

Key informer labeled 'prince of darkness' at drug graft trial of 2 lawmen

By ROBERT RUDOLPH

The prosecution of two Essex County lawmen on drug related corruption charges yesterday became a forum for the condemnation of a key government informant as a "prince of darkness" who may be responsible for multiple unsolved homicides.

Federal prosecutors charged the two Essex lawmen leaked confidential information about sensitive narcotics investigations to the informant in exchange for "drugs and money," but defense lawyers said U.S. authorities

made a deal with a vicious liar with the "instincts of a mad-dog killer" who has escaped punishment for numerous murders.

"Before we are through here," defense attorney David Ruhnke declared, "there will be other unsolved murders that will be solved here and those bodies will wind up at the feet of Robert Vidal," the government informant.

The charges and counter charges were presented to a federal jury in Newark during the opening day of the trial of two suspended members of the investigative staff of the Essex County

Defense contends U.S. ignored murders by kingpin to strike deal

Prosecutor's Office, who are charged with trading protection and secrets for cocaine, cash and favors from a notorious drug trafficker.

On trial are Thomas Gilsenan, 42, of Verona, a detective in the prosecutor's office since 1971, and Ralph Cicalese, 35, of West Orange, a former New-

ark police officer who had served as an investigator for the prosecutor's office since 1984.

The two have been accused of entering into a secret relationship with Vidal—a drug kingpin once described by a state judge as a "manipulative criminal with no respect for the law,"

who turned informant after being convicted and sentenced to a 20-year prison term.

Vidal and his wife, who was also jailed for involvement in the drug operation, have accused the two Essex lawmen of graft, and their testimony has become the basis for a racketeering prosecution against the two men by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

The case became the focus of controversy earlier this week because of an eleventh-hour attempt to resolve the charges through a plea bargain agreement. The deal, which called for the de-

fendants to admit guilt in exchange for probation and promises not to seek their old jobs back, was rejected Monday by U.S. District Judge Maryanne Trump Barry.

As the trial opened yesterday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Kevin McCarthy told jurors the case would take them on a journey into a "drug underworld," and reveal how the two law enforcement officials "joined that underworld" and "sold out" the interests of the public.

McCarthy charged that among other incidents, the two officers had alerted Vidal to a federal probe and had provided him with the names of informants who had given information on his activities.

McCarthy characterized Gilsenan as a man with a drinking problem who regularly shook down Vidal for clothing, jewelry and money, while he said Cicalese was a cocaine user who was more interested in obtaining drugs for his own use.

The prosecutor charged that instead of attempting to get Vidal off the street, they conspired to keep him in business for their own profit.

In a heated opening rebuttal, however, defense attorney Michael Critchley charged the two officers had become the scapegoats for a system that had sent them out as "commandos" to work "behind enemy lines" with criminals such as Vidal, but which had now turned on them by working with Vidal to build a case against them.

The defense attorney charged the accusations against Gilsenan and Cicalese were only part of a similar pattern of accusations that have been leveled by the drug dealer against many other law enforcement officials, including an accusation involving a former U.S. prosecutor who once investigated him. Critchley said he plans to expose details of those accusations during the trial.

While McCarthy portrayed the officers as corrupt cops motivated by greed and a desire for drugs, Critchley and Ruhnke charged that federal prosecutors had made deals with Vidal that ignored his involvement in a number of cold-blooded murders.

Critchley branded the case a "hoax" perpetrated by Vidal on the administration of justice, and described the drug dealer-informant as "the essence of evil."

In one example cited by Critchley, the defense lawyer charged that Vidal, and a band of associates once chased down a victim on Route 1 near Newark International Airport, shot him, stuffed his body in the trunk of a car "like a piece of meat" and then dumped his corpse over the Pulaski Skyway into Newark Bay.

Ruhnke also charged the government had accepted Vidal's accusations without regard to facts and has ignored evidence to the contrary.

To prove his point, he noted that Vidal once told authorities that he had given Gilsenan a gold pendant, and then produced for the jury an original bill of sale showing that the pendant actually had been purchased by Gilsenan's wife as an anniversary gift.

He said Gilsenan will probably take the witness stand in his own defense and "tell it to you straight."

The case against the two lawmen resulted from a two-year investigation into alleged corruption involving law enforcement officers in Essex County, and had been hailed by U.S. Attorney Samuel A. Alito Jr. as demonstrating the "corrupting influence" that "drugs and money have on our society."

Defense attorneys, however, said a subsequent investigation into the case disclosed that authorities immunized at least two witnesses from potential murder charges and that some witnesses, including Vidal, made statements that U.S. authorities pressured them to lie about police officers.

The trial is scheduled to resume today.

Man seized in shooting

By KEVIN DILWORTH

A 23-year-old Springfield man has been arrested for firing a gun at a teenager during a weekend football game at Bell Stadium in Orange, authorities said.

Police Director Charles Cobbett identified the suspect as Francesco Romano of Golf Oval in the Union County township. The shooting occurred shortly before 6 p.m. Sunday, but police did not disclose the incident until inquiries were made yesterday.

Some 150 people were watching the game between a team from the city and players from another municipality when Romano fired three shots from a .25-caliber gun at a 17-year-old city teenager, Cobbett said.

The teenager was not injured and it has not been determined why Romano fired the gun, police said.

Kenneth Gernert, an off-duty city police officer viewing the game, witnessed the shooting. Gernert "tackled the suspect, grabbed him by the neck and pulled the gun out of his hand," Cobbett continued.

Amid the struggle, the suspect managed to break away and flee on foot, added the police director. However, Romano dropped his driver's license, enabling police to determine his identity and home address.

Orange police went to the suspect's home, but they did not find him there, Cobbett said. Romano surrendered at Orange police headquarters on Monday, he added.

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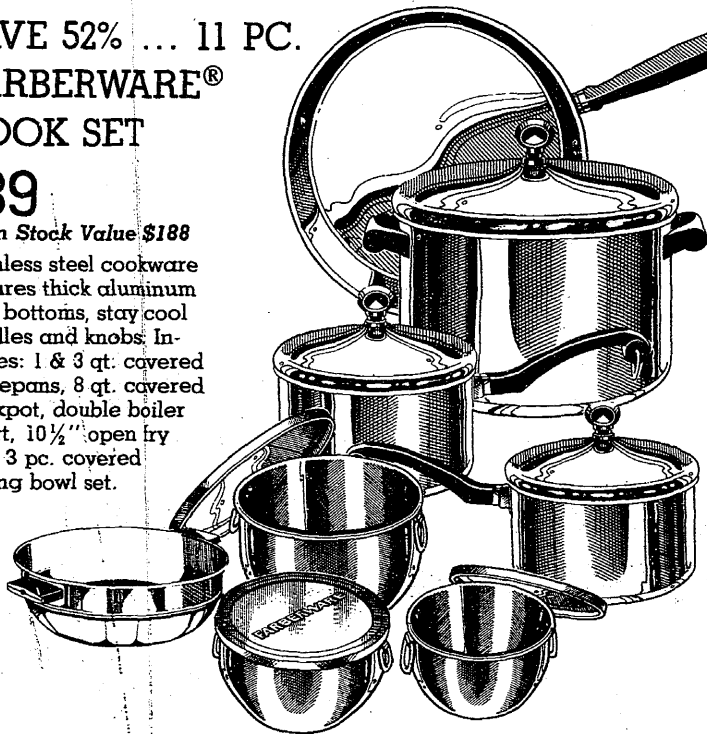
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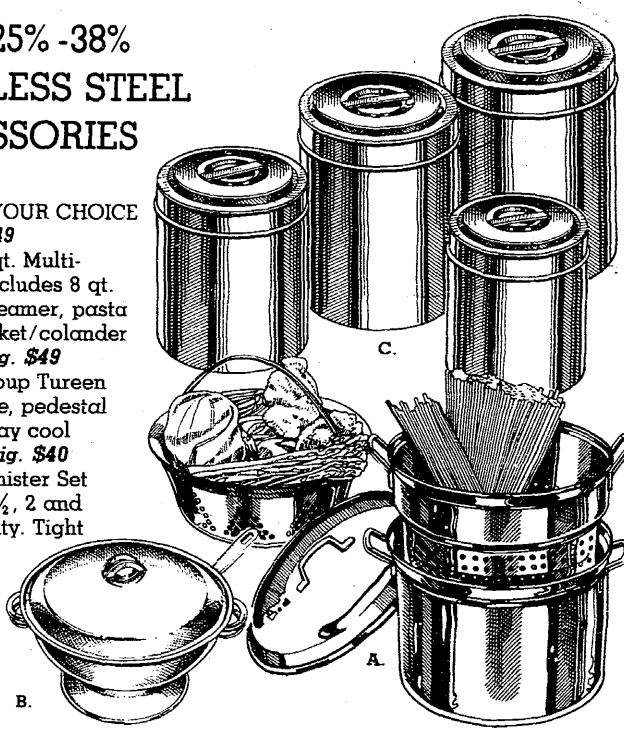


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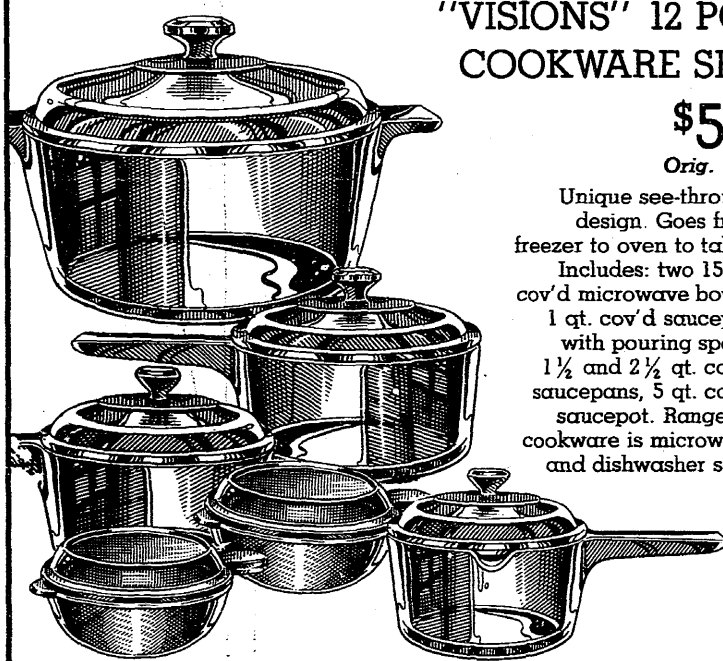


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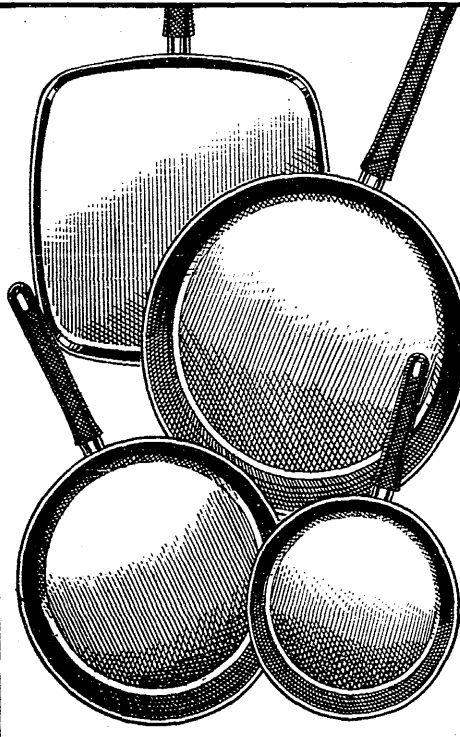


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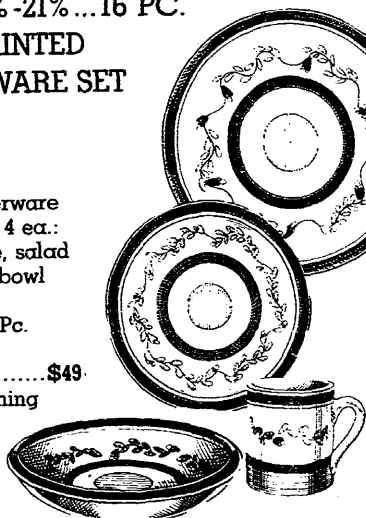


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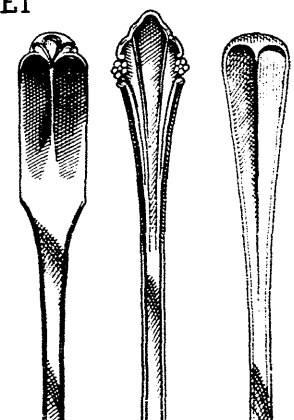


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