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LEADING THE HUNT IN ATLANTA'S MURDERS

By M.A. FARBER MAY 3, 1981

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Like so many of Atlanta's black children today, 15-year-old Jo-Jo Bell often boasted that "no kid snatcher was going to get me." But last March 2nd, after finishing work at a fast-food fish restaurant near his home in southwest Atlanta, Joseph disappeared. On Easter Sunday afternoon, April 19, his mud-caked, decomposing body was pulled from the South River, in neighboring DeKalb County. The body, snagged on fallen branches at a bend in the narrow river, was discovered by a couple enjoying the budding green foliage along a bike trail. It was clad only in gym shorts. Jo-Jo Bell, who was suffocated before being dumped in the river, became still another victim of a tragedy that, with relentless regularity, knocks the breath out of a bewildered city. The table near the entrance to Northside High School's gymnasium is laden with brightly printed posters, bumper stickers and pamphlets that say "Take a Minute, Save a Child" and "Help Keep Our Children Safe - Reward Up to $100,000." The adults filing in pick up the materials and head for the folding chairs. Most of the crowd is young and most of it, like the neighborhood around the school, is white. Off to the side, his hands in the pockets of his beige suit jacket as he chats with reporters and waits for the television cameras to be set up, is a tall, solidly built, light-complexioned black man. The woman who introduces him says he is here to discuss "the situation in our city."

Washington-based Police Foundation. Brown's rise began in the mid-1960's, when, as a young police officer in San Jose, Calif., he developed a widely acclaimed community-relations program. Brown was soon chosen by Portland State University in Oregon to head a new department of criminal justice. In 1975, he was named Sheriff of Multnomah County, which includes Portland. And in 1977, when he had drafted a National Urban League anticrime proposal to President Carter and was scheduled to be deputy director of the Federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, Brown was lured to Atlanta to reform a police department torn by conflicts over race, political meddling and personalities.

His work until now has been eclipsed by the bodies of the 23 boys and young men and two girls found in Atlanta's woods, rivers and abandoned buildings in the last 22 months. Since the children who are dying are black, and since the city is two-thirds black and its municipal government, more than any other in the country, is controlled by blacks, Brown is under particular scrutiny by members of his own race. To many of them, as to many whites, he is something of an enigma. "It's hard to read Lee Brown," remarked an official who has observed him closely. "He's glib, he has the facts, but, beyond that, you can't tell the real depth of his ability. You wish he'd let you get a glimpse now and then of what's inside."

More elusive still is the case that dominates Brown's life. The task-force headquarters is located in a low-slung building a few blocks north of the gleaming office towers and shops of Peachtree Center. The building once housed an automobile showroom and has large plate-glass windows. But, now, those windows are completely painted over, so that no passer-by can glimpse what's inside. The public hears and reads about dog hairs and synthetic fibers recovered from some of the children's bodies, without knowing the significance of the evidence. It hears about psychics and bounty hunters who come to town to crack the case, and don't; about Guardian Angels from New York who offer their services, and get a mixed reception; about "supercops" from other cities who fly in to offer advice, and fly out again; about tips that seem promising, and don't pan out; about cars that may be suspicious, and aren't found. It hears about arrests of men in other states who might be connected to the case, and are later deemed not. It hears about arrests, stemming from the case, of crank callers and child molesters.

But it doesn't hear about the arrest of the killers. Last month, William H. Webster, the director of the F.B.I., caused an uproar by saying, in Washington, that

the killings are racist?" Atlanta, he answers a little wearily, "does not live in isolation. It is difficult to separate these incidents" around the country. "But we can't say the murders here are racially motivated because we don't know the motivation. We don't exclude any possibility."

The Commissioner, his frustration as palpable as that of the audience, leaves Northside High in an unobtrusive old Chevrolet, chauffeured by a detective bodyguard. On nights like these, before going on to another engagement or heading home to his family with a full briefcase, he often stops for dinner at Ivey's South, a dimly lighted midtown restaurant owned by Beni Ivey, a woman whose sister is married to one of Brown's brothers. Dinner, supplemented by multiple vitamins twice a day, is the only meal Brown normally eats. "We're all home folks here," Miss Ivey says. "Pat - he's always been called Pat - comes in and eats the same thing all the time. A bowl of gumbo. Ribs and collard greens and yams. He tries to relax, but you can see that these killings are working on him. He's got bags under his eyes and he's so tight. He's tapping on the table with his fingers. Tapping and tapping." On the evening of May 21, 1979, a year after he became Commissioner, Brown was filling in for Mayor Jackson at an awards ceremony in a theater in the well-to-do Buckhead section of the city. As he was reading a proclamation, he fainted and slumped to the stage. He had been working day in and day out, and he was exhausted. When lung tests at the hospital also showed that he was smoking too much, he gave up cigarettes altogether. But no sooner was the Commissioner out of the hospital and back on his feet than a man scavenging for redeemable aluminum cans in Atlanta's isolated Niskey Lake area made a discovery that, in time, would change Brown's life and the life of a city of 425,000. For just as Brown, the son of a fruit picker whose schooling ended in the third grade, had reached the pinnacle of his profession after years of study and struggle, he was caught up in one of the strangest and most heart-rending episodes in the annals of American crime.

At first, the man searching for cans on July 28, 1979, thought he had come upon the remains of a dead animal. But, moving closer, he noticed black trousers, a belt and the torso of a black boy who would turn out to be 13-year-old Alfred Evans. Lacking other physical signs, medical examiners assume that Evans had been asphyxiated after disappearing from his southwest Atlanta home on July 25. In the 90-degree heat, a sickening odor of decomposition hung over the dump. But the smell was not so much from Evans as from still another body, lying in underbrush

bodies of three children who were missing in 1980. With the exception of one boy, whose body had mild abrasions, none of those on the task-force list appear to have resisted their killer. Toxicological tests at autopsy showed that none of the victims who were children - generally poor, from broken homes, accustomed to scrounging for a dollar and small for their ages - were drugged or given alcohol. None had been mutilated and none, according to the results of oral, rectal and other examinations, had been sexually assaulted. But law-enforcement officials and forensic scientists have not ruled out sexual attraction as a possible motive in the 10 or more cases that, in the past six months, they have come to believe are the work of one killer, one whom they fear may be feeding upon the publicity surrounding the case. Some of the more recent victims, who have been strangled or suffocated, have been found disrobed down to their underwear. Only 23-year-old Michael McIntosh, found on April 20 in the Chattahoochee River, was naked. Brown says the task force has no idea at this stage whether killers of the children are responsible for the murders of the young men. "We're trying to figure out what this development means," he adds.

From some of the recent bodies, as well as from the clothing and remains of some of the earlier victims, the Georgia state crime laboratory has retrieved similar synthetic fibers and natural hairs, perhaps belonging to an Alaska husky dog. The fibers and hair may contribute little to apprehending a killer, but they could help convict one.

Meanwhile, authorities are now scouting for a middle-aged, lightskinned black man with long hair who was reportedly seen driving around in a green station wagon last month with a youth who was subsequently found dead in an abandoned apartment building. Taskforce members are also studying fingerprints lifted in the apartment, although the prints may be those of derelicts who take shelter in the building.

Several months ago, Brown revamped the leadership of the task force, installing Morris Redding, an Atlanta deputy police chief, as its director and Inspector J.R. (Robbie) Hamrick of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation as its investigative coordinator. The 40-year-old Hamrick, a former intelligence officer and agent on the G.B.I. major-crimes squad, was head of the agency's Atlanta office before his appointment as supervisor of G.B.I. field operations. He was lent by Gov. George Busbee, who was said to be increasingly concerned about the progress of the child-murders investigation. The strengthening of the task force, which had been led by

hold this investigation together and see it through, it is Brown. Brown's own view is that no one could have prepared for this crisis, just as no one can steel himself for the death of yet another child. But maybe, he ventures, his qualifications are as good as the next person's and better than most. "I have tried," he says, "to put in my life a prescription that enables me to do anything." For a quarter of a century after World War II, while Atlanta was forging its position as the financial, commercial and transportation hub of the Southeast, its police department was run by the much admired Herbert T. Jenkins, an Atlanta institution at a time when the prevailing color of politics had yet to change from white to black. An autocrat who could make a sergeant a captain one day and a captain a sergeant the next, Jenkins hired the city's first black policemen - although, for years, they could patrol only black neighborhoods and were not allowed to arrest whites - and enforced the city's policy of peaceful school desegregation.

One thing Jenkins was unable to do was name his successor. In 1972, Mayor Sam Massell passed over Jenkins's choice, Assistant Chief Clinton Chafin, and gave the job to John Inman, an assistant chief friendly with the Mayor's brother, Howard. Inman was dogged by allegations that he had mixed with hoodlums and was taking his cue as chief from Howard Massell. More importantly, Inman was also a target of Maynard Jackson, then the city's Vice Mayor, who, like many other blacks, considered Inman a racist who condoned police brutality, a charge the Chief and his supporters vehemently denied. After Jackson was elected Mayor in 1973, with 95 percent of the black vote and 22 percent of the white, he tried to replace Inman with Chafin, who is now the police chief of Fulton County. But Inman refused to give up his quarters, surrounding himself for a time with rifle-toting members of Atlanta's Special Weapons and Tactics team. The Mayor responded to this first challenge to his authority by establishing a new post, Commissioner of Public Safety, over Inman, who later retired. As commissioner, Jackson picked A. Reginald Eaves, a black college friend active in Democratic politics in Boston, where he supervised a jail and was also administrator of the Mayor's Office of Human Rights.

Within weeks of his installation in August 1974, Eaves demoted or transfered scores of Atlanta police officers; some, backed by the predominantly white Fraternal Order of Police, went to court, alleging reverse discrimination. But, on the bias issue, blacks had got to court first. In 1973, the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, noting that blacks made up 51 percent of Atlanta's population but only 22 percent of its

Meanwhile, Brown received a master's degree in sociology at San Jose State University and a Ph.D. degree in criminology, in 1970, at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1975, as Sheriff of Oregon's most populous county, he decentralized the police force into geographic "teams" and initiated a restrictive policy on the use of deadly force. But it was Brown's long-held ambition to run a major police department in a city with a significant minority population.

In 1977, Brown wrote a position paper that the National Urban League hoped would form the basis for an anticrime message to Congress by President Carter. The message did not come to pass, but the paper distilled much of Brown's thinking about crime and minorities: In Brown's view, crime cannot be controlled by a system that fails to apprehend most criminals, fails to mete out equal justice to those caught and fails to rehabilitate those imprisoned; any successful strategy must include a massive, sustained attack on the "root problems" of unemployment, inadequate health care, substandard housing and discrimination. In this context, says Brown, the police must be "community activists" who facilitate "nonviolent change."

In conversation, Brown tends to be matter-of-fact about his own encounters with discrimination. "Race," he says coolly, "is relevant in America. In my own profession, you won't find a city of any size where the mayor is white and the police chief is black. And that's not by choice of the blacks."

In early 1978, after Brown had moved up to the position of director of Multnomah County's Department of Justice Services, he received an urgent call from Mayor Jackson. Atlanta, Jackson said, needed Brown. Brown eases his 6-foot 2-inch frame into the high-backed chair of his office in downtown Atlanta, near police headquarters. The office, with tan walls and rust carpeting, is as immaculate as its occupant. In the center, a coffee table supports a few books on Georgia and annual reports of the departments for which the Commissioner is responsible. The blinds behind Brown's sprawling desk are drawn, cutting the noise from the interstate highway five stories below.

"When I came here in 1978, the police bureau was at a standstill and there was no respect for the chain of command," says Brown, who is paid $49,800 a year. He ticks off the changes he has instituted: The discrimination suits were settled, enabling the police to resume hiring and to plan for a promotional examination this summer; of the 1,270 officers now on the force, 42 percent are black; the department was revamped administratively; police operations were further decentralized around

part, Mrs. Alford says, Brown manages to conceal the strain he's under. "He's very low-key, and he's durable. But when Chief Redding calls about another child missing, or a body, he gets very tensed up, with that sad look on his face."

Brown makes it a practice to visit the scenes where the children's bodies have been found. "I do it," he says, "to show my concern, and because it lends a command presence." For the same reasons, the Commissioner regularly visits the task-force headquarters: "I want them to know over there that I appreciate what they're doing." Brown talks by phone several times a day to Redding, a courtly, 20-year veteran of the Atlanta police force who was formerly chief of detectives, and sees him at least once a day. At least once a week, the Commissioner meets with Maj. Taylor, who is now the task force's administrative coordinator, and Inspector Hamrick, its investigative coordinator.

"It's not my job to play detective," Brown says. "But every day, I'm on the phone with law-enforcement people around the country and others who want to contribute their thoughts to the case. From that, and from my own experience, I can propose areas of exploration to Redding and Hamrick. They use me as a sounding board. We talk about investigative techniques and what avenues have to be followed in deciding on, or clearing, a suspect. In the end, I have to be satisified." Brown admits to having been disappointed several times when promising leads did not work out. "But I always keep in mind that you've only got something when you've got something." The Commissioner often remarks that some cases - such as a series of sexrelated child murders in Michigan some years ago and, more recently, a series of rape slayings of elderly women in Columbus, Ga. - are never solved.

Brown bristles at the suggestion, advanced by some local lawenforcement officials, that the police already have enough evidence to make arrests in connection with some of the child deaths. "I tell you that if I had the elements to make an arrest now, I'd make an arrest. There are no hidden agendas. But nobody," he snaps, "is going to make an arrest just to take the heat off, and if anybody in my command even thought of that, I'd fire him. We have to have a system with a semblance of justice."

Since most of Brown's day is taken up with matters pertaining to the child slayings, he delegates a larger share of his usual business to subordinates; asks for more oral, rather than written, reports, and makes increasing use of outside consultants for advice on departmental affairs. "I'm not afraid to ask for help when I

Shortly before midnight, Lee Brown opens his briefcase and starts to pore over documents about Fire Department training, the financing of a new jail and the feasibility of a secret-witness program for the police department. Also awaiting him is a draft of the forthcoming report of the National Minority Advisory Council on Criminal Justice, of which he is chairman. Maybe some weekend - again, if he's lucky - he will have time for one of those family talent shows where he stands on a box and imitates Billy Eckstine and makes up stories where he throws imaginary monsters across the sky.

About 1 A.M., Brown slips upstairs to bed. In downtown Atlanta at that hour, police recruits and others are keeping the late watch at task-force headquarters, answering phones, clacking out reports, planning for the next day. Under lights that never go out, they search and wait for "the one bit of information" that might begin to unravel the awful mystery that has pained the city for so long.

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