bitterness and frustration with the politics of the past election year, in which drugs

emerged as a national issue and candidates fell all over each other in declaring their support for tougher narcotics enforcement.

"For years, these people ignore the problem. Now they think more money and more people will solve it," says one city narcotics detective. "We could double or triple the budgets for the DEA, the FBI and Baltimore City [narcotics squad] and you will still be able to go down to the projects or Westport and find heroin or coke or whatever you want."

And whether local authorities have the money, manpower and will to sustain their campaign of costly narcotics prosecutions is a question being asked by a number of law enforcement officials.

Strapped by recent congressional budget restrictions, the U.S. attorney's office in Baltimore and the regional Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force that works out of that office are hardly in a position to pursue an unlimited string of long-term investigations.

Sources concede that both the task force and the office as a whole are badly understaffed and prosecutors in the narcotics units are juggling about twice the number of drug cases as they would ordinarily be assigned. Indeed, the status of the Melvin Williams probe, which has remained on the shelf for almost a year, is dependent on such manpower considerations, the sources said.

In addition, local law-enforcement officials privately express concern over the long-term direction of the federal prosecutor's office, which with its larger budget and its arsenal of statutes on federal conspiracy and continuing criminal enterprise is best equipped to prosecute large drug organizations.

Breckinridge L. Willcox, the new U.S. attorney, has repeatedly expressed interest in concentrating more on white-collar crime and political corruption, and investigators anticipate that a larger percentage of narcotics cases will likely become the responsibility of local courts.

That view has drawn some muted criticism from others in law enforcement, who regard Baltimore's wholesale narcotics network as this state's organized crime problem, comparable in scope, if not stature, to the mob families of New York and New Jersey.

"There was some feeling that for a moment there, we were close to delivering a knockout punch to the large dealers, the organized crime element," said one former law enforcement official. "That may have been too optimistic considering changing priorities."

Mr. Willcox, however, points out that increased attention to white-collar crime does not necessarily mean a reduced emphasis on drug enforcement.

"I think you're going to see the numbers stay about the same, with about half our prosecutions being narcotics cases," Mr. Willcox said. "That's been and probably will always be the most important role of this office."

In any event, the city's narcotics traffickers have wasted little time.

Investigators contend that a number of smaller, independent operators have appeared in Baltimore to fill the vacuum created by recent prosecutions. And city police last month raided Melvin Williams' Underground nightclub and arrested 23 people on drug charges, ending a four-month investigation that appeared to be aimed at keeping pressure on those connected to Williams.

More important, in the short span of time since the Williams probe — which cost the task force several hundred thousand dollars and at its height involved 20 detectives — authorities have found themselves burdened with probes of at least two other large West Baltimore drug rings.

One longstanding investigation has surfaced in court records: FBI agents and federal prosecutors for more than three years have been pursuing William E. "Little Will" Franklin Jr., a 44-year-old parolee who was last sentenced in 1977, a 12-year prison term on heroin charges, according to affidavits filed in U.S. District Court.

Although law-enforcement sources contend that Franklin has limited his drug involvement since the federal investigation became public last year, the probe remains active, and sources say that Franklin's organization remains largely intact.

A second suspected West Baltimore narcotics distributor is also being scrutinized by narcotics investigators, but law-enforcement sources will confirm little beyond that fact.

Like the Williams investigation, however, both of the current probes promise to be lengthy, costly and complex. The trend is not lost on drug enforcement officials, who are aware that the city's drug traffickers are becoming more sophisticated, more elusive.

"There's no question that the bad guys are learning," says the DEA's Agent O'Grady. "They look at how people are getting caught and they move a step ahead. We have to move with them."

In the Williams investigation, for example, detectives found that the sophisticated use of contact beepers and pay phones had rendered obsolete the traditional methods of wire-tap surveillance. Investigators in that case were also compelled to use

a new tool — video surveillance — to find out what was happening inside one group's Pimlico cutting house.

Similarly, undercover officers were required to perform extraordinary feats of surveillance in their probe of Clarence Meredith's east side organization, in which Meredith, a federal fugitive, avoided telephones and communicated with his lieutenants at seemingly chance meetings in the courtyards of the city's high-rise housing projects.

Asks veteran narcotics Detective Gary Childs, an investigator on the Meredith case: "Do you know how hard it is to go undercover in the projects and not draw any attention? But that's exactly what it took to get at them."

In their financial affairs as well, the city narcotics traffickers are becoming more sophisticated, less vulnerable to the federal "criminal enterprise" statutes that allow the government to seize real estate, autos and other assets that they can show to have been purchased with the proceeds of a criminal enterprise.

"When we first got that law, we were catching people with all kinds of money," recalls Major Newman, of the city police department. "But over time, the dealers have become more adept at hiding assets and we're no longer getting as much."

Investigators have found that suspected narcotics traffickers are hiding their assets behind legitimate front companies or individuals, making it harder for agents to seize property.

In the Will Franklin investigation, for example, FBI agents were told by informants that one member of Franklin's organization had paid a realty manager to falsify a lien on his newly renovated home to prevent federal agents from seizing the property. And Franklin himself allegedly has used such tactics to hide his financial interest in Odell's, a popular nightclub on North Avenue, according to court affidavits.

Other narcotics investigations have linked suspected narcotics money to a variety of Baltimore businesses and development projects. City nightclubs and taverns, office buildings, shopping centers, groceries, towing companies, rental properties and restaurants have all been linked to drug money in court papers or are currently being scrutinized by investigators.

"The deeper problem for the community is that a legitimate businessman can't compete with a business that is supported by narcotics money," explains Major Newman. "With all that money being funneled through his business, a drug trafficker doesn't have to worry about whether he's making a profit."

Although they concede that greater caution on the part of the city's top narcotics dealers is making narcotics enforcement more expensive and complex, few drug enforcement officials are ready to believe that a major dealer can operate for any length of time without eventually being found out and prosecuted.

Says Detective Childs: "I don't care how sophisticated or clever their system is, there's always something that catches them. With Melvin Williams it was the beepers, with Meredith it was the meetings in the courtyards. . . . There's always a weak link."

Adds Major Newman: "We can make a thousand mistakes, but a dealer only has to make one."

And yet the endless supply of willing participants in the drug trade — from the 17-year-old enforcers to the middle-aged wholesalers — is a reality that even the most optimistic law enforcement officer accepts.

"There's so much money in drugs," complains the city's Commissioner Robinson. "We've got to convince these kids that there's more to it than that. That there's no future in dealing drugs, getting the money quick and living the Hollywood life."

The economics are overwhelming.

"We've arrested kids, 16 years old, who are making a thousand dollars a week. They sit there with thousands of dollars in jewelry on them," says STOP squad Detective William Matthews. "How do you deal with that?"

It's an essential truth, and by all accounts, one that Melvin Williams grasped years ago.

In the unforgiving streets of West Baltimore, he could tell you, money is a magnet. And drug money — obscene in its sheer quantity — becomes irresistible.

Community leaders, as well as police officers, point out that the great majority of residents in neighborhoods deluged by narcotics trafficking have nothing to do with drugs or drug money, and hold little respect or awe for those who do. Often, they become victims of that underground economy.

But for others the myth endures. Police officers saw it firsthand, when Williams would glide through west side streets in that black Maserati Quadraporte, a \$52,000 apparition against a landscape of boarded-up row houses and battered housing projects.

"When he rode around in that car, everyone knew who it was," recalls Detective Matthews, shaking his head. "You'd hear them yelling, 'Hey, it's Little Melvin. Hey, Melvin. . . . Even the younger kids knew it.'"