

Where to Find Dillinger's Hideout and Ma Barker's Boys.

By Paul Maccabee

It was the lawless 1930s of tommy guns, jazz and bootleg hooch, a time when every major American city harbored speakeasies, brothels and gambling dens, the years when a crime syndicate headed by Lucky Luciano, Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky in New York and Al Capone in Chicago spread its tentacles across the nation.

But it was the Depression-era bandits, termed "Public Enemies" by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who captivated and horrified the public—bankrobbers like John Dillinger, George "Machine Gun Kelly" Barnes and Lester "Babyface Nelson" Gillis; kidnapper Alvin "Creepy" Karpis; and the legendary den mother of crime, Katherine "Ma" Barker. Each of these outlaws sought safe harbor in St. Paul, Minnesota, a city U.S. Senator Royal Copeland condemned as a "Poison Spot of American Crime." As a member of the Senate Racketeering Committee, the New York Republican was in a position to know.

Visitors to the Sainly City today seek out the historic homes of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald and railroad magnate James J. Hill. But to the FBI, St. Paul is better remembered as home to Machine Gun Kelly and dozens of other desperados. St. Paul "was a haven for criminals," confided a 1934 FBI memo. "The citizenry knew it, the hoodlums knew it, and every police officer knew it."

"Everyone had the same things in common," wrote Creepy Karpis of Minnesota's capitol city. "Stealing, killing and looting." If you hadn't seen a criminal in a few months, Karpis mused in his autobiography, you knew he'd be in one of two places--federal prison or St. Paul.

To see the hoodlums' St. Paul, put on your black fedora and begin your Crook's Tour at the St. Paul Police Headquarters, still standing at 100 East 11th Street. Renovated in the mid-1980s, the building's Roman-Doric exterior looks as it did when it opened in 1930, when Chief John "The Big Fellow" O'Connor kept a Devil's Bargain with the underworld. Under his "O'Connor Agreement" outlaws were welcome as long as they checked in with police, paid a small bribe and promised not to kill, kidnap or rob within city limits.

Chief O'Connor's underworld ambassador was "Dapper Danny" Hogan, whom the Justice Department termed "one of the most resourceful and keenest criminals" in the nation. Dapper Danny's reign ended December 4, 1928, when a car bomb blew him and his Paige coupe apart at his home, 1607 West Seventh Street, visible today near May Street and I-35E. In the police headquarters' second-floor museum you can see, by special appointment, a five-inch chunk of the bomb that killed Hogan. His replacement as O'Connor Agreement czar was bootlegger Harry "Dutch" Sawyer, who made sure police warned gangsters before raiding hideouts.

When Prohibition went into effect in 1920, St. Paul's small-time hoodlums graduated to the big leagues of bootlegging. The money poured in, forging tighter links between gangsters and city government and providing local bad boys with some very posh addresses.

Fronting gracious Rice Park is the St. Paul Hotel, 350 Market Street, which the FBI called "a rendezvous for gangsters." Built in 1910 and reopened in 1989 after renovation, the hotel served as headquarters for bootlegger Leon Gleckman, "The Al Capone of St. Paul," who counted the city's ruling elite as his friends.

Vacationing mobsters and the city's most prominent businessmen mingled at Nina Clifford's brothel, once located at 147 South Washing-ton (now Hill Street), below what is today the Civic Center. Although Nina's establishment was razed in 1937, today you can visit the main bar of the Minnesota Club (317 Washington Street, across Rice Park from the St. Paul Hotel) to view a portrait said to be of Nina and a brick from her house of ill fame. According to legend, the club and Nina's brothel were connected by a tunnel, used by businessmen who wanted to sneak over to enjoy her hospitality.

Typical of the hospitality St. Paul offered criminals was the police tip-off at Ma Barker's hideout, which still stands today at 1031 South Robert Street, near Bernard Street in West St. Paul. Ma Barker moved to this house in February 1932, accompanied by Alvin "Creepy" Karpis and Ma's son Fred. The Barker-Karpis Gang was then at the midpoint of a larcenous career that would earn it \$3 million in

bank and kidnap loot. FBI head J. Edgar Hoover called it "the most vicious, cold-blooded crew of murderers, kidnapers and robbers in recent memory."

On April 25, landlord Nick Hannegraff recognized his three boarders in an issue of True Detective Mysteries magazine and, eager to earn the \$100 reward, alerted police to the location of the Public Enemies. The police, in turn, tipped off the Barkers—who fled, leaving dinner on the table and a stolen \$500 bond under the rug.

Hoover demonized Ma as "the most vicious, dangerous and resourceful criminal brain of the last decade." But a review of 76,000 pages of FBI files suggests Ma was never involved in any of the gang's crimes. Asked if Ma Barker planned the crimes the FBI attributed to her, Oklahoma bankrobber Harvey Bailey hooted, "That old woman couldn't plan breakfast!"

Some of the best criminals in the nation hung out in 1931-34 at St. Paul's Edgcumbe Apartments, still standing at 1095 Osceola Avenue, off Lexington Parkway. Among felons lounging in what the FBI called "a lamster's hideout" were Frank "the Gentleman Bandit" Nash who read Shakespeare in prison and Edna "the Kissing Bandit" Murray who waylaid truck drivers with her affections while her gang hijacked the cargo.

But those paid to ignore St. Paul outlaws were stunned on June 15, 1933, when the Barker-Karpis Gang kidnapped William Hamm, Jr., president of the Hamm Brewing Company (today, standing as the Stroh Brewery at 681 East Minnehaha Avenue, near Payne Avenue).

The gang abducted Hamm as he walked from his brewery to the Hamm family mansion, 671 Cable Avenue at the intersection of Greenbrier and Margaret Streets. (The mansion burned down in 1954, but a nine-foot brick column from the estate remains on the site.) They released the brewery mogul after payment of a \$100,000 ransom.

The kidnapping was planned inside the Hollyhocks Club Casino, visible today as a three-story private residence at 1590 South Mississippi River Boulevard, near Cleveland Avenue between 1606 and 1616 South Mississippi River Boulevard (new buildings threw off the street numbers). Legend holds there was a tunnel from the casino to the Mississippi for smuggling in liquor and dropping corpses from the gambling rooms to the river below.

Ma and her crew gathered in January 1934 at Freddy Barker's Dale Apartments, 628 Grand Avenue (a three-story building still standing at the intersection of Grand and South Dale Street), to plan the kidnapping of another millionaire. Their next victim, Edward Bremer, was president of Commercial State Bank and son of Adolf Bremer, president of the Jacob Schmidt Brewing Company (now the Minnesota Brewing Company), 882 West Seventh Street at Webster Street.

The boys seized Bremer at the corner of Lexington Parkway and Goodrich Avenue on January 17. St. Paul was outraged. Even U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued a statement decrying the crime. Recalled crime reporter Nate Bomberg, "When you started to pick on the fat boys," millionaires like Hamm and Bremer, "then people get alarmed."

Finally convinced to abandon its deal with the underworld, St. Paul was rocked by a series of shootouts involving John Dillinger, the baseball-loving Indiana felon whose career left 12 men dead, seven wounded and \$500,000 criminally "withdrawn" from U.S. banks. Dillinger and his girlfriend Evelyn Frechette lived at the Lincoln Court Apartments (locals will point out the location of Dillinger's third-floor apartment, at 93 South Lexington Avenue at Lincoln). The gangster had just escaped from Indiana's Crown Point Jail and was wanted for stealing \$49,000 from a bank in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and \$52,000 from a Mason City, Iowa, bank.

On March 31, FBI agents knocked on Dillinger's door, acting on a tip from a suspicious landlady. The bankrobber responded by spraying the hallway with machine-gun bullets, then escaping out the back into a getaway car. "We had a quiet, well-to-do neighborhood," remembers Bob Geisenheyner, then a 7th-grader living opposite Dillinger's apartment. "Except for the John Dillinger shootout and the kidnapping of [Ed] Bremer down the block!"

Next St. Paul cleaned out its home-grown corruption, beginning in the Ramsey County Courthouse (St. Paul City Hall, still standing at 15 West Kellogg Boulevard). It was here in an 8th-floor courtroom Roger "The Terrible" Touhy, who the FBI mistakenly believed was responsible for the Hamm

kidnapping, was tried and acquitted. By 1935, police corruption trials were held in the 11th-floor courtrooms. Based on evidence from 2,500 wiretapped phone conversations between police and gangsters, the city fired the crooked officers and dismantled the O'Connor Agreement for good.

Your Crook's Tour of St. Paul terminates where the careers of remaining gang members ended, at what is today Landmark Center (formerly the Old Federal Courts Building) at Fifth and Market Streets. Built in 1902, the neo-Romanesque structure housed the FBI field office in Room 203. There agents interrogated Karpis and others. Climb one floor up to courtroom 317, lush with marble and hand-carved cherrywood, where the Barker-Karpis Gang members were finally convicted for the Hamm and Bremer kidnappings.

After half a century of hiding from its nefarious past, St. Paul now embraces its Dillinger-era legacy. The St. Paul Convention and Visitors Bureau welcomes travelers by promoting the city's gangland history. Restaurants like Forepaugh's host gangster-themed dinners, the St. Paul Saints sponsor Public Enemy baseball nights, a costumed Ma Barker character leads visitors through Landmark Center, and St. Paul Gangster bus tours, led by costumed guides, entertain tourists with tales of St. Paul's lawless past.

For some, the era of John Dillinger never ended. "I dream about him every day," Dillinger's sister Audrey told a Chicago Reader reporter in 1984, "and I wonder what I would do if he came in that door. I dreamed about him one night. I heard him calling, 'Sis!' just so plain, and I got out of bed and swung that door wide open, expecting to find my brother there. But it wasn't [him]: it was a dream. I never have had a dream as real as that one."