

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Officer Rudy Escalante arrests drug suspect Curtis Thompson.

Agents crack drug 'family'

Sweep puts 18 suspected Nelson Center dealers out of business

By MARK BERGSTROM
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — County narcotics agents say they knocked out more than 90 percent of the city's suspected crack cocaine dealers in a massive arrest sweep Friday.

Agents ended the day with 18 arrests and warrants for eight more. They expected the others to be picked up one by one as they showed up on the street. Most of the crack, agents said, was being sold at the Loudon Nelson Center.

Among those arrested was a man agents had been trying to build a case against for almost eight years.

"If I could only be guaranteed one arrest, I'd say I want Clarence," said Dave Tresmontan, commander of the County Narcotics Enforcement Team.

It was easy for Tresmontan to say, because handcuffed and face-down on the sidewalk in front of him was the top target in Friday's sweep: Clarence McComb, 23.

The other 25 arrested or sought represent about 90 percent of the current crack dealers in Santa Cruz, Tresmontan said.

Most of them are related in some fashion, said agent Lee Sepulveda. Sepulveda and Bob Pursley headed a six-month "buy" program which led to Friday's sweep.

"We bought from fathers and sons, brothers and sisters and boyfriends and girlfriends," said Sepulveda.

Previously, he said, local police had been unable to break into that tight circle.

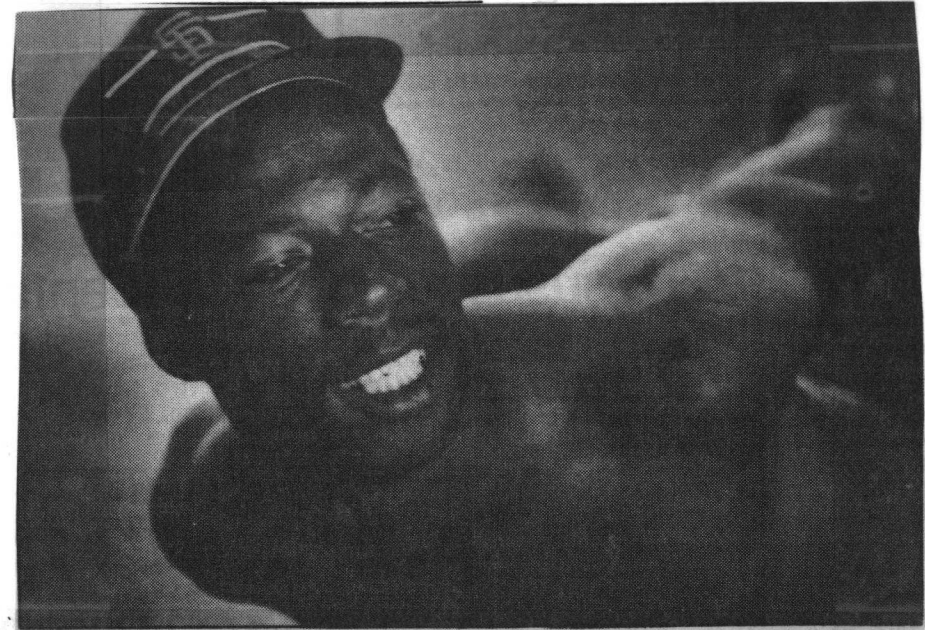
The state sent in a black female agent from the Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement office in Fresno, and she was able to infiltrate, he said.

Sepulveda said most of the 53 crack purchases were made on the street. "The boundaries ran from Loudon Nelson Center to Pacific Avenue and from the Foster Freeze to Maple and Elm streets.

Most of the buys, he said, were \$20 purchases of one-tenth-gram "rocks." He said that quantity is enough to get a couple of people high for about a half-hour. "The high is really short. By an hour they have to go again. It's that addictive."

He called McComb a "ringleader — for lack of a better term." He said McComb is a major supplier of the crack sold at the Nelson Center.

Tresmontan said agents made four two-ounce buys from McComb. "He's got the source," Tresmontan said.

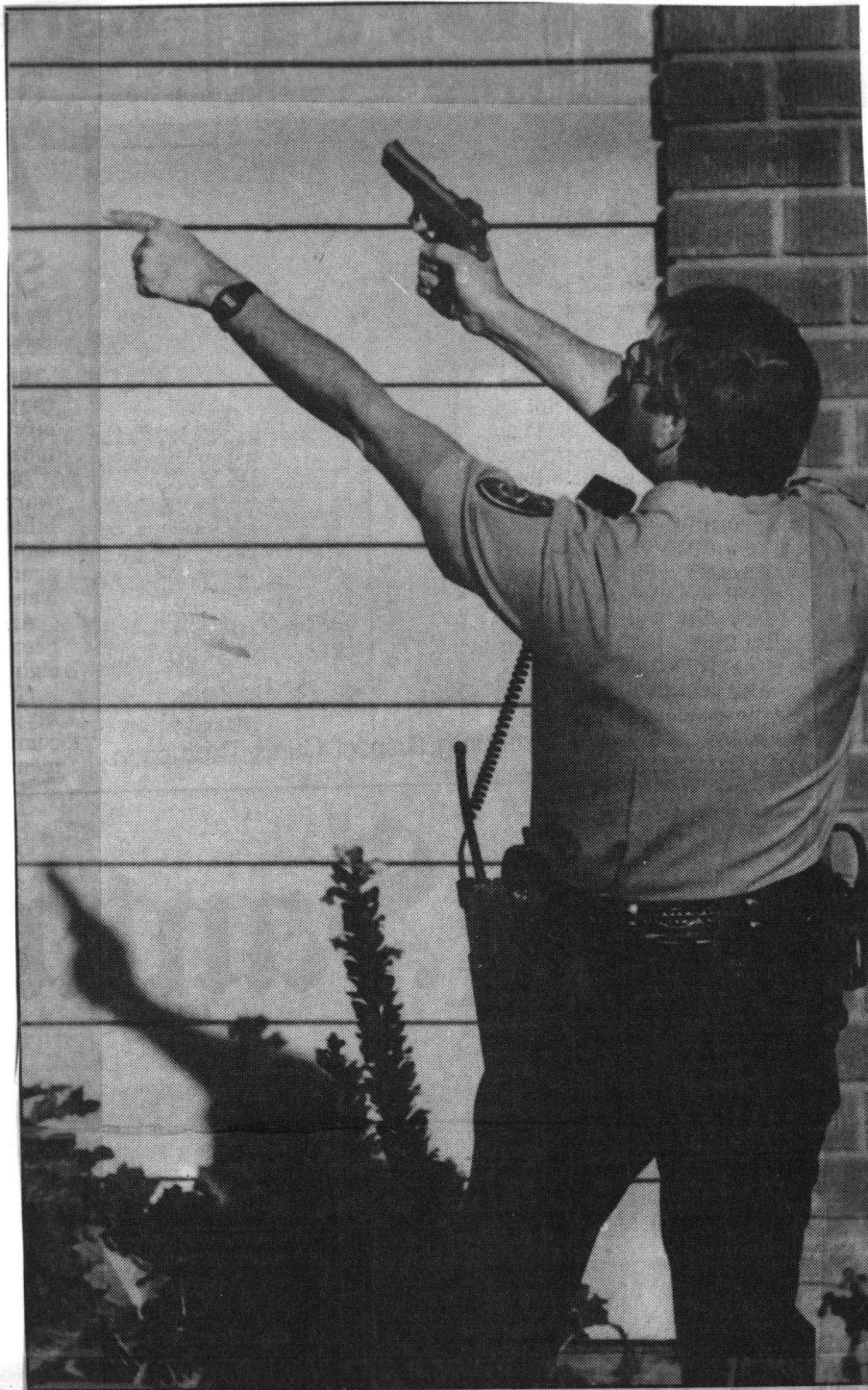


Photos by Bill Lovejoy

Clarence McComb is suspected of being a major dealer.

REFERENCE

[Redacted text]



Officer watches an upstairs window as his partners rush the door.

Tresmontan said the crack being sold in Santa Cruz comes from the Oakland area. McComb identifies himself as being from that city, although local police say he has been operating in this county for about eight years.

Despite efforts by Santa Cruz Police and the hiring of private security guards, crack continues to be sold unabated in the park behind the Loudon Nelson Center, Tresmontan said.

Tresmontan said he knows that even the arrest of 90 percent of the sellers will not stop the crack problem in Santa Cruz.

He said agents will be looking to the courts for help because other sellers waiting in the wings will be watching to see what kind of sentences are meted out.

Sepulveda said the cases built against all of those arrested — or still wanted — are strong enough to warrant prison terms.

Friday's sweep was the second such round-up of suspected crack dealers. "The first time we got the first generation. Now we have the second generation," said Sepulveda.

"If others step up and fill their shoes, we'll do it again and again," Sepulveda said.

Friday's raid began just before 7 a.m. From a command post in the Santa Cruz City Council Chamber, agents planned the operation, code-named "Crack-Down."

Ironically, despite cries for help in

that chamber from residents who live near the Nelson Center, the City Council refused to fund a special four-member police drug team last week.

Backed by a dozen Santa Cruz Police officers and volunteers from Scotts Valley Police, agents formed teams and headed out after the suspects following the early-morning briefing.

But, because agents had developed only a half-dozen "good" addresses for their suspects, finding them was difficult.

Agents did get lucky right off the bat when they kicked in the door to an apartment on Felix Street where a couple of deals had been made.

A man identified as Curtis Thompson, 32, jumped up from bed on the living room floor, knocking over a stack of \$100 bills which scattered about the carpet. Agents said they confiscated about \$3,000 from the apartment.

"Most of the runners live from motel to motel," Tresmontan said. So after looking for suspects with known addresses, agents started at the north end of Ocean Street, going from motel to motel showing managers photos of the suspects.

Shortly after agents arrived at the La Plaza motel, McComb walked up. Agents quickly grabbed him.

McComb reportedly told agents he was staying in a room at the motel, and asked if he could go there to get a shirt. Another suspect, identified as Jokelle Porter, 20, answered the door and was arrested. His name was on the list, too.