

Alvin Karpis: “No Lousy Hoodlum”

by Keith Marquart

Lazy, humid days are no rarity in New Orleans. May 1, 1936 was such a day. At 4:30 in the afternoon, in a hotel one-half block from downtown, Ruth, “about 21 years old, pretty, red haired and dressed in white,” had just emerged from her first floor apartment with her boyfriend, Alvin, and his friend Fred.¹ Upon casual inspection Alvin, a short man at 5’ 6”, with light brown hair and blue eyes had only one distinguishing trait: exceptionally long arms. A closer look would also reveal his scarred face and fingertips.

The three walked through the lobby on their way to Alvin’s car which was parked on the street in front of the hotel. Upon reaching the sidewalk they were immediately surrounded by fifteen to twenty heavily armed F.B.I. agents who “called upon them to surrender . . . they were taken without the firing of a shot.”² The trio was taken into custody so quietly and smoothly that only persons nearby were aware of the Federal Agents’ latest success, the arrest of Public Enemy No. 1, Alvin “Creepy” Karpis.³

Alvin Karpowicz, later “shortened to Alvin Karpis by a teacher for pronunciation purposes,” was born in 1908 to John and Anna Karpowicz, Lithuanian immigrants who first migrated to London, England and then to Montreal, Canada where Alvin was born.⁴ Next they moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan and finally to Topeka, Kansas. Years later E. W. Ford, veteran identification officer at the Kansas State Reformatory in Hutchinson, where Alvin spent some years during his teens, would say, “He came from a good family, as far as we could find.”⁵

The Karpowicz house in Topeka, where Alvin lived with his parents and his three sisters, Mihilin, Emily and Clara, was situated next to the railroad tracks in the “bad” part of town. By the age of

1. “Karpis Captured in New Orleans by Hoover Himself,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1936, p. 1

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1

4. Alvin Karpis with Phil Trent, *The Alvin Karpis Story*. (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1971), p. 29.

5. “Karpis Learned ‘Trade’ at Hutchinson,” *The Wichita Eagle*, May 2, 1936.

nine, Alvin was running errands for prostitutes.⁶ Young Alvin attended elementary school in Topeka where his teachers remembered him as a “mediocre student, not especially good, not especially bad, who excelled in only one line—he was the best marble shooter at the Banner school”⁷

In 1918, Arthur Witchy, “eighteen years old and straight out of the reformatory,” moved into the neighborhood.⁸ Of Arthur Alvin would later say, “At 10 I considered him a bigshot, and when he asked me to break into a grocery store with him, I didn’t give it a second thought . . . it seemed so simple . . . Arthur and I walked into a grocery store one night, picked the place clean of money . . . and slipped away.”⁹ Witchey got Karpis launched, and for the next few years he kept up his own one-man crime wave in Topeka; unaccosted by the police, the only thing that ended the spree was Karpis’ father’s decision to move to Chicago.¹⁰

The year was 1922 and for the fifth time in less than twenty years, the Karpowicz family packed up and moved. Alvin found his first and only legitimate job in Chicago, as a shipping clerk in a warehouse. Frankly, honest work bored Karpis. Later he would admit, “What I wanted . . . was big automobiles like the rich people had and everything like that. I didn’t see how I was going to get them by making a fool of myself and working all my life. So I decided to take what I wanted.”¹¹

Surprisingly, Karpis’ first arrest had nothing to do with burglary. In 1925 at age seventeen he was caught riding the roof of the Pan American Express, playing out a fascination for trains he had cultivated while living near the tracks in Topeka. He was sentenced to a thirty-day stretch on a Florida chain gang. Alvin Karpis now had a criminal record; his next arrest would bring more severe punishment.

After completing his thirty days of hard labor, Karpis left Florida and returned to Kansas. There in 1926 he was caught in the middle of a routine warehouse job and received a ten-year sentence in the Kansas State Reformatory at Hutchinson. The stiff sentence surprised him but he would later write in his autobiography, “I recognized an opportunity when I saw one: I was about to begin my education in big-time crime.”¹²

6. Karpis, *op cit.*, p. 27.

7 “Karpis Started Career of Crime Here, Wanted in Hassebroek Kidnapping.” *The Topeka Capital*, May 2, 1936

8 Karpis, *op cit.*, p. 27.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8

10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

11. Jay Robert Nash, *Bloodletters and Badmen* (New York: M. Evans and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 36

12 Karpis, *op cit.*, p. 30

At Hutchinson, he met Larry Devol, alias O'Keefe, an "instinctive murderer and habitual criminal"¹³, who, being a "specialist at burglarizing banks, taught Karpis how to crack open safes."¹⁴ Of this particular friendship a prison official would say, "Larry O'Keefe was the guy back of Karpis When he was here he didn't have the qualifications for a No. 1 gunman. With such a companion as O'Keefe it isn't difficult to see how Karpis got his start."¹⁵

Alvin Karpis never finished his sentence in Hutchinson. He, Devol and two others escaped in 1929. All four of the escapees were employed in the prison workshop and found it no problem to smuggle a couple of saws out with them. One night they sawed through a set of bars and lit out across Kansas stealing cars, clothes and everything else they needed as they traveled.¹⁶

Larry Devol was recaptured in Chicago and sentenced to a term in the Kansas State Penitentiary at Lansing. Shortly after he arrived there he learned that inmates who volunteered to work in a nearby coal mine got time knocked off their sentence. The deal sounded good to Devol. He volunteered, worked in the mine and was back with Karpis in almost no time at all.

Larry had made some friends in Lansing. He told Karpis, "The guys back there needed clothes In Lansing prisoners were allowed to hang on to their own shirts and shoes, but they had no way of replacing clothes that wore out."¹⁷ Devol's idea was to break into a "rag joint" and ship the loot back to his friends. Karpis liked the idea and within one month, the inmates at Lansing had new "rags."

One year after his escape from Hutchinson, Karpis was captured during his get-a-way from a pool hall robbery in Kansas City, Missouri. Karpis was taken to the police station where the police attempted to coerce a confession from him.

One hefty cop had a trick of putting four pencils between all the fingers and thumb of one of my hands and squeezing as hard as he could. Then he'd stand behind me and press his thumbs with all his might behind my ears. Everything he did hurt like hell. The other cops weren't so scientific—they just hauled off and smacked me in the face.¹⁸

Regardless of the means used by the police, Karpis would not talk; however, a detective recognized him as a fugitive and he was soon back at Hutchinson. Once there he requested a transfer to Lansing and received it. Upon his arrival at Lansing he volunteered for work

13. Nash, *op cit.*, p. 296.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

15. *The Wichita Eagle, op cit.*

16. Karpis, *op cit.*, p. 31.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

in the coal mine. This request was also granted. In the mine he met some of Devol's friends who thanked him for the clothes. He served his time and was released.

The time that Karpis spent at Lansing was not wasted. There he met Freddie Barker who would remain his friend until Barker's death at the hands of F.B.I. agents in 1935. Barker completed Karpis' education in crime by introducing him to bank robbing and kidnapping. It was Barker who gave Alvin the nickname "Old Creepy" because of his strange and sinister smile.¹⁹

For Old Creepy's first bank job Barker chose the small sleepy, rural town of Mountain View, Missouri. The job went without a hitch and netted \$7,000. During the get-a-way they "spun down the main road sprinkling two inch roofing tacks on the road to discourage the cops who might follow . . ." ²⁰

Using this job as a stepping stone, the Barker gang, of which Karpis was now a member, embarked upon a spree of bank robberies. Most of them were easy, some were not. In Concordia, Missouri, the gang routinely walked into a bank, announced their intentions, hustled the customers into a backroom, cleaned out the tills and took the head cashier over to the vault. At about this time a waitress from the diner across the street came in to get some change. She was immediately informed of the robbery and was sent to the backroom with the other customers. While this was going on, the cashier refused to open the safe. The owner of the cafe became impatient for the change and, fearing that one of his employees was loafing on the job, sent another waitress to check on the whereabouts of the first one. She, too was sent to the backroom. The clerk, despite numerous threats from Barker, still refused to open the safe. The owner of the diner now marched over to the bank in person. Karpis greeted him at the door with a machine-gun in the face, and told him that his girls were fine but that he also would have to go to the backroom. Karpis was getting irritated with the head cashier. Seeing that Barker's threats were having no effect, he went to the backroom, picked out the prettiest girl and guided her over to the safe, threatening to kill her if the safe was not opened immediately. His approach also failed. Karpis had no intention of killing the girl and the cashier seemed to know it. Then Barker worked the clerk over, but he still refused. By this time they had been in the bank for well over half an hour. Finally Karpis said, "All right . . . you got one more chance. Open up or I'll kill you." He still said no. "That's it, you guys . . . We've been in here for forty-five minutes. Let's go."²¹ The gang hurried out, "the

19. Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

20. Karpis, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

safe remained closed. The money was still inside. And the head cashier was sitting on the floor, mumbling through bleeding lips."²²

In yet another bank robbery, the Barker gang was joined by Arthur Bailey, "a cool headed bandit who preferred to avoid gun play and possibly the best man in the business."²³ Baily was a scientific thief who depended on meticulous planning, while the Barkers were improvisers. To Baily the job "seemed amateurish from the start but Bailey needed money so he let the hot-headed Barkers do the talking and bungling."²⁴

When the day of the burglary came:

Everything seemed to go wrong. A few minutes after Bailey entered the bank . . . a teller hit an alarm button. Freddie Barker always a lethal lunatic, began yelling that he was going to "shoot everybody in the place!" Baily looked out a window to see a deserted street. "Take it easy Fred," he said soothingly to the neurotic gangster. "Just get the money."²⁵

Barker gathered up \$47,000 and, as the get-a-way car sped up, Karpis who was watching the door yelled:

"Look at that!" . . . and pointed down the street where a dozen lawmen were racing after them.

"Grab these girls," Barker screamed and hustled three girls in the bank out the door. One became so terrified that she fainted on the sidewalk. Bailey did as he was ordered but without much enthusiasm. This wasn't his kind of bank robbery. He ushered a girl out to the Hudson where the gang waited and told her, almost apologetically, to stand on the running board. "It's only for a few miles," he told her.²⁶

The car rushed from the scene with only a motorcycle cop in pursuit. The bandits discouraged him from following too closely with machine-gun fire. The girls were dropped off a few miles down the road, after the car had kicked up so much dust that they were gagging. At first Barker didn't want to let them go, but Bailey interceded. The girls thanked him as the gang sped away.²⁷

Discouraged, the Barker gang decided to look for an easier way to make money. They found it in kidnapping. Shifting their base of operations from Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma to Minnesota, the gang chose as their victim wealthy Minneapolis brewer, William Hamm.

22. *Ibid.* p. 44.

23. Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

24. *Ibid.* p. 27.

25. *Ibid.* p. 27.

26. *Ibid.* p. 27.

27. *Ibid.* p. 27.

At approximately 12:45 p.m. on Thursday, June 15, 1933, Hamm was abducted as he was walking in front of his brewery.²⁸ Later that day, William W. Dunn, an official at the Hamm brewery was contacted and advised that Hamm was being held for \$100,000 ransom and told that the payment was to be made in small denominations.²⁹ A second note was sent and on Saturday, June 17, a third ransom note was received by Mr. Dunn, instructing him to:

Remove the doors of his automobile and to remove the turtle back thereof. He was to place a red lantern on the rear of his car. The money was to be placed in a package and he was to proceed to St. Paul on Highway 61 at a rate of speed not to exceed twenty miles per hour. Upon receiving a signal from a car which would flash its headlights five times, he was to drop the package containing the ransom money to the road and proceed in the direction of Duluth, Minnesota, at a speed not to exceed twenty miles an hour.³⁰

Hamm was returned unharmed.

Encouraged by their success, the gang decided to remain in the area and pull another job. They now chose as their prey another prominent citizen, Edward E. Bremmer, St. Paul banker whose father was a "personal friend of President Roosevelt and [Minnesota] Governor Floyd B. Olson."³¹ Bremmer was abducted on January 17, 1934. The gang, now experienced in the trade, refined their ransom note. They "demanded that \$200,000 in old \$5, \$10, and \$20 bills, not numbered consecutively, be placed in a cardboard box tied with string."³² Once again the family complied with the instructions and Bremmer was returned on February 7, 1934.

On March 23, 1934 two months after the abduction and more than a month and a half after Bremmer's release, the name of Alvin Karpis was brought into the national spotlight for the first time when the F.B.I. announced that he and Barker had perpetrated the crime. The F.B.I. made this announcement after identifying both men's fingerprints on "gasoline cans and a flashlight believed to have been used by the kidnapers."³³ The Barker-Karpis gang, as they were now known, had been careful but not careful enough. Justice Department officials now "predicted that their capture would be the result of long, hard digging."³⁴

From this point, the heat would be on. Karpis and Barker decided to have their fingerprints erased by surgery. They contacted Doc Moran, a Chicago abortionist they knew by reputation.

28 "Hamm Kidnapping Brings Three Arrests," *The New York Times*, April 19, 1936, p. 1

29 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 1

31 "Kidnappers Hold St. Paul Banker; Notes Asks \$200,000," *New York Times*, January 19, 1934, p. 1.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 1

33 "Bremer Hunt Nets Eight in Outlaw Lair," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1934, p. 5

34 "Two Kidnappers of Bremer Named," *The New York Times*, March 23, 1934, p. 4b

... and he agreed to look after us. It cost Freddie \$500 and me \$750. The extra \$250 was for patching up my face from the going over in Kansas City police gave it back in 1930. The fingerprint operation was damn painful. Moran started by looping elastic bands tight around my fingers at the first joints. Next he froze my fingertips with an injection of cocaine in each one. Finally he started the scraping. He used a scalpel, sharpening the ends of my fingers just like you'd sharpen a pencil. He really took the meat off and as he finished each finger, he'd remove the elastic band and bandaged cotton around the scraped tip.³⁵

In January 1935 Karpis and Barker split up in Miami, Florida. Karpis went to Atlantic City, New Jersey where he narrowly escaped a police dragnet. Barker ended up in the Miami morgue. Both he and his mother, Kate, "Ma" Barker, died in a machine-gun battle with federal agents.³⁶

The news of his friend's death grieved Karpis, but his life of crime continued. Karpis' fascination with trains once again surfaced; this time he would rob one. Karpis' target for this robbery was the Erie mail train No. 622, carrying the Youngstown Sheet and Tube payroll worth about \$200,000. Karpis and his new teammate, Harry Campbell, stopped the train in Garettsville, Ohio. When the door to the mail car opened, Karpis announced the robbery and threw an unlit stick of dynamite into the car. "I'm gonna heave another stick in," Karpis called to the clerks, "and it will be burning."³⁷ They did not respond. Next Karpis reminded them another train would be along soon and that there would be a collision and that people, including themselves, would be killed. The clerks co-operated but it was of no use to the bandits; the Youngstown payroll had been sent on an earlier train.

With this robbery, another federal crime, mail tampering was added to Karpis' record; but nothing did more to increase the pressure on law enforcement officials to bring him to justice than a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing, in early 1936, concerning F.B.I. spending. There, Director of the F.B.I., J. Edgar Hoover, was humbled when Senator Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee compelled him "to admit that he had never personally made an arrest. Hoover angrily made plans to do exactly that. The gangster in his sights was his imagined nemesis, Alvin 'Old Creepy' Karpis."³⁸ Karpis may have been in Hoover's sights, but he had beaten the director to the draw. In a letter to Hoover in 1935, Karpis threatened to kill the young director, making good use of the sharp aim he had developed as a grade school marble champion.

35. Karpis, *op. cit.*, p. 52

36. "Karpis Threatens to Kill J. E. Hoover," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1935, p. 3

37. Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 298

38. *Ibid.*, p. 298

The hunt for Karpis was nationwide. An F.B.I. directive "asked local police . . . to hold all persons with mutilated fingertips they arrest." An action designed to capture "Alvin Karpis now called 'Public Enemy No. 1' and other gangsters who are known to have tried, apparently unsuccessfully, to rub out tell-tale fingerprints by cutting or burning their fingers" was launched.³⁹ Federal agents tried to learn Karpis' whereabouts through his friend Freddie Hunter's girl, Connie.

They hired a fellow to take her out on the town with instructions to fill her full of booze and let her talk. Connie was too smart. She poured the liquor under the table, and it was the undercover man who drank too much. He told her who he was and what he was up to . . . She brushed him off . . .⁴⁰

The search was intensified. In Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and other areas Karpis had earlier frequented, police were put on the lookout. In Little Rock, Arkansas, an old Karpis hang-out, five Federal agents believed to be looking for the gangster caused a stir at the Albert Pike Hotel, "startling Negro bellhops, who said that they all carried big guns."⁴¹

The Federal agents visited Little Rock on March 29, 1936. On April 22, Attorney General Homer Cummings announced a \$5,000 reward for "information that would lead to the arrest of Alvin Karpis . . . for the kidnapping of Edward Bremer of St. Paul."⁴² Six days later the Postal Inspection Service added \$2,000 to the price. The end was near. The agents were closing in and the greatest manhunt in F.B.I. history would come to an end three days later. On May 1, 1936, Karpis was captured in New Orleans. Karpis, his girl and Freddy Hunter were surrounded in front of their hotel by fifteen to twenty agents. According to Karpis the agents waited until they learned that he was unarmed and then yelled, "We've got him! We've got him! It's all clear Chief."⁴³ J. Edgar Hoover then appeared from around the corner of the building and took credit for his first arrest. Hoover ordered Karpis shackled, but to his embarrassment not one of his G-men had brought a set of handcuffs; they had to tie him up with their neckties.

Later that day, Karpis, accompanied by Hoover and several agents, boarded a plane bound for St. Paul. During the trip Hoover, in the course of conversation, referred to Karpis as a hood. Karpis

³⁹ "'Enemies' Drive Seeks All With Mutilated Fingers." *The New York Times*, March 12, 1936, p. 9

⁴⁰ Karpis, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁴¹ "Federal Men Cause Stir." *The New York Times*, March 30, 1936, p. 1

⁴² "Cummings Offers \$5,000 Reward for Tip That Will Lead to the Arrest of Alvin Karpis." *The New York Times*, April 23, 1936, p. 1

⁴³ Karpis, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

was a defeated man, but still had his pride. "I'm no hood . . . and I don't like to be called a hood. I'm a thief,"⁴⁴ he insisted. Karpis contended that his independence from any criminal syndicate made him a thief.

A hoodlum is a pretty lousy sort of scum. He works for gangsters, bumps guys off after they have been put on the spot. Why after I'd made my rep, some of the Chicago syndicate wanted me to go to work for them as a hood — you know, handling a machine-gun. They offered me \$250 a week and all the protection I needed. I was on the lam at the time and not able to work at my regular line. But I wouldn't consider it. I'm a thief. I said, I'm no lousy hoodlum.⁴⁵

Federal agents grilled Karpis for five days in St. Paul, but he wouldn't talk. Finally on May 6, 1936, he was charged with the Hamm and Bremer kidnappings and his bail was set at \$500,000. "Do you care to make this bond today?" a court clerk asked Karpis. "Well, hardly," he said.⁴⁶

A May 13, 1936, *New York Times* editorial praised the Department of Justice's able G-men for the capture of our "distinguished No. 1," and two other notable criminals. "The timing has been so dramatic," said the *Times*, "that one might almost suspect a touch of stage direction, as if J. Edgar Hoover had all three of his quarry in hand and chose to release them one by one. The effect has been not unlike the knitting women at the guillotine in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The American people have been counting gangster heads as they dropped into the basket."⁴⁷ The F.B.I. was starting to build its invincible image.

Alvin Karpis pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment. He began serving his term at Alcatraz on August 7, 1936. In 1962, after serving twenty six years of his sentence at "the rock," he was transferred to the Federal penitentiary at McNeil island. At this time, J. Madigan, warden at McNeil Island, speaking of Karpis' years at Alcatraz said, "Karpis has improved quite a little."⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Alvin Karpis was paroled in January 1969, seventeen years after he was first eligible for the privilege. At his own request he was deported to Montreal, Canada, his birthplace, where he can frequently be seen at the check-out stand of his neighborhood supermarket.

44 Nash, *op cit*, p 300

44 Nash, *op cit*, p 300

45 *Ibid*, p 300.

46 *Ibid*, p 300

47 Editorial, *The New York Times*, May 13, 1936, p 22

48 "Alvin Karpis is Transferred from Alcatraz," *The Independence Reporter*, April 11, 1962