



**KAL'S
KALEIDOSCOPE**

Public Enemy

#1

On Mississippi Gulf Coast!



Fernwood by the Sea. Photos courtesy of Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History



Alvin "Creepy" Karpis

"Mother of Mercy...is this the end of Rico?" This famous line ended the classic gangster movie, *Little Caesar*, starring Edward G. Robinson. That line may have ended the movie, but it was the beginning of America's fascination with gangsters. Hollywood peppered the public's appetite with movies like *Scarface*, *White Heat* and *The Public Enemy*. Movies like these were based in gritty reality, using real events like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. They were also based on real people like Al Capone, Lucky Luciano and John Dillinger.



By the mid-30s, the violence surrounding gangsters and their illegal shenanigans was front page news. As the murderous violence increased, so did the public's demand to stop it. To save the day, in blazed J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI with their "War on Crime." That war led to the demise of the likes of "Baby Face" Nelson, "Machine Gun" Kelly, and Alvin "Creepy" Karpis. Of all the famous gangsters from the 20s and 30s, Karpis was the last Public Enemy #1 to be arrested, and also spent the longest time as a federal prisoner in Alcatraz, serving twenty-six years.

Alvin "Creepy" Karpis got his nickname due to his sinister smile, which was the last thing many of his victims saw. Born in 1907 to Lithuanian immigrants in Montreal, Canada, he got an early start in the world of crime at the ripe age of 10 while hanging around gamblers, bootleggers and pimps. After moving to Kansas City with his family in the early 20s, he was caught stealing a car, which landed him in the Kansas State Penitentiary. While there, he met someone who irrevocably changed his life—Fred Barker, a notorious member of the "Bloody Barkers," as the newspapers of the time called them.

Once the two men did their time, they went

on to form the Barker-Karpis Gang, which became one of the most feared gangster gangs of the 1930s. They robbed banks with a vengeance, murdered those who got in their way, and ruthlessly kidnapped at will. But their kidnapping sprees lead to the gang's demise. After Fred Barker's death, due to a vicious 1935 shootout with the FBI, "Creepy" sent word to J. Edgar Hoover he intended to kill Hoover the way Hoover had killed Barker. A determined Hoover vowed he would capture Karpis personally; he would not have long to wait. In 1936, the FBI located "Creepy," who had been living in New Orleans. They found him after it had been reported he was spotted fishing on the Mississippi Gulf Coast while staying at a quaint tourist court named "Fernwood by the Sea."

Fernwood by the Sea was the creation of Mr. E. H. Stapp, who, in 1929, purchased seven acres of land between what is now Dubuys Road and the Edgewater Mall. Nestled under a grotto of live oaks and pines, Fernwood by the Sea consisted of individual bungalows that were built in the then-popular Spanish Mission style of architecture. The grounds were landscaped with oleanders and azaleas, and along with the bungalows, sported a filling station for gas and a tea room. According to a 1929 Daily Herald article, Fernwood by the Sea would be "an up-to-date tourist camp, with modern, fully equipped apartments with adjoining garages. All of the buildings are to be electrically lighted and provided with pure artesian water from a well on the premises. Cooking equipment will also be available. It is planned to give guests hotel comforts with camp surroundings. Mr. Stapp states Fernwood by the Sea is to be one of the showplaces along the Coast when completed. Arrangements will also be made for sea bathing, which is declared particularly good."

That is how Mrs. Kaye Perrett of Gulfport remembers Fernwood by the Sea. She stated her father, Mr. Robert O. Holt, bought the tourist court from "a Mr. West," and they lived there for many years. Remembering the old camp site, she said, "The bungalows were stucco on the outside, and most were redwood

on the inside. The builder knew that termites avoided redwood and, at great expense, he had redwood brought from California. He later had financial problems, and I heard hanged himself on one of the rafters."

Mrs. Perrett also remembers many of the guests who stayed at Fernwood by the Sea. "There seemed to be a regular crowd from Louisiana, Tennessee and Illinois," Perrett said. "Once, we had a family staying there. They had two little boys. They (the parents) had gone shopping and bought the kids a boat. When they came back, it was storming, and they went to the cottages where they were going to take a nap. The nine-year-old went in the wrong, next-door cottage and went to sleep. Meanwhile, his parents (after their nap and after missing the boy) were sure he had gone on off sailing in the boat. The police were called, and they started searching the Gulf and a large swampy area in the back. When the little boy woke up, he stumbled out of the wrong cottage, wondering what all the fuss was about it. Two of the regulars who came ever summer were a couple of ladies who worked for a casket company, sewing the linings in caskets. Other guests were going to Dr. Fred Gay's Clinic, a relatively famous asthma clinic of the time."

Mrs. Perrett's other memories include unrequited love: "I had a very good time living there. Met lots of people that I stayed in touch with for some years. Was proposed to when I was 12 by a 15 year old boy. He said he would come back and get me when I was 16. He didn't show up."

But one person who did show up at Fernwood by the Sea was "Creepy" Karpis. He loved to fish, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast was--and still is--a great place to fish! J. Edgar Hoover stated Karpis had been on many fishing trips on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and had sought asylum on the Coast and in New Orleans while on the run from the law. "Creepy" met his Waterloo, as it were, in 1936.

When the FBI learned "Creepy" was living in an apartment house located at 3343 Canal Street, they swarmed over the place like "a duck on a Junebug." Once he had been seized, J. Edgar

Hoover said, "Put the handcuffs on him." But--much to the FBI's chagrin--not one agent had brought handcuffs with him, so "Creepy" ended his gangster days in the tight bond of one of the agent's neckties. The capture of "Creepy" Karpis essentially ended the age of the big-name, Depression Era criminals.

After being released on parole in 1969, Karpis was deported to Canada, where he wrote his first memoir in 1971, "The Alvin Karpis Story." In 1973, he moved to Spain, where he died in 1979 due to what was originally ruled a suicide. Later it was decided that Karpis had died from natural causes, but some closer to the scene say foul play may have been involved. Rumor had it that his last girlfriend introduced him to pills and alcohol to give him "a relaxing high." And maybe the old boy, now in his 70s, over-indulged on one occasion...with fatal consequences. A coincidence? Foul play? One intriguing note: no autopsy was performed on Karpis, and he was buried the day after his death in Malaga, Spain.

Perhaps it's fitting that a bank--long a target of the Barker-Karpis Gang--sits on the present day site of the old apartment house where "Creepy" was captured and arrested all those years ago. And what of his old haunt, Fernwood by the Sea? It survived the great 1947 hurricane, but had ceased to exist by the late 50s. It is now nothing more than a faded, sepia-toned memory of good times and good fishing. And one--not so nice, but extremely famous--gangster who once stayed there.

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God Bless, and keep a song in your heart!

Kal



To see other pictures of Fernwood by the Sea and "Creepy" please visit me at www.anthonykallberg.com