

Major trial of reputed drug kingpin opens

By Paul Gustafson
Staff Writer

The legions of attorneys and the extra-tight security measures in Courtroom No. 1 in St. Paul's federal building Monday underlined what prosecutors and narcotics agents have said since Ralph C. (Plukey) Duke was arrested last May.

Duke is no ordinary defendant facing drug charges, but the reputed kingpin

of a major drug-running operation in Minnesota, federal officials have said.

The trial of Duke and up to 10 of his relatives and associates on a slew of drug-related charges promises to be one of the longest, most complicated and most important of its type in state history.

Jury selection was completed yesterday, and the trial before U.S. District

Judge David Doty is expected to begin today with opening arguments by the government's chief prosecutor, Assistant U.S. Attorney Jon Hope-man.

In a July court appearance, Duke said he made money by gambling and dealing in expensive imported cars such as Ferraris and Rolls-Royces, not from drugs.

But U.S. Attorney Jerome Arnold

has charged that Duke's organization included a network of drug wholesalers and dealers that operated in Minnesota, Iowa, California and Texas.

Law enforcement officials said they have long suspected Duke of being a major drug dealer but were unable to penetrate his organization deeply enough to implicate him directly.

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They said their break came last May when an informant established contact with Duke's son, Ralph LaMont Nunn.

According to affidavits filed with criminal complaints, Nunn bragged to the informant that his father "ran all the dope business in Minneapolis and St. Paul" and had at one time sold 16 kilos (about 35 pounds) of cocaine in one day.

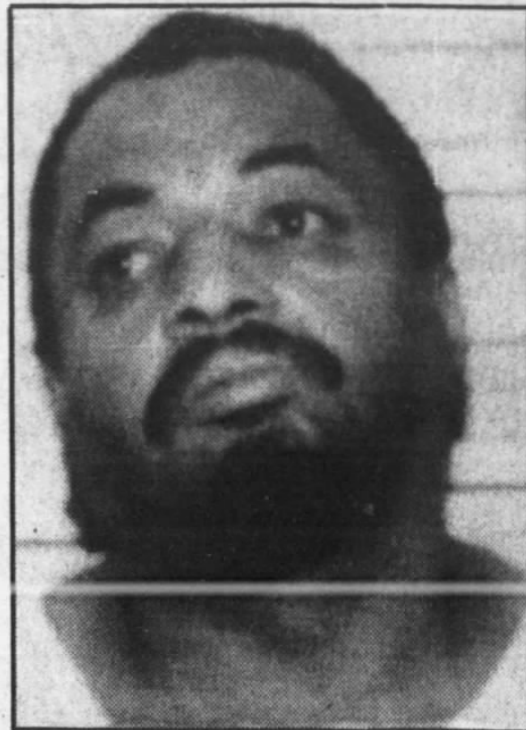
On May 17 Nunn told the informant that he was interested in buying 20 kilos of cocaine and said he would approach his father about helping with the purchase, according to the affidavits.

That night, members of a task force of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration executed the "sting," arresting Nunn and four associates and recovering \$118,000.

Duke, who is alleged to have asked an associate to lend him \$100,000 the day before the "sting" operation, also was arrested that night near his downtown Minneapolis apartment.

In June a federal grand jury indicted him and 20 others on dozens of drug-related charges.

Duke was charged with 13 criminal counts, including one of organizing and operating a "continual criminal enterprise," which carries a mini-



Ralph (Plukey) Duke

mum penalty of 20 years in prison.

Nunn was charged with one count of racketeering travel, for allegedly flying from Minnesota to California carrying \$22,000, and three other counts relating to distributing cocaine.

In September Duke's wife, Patricia Bettyce Holley; her sister, Alta Laverne Manuel, and Ralph Clinton Tillman were indicted on charges of laundering money for Duke to conceal that narcotics were his source of income.

Four of the 14 other defendants scheduled to go on trial with Duke this week pleaded guilty to some charges last week.