

For sale in Florida: The house where gangster Ma Barker died

By Lane DeGregory, Times Staff Writer

The back bedroom
as it was in 1935
when the FBI took
this photo.



OCKLAWAHA — We start at the boathouse, a long wooden box perched on the north shore of Lake Weir. Ma Barker sat on this dock 77 years ago, writing letters to her son, describing an enormous alligator named Old Joe.

Not long after, federal agents hid out in this boathouse, with machine guns at the ready.

This is where the bloody Barker gang met its end in the FBI's longest shootout. Now this bullet-pocked slice of history can be yours.

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The home was — and still is — "in the middle of nowhere," says Mark Arnold, the Sotheby's agent who is selling the historic home. "Just a cluster of lake houses for wealthy families.

"No one here knew her. She was just a nice old lady who was looking for somewhere to spend the winter with her sons. And she seemed to have a lot of cash."

From the boathouse, we cross a sandy beach and follow a walkway into a grove of live oaks. Bullets still scar the thick trunks. Some say Mason jars full of money are buried around the roots.

"All the kids who came out here grew up digging for treasure," Arnold says. "Nobody ever found anything. But there are so many great stories."

The house, a wooden two-story with a wide screened porch, is mostly unchanged since Ma Barker rented it under an alias in November 1934. The shattered windows have been repaired; plaster masks hundreds of bullet holes. Inside, the beds, the refrigerator, even the blue china tea cups are the same ones the gangsters used the day they died.

"We moved things around a little, to match the FBI photos," Arnold says, climbing onto the porch. "Everything is still here, just like it was then. It's like a time capsule."

For decades, the house has been a vacation home for the Bradford family of Miami, furniture makers and dog racing enthusiasts. Four generations have spent weeks at the lake. But no one has ever stayed longer. Except for the Barker gang.

In August, the 10 remaining Bradford relatives decided to sell the home — and the 10-acre lot on the water. They told the real estate agent about the boathouse, the great fishing and family memories.

The bodies were almost an afterthought.

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Ocklawaha is a rural corner of Marion County, eight miles north of the Villages, 25 minutes southeast of Ocala, two hours from Tampa. Most of the modest homes are scattered around the spring-fed lake.

Ma Barker's Hideaway sits on Highway 25. Across the road, a waterfront watering hole called Gator Joe's serves alligator tail and cold beer. Framed wanted posters of the gangsters frown from one wall.

The property Sotheby's is selling includes 4 empty acres across the road from the lake, and 6 that slope through the trees onto a wide beach.

The historic home, built in 1930, has four bedrooms and two baths: 2,016 square feet. A three-bedroom, two-bath brick house, built next door in 1974, also is included, along with a two-car garage.

Sotheby's is accepting bids through Oct. 26 — and wants at least \$1 million. That's roughly comparable to the sale prices of nearby homes. "The land alone is worth \$700,000," says Arnold. "Add that to the value of the two existing homes and we come close to that million already. We haven't even factored in the value of all the memorabilia inside, or what that historic event adds."



In an FBI photo from 1935, bullet holes mark the doors and walls of the room in which Ma Barker and her son Freddie were killed.

The association with Ma Barker — and the FBI shootout — has "attracted a lot of attention around the world," Arnold says. "People are so interested in the lore of gangsters."

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Arizona Donnie Clark was born in Missouri in 1873. She married a farmhand named George Barker and they had four sons: Herman, Lloyd, Arthur and Fred. Baby "Freddie" was her favorite, the one who was with her in the end.

Ma Barker raised her boys with her husband, but he left soon after they became men. For the next 20 years, the boys who grew up poor and aimed to be rich robbed and murdered across the Midwest.

The Barker brothers' crime wave started in 1910, when Herman robbed a bank in Webb City, Mo. Blood began flowing in 1921 when Arthur murdered a night watchman, then Herman helped gun down a police captain. That same year, Freddie robbed his first bank.

Gangsters terrorized the country through the '20s and '30s. Headline writers nicknamed them, to make them sound more glamorous: Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd, Bonnie and Clyde. No one knows if Ma Barker ran the gang that is said to have stolen \$2 million and killed at least 10 people — or if she just fed her boys, kept house for them and mothered them between murders.

Alvin "Creepy" Karpis met Freddie in prison in 1931, and when they were released Karpis joined the family. He swore Ma Barker never took part in any of their crimes, said they always sent her to the movies while they were working. In his memoir, Karpis wrote, "Ma saw a lot of movies."

In 1933 the gang staged their first kidnapping — a millionaire Minnesota brewer. They received \$100,000 in ransom and let the man go unharmed. The next year, they captured St. Paul banker Edward George Bremer, doubled their asking price, and got the nation's attention.

Bremer was a friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who talked about the kidnapping during a fireside chat. The FBI's first director, J. Edgar Hoover, set a \$1,200 bounty on the Barker Gang and declared them "the worst criminals in the entire country." Ma Barker became the only woman to ever top the FBI's most wanted list. She may not have been a killer, but she was the mama of four killers — and that was enough.



[JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times]

The back bedroom of the Ocklawaha home in which the Barkers died as it is now.



An FBI photo of the guns and ammunition found in the home after the shootout. "Not knowing the extent of their equipment and ammunition," wrote FBI director J. Edgar Hoover at the time. "I am deeply concerned lest our agents exhaust their supply."

With \$200,000 from the ransom, and who knows how much else from the banks, the Barkers had enough cash to go into hiding. Arthur, known as "Doc," moved to Chicago with some of his henchmen. And Ma and Freddie headed to Miami.

"Ma registered at the posh El Comodore Hotel as Mrs. T.C. Blackburn and son," Myron Quimby wrote in 1969 in *The Devil's Emissaries*. She "seemed like a gracious lady with wealth seeking a quiet and remote spot for a long vacation from the cold of the north." Someone introduced her to an associate of Carson Bradford, a wealthy furniture maker. "Bradford owned such a place on the banks of Lake Weir."

Relatives say Bradford's wife didn't want to rent their pretty white cottage near Ocala. But "Mrs. Blackburn" seemed sweet and matronly, and she had enough cash to cover the whole winter. So just before Thanksgiving 1934, Freddie drove Ma in his shiny new Buick to the tiny town of Ocklawaha, population 600, with a general store and a single telephone. They turned onto a dirt lane leading to the water, steered between live oaks laced with Spanish moss, and parked beside the hideout that would become their first real home in decades — and their last.

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Four steps climb to the screened door, which creaks open onto a pair of wicker rockers facing the water. A fishing net is propped in one corner. The other is filled with an antique radio.

Inside, the living room looks exactly like the FBI's evidence photo: scrolled, wooden shelves with a Bible on top; a writing desk; a crimson couch. The chandelier dangles over the dining room table, its lower crystals shot off.

"They repaired that mirror by the door. Gunfire had shattered it," says Arnold, who tracked down FBI files about the case. "To my mind, that was the last thing Fred saw when he looked out those windows at all those agents: a reflection of himself in that mirror, realizing."

Through a wide arch, up 13 stairs, the second story bears even deeper wounds. Bullet holes pepper the door frame and every wall of the back bedroom.



A bullet from the 1935 shootout that ended in the deaths of Ma and Freddie Barker remains lodged in the back of a bedroom chair.

"Think of all those bullets flying at you, and you're trapped up here, with nowhere to run," the real estate agent says, continuing his pitch. "All of these furnishings are included. It's hard to put a value on something like this."

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Ma Barker, Freddie, and some of the gang spent Christmas in the secluded lake house. Neighbors saw them buying groceries, having picnics, even going to church. At sundown, Freddie and his friends would take out the motor boat to search for a 15-foot gator locals called Old Joe.

Arthur stayed in Chicago for the holidays, so Ma wrote him about the alligator. She drew him a map of Lake Weir, circled the closest town: Ocala. Mailed it from Ocklawaha's little post office.

On Jan. 8, 1935, FBI agents arrested Arthur at his apartment and found the letter. A week later, they boarded planes for Florida.

"Not knowing the extent of their equipment and ammunition," wrote Hoover, "I am deeply concerned lest our agents exhaust their supply."

In the predawn darkness of Jan. 16, a dozen FBI shooters circled the two-story home. They hid behind the oaks, beside the garage, in the boathouse, bearing shields and extra rounds for their machine guns. According to a typed report in the federal agency's files, an officer shouted, "This is the FBI. You are surrounded. Unless you come out, we'll use tear gas."



For decades, this house on Lake Weir in Ocklawaha has been a vacation home for the Bradford family of Miami. In 1935, it was the site of the FBI shootout with the Barker gang. The house and 10 acres around it are for sale.

The report said Ma bellowed, "All right, go ahead!" Then she started firing through the windows.

Some say the battle raged for four hours, others as long as six. Agents estimate they fired 2,000 rounds into the house, splintering walls on all sides.

Ma and Freddie, running between the upstairs bedrooms, kept firing their Thompson machine guns, kept reloading the 100-cartridge drums. They shot Colt .45s, .350-caliber Colt pistols, a Browning automatic, a Remington pump shotgun. All morning, bullets sailed through the Spanish moss.

Neighbors followed the gunfire and showed up to watch. People got out of their vehicles and lay on the ground to stay below the hail of ammunition.

When the firing stopped from inside, no FBI agents had been injured. They waited a few minutes — then sent in a young man who had cooked for the Barkers. He found Ma and Freddie in the front bedroom, slumped side by side. Freddie, 32, looked like he had been heading for the door when a shot struck the back of his head. Ma, 63, was curled up, cradling her Tommy gun.

"The backbone of the gang is broken," said Hoover, whom some accused of staging the photograph to justify killing the gangsters' mother. That day, he said, marked "the end of an era of violence."

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We finish our tour in the front bedroom, where the Barkers' bodies were found.

"I get the weirdest feeling when I'm in here," said Roger Soderstrom, a young agent working with Arnold. "The hair on my arms stands up."

Over the years, there has been predictable talk that Ma Barker still haunts this place. Lights are said to go on mysteriously, and a psychic from Cassadega once performed an exorcism. She said she got Freddie to scam but Ma wouldn't budge.

"Nothing negative has ever happened to the family who stayed here," says Arnold. "The potential of paranormal activity only adds to the interest." Ghosts are all part of the marketing.

The legend of Ma Barker has long permeated pop culture. Her character was in a 1959 episode of television's *The Untouchables*. The same year, Jimmy Stewart battled the Barkers in a movie called *The FBI Story*. Batman confronted her in his 1966 season. And in 1970, Shelly Winters starred with Robert De Niro in the low budget film *Bloody Mama*. Even Disney's *Duck Tales* included episodes about a band of bad dogs led by Ma Beagle.

Since the home went on the market last month, people from around the world have called to inquire. Reporters from Canada, England and Germany — as well as international investors — all have asked to see the house and pondered its potential.

"People are so interested in the lore of gangsters, so drawn to the idea of that era," says Arnold, "they want to feel a connection."

Standing here in front of the windows where Ma Barker made her last stand, it's easy to feel one. Her blood has been scrubbed from the pine floorboards. But in the back of a bedside chair, one spent bullet remains.

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Ma's house

For more information, and to see FBI photographs and reports about the house, go to **mabarkerhouse.com**.
