

History, Legend & Lore: Washington County's Gangster Days

The 1920's earned the moniker - *Roaring 20s* - because of bank-robbing gangsters who peddled illegal booze to a dry nation, and generally created mayhem wherever they went. Their names are immortalized in history: Al Capone, Ma Barker, Creepy Karpis and John Dillinger. These clever criminals were always on the run from the law, but they had one thing in common – a hideout in Washington County.

John Dillinger reportedly stayed in a cabin on the south shore of Big Marine Lake, near present day 182nd Street. Local resident Ruby Remick remember her brush with notoriety. She and a brother were walking out to the pasture to bring the cows home when Dillinger pulls up in his big black truck and offers then a ride. They accepted and lived to tell the story. In fact, Dillinger gave Ruby and her brother some candy when he dropped them off at the pasture gate. And, it is a small world. From Ruby's great uncle, Joseph Dahlquist, Dillinger would buy his milk and pick up his mail.

There was another Dillinger sighting in Scandia, at Shalander's store, now Meisters Bar and Grill. Apparently Dillinger and two members of his gang were served at the tavern and quietly left. When pictures of Dillinger made the paper, the locals were sure it was the outlaw they had served. The Shalander's reportedly feared reprisal so kept quiet about the encounter for years.

To set the timeline. It's believed that Dillinger was in Washington County and environs after he was released from the Indiana State Prison in the summer of 1933, and before he was gunned down outside a Chicago movie theatre in July 1934.

The Gorilla Kid

Another gangster ended his life in our county. On the night of July 19, 1932, mobster Harry "The Gorilla Kid" Davis was shot in the head, his body dumped from a speeding car into a ditch about three miles from Big Marine Lake.

The "Gorilla Kid" was reportedly linked to liquor rackets in St. Paul and is said to have shot-up a St. Paul night club in 1931. He made more than a few enemies along the way. The Kid's suspected killer was a man named Abel Loeb, who was gunned down along

with companion, Al Gordon, at the intersection of University and Snelling in St. Paul. According to Paul Maccabee's book, *John Dillinger Slept Here*, Loeb's real name was Abe Wagner. He was a hit man for Al Capone's Murder, Inc.

In 1932, notorious bank robbers Al "Creepy" Karpis, Arthur "Doc" Barker and Kate "Ma" Barker were tenants of Mr. and Mrs. John Lambert in Mahtomedi. According to the Lamberts, they were pleasant tenants who rented a large cottage with eight rooms and a full basement. (Just don't look in the basement!)

The Barker gang would frequently reserve the Blue Room at Dick's Inn in Mahtomedi. According to Mrs. Alice Freeman, the gang was "most polite at all times."

Also visiting Mahtomedi was John Dillinger who reportedly purchased groceries at Cusick's Grocery Store. Floyd "Baby Face" Nelson stopped by the post office at Spink's store to pick up his mail, Mr. Spink mistook him as a gentleman tutor for a family of some summer residents.

Mahtomedi offered some well known speakeasies in the era. The Silver Slipper, located on Warner Road, was later called the King's Horses. It seemed trouble was never far away. At the Silver Slipper, a St. Paul man by the name of Putnam was kidnapped and held for a time until a ransom was paid.

In Stillwater there is a little log cabin on the south side of Highway 36, about a mile out of town. Originally built and operated as Lynch's Chicken Shack, the business burned in 1932, was rebuilt and opened as the Log Cabin. By 1946, the name was changed to Club Tara Hideaway, and the legends of the gangsters who visited the Log Cabin remain today.

The old log cabin remains one of the unique roadside memorials to the bootlegger days. The building, now known as Phil's Tara Hideaway, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on December 27, 2007.

According to local lore, visits to the cabin by Al Capone, John Dillinger, and other gangsters were common, as they came north to cool off while the heat was on.

For more information about the days of the gangsters in Washington County look for the books *Pioneers of the Big Lake Community* by Dick Johnson and Paul Wahlquist; *Mahtomedi Memories* by Alice Smith, Sharon Wright, and Judy Kaiser; and *John Dillinger Slept Here* by Paul Maccabee.

And visit www.wchsmn.org for more on the rich, diverse history (and a little legend and lore) we share as citizens of Minnesota's first county.

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