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THE BULGER MYSTIQUE: Whitey and the FBI

So where was Whitey? The question has become law enforcement's lament as it tries to get evidence against him. Last month, the elusive Bulger was photographed as he took a walk in an MDC park near Neponset Circle.

■ SPOTLIGHT
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The image has served him well. He has confounded everyone. The Mafia has a love-hate thing with him. "They're with us," Ilario M.A. Zannino, the tough Mafia lieutenant, once said about Bulger and his associates, only to bluster another time about how he would like to blow them all away with machine guns.

SPOTLIGHT

PART 3
in a four part series

And the Federal Bureau of Investigation has for years had a special relationship with Bulger that has divided law enforcement bitterly and poisoned relations among many investigators, the Spotlight Team has learned.

"Isn't he a great guy?" said an FBI agent about Bulger, according to another agent who feels the FBI should bust Bulger, not be beguiled by him.

For Whitey, the one willing to walk the high wire, the confusion provides the breathing room to prosper and survive.

"We're all good guys here," he proclaimed in 1984 as he waited politely for outwitted federal drug agents to finish retrieving a microphone he had discovered in his car. "You're the good-good guys, and we're the bad-good guys."

EVER SINCE his wild days of robbing banks, there have been few public glimpses of Bulger. But there have been plenty of secret ones – from the Quincy police, state troopers and federal drug agents who have spent large portions of their professional lives chasing Bulger.

In the past decade, those sources said, Bulger has carved out a lucrative niche with his associate Stephen (The Rifleman) Flemmi: They control South Boston, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, a piece of the South End and parts of Quincy and Lowell. With the Mafia in disarray, some now consider Bulger the most powerful mobster in Boston. "If they choose to be, Whitey and Flemmi are today as powerful as any Mafia regime," said one investigator.

Using a low-key style, the two are believed to function, in effect, as landlords – collecting rent from anyone doing business on their turf, whether it is running numbers or drugs. In recent years, South Boston's piers and warehouses have been used as a staging area for drug distribution, a set-up that police say could only happen with Bulger's blessing.

"At the very least, he's getting protection money from drug runners," said one agent. "Legally, that puts him in their service." But to others, collecting tithes is the extent of his role in drug trafficking. Bulger, said another, is in the "business of money, not drugs." And the money game includes shaking down drug dealers as well as lending funds at sky-high rates to loan sharks and gamblers who need cash quickly.

It is a business conducted mostly after hours. Like most major mobsters, Whitey is a creature of the night. His routine is to avoid a routine, having become ever more wary of being followed.

For a time in 1980, he and Flemmi operated out of a garage on Lancaster Street, near North Station. They waited outside for their appointments, each standing with his arms folded across his chest, not a hair out of place, not a shirt button out of line, as they stared down passersby.

There was the 50-year-old Whitey, still flexing the results of a lifetime of lifting weights, first in his bedroom in the Old Harbor tenements and more recently in health clubs.

On the street outside the garage, his demeanor was usually dour. He has a benign, Irish face, but somehow it is always clear he is not approachable. There is something firm and flat about the eyes, which look like marbles when he is angry.

Making visits to talk to the inseparable pair were a Who's Who of Boston's mobsters: Larry Zannino, Danny Angiulo, Nick Giso, Frank LePere, Connie Frizzi. They came carrying briefcases, and money was seen changing hands in an office inside.

Sidekick Nicky Femia usually stood watch, a beefy, gun-toting hit man who was murdered in 1983. Femia's lack of discipline and fitness was the sort of thing that set off Whitey Bulger the health fanatic, who only occasionally sips wine, does not smoke and does not permit anyone near him to smoke. Coming out of the garage office one day, Bulger spotted the 240-pound Femia using the polished hood of a black Chevy as a tabletop for a feast of McDonald's hamburgers and greasy French fries. Bulger grabbed the fast food and began throwing it into the face of the back-pedalling henchman twice his size.

It was like a scene from a mob movie, and the sudden burst of anger stunned the state troopers who were watching secretly from across the street. The troopers were left with an indelible impression similar to one a South Boston man had when he first saw Bulger's violent side 40 years ago. "I saw him get into a fight, and he just beat the piss out of the guy. Oh, he was vicious. And he wasn't that big. The other guy was bigger. But he was tough, and everyone whispered, 'That's Whitey Bulger.'"

But the garage near Boston Garden was only a pit stop for a man whose business makes perpetual motion a lifestyle. For a while, he shifted his meetings to the back room of a smokeshop near City Hall. Or he would make the rounds himself, ducking into the Cafe Pompeii in the North End to see Donato Angiulo, who ran his family's loan-sharking out of the Hanover Street coffee shop.

Mostly, however, Bulger has always commuted between pay phones. Many days, Bulger and Flemmi could be seen fishing in their pockets for dimes. They would make a call at the corner of Old Colony and Dorchester streets in South Boston, then go down to the phone at West Broadway and Dorchester Avenue. Then into a variety store on Broadway, followed by a quick swing into a bar. For a while, the favorite spot was the bank of pay phones outside the Howard Johnson's off the Southeast Expressway.

From there, they would head off to meet someone inside a row house on a narrow South Boston side street or in the parking lots of the factories at Fort Port Channel. They cruised around in leased cars that were changed frequently to guard against surveillance. For weekends, Whitey has kept a Cadillac or Jaguar – the kind of luxury car he has always prized, going back to the projects when he not only had the wheels few others could afford but a car that sported the big fins and shiny chrome of the era.

The phones, the rotating cars and the open air meetings were all calculated moves. Said a source, "He's compulsive. The agents would do his trash . . . and there was a lot of ash, he would burn stuff in his fireplace. He would rip things into tiny little shreds, almost like he had a shredder in his apartment."

They were days in the early 1980s that often ended at a private club in Roxbury controlled by Flemmi. And they were days that periodically featured Bulger's legendary temper – a mean streak that first surfaced in his teen-age fighting days and became part of underworld folklore by the 1970s, when a wiseguy once warned a secretly wired loan-shark victim that he would rather tangle "with a cobra" than cross Whitey Bulger.

At 3:05 p.m. on Sept. 25, 1980, according to a state police report, a trooper who was following Bulger and Flemmi witnessed Whitey's distaste for riffraff in his hometown: Bulger suddenly jumped from his car and grabbed a wino, who had been slumped on a Silver Street stoop. With Flemmi standing by, Bulger beat the man about the face, kicked him, then, in a final flourish, took the wino's hat and threw it down the street. Bulger got back in the car laughing and drove away. When the plain-clothes trooper approached the wino, the man pushed him away. "I don't know nothin'," the wino said. "And leave me alone."

Few have a clue about the size of Bulger's South Boston cadre, but no one doubts his strength. "I can't tell you that anybody I've worked with has any idea what kind of muscle he has – just that everybody's scared to death of him," said a former federal prosecutor.

But what Bulger may lack in numbers, compared to the beefier Mafia, he more than makes up for in guile and style. He has also always been different things to different people. To his mother, who died in 1980, the daring kid with the reddish-blond hair and easy smile was always Sonny. To his friends and siblings, he has always been Jimmy and a fierce loyalist.

Whitey has spent a lifetime helping out the mothers living in South Boston's Old Harbor Village tenements, where the Bulger family was among the first residents in 1938. "If he was coming up the street, and I had the carriage going down just four stairs, he'd yell, 'Wait a minute, Mrs. Dame,'" said Sally Dame, recalling five decades ago.

To the troopers who often followed Bulger into South Boston, there was always a noticeable change in his manner. Whitey Bulger, who crossed his arms and stared through those who came to pay him tribute at the downtown garage, would say hello to children and show deference to elderly women: Said a detective about Bulger today, "He would stop and open a car door for a lady, stop traffic." He has distributed baskets and turkeys in the housing projects at Christmas, donated money to the youth sports teams and sent money to the families of men in jail.

But, for the most part, the homefront talk of Whitey is restricted to his cordial relations with adults as a boy. In interviews, many neighbors said no one ever openly discusses Sonny-Jimmy-Whitey's professional life, which dates back to a 13-year-old's first unruly journeys up to Mercer Street and petty crime. It is a rock no one turns over.

Said a friend: "He's a hell of a guy; it's just if you are on the wrong side. . .."

THE TURKEYS and the donations, pulled off with a politician's touch, have helped create the good-bad guy that is Whitey Bulger. Except for Flemmi, he has never stuck with anyone long enough that they could know otherwise. Even in the beginning, Whitey was there but not there: in his early teens he hung around with a few of the Shamrocks but was never himself a member of that gang. Then came his association with the Killeen brothers of South Boston and, after that, with Howie Winter. It has been a lifetime of mergers and acquisitions.

He has been a schizophrenic puzzle to the most powerful underworld enterprise, the Mafia. During three months of secret bugging of the Angiulos in 1981, the Mafia relished the idea they could call on Bulger and Flemmi, if need be, even to kill. "I'll tell you right now, if I called these guys right now they'd kill anybody we tell 'em to," underboss Gennaro Angiulo claimed one winter afternoon. Later that year, Angiulo's lieutenant Zannino discussed the fate of a wiseguy who had erred by not paying Bulger and Flemmi long overdue money. Noted a soldier to Zannino, "I know if Stevie or Whitey sees him. . ."

"They're going to hit him," Zannino said.

But this same cast of Mafiosi could suddenly turn on Bulger and Flemmi when the subject became the pair's $245,000 debt. "When did they ever come

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Whitey eludes snares set by troopers, DEA

AFTER A WHILE, they called themselves "The Losers" – this bunch of state troopers who spent 1980 trying to bust Whitey Bulger, only to suffer a series of bellyflops.

They bugged his office, the phones he used and, finally, tried to bug his car, but each time Bulger eluded them; he either uttered small talk or nothing at all.

The troopers nad stumbled onto the Irish mobster by accident: a tip came in that a stolen car ring was working out of a garage near Boston Garden. Instead of stolen cars, the troopers found Bulger and his partner, Stephen Flemmi, were holding court daily inside the Lancaster Street garage.

Setting up shop in a Merrimac Street flophouse across from the garage, the troopers began keeping an eye on Bulger. To pass the hours while waiting for their target to appear, the troopers killed cockroaches, then mounted them on the wall, noting their size and time of death. From a third-floor window, they monitored what was suspected to be Bulger's gaming and loan-sharking affairs.

The troopers captured the comings and goings of some of Boston's best-known drug traffickers, loan sharks and hit men. "We saw the transfer of cash from hand to hand," a trooper said. One day they tailed a Mafioso carrying a bag of cash from Lancaster Street to the nearby headquarters of Gennaro Angiulo, the Mafia underboss.

The stakeout was fruitful; six months of photos and intelligence was more than enough for a court to permit the troopers to plant a bug inside the garage. But as soon as they tried to close in on Bulger, the probe that had seemed so promising fizzled quickly.

First came the agonizing setbacks resulting from their own inexperience. The trick was breaking into the garage to install the bug. One break-in that succeeded involved a trooper hiding beneath the floor of a van that had been stored at the garage overnight. It became known as the Trojan Horse maneuver.

Bathed in perspiration, the trooper climbed out in the early morning darkness and installed the bug. But the effort went for naught when the microphone failed to pick up voices.

Follow-up break-ins to move a new microphone into better listening positions also encountered technical troubles. Putting the mike under an office couch proved a disaster when Vincent (Fat Vinnie) Roberto, a reputed Mafia associate, sat his 400-pound frame down and squashed the bug over the monitor. It sounded as if a hurricane had hit. Then the monitor failed to filter out radio transmissions. "We'd hear all the comings and goings of the ambulances across the city. It was terrible," said a trooper.

"Whitey would be in the middle of a sentence and all you'd hear is, 'Unit 10, you're needed at BCH.'"

In the end, they listened in for about 30 days, but right off the troopers sensed Bulger was onto them. "Once we installed the device, all the conversations that were taking place in the open bays stopped," said one official. "All of a sudden, in the middle of the summer, they start having people get into cars to have talks."

And the talk they overheard was not the stuff of criminal cases. One time, Bulger rambled on about how he hated the television show "The Rookies" because the Irish cops were portrayed as fools. The gangsters constantly listened to radio station WEEI and, "Whenever they'd hear a story about a crime, they'd stop and discuss the social significance of it. They'd be saying, 'You can't walk the streets anymore. . . it's terrible how bad the crime is.' We'd be rolling on the floor laughing."

When one gangster told another who was going on vacation to be careful not to drive improperly "because those state troopers out there, they do a great job, they don't miss a trick," the troopers suspected something was amiss.

Then Bulger began showing up less, so the troopers, convinced he knew about the bug, tailed him. For three months, they watched Bulger and Flemmi make calls from the pay phones outside Howard Johnson's in Dorchester. But that autumn, as soon as they bugged those phones, Bulger became a no-show.

"The day we were authorized to turn on at the pay phones, they stopped going there," said a trooper.

As a last resort, they tried to put a bug into the car Bulger and Flemmi drove. The car's alarm sent the troopers scrambling. A second attempt – involving a ruse in which troopers would act as if the car was stolen, tow it away and then infstall a bug – collapsed when Flemmi threw a fit at the trooper who pulled him over, shouting that their ploy to bug the car was obvious.

In less than 12 months, three swings, three misses.

Three years later, the Drug Enforcement Administration got in on the act. During drug probes in 1983, the agency kept bumping into Bulger's ghost. "Whitey's name always came up in one respect or another," said one official.

"Consistently you would hear the stories that they (traffickers) operated out of the piers of South Boston and that they were operating with Whitey's sanction and would have to pay him some money through some of his people."

By mid-1984, after months of careful planning, DEA agents inserted a bug in the windowsill of a condominium where Bulger was living in Quincy, the Louisburg Square complex. Mostly, all they got was a television blaring.

The drug agents, however, did succeed where state troopers had failed: They managed to hide a listening device in the panel of Bulger's car door. Instead of a TV, agents heard a car radio.

"He would not talk to anybody unless the radio was blaring," said an investigator who worked on the case.

But Bulger's apparent genius for evasive action did not end there: not long after the bug was installed Bulger drove his car into a South Boston garage and ordered a mechanic to take the door apart. They found the tiny microphone, forcing agents to rush over to retrieve the government equipment.

"We got everybody else we wanted to, except Whitey," noted a federal official.

Globe staff photos

In the 1980s, investigators installed bugs at several locations in an unsuccessful attempt to investigate Whitey Bulger. They placed bugs at a Lancaster Street garage near North Station where Bulger met underworld figures, at telephone booths near the Dorchester Howard Johnson's where he made phone calls, and at a condo in Quincy where he was staying.

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