

Matriarch Of Crime

Ma Barker & the Barker Gang

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover called her “the most vicious, dangerous and resourceful criminal brain of the last decade.” She has been held up as an example of maternal instincts gone wrong; a woman who contributed to her sons’ deaths by driving them to commit violent crimes. Yet many argue that she was a victim of FBI character assassination, guilty only of passivity.

Read the story of the Barker Gang that terrorized the Midwest in the 1920s and 30s, and the role of the legendary Ma Barker.

It was the pre-dawn hours of January 16, 1935, in a small town in Florida. A horde of agents from the Bureau of Investigation (BOI), soon-to-be-renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), descended on a quiet, secluded home at the edge of a lake. Inside the two-story cottage, an unknown number of members of one of the most brutal gangs of hoodlums the United States had ever seen were hiding. The gang that had terrorized the Midwest for the last five years would have a showdown with law enforcement at last.

When all was ready, the officers shouted to the gangsters inside that they were surrounded. They were to come out at once and surrender.

There was no response.

Finally Agent Earl E. Connelly of Cincinnati called out, "Come out or we're going to start shooting!"

In reply a woman's voice called out a challenge: "All right—go ahead."

Off to a Bad Start

Arizona Donnie Clark was born to parents of Scotch and Irish background, possibly on October 8, 1873. She was born in Ash Grove, near Springfield, Missouri, in the Ozarks. Commonly known as Arrie, at some later point she took the first name Kate. Arrie Clark married George Barker on September 4, 1892. They spent the early years of their marriage in Aurora, Missouri.

George Barker, according to an FBI report, "was more or less a shiftless individual." He worked as a sharecropper and held other various low-paying jobs. The couple's oldest son Herman was born in 1894, followed by Lloyd in 1896, Arthur in 1899 and Fred in 1902. Around 1904 the family moved to Webb City, Missouri, and in 1915 they settled in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The FBI describes the family as having been poor with little ambition to improve its overall situation. The Barkers and the people they associated with did not place much emphasis on their education and as a



The Florida cottage where the shootout took place as it appears today. Ma and Fred Barker made their last, desperate stand in the upper left bedroom.

result the Barker boys were "more or less illiterate." Ma Barker let her boys run wild and refused to intervene when neighbors complained about their delinquent behavior. "If the good people of this town don't like my boys, then the good people know what they can do," she would say.

The Barker boys had run-ins with the law from an early age. The oldest, Herman, was arrested on charges of robbery in 1910 when he was just 16. He was arrested again in Joplin, Missouri, on March 5, 1915, for committing a robbery along with the infamous Central Park Gang. Arthur, 19, was arrested on July 4, 1918, for his involvement in a car theft in Tulsa. He escaped from police custody.

The Roaring Twenties

Their crimes escalated during the 1920s, with all four brothers involved in a list of bank robberies and shootouts that left law enforcement officials dead. The brothers were alternately arrested, released from prison and then committed more robberies.

Early on, Lloyd "Red" Barker was involved in a mail robbery in Baxter Springs, Kansas. He was sentenced to 25 years at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, where he began serving in January 1922. As a result, he was effectively excluded from his

brothers' gang activities. (After his release in 1938 Lloyd found employment and stayed away from crime. He served as a cook in the US army, working in a POW camp in Michigan during World War II. He settled down in Westminster, near Denver, Colorado, where he helped manage a restaurant. Lloyd was shot and killed by his wife of less than two months on March 18, 1949; she was subsequently admitted to an insane asylum.)

Arthur "Doc" Barker spent six months in Oklahoma State Prison for an attempted bank robbery in early 1921. On the night of August 16, barely a month after his release, Doc was caught red-handed breaking into a warehouse in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He was together with childhood friend and fellow gangster Volney Davis. The night watchman who stopped them, Thomas J. Sherrill, was killed. The law caught up with Doc, and in February 1922 he began serving a life sentence at Oklahoma State Prison.

Fred Barker robbed a bank in Winfield, Kansas, in 1926 and was sent to Kansas State Prison on March 12, 1927.

On August 1, 1927, Herman Barker entered a bank to cash some stolen bonds. He was spotted by Sheriff Deputy Arthur Osborn who followed him as he drove away in his car. When Osborn stopped him, Herman shot the sheriff. He was also involved with the Kimes-Terril gang and its August 9 murder of Wichita Police Officer J. E. Marshall. Later, Herman Barker was stopped by police at a roadblock on August 27, after robbing a factory with two accomplices. He refused to submit, instigating a protracted shootout instead. Herman was killed by the police.

With Herman gone and the rest of his boys behind bars, George left the family in 1928. He spent the next years operating a gas station in Joplin. Conflicting explanations are given as to why he opted out. Some say Kate threw him out, while others suggest he could not make peace with his criminal family. The FBI accused him of enjoying the profits of his sons' thievery, but there seems to be very little basis for that accusation. By

all accounts George was completely uninvolved in his sons' later activities. Now Ma was left alone to look after her boys.

Spurred by Herman's death, Kate Barker decided that something had to be done about the rest of her boys. She went to the authorities and pleaded with them for clemency. She visited jail wardens, parole boards and state governors—anyone who would listen to her. When pleading didn't work she would kick up such a ruckus that the officers could not get their work done. Moved by the woman's predicament and copious tears, officials relented and Arthur and Fred were soon released.

Ma Barker's efforts to free her sons grew into a full-time occupation. She spent a lot of her time pleading for her boys as they constantly shifted in and out of jail.

The Barker-Karpis Gang

Fred Barker's time in the Kansas prison proved to be a turning point in his career, but not because it reformed him.

While in prison Fred met a fellow inmate named Alvin "Creepy" Karpis (so called because he often sported a sinister smile) and the two formed a highly profitable criminal relationship. Their partnership would come to include the remaining Barkers and many other leading outlaws of the time. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover would brand their gang "the most vicious, cold-blooded crew of murderers, kidnappers and robbers in recent memory."



Lloyd Barker, perhaps the most pathetic figure in the family. He was incarcerated early on for his crimes. On his release from prison he turned straight but was shot by his mentally unstable wife.