

Girl claims deputy pulled out her hair

By SHARON NOGUCHI

A fistful of her hair was pulled out by a San Mateo County Sheriff's deputy, 15-year-old Neomi Williams of East Palo Alto told the Municipal Council Tuesday night.

Neomi lifted her neatly combed hair and turned to reveal a triangular patch of barren scalp on the back of her head.

A fistful of braids was yanked out by the roots from that spot a week ago by the deputy, as he pushed her away from her brother, 16-year-old Don Williams, Neomi said.

A suit alleging "severe and permanent injuries" and seeking \$500,000 in damages from San Mateo County and the deputy, James Burns, was to be filed today, the Williams' attorney, LaDoris Cordell, said.

Ms. Cordell, on behalf of Neomi and her parents, Willie and Catherine Williams, asked the East Palo Alto Municipal Council to recommend Burns' suspension and to set public hearings on the topic of police harassment. The council agreed and also asked for the county Board of Supervisors' blessings on the hearings and for a public investigation of the incident.

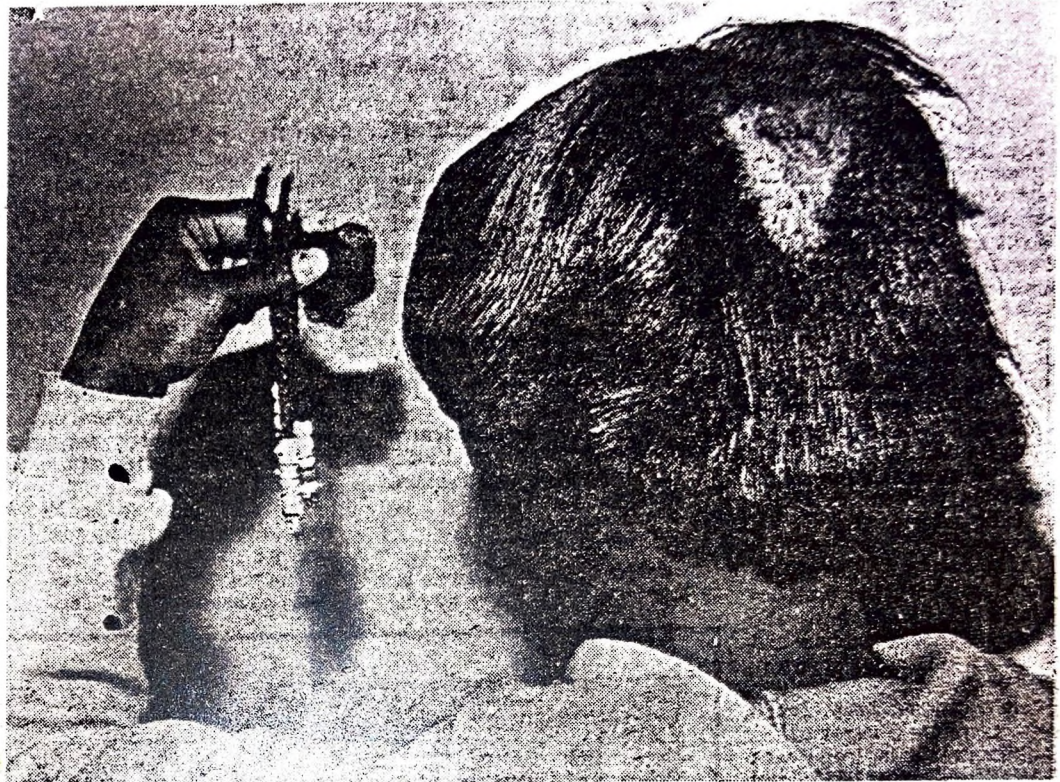
San Mateo County Sheriff John R. McDonald Jr. said today that his office has not been notified of the Williams complaint nor has he been contacted by the East Palo Alto Municipal Council in regard to the alleged incident.

"If and when a complaint is filed by the Williams family, the East Palo Alto Municipal Council or the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors, this office will investigate the complaint and act accordingly," McDonald said. "But until I receive a formal complaint and know a little more about the matter, there is very little that I can do."

Willie Williams told the Municipal Council that on Saturday, April 22, his son, Don Williams, and another youth had been arguing while standing on Annapolis Street near Notre Dame Avenue in East Palo Alto. Willie Williams said Burns, with two other sheriff's deputies, arrived and picked up Don Williams by gripping his throat, and threw him against a parked car, the elder Williams said.

His son was then ordered to go home, Williams said. The family lives at 2627 Fordham St.

Miss Williams said she went to



Neomi Williams shows the bald spot on her scalp and the braids that were ripped from it. (Photo by Joe Melena)

get her brother, who was still arguing as he backed away from the officer, to take him home when Burns turned and grabbed her hair. She said she fell away as he tore loose a handful of hair, which had been braided in "corn rows," tiny braids close to the head.

Burns threw down the hair, which Miss Williams recovered, and told another of her brothers, Vernon Ford, "he had three seconds to get us out of there or we were going to jail," she said.

She said Burns also had grabbed her and her sister, Debbie Williams, and knocked their heads together.

No charges were filed stemming from the argument or ensuing confrontation.

Mr. and Mrs. Williams had taken their four younger children with them on a weekend fishing trip and didn't return until Sunday evening. Six older children had been left at home under the supervision of a 23-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter, Mrs. Williams said.

The parents called every day to check on the family at home, but the children didn't tell them about the run-in with the deputies for fear of ruining their weekend, Mrs. Williams said. She took her daughter to the hospital Monday, the day after returning from the trip. Doctors told her "they had never seen anything like it" and didn't know whether the hair would grow back, Mrs. Williams said.

"It's still sore," Miss Williams said.

Willie Williams called the hair-pulling the latest "five or six" incidents of harassment by Burns, whom he accused of harassing the family ever since a neighborhood shooting incident in 1975.

"He just comes in (the home) and acts like a bully," Mrs. Williams said. She said until 1975 the family never had any trouble with the police, and has had no difficulties with other officers.

The incident to which they referred, apparently, was in June, 1975, when Quintel de Carlo Clayton, 19, 2616 Fordham St., East Palo Alto, was shot and killed by deputies who said Clayton had cocked the shotgun he was carrying and pointed it at them. Clayton was on the roof of his home, to where he had fled after a street fight. The shooting touched off a new riot by 1,000 people in the neighborhood. Burns was not the deputy who shot Clayton.

"This is one of the more outrageous incidents of police brutality," Ms. Cordell said Tuesday of the hair-pulling incident. "I'm not accusing the entire Sheriff's Department, but repeatedly some people are mentioned."

"I'm really appalled," Councilwoman Barbara Mouton said. "It's just unbelievable that a man would do this to a child."

Councilman Henry Anthony urged an investigation by the dis-

trict attorney's office. "Nothing bothers me more than law enforcement in this community," he said.

The council approved a recommendation by Councilman Frank (Omowale) Satterwhite to ask for an investigation and report from Capt. Gerald Fitting, captain of the sheriff's substation in East Palo Alto, and for a written account from Ms. Cordell.

Much of the problem stems from the lack of black officers assigned to East Palo Alto, Council Chairwoman Gertrude Wilks said. When the council inquires about getting black officers on the beat, the sheriff responds that all assignments are rotated and assignment to East Palo Alto only is unfair to an officer, and that officers are hired on the basis of qualification regardless of race, she said.

"It's the most blatant act of racism I've seen since I left Mississippi," Mrs. Wilks said.

Ms. Cordell suggested placing a measure on the ballot to abolish County Service Area 5, a special taxing district established to provide beefed-up law enforcement for East Palo Alto. Instead, families could be assessed a flat fee, and a contract for police protection for East Palo Alto be let out for bid, she said.