

**ARIZONA
DONNIE CLARK
“KATE” BARKER
1873-1935**



**MA
AND
HER
BOYS**

Kate “Ma” Barker died in an FBI shootout with her son Fred in January 1935. The FBI portrayed her as a criminal genius to explain why a 61-year-old woman with no criminal record was killed during a gun battle. Was she a midwestern mother of four sons who didn’t discipline them or a bloodthirsty criminal mastermind?

Arizona “Arrie” Donnie Clark was born in Ash Grove, Missouri in October 1873. As a child, Arrie witnessed local outlaw Jesse James and his gang ride through her hometown. The sight triggered her thirst for adventure. Arrie married George Barker in 1892 and had four sons – Herman, Lloyd, Arthur and Fred. They never went to school and at a young age were picked up for theft, fighting, and damaging property. George told everyone, “Mother handles the boys.”

In 1915, the family moved to Tulsa. Arrie wanted the finer things in life so she encouraged the boys’ petty theft and bad behavior. They were soon inducted into the Central Park Gang. In 1927, Herman shot a policeman in a robbery and killed himself to avoid prosecution.

With Lloyd in Leavenworth, Arthur in McAlester, and Fred in Lansing, Kansas, George moved back to Missouri. Out of prison, Fred and his prison-mate Alvin Karpis formed the Karpis-Barker Gang in 1931. Arthur soon joined them and Arrie let them use her dirt-floor shack as a hideout. Living vicariously through her boys’ exploits offered her the adventure she always craved.

After a series of robberies and the murder of a sheriff, a wanted poster offered \$100 reward for the capture of “Old Lady Arrie Barker” as an accomplice. Arrie soon changed her name to Kate. In 1933, the gang kidnapped wealthy businessmen William Hamm for \$100,000 and Edward Bremer for \$200,000. On January 8, 1935 Arthur was arrested for the Bremer kidnapping and was sent to Leavenworth and later Alcatraz. In January 1939 during an escape, he was killed by prison guards.

A map in Arthur’s possession indicated the gang was hiding in Ocklawaha, Florida. Karpis and others left before heavily-armed agents surrounded the house at 5:30am on the morning of January 16th. Fred and Kate were ordered to surrender, but machine-gun fire erupted from the house. During the four-hour gun battle, the house was riddled with over 3,500 bullets. The Barkers’ handyman found them dead in an upstairs bedroom.

Agents found a collection of guns and about \$14,000 in cash. Kate died from a single bullet wound; Fred’s body was riddled with bullets. A .45 caliber automatic pistol was found next to his body and a machine gun lay at her left hand. Was it staged by the FBI? J. Edgar Hoover spread the falsehood to justify her violent death that Ma was “the most vicious and dangerous criminal brain of the last decade”. George claimed the bodies and buried them next to Herman in the Welch Cemetery.

Lloyd learned of their deaths while serving 25 years in Leavenworth for a 1921 mail robbery. He became a model prisoner and was released in 1938, but was shot by his insane wife in 1949. In his autobiography, Karpis claimed it was “the most ridiculous story in the annals of crime that Ma Barker was the mastermind behind the Karpis-Barker Gang”. He said that Ma was sent to the movies whenever they planned anything – and she saw a lot of movies!