

Post 10-20-74

Mexican Authorities Crack Drug Ring Run From Prison

TIJUANA, Oct. 19—Mexican federal police supported by army troops have invaded a prison here to arrest the suspected leaders of a narcotics ring believed to be doing a \$3 million-a-month business from behind bars.

American narcotics investigators familiar with the ring said yesterday that it may even surpass the scope of the "French Connection," which moved thousands of pounds of heroin from laboratories in Marseilles through South America to the United States in the past decade.

The Mexican raid on Thursday also yielded strong indications that the ring may have become the major American outlet for French heroin since the breakup of Marseilles-South American smugglers, according to a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman.

Mexican Federal District Attorney Alfonso Lopez Quiroga confirmed that his officers searched the La Mesa Penitentiary quarters of Helen Calderon Hernandez, 39; her husband, Roberto, and his brother Juan.

The three were arrested. They have been identified by U.S. and Mexican officials as the leaders of a ring that has operated in the United States for 15 years.

For the past four years, the three have been in La Mesa prison serving 11-year terms for smuggling drugs into California.

In Mrs. Hernandez' prison quarters Quiroga said, police found \$30,000 in American currency, \$100,000 worth of jewelry, detailed records of major drug transactions and an elaborate telephone code by which the ring conducted business.

American narcotics investigators said the records reveal a network of drug traffickers across the United States and extending from cocaine manufacturers in South America to narcotics dealers in Canada.

Some U.S. investigators believe that the entire operation

was masterminded by Mrs. Hernandez, and that it used trucks and autos to smuggle narcotics across the border to points in California and throughout the NID States.

Quiroga said the search of the Hernandez' cells was conducted on orders issued by Mexican Atty. Gen. Pedro Ojeda Paullada. The penitentiary belongs to Maja California stat.

The raid was the second major Mexican operation in the past month. In September, Mexican authorities arrested more than a dozen persons and confiscate six pill presses that had been turning out 3 million amphetamine tablets called "mini-bennies." At the same time, American drug agents arrested more than 100 suspected amphetamine dealers throughout the United States.

Quiroga said the Hernandez operation was conducted from prison through the use of telephone codes and intermediaries. He would not comment on the possible complicity of prison officials; although he said the suspects ringleaders handled all financing from their cells.

Investigators have been aware of the Hernandez ring for more than 15 years; according to local, state and federal authorities, but the wholesalers and smugglers had operated from an apparently safe haven in Tijuana until the past few years.

In 1968, Mrs. Hernandez, her husband and his brother were indicted, along with 48 others, in San Diego after the seizure by border guards of a \$1 million shipment of heroin and cocaine. Many of those indicted pleaded guilty, but the Hernandezes fled to Mexico and never were brought to trial.

In 1970, the Hernandez family and seven others were jailed in Mexico after investigators traced a 10-ounce heroin shipment to their home in Tijuana. Mexican police said they found a heroin lab, \$2.4

million worth of pure heroin, \$25,000 in cash and an illegal arsenal inside the house. Since conviction on drug charges in a Mexican court, the three have been serving 11-year sentences.

U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration investigators said information from Tijuana indicates that the drug operations from La Mesa involved large quantities of most of the major illicit drugs available on the street in the United States. Mrs. Hernandez apparently had access to a telephone in the prison and was able to coordinate activities outside the walls through the coded calls.

[Prior to the arrival of the Hernandezes, the Tijuana penitentiary's most infamous inmate was another reputed drug kingpin, Patricio Becerra Ortiz. He lived in a penthouse cell with a television set and bar and was said in 1969 to operate his drug network from atop the jail. Inmates, including many Americans convicted in drug cases, live comfortably in the jail or barely survive, according to their outside income. State funds for sustenance of prisoners are inadequate.]

The ring apparently dealt primarily in heroin and cocaine, mostly in lots of 2½ to 5 pounds, and also in hashish oil, pills and marijuana, an American spokesman said.

Confiscated records deal with transactions in New York, several Southern states including Georgia and North Carolina, Western states and Canada.

The DEA spokesman cited "strong evidence" that the ring had been dealing in European heroin disguised to make it appear to be of Mexican origin. European heroin typically is white and powdery, while Mexican heroin is brown because of less sophisticated refining methods. The Hernandez ring apparently had been dealing in large quantities of European heroin for several years, but only after dying it brown, the spokesman said.