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Drug expert: 'Crack' born in San Francisco Bay Area in '74

*It was a failed attempt to copy something else***Published: Aug. 19, 1996****BY GARY WEBB**

Mercury News Staff Writer

THOUGH MIAMI AND LOS ANGELES are commonly regarded as the twin cradles of "crack" cocaine, the first government-financed study of cocaine smoking concluded that it was actually born here, in the San Francisco Bay Area, in January 1974.

After comedian Richard Pryor nearly immolated himself during a cocaine-smoking binge in 1980, the National Institute on Drug Abuse hired UCLA drug expert Ronald K. Siegel to look into the then-unfamiliar practice. Siegel, the first scientist to document crack's use in the United States, traced the smoking habit back to 1930, when Colombians first started it.

Translation problem

But what was being smoked south of the border -- a paste-like substance called basé (bah-SAY) -- was very different from what Californians were putting in their pipes, Siegel found, even though they called it the same thing: free base.

Basé was a crude, toxics-laden precursor to cocaine powder. On the other hand, free base (which later became known as crack or rock), was cocaine powder that had been reverse-engineered to make it smokable. When Bay Area dealers tried recreating the drug they'd seen in South America, Siegel learned, they'd screwed up.

"When they looked it up in the Merck Manual, they saw cocaine base and thought, well, yeah, this is it," Siegel, a nationally known drug researcher, said in an interview. "They mispronounced it, misunderstood the Spanish, and thought (basé) was cocaine base."

Unintentional success

The base described in the organic chemistry handbook was cocaine powder separated from its salts, a process easily done with boiling water and baking soda. It was an immediate, if unintentional, hit.

"They were wowed by it," Siegel said. "They thought they were smoking basé. They were not. They were smoking something nobody on the planet had ever smoked before."

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Using the sales records of several major drug paraphernalia companies, Siegel correlated crack's public appearance with the appearance of [base-making kits and glass pipes](#) for smoking it. The sales records zeroed in on the Bay Area.



[Pictures of crack cocaine](#)

Study never published

"We were able to show to our satisfaction that they were directly responsible for distributing the habit throughout the United States. Wherever they were selling their kits, that's where we started getting the clinical reports," Siegel said. "It all started in Northern California."

His groundbreaking study was never published by the government, purportedly for budgetary reasons. Siegel, who said he grew concerned that the information would not be made available to other researchers, published it himself in an obscure medical journal in late 1982.

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