

The Funny Money Caper

Wayne Dennis thought he was a millionaire after printing \$12 million in fake bills. But all he got when he tried to cash it in was hard time.

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WAYNE DENNIS ARRIVED IN LAS VEGAS WITH A SUITCASE full of homemade \$20 bills and dreams of becoming a millionaire.

He tried out his first fake \$20 at a Wendy's restaurant, his hand trembling as he handed it to the cashier to buy a burger and Coke. She put the bill in the register and handed Dennis his change.

Wow, he thought. This is really going to work.

With his wallet bulging with cash and his girlfriend by his side, Dennis set out to try his luck at the casinos. He peeled off crisp new 20s to buy stacks of gambling chips and play blackjack. He hit the Tropicana, Caesar's Palace, the Golden Nugget. No one took a second look at the funny money. Everything seemed to be going perfectly.

When he got to the Circus Circus Casino with his girlfriend, Alexia Lopez, Dennis got change for a couple more 20s to play 50-cent carnival games. He squirted a watergun into a clown's mouth and threw softballs at milk bottles, winning stuffed animals and having a great time.

Then a game attendant making change for another \$20 examined the bill.

"Is there a problem?" Dennis asked.

"No, I'm just looking at it," the attendant said.

Alexia turned to Dennis.

"I don't like this," she whispered. "We should leave."

"You're being paranoid," Dennis said. "Just one more."

But as they walked over to the basketball toss to change another \$20, Dennis heard the crackle of a walkie-talkie behind him.

"Sir, may I see that bill?" a security guard asked Dennis. Three other guards surrounded

him.

Dennis handed over the bill.

"Would you come with us, please?" the guard said.

Dennis felt his body go numb. "I knew it was all over then," he says, remembering that day three years ago.

WAYNE VICTOR DENNIS SPENT WEEKS secretly printing \$12 million in counterfeit \$20s in a soundproof room inside a house in Miramar. He was caught on the third day he tried to pass the bills.

After months of careful planning, painstaking work and sleepless nights, Dennis barely got a chance to enjoy the fruits of his labor - his "obsession" as he called it. He spent a measly \$1,500 before being arrested.

Inspired by the movie *To Live and Die in LA*, a drama about counterfeiting, Dennis tried to become a self-made millionaire. He printed his own money, thinking it would allow him to live as he wished for the rest of his life, to buy property, cars and electronics, to take long vacations to exotic destinations, invest in businesses and never worry about working again.

"I'd probably be in Australia right now diving the Great Barrier Reef if I hadn't been caught," he says as he sits in a federal prison camp outside Las Vegas. "And I would have houses in Costa Rica and Hawaii."

The 36-year-old entrepreneur, inventor, health-food fanatic and self-published author was the mastermind behind Florida's largest counterfeiting operation, but he did not do it alone.

Two Broward businessmen and Dennis' cousin, a 17-year-old student at Broward Community College when the counterfeiting began, also were convicted for taking part.

Federal agents believe they have recovered or accounted for all of the funny money, some hidden in a storage warehouse.

Although he was caught so quickly, Dennis talks about his counterfeiting operation with pride and bravado. He is a man who likes to talk about himself and his accomplishments.

"This counterfeiting thing was part challenge, part dream," he says. "It took talent, brains and ingenuity."

His scheme, zany as it sounds, was to cash \$6 million - his share of the money - by going around the country on Rollerblades, buying fast food, groceries and cigarettes with his fake \$20s and piling up the change. He figured it would take about six years to launder his dirty money.

Instead, he has spent the last three years in prison.

WAYNE DENNIS HAS ALWAYS been a dreamer, a good talker and a bit of a hustler.

"Ever since I can remember I've wanted to make millions," says Dennis, who grew up in Las Vegas and moved to South Florida in 1990. "For me, wealth means freedom - freedom to travel, to see beautiful things. Who wants to wake up to an alarm clock every day and go to work from 9 to 5?"

Dennis was never a 9-to-5 kind of guy. He didn't like being told what to do and was expelled from high school his last semester for fighting.

In 1978, he decided to join the Navy and learn to be a jet-engine mechanic. But after four years of touring the Pacific in an aircraft carrier and spending months at sea, Dennis grew weary of the naval life and left with an honorable discharge.

He spent a few months taking road trips through Nevada, California and Arizona prospecting for gold. He panned for it in streams and sifted through dirt. "I didn't make much," he says. "And I grew impatient."

To earn money, Dennis made address plaques out of painted wood and reflective beads and sold them door-to-door. He worked as a valet, parking cars at the Golden Nugget, started an automobile cleaning-and-detailing business and wrote and published his own natural-foods recipe books as well as a guide to stop smoking.

"He's always been his own boss," says Jerry Adler, a longtime friend and former craps dealer in Las Vegas. "He was a good seller, and he always had plenty of ideas."

Dennis liked to draw up various contraptions and devices like a self-generating electric automobile, an inflatable cinema headrest, a public phone sanitizer, a wallet card to test foods for MSG and caffeine, a backpack helicopter and a backpack with wings.

"I don't mind if people think I'm a little eccentric," he says. "They said Wilbur and Orville Wright were crazy, didn't they?"

John Robison, a friend since junior high school, remembers Dennis as being more than a little eccentric. "People as smart as him usually are strange," says Robison. "He's always been enterprising, always had ideas. He made money at everything he did, but I guess he wanted to make it faster."

On a trip to Arizona in 1987, Dennis was arrested for breaking into a motorhome. He stole a few pieces of jewelry and a camera. A judge sentenced him to six months in jail and three years' probation.

When he completed his sentence, Dennis moved back to Las Vegas. He parked cars again and got into the furniture-design business, creating custom-made Southwestern-style furniture by coating wood with a drywall compound that he could mold into interesting shapes and textures.

In 1990, Dennis moved to a house in Miramar owned by his uncle, Dave Goldman. Goldman also owned a linen and clothing dye company in Hollywood, and offered his

nephew some space in a warehouse he owned. Goldman suggested that he try the furniture business here.

But Dennis had a new idea.

After reading a magazine story about children who were injured when they caught their hands in a VCR, Dennis decided to design and market a VCR lock. He showed it to his uncle, who agreed to invest in the product. They had 25,000 of the locks made and tried to market them with retail stores around the country.

The business failed. Once again, Dennis began looking for a way to fulfill his dreams.

WHEN HE WASN'T TRYING to hustle business, Dennis hung out with his 17-year-old cousin, Joey Goldman. They worked out together, went to the beach, watched movies and ate health foods. While at the health club, Dennis also met Alexia Lopez, a former stripper and college student from Argentina who spoke English, French and Spanish.

Dennis began getting his kicks in strange ways. He bought a police-like badge and flashed it at motorists to pull them over on traffic violations. He says he would only pull over drivers who had children that were not properly restrained or drivers who sped through school zones.

"I may have been a criminal," he says, "but I still had morals."

While Dennis was trying to salvage his VCR lock business, a man who packaged the locks arranged for Dennis to meet David Spiller, a young businessman who was marketing a remote-control holder through his electronics company, DLS Enterprises. Spiller supposedly had a lot of money and might be able to help Dennis market the VCR lock.

Dennis met Spiller at the DLS offices in Lauderhill and says he was immediately impressed because Spiller had a Porsche convertible parked out front and a huge aquarium in his office.

Dennis showed Spiller his VCR lock. Spiller showed Dennis his remote-control holder. They discussed whether they could sell both items as a package deal through commercials, infomercials and direct mail.

Spiller bought about 1,500 locks but sales reps had little success in pitching them to retail stores.

Then in October 1991, Dennis and Spiller had a lunch meeting that would change everything. They agreed that the VCR lock and remote-control holder were not going to make it.

Dennis started talking about the counterfeiting movie, *To Live and Die in LA*, which he had seen five times.

"So I stupidly suggested that I had a way we could make a lot of money quickly," he

recalls. "I said I thought we could print money if he could finance the equipment. Spiller started getting really enthused. He asked if I thought I could do it. I said anyone can do whatever they want if they put their mind to it."

Spiller agreed to put up \$40,000 to finance the operation. Dennis would buy everything they needed and set up in the house his Uncle Dave was letting him live in. They suggested printing \$12 million and agreed to split the money 50/50. Dennis said he planned to give his cousin Joey half of his \$6-million share.

DENNIS DECIDED HE WOULD MAKE HIS millions by printing only \$20 bills, figuring that businesses and banks always looked more closely at 50s and 100s when trying to detect counterfeit bills.

His plan was to photograph real \$20s, make printing plates from the negatives and run them on a press. Simple-sounding steps but a complicated process.

With the money provided by Spiller, Dennis attended a photo-equipment sale in Miami and purchased a printer's camera that was five feet tall and weighed 200 pounds. He also got a light table, special photographic tape, X-acto blades and latex gloves.

Dennis had heard that police helicopters often flew over residential areas with heat-sensing equipment to spot artificially lighted rooms. Such rooms often are used by indoor marijuana growers. Because Dennis was going to be using bright lights, he covered the roof of the home with a heat-reflecting paint to avoid detection. He also bought alarms and thick, deadbolt locks for all the doors.

Dennis drove to a dozen different banks to get as many new \$20s as possible. He photographed several hundred of them, experimenting with different exposures and light to get the sharpest detail.

When he got his negatives, Dennis wore magnifying glasses to examine their quality. Andrew Jackson's face had to be clean, the clouds above the White House had to be visible. To repair flaws, he used the X-acto blades to etch lines and filled in uneven lines with a Rapidograph pen. He had to widen each serial number individually and draw the Treasury seal by hand because it would not photograph properly.

To print the bills, Dennis made three plates because various parts of the bill, such as the Treasury seal and serial numbers, had to be printed in special shades of green and black.

Dennis sat hunched over his dining-room table, sometimes 18 hours a day, trying to perfect his negatives. He says that while he worked on the negatives, Joey and Alexia ran errands and bought supplies. Though Joey and Alexia would later deny it, Dennis claims they were aware of the counterfeiting operation and assisted in it.

When Dennis finally produced a set of negatives that satisfied him, he was ready to prepare the printing plates - thin, bright blue aluminum plates that would be imprinted with the image of the bills.

The first plate would reproduce the front of the bill, minus the serial numbers and

Treasury seal, which had to be printed in green. The second plate carried the serial numbers and seal. The third would reproduce the back of the bill, which was to be printed in olive green.

Dennis kept meticulous records of his work because, he says, he wanted to show Spiller how the money was being spent and how the project was coming along.

In Decemebr 1991, Dennis sold the photo equipment and bought an A.B. Dick 360 chain delivery printing press for \$6,800. The salesman kept insisting that the company deliver the 750-pound press, and Dennis kept insisting he could take it himself. The press was deposited by a forklift onto Dennis' Toyota pickup truck, and he drove it home. His cousin Joey and an employee of Spiller's helped to move the press into the house under cover of darkness.

Dennis shopped at various office- and art-supply stores for paper, settling on 20-pound typing paper. He spent days testing the printing equipment, trying to get the right flow of ink and the right tone. When he had problems with the printer, he called local printers with technical questions, being careful not to reveal too much. "I never called the same printer twice," he says.

It took about a week before he was satisfied that the press was capable of producing realistic-looking \$20 bills.

THE PRESS STARTED ROLLING in February 1992 and kept going day and night. Only about \$10 million came out well, and Dennis had to get rid of \$2 million in poorly printed bills. Disposing of the flawed money became a comedy of errors.

Dennis purchased a couple of paper shredders at Office Depot and began shredding the bills, flushing them down the toilet. But the shredders would not work fast enough.

Dennis says he gave Joey money to buy a barbecue grill and began burning the money in the back yard, hoping the neighbors wouldn't look over the fence and see them throwing stacks of \$20s into the fire. But the wind kicked up and blew bills around the yard, with Dennis and Joey running frantically around trying to collect them.

Concerned that he might be discovered, Dennis says he called David Spiller, who agreed to let them burn the money in his fireplace at home. But that didn't work too well either. The fire got out of control and nearly burned the living room carpet. Dennis grabbed one of Mrs. Spiller's favorite golf clubs to push the money in and then tried a pool-cleaning pole, which melted.

Partially burned bills blew out the chimney and scattered around the neighborhood. "A fiasco," Dennis says.

Spiller said he would burn the rest later. With thousands of bills still to be disposed of, Dennis and Alexia dumped trash bags full of fake money in Dumpsters all around Broward County.

Of the \$10 million that looked reasonably realistic, Dennis said he gave Spiller \$6

million, which Spiller hid in a rented storage warehouse near his office.

But the money wasn't ready to be circulated yet. Dennis wanted to make it look like it had been passed around. He experimented by soaking the bills in fruit juices, household chemicals and spray starch. He bought two clothes dryers because he remembered that the characters in *To Live and Die in LA* used them to dry and age their money. He put bills in the clothes dryers with sandpaper and bark, but it didn't seem to help.

He figured he would have to age the bills one by one.

After much experimentation, Dennis found the best method was to fill a glass lasagne pan halfway with water, add two bottles of spray starch, top off with a teaspoon of coffee and stir. After soaking the bills in this mixture, he ironed them on marble slabs.

For a final touch, he placed the bills in a plastic container, sprinkled on a few dashes of baby powder, put on a lid and shook vigorously.

Dennis recalls that he, Joey and Alexia would close their eyes and finger a genuine \$20 bill and one of the fake ones. They couldn't tell the difference.

Dennis says he gave Joey the first 25,000 bills - \$500,000 - which Joey placed in a metal ammunition box and buried behind his uncle's laundry business in Hollywood. Dennis filled an old stereo speaker with another \$500,000, and stashed the speakers behind the laundry too.

David Spiller had stayed away from any direct involvement in the operation, but one afternoon he sent one his employees, Steven Penner, to Miramar to find out what was happening. Dennis handed Penner a package filled with the fake bills.

"That was the day I became aware of what was going on," Penner later testified in court. "And that was the day I made the wrong decision in my life and I became a part of it."

Penner admits to helping process the money and making deliveries of the fake bills to his boss.

He testified that David Spiller offered to "boost" his salary if he would try to pass some of the money in New York City. Penner drove up to New York but had only partial success when he tried to pass the bills, with about half of the people saying there was "something wrong" with them. Scared, Penner headed back to Florida and told Spiller he wanted nothing more to do with the venture.

Dennis and Alexia took a two-week vacation to Argentina to see Alexia's family, but Dennis didn't bring his fake money for fear of being thrown in a foreign jail. "I've seen *Midnight Express*," he says.

ON APRIL 20, 1992, DENNIS and Alexia Lopez flew to Las Vegas with \$100,000 in fake bills packed into a large suitcase. Dennis had chosen Las Vegas as the place to try out his money because cash was passed around town so quickly, and because many casinos were dimly lit.

When the couple arrived, they rented a car, drove to the Strip and checked into the Excalibur Hotel. They decided to try cashing their first bill at a Wendy's restaurant. They were ecstatic when it worked.

"Alexia and I looked at each other. Right then we knew we were millionaires," Dennis says.

After that, they passed bills at a few casinos and bars and played a few games of blackjack. Sometimes Dennis wore round glasses and a fake mustache. Alexia wore a black wig. In two days, they passed more than \$1,000 in fake bills.

On their third day in town, they decided to go to the Circus Circus casino to pass more money, and that's where it all ended.

At first, Dennis told police and Secret Service agents that he had found the money in a suitcase at a nightclub in Miami. He told them they could find the rest of the cash in his room at the Excalibur.

Dennis thought he might be released, but then figured the Secret Service would probably do a little homework, show his picture around and investigate him back in Florida. He and Alexia spent an uncomfortable night in a federal holding cell.

The next day, a Secret Service agent confronted Dennis with a logbook which Dennis had left in his hotel room. The entire counterfeiting operation was detailed in the book.

"I knew then that they'd found all the information they would ever need," Dennis says.

Faced with the inevitable, Dennis pleaded guilty to federal charges of conspiring to manufacture and manufacturing counterfeit money and told agents where they could find the cash. He lied to the agents about Alexia, insisting that she was not involved and had no knowledge of the operation. Dennis says he was in love with her and would have said anything to protect her. Alexia was still charged with passing counterfeit bills.

Dennis, originally sentenced to 5 1/2 years in prison, finally got four years because of his cooperation in the case.

David Spiller, who financed the operation, was convicted in a jury trial of conspiracy and counterfeiting charges and got seven years. Agents found his \$6 million share at his brother's house in Sunrise. Penner pleaded guilty and got 2 1/2 years, later reduced to three years of supervised release. Alexia Lopez pleaded guilty to one count of passing counterfeit money and got six months' house arrest.

Two years after his arrest, Dennis decided to break his silence about Joey Goldman's involvement. He turned in Joey, he says, because of a dispute with Joey and his family over the return of Dennis' personal belongings, which he had stored at their business in Hollywood.

Joey Goldman was convicted in a jury trial for conspiring and assisting in the manufacture of counterfeit bills and was sentenced to 3 1/2 years in prison.

Both Goldman and Spiller are appealing their convictions.

Dennis says that his co-conspirators needed to learn a lesson, to face the truth and take their punishment, just like he had to. But the Goldman family claims that Dennis lied about Joey's involvement because they did not come to Dennis' aid after his arrest.

"We didn't want anything to do with Wayne after we found out he was printing money in my Dad's house," Rick Goldman says. "He's mad at us for not having anything to do with him, but we don't associate with criminals."

Rick Goldman says he was surprised that a jury believed Dennis, who had already admitted to lying about Alexia to protect her.

"Two years later, suddenly Joey's a bad guy? Joey wasn't involved in this," Goldman says. "Wayne's a good talker. He's convincing. He knows a lot about a lot of things and he takes delight in talking about his crimes."

The whole matter has left the Dennis family saddened and disappointed.

Dennis' father, Jason, doesn't have much to say except that he hopes his son will turn his life around. His older brother, Gary, is less supportive.

"I love my brother," he says, "but I'm not interested in having anything to do with him."

DENNIS IS NEARING THE END of his 37-month sentence at a federal prison camp at Nellis Air Force Base near Las Vegas. He has applied for a presidential pardon, saying he has learned his lesson and can be a productive member of society. He also has applied for a job at the Treasury Department as an anti-counterfeiting expert.

"He has a lot of skills, and hopefully he'll use them the right way now," says federal prosecutor James Boma. "He's a bright guy, based on what I've seen, but not bright enough to get away with what he did."

Meanwhile, Dennis is busy typing his autobiography, which he has titled *The Counterfeit Millionaire*. He plans to design and print the book himself and hopes to make it into a movie.

"Someday I'll be a real millionaire," he says. "With dollars I've earned myself."

KEVIN DAVIS is a staff writer with the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel.

Counterfeiting cash

Last year, \$25.3 million in counterfeit bills was passed on to the American public. The U.S. Secret Service says another \$45.7 million was seized before it hit the streets. Police arrested 1,955 suspects.

According to the feds, South Florida is awash in funny money. In Broward, Dade and Monroe counties, \$2.5 million in counterfeit money was passed last year, and \$8.4 million was seized, with 73 suspects arrested.

Counterfeiting is not, as some counterfeiters claim, a victimless crime. When banks find fake bills have been deposited by businesses, those business must make up the losses.

No matter how perfect a counterfeiter thinks his money is, chances are that he will get caught, says Miami Secret Service agent Bill Brush.

"We have a very high arrest rate," Brush says. "But anybody would be naive to think that we catch everybody."

The availability of high-quality color laser copiers and recent technological developments in printing equipment have helped the counterfeiters.

To counteract this, the Treasury Department last July announced a series of new anti-counterfeiting measures that include enlarging the faces of the presidents to permit more detail in their portraits. Other changes include an ink that appears green when viewed straight on, and gold from an angle, and computer-designed patterns that turn wavy when illicitly copied.

It is the first major redesign of America's paper money since 1929, when the size of bills was reduced by 25 percent. The words "In God We Trust" were added in 1957.