The Bremer Kidnapping

The morning of January 17, 1934, Edward G. Bremer Jr., president of Commercial State Bank, dropped off his daughter at Summit School on the corner of Lexington and Goodrich—and was abducted at gunpoint. The brazenness of the crime in broad daylight shook the public.

Just the year before, William A. Hamm Jr., president of Hamm's Brewing Company, had similarly been plucked off St. Paul's streets in plain sight. Within two days, the Hamm family had paid the $100,000 ransom, a huge sum during those Depression days (worth more than $2.3 million today). Now, with Bremer, the kidnappers were demanding $200,000 for his safe return. Though it took longer than it had with Hamm—this time about three weeks—the criminals eventually got the ransom.

But they didn't get away. The FBI, under pressure to catch the criminals, managed to track down members of the Barker-Karpis gang who'd carried out the job, thanks in part to new technology that allowed them to read latent fingerprints. Prints found on an empty gas can linked Arthur "Doc" Barker to the Bremer case, and FBI agents arrested the gang's co-leader in Chicago on January 8, 1935. They found his mother, Ma Barker, and his brother Fred hiding out in a lake cottage outside of Miami, Florida, and killed them in a shootout on January 16, 1935. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover himself flew to New Orleans to capture Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, the gang's other leader, on May 1.

That left the mastermind behind the kidnappings—and a wealth of other crimes—Harry Sawyer at large. Sawyer, né Sandlovich in Lithuania, had taken over the mob that operated with impunity in St. Paul during those days, after offing his boss, "Dapper Dan" Hogan, seven years earlier with a car bomb. Sawyer supposedly had targeted Hamm and Bremer, who also ran the Schmidt brewery owned by his in-laws, not only for their money but because of a personal grudge against each for cutting ties with his bootlegging crew after Prohibition ended in 1933.

The man in the photograph is hawking papers with the lead article detailing how FBI agents caught Sawyer on May 4, 1935, inside "a shabby gambling house" he ran in Pass Christian, Mississippi. Convicted at a trial in St. Paul, Sawyer spent nearly 20 combined years in prison at Leavenworth and Alcatraz.

The arrests and convictions enhanced the FBI's reputation. They also brought down St. Paul police detective "Big Tom" Brown, who was exposed for conspiring with the kidnappers. The former police chief was discharged from the force.

—John Rosengren

A street vendor hawks papers trumpeting the news that the feds had caught Harry Sawyer, whom they had fingered as the mastermind of the Bremer kidnapping plot. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

This feature was made possible by the Henry and Donna Morgan Fund for Research and Publications.

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