

# The 1934 Battle at Barrington

*The ‘untouchables’ come to town*

“...[T]wo outlaws, one reported definitely as the notorious George ‘Baby Face’ Nelson, shot and mortally wounded two federal agents a few minutes after 4 p.m. Tuesday, during a two-sided machine gun and pistol battle which sprayed bullets dangerously up and down both sides of the Northwest highway...”

—The Barrington Review, November 29, 1934

- By Patty Dowd Schmitz -

Just two days before Thanksgiving 1934, it was windy and blustery in Barrington as Frances Kramer stood gazing out the window of the Standard Oil station. Her son, Harold, owned the filling station just north of town on Northwest Highway near Bryant Street (site of the present Kooker’s), and she had come over to babysit his two-year-old son during the busy evening hours. Suddenly, around 4 p.m., Kramer heard loud popping noises approaching down the highway from the northwest.

At first, she dismissed the sounds as an automobile back-firing. But she stepped outside to be sure, and as she looked to the west, she saw a blue Hudson sedan and a newly minted Ford V8 racing down Northwest Highway at top speed. The cars were neck and neck, and Kramer’s eyes grew wide as she realized that the sounds she had heard were not those of a disabled vehicle, but were instead the startling pop-pop-pop of

machine-gun fire.

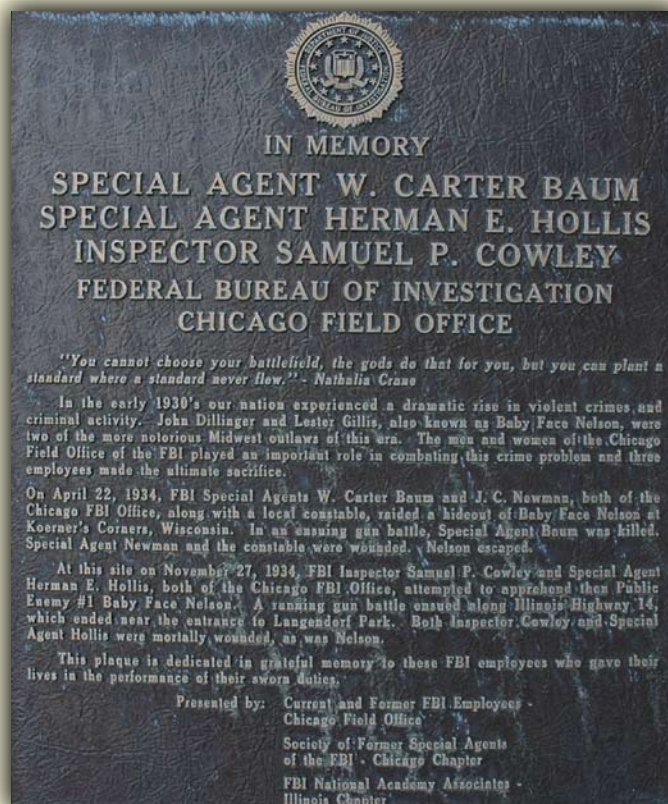
Mrs. Kramer watched in horror as the Ford careened off the highway in a flash and turned into the entrance of North Park (now Langendorf Park). Three people bailed out of the car. The Hudson screeched to a stop right in the middle of the highway, and two men blasted into

the country’s Public Enemy No. 1 and a dangerous gangster closely tied to the recently slain John Dillinger. The event that occurred that day on Northwest Highway, just minutes from the village center, would make national news and put bucolic Barrington on the map.

## The year the gangsters came to town

In 1934, Barrington was a small, sleepy village set in the picturesque prairie and rolling marshlands 35 miles northwest of Chicago. It was a town where the men ambled into the village center to shoot the breeze, the women prepared for the local garden show, and the children played baseball in the fields and parks. It was not yet a bona fide suburb, with its 3,300 village residents supplemented by summering wealthy Chicagoans who had carved out large estates in the countryside west of town.

The Dust Bowl year of 1934 was one of the hottest on record across the country, as the sum-



the street, guns drawn. Gunfire deafened the air. Minutes later, bodies lay strewn about both sides of the highway.

The date was November 27, 1934, and Kramer had just witnessed the infamous “Battle at Barrington” that killed two federal agents and mortally wounded George “Baby Face” Nelson,

mer brought sweltering heat and drought that parched the nation from coast to coast. The oppressive heat only exacerbated the general anxiety that had pervaded Chicago that year—on March 3, gangster John Dillinger had escaped from a prison in Crown Point, Indiana. As spring turned into summer, much of the Midwest was on the lookout for the dangerous criminal.

Dillinger was the nation's most feared gangster at the time (Al Capone had been jailed several years previously), and when he went on the lam, he slipped into the vast underground network of gangsterland, popping in and out of the speakeasies, nightclubs, and lakefront hideouts of underworld Chicago in a

ney general had declared him "Public Enemy No. 1," and the heat was definitely on.

In April of that year, federal agents were informed that Dillinger and his gang were hiding out at the Little Bohemia Lodge in far northern Wisconsin near the town of Manitowish Waters. Lawmen swarmed the lodge and a shootout ensued, during which federal agent W. Carter Baum was killed along with a local police officer. But though he had been wounded, Dillinger escaped through the back door of the lodge along with Baby Face and his pals, leaving a dotted line of bullet holes sprayed across the building's walls.

The FBI stepped up its efforts to capture the fugitives, declar-

ing at the Biograph Theater on Lincoln Avenue to see a performance of "Manhattan Melodrama," a gangster movie starring Clark Gable.

A band of sixteen federal agents and lawmen staked out the theater and lay in wait for Dillinger to emerge after the show. The men were led by Melvin H. Purvis, the chief of the Chicago unit of the Department of Justice, and his first deputy, Samuel P. Cowley. As the men waited over two hours for Dillinger, they became more and more apprehensive that their prey had escaped yet once again.

But at 10:30 that evening, Dillinger jauntily stepped from the theater, wearing a straw hat

and the city was breathing just a bit easier as the weather cooled and Dillinger's cold, hard body was disposed in the ground.

But the work of federal agent Purvis and his cadre of gangland prosecutors was far from done. Quickly Purvis declared that the nation's new Public Enemy No. 1 was George "Baby Face" Nelson, Dillinger's close confidante. Nelson had gained widespread notoriety after his participation in the Little Bohemia shootout the previous April.

The 25-year-old Baby Face, whose real name was Lester M. Gillis, had a long history of crime. His short stature, steely blue eyes, and baby-faced features belied a desperate criminal who had a taste for the kill. The

## The gangsters' multi-state reign of terror had left much of the Midwest in a palpable state of unease during the height of the Depression.

desperate quest to stay one step ahead of his FBI pursuers.

During the spring and summer of 1934, the press regularly reported on the whereabouts and criminal exploits of Dillinger and his outlaw band of brothers—including Baby Face Nelson, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd, John Chase, John Hamilton, and Homer Van Meter. No one knew where the Dillinger gang might show up next, brandishing machine guns and leaving a trail of blood and chaos splattered across the landscape. The gangsters' multi-state reign of terror had left much of the Midwest in a palpable state of unease during the height of the Depression. After Dillinger's escape from jail, the U.S. attor-

ing that it would hunt Dillinger, Nelson, and the rest of the gang from "coast to coast"—and that they would shoot to kill.

### Summer swelters at the Biograph Theater

By July, temperatures had swelled to an unbearable 105 degrees in Chicago and 114 in Wauconda. Public pools were filled to capacity, and grocery stores had seen a run on ice and powdered fruit drinks. More than 315 people had died in Illinois during an eight-day heat wave that month.

But the infamous gangsters remained at large until the sweltering evening of Sunday, July 22, when FBI agents were tipped off that Dillinger was back in Chicago and would be arriv-

ing at the Biograph Theater on Lincoln Avenue to see a performance of "Manhattan Melodrama," a gangster movie starring Clark Gable. A band of sixteen federal agents and lawmen staked out the theater and lay in wait for Dillinger to emerge after the show. The men were led by Melvin H. Purvis, the chief of the Chicago unit of the Department of Justice, and his first deputy, Samuel P. Cowley. As the men waited over two hours for Dillinger, they became more and more apprehensive that their prey had escaped yet once again. But at 10:30 that evening, Dillinger jauntily stepped from the theater, wearing a straw hat

### Nelson becomes the new Public Enemy No. 1

The news of Dillinger's demise rang out around the country,

*Chicago Daily Tribune* described him as "a merciless killer, a quick trigger man with an insane hate of 'coppers and G-men.'"

Nelson had stolen automobile accessories when he was 13 and had been sent to the St. Charles School for Boys as punishment. Two years later, he was set free, but he was sent back after repeatedly violating his parole. In 1931 he landed in Joliet prison for robbing the Itasca State Bank. He escaped the prison during a rainstorm that occurred when he was being transported to Wheaton for his trial. Once on the lam, he held up more banks in a crime spree that took him from Chicago to Iowa, South Dakota, and Minnesota, where he killed a man during

a robbery. He would next surface in April 1934 as Dillinger's right-hand man at the Little Bohemia Lodge shootout, at which federal agent Crum was killed.

The killing of Crum hardened the G-men's resolve to get these gangsters, and Nelson knew he was a marked man. After Little Bohemia, Nelson went into hiding with his wife, Helen Gillis, and his associate, John Chase. The trio criss-crossed the country that fall, making a number of trips between California, Nevada, and Chicago. Once, they were even stopped for speeding. But incredibly, the officer didn't notice the machine guns, ammunition, and rifles stashed in the gangsters' car, and the three were let go.

By late November 1934, Baby Face Nelson and his pals were

He raced toward the northwest in his blue Hudson, with special agent Herman E. Hollis at the wheel. Just west of Barrington, the pair passed the stolen Ford sedan carrying Baby Face Nelson, and they turned around and gave chase as the gangsters headed toward town.

At that moment, Frances Kramer looked out from the Standard Oil station to see the cars barreling down the highway. She watched as Cowley and Hollis pulled alongside the Ford, and she heard the popping as the shooting began. Later, she gave this account of the incident, which was paraphrased by the *Barrington Review's* report on the shooting that week:

"The cars were racing southeast along the highway with the federal agents' Hudson sedan

door and Hollis through the left, Hollis running around to the front of his car to use it as a shield from the outlaws' bullets.

"Both Hollis and Cowley fired several shots at the outlaws before Cowley was mowed down by machine gun fire. When Hollis stopped firing (it is believed he ran out of bullets), one of the bandits ran down the road toward him. Hollis ran from the car northeast across the road, seeking shelter of a telephone pole. He was shot down at that place.

"The killer then climbed into the agents' car, backed it up and into the park entrance alongside his own car. The two men then transferred guns and ammunition from their machine to the Hudson and climbed in. Their woman companion ran out

Bullet holes had punctured buildings and signs up and down the small section of Northwest Highway. Harold Kramer's Standard Oil station had been hit, as had the Shell station and the Sinclair station, all on Northwest Highway. Two bullets had whizzed all the way down the block and into the walls of the Jewel Park home of Mr. and Mrs. Clayton Watkins on Elm Street, where thankfully no one had been hurt.

A telephone pole near the park and a tree that had recently been planted by the Barrington Bird Club also were pierced. The bandits' stolen Ford, which had been rendered inoperable by the agents during the chase, was riddled with bullet holes as well.

The car became quite a spectacle in Barrington after it was

**Bullet holes had punctured buildings and signs up and down the small section of Northwest Highway. Harold Kramer's Standard Oil station had been hit, as had the Shell station and the Sinclair station, all on Northwest Highway.**

back in Chicago. On November 26, they stole a car and headed for Wisconsin. The next day they were sighted at Lake Como near Lake Geneva, and a federal informant tipped off the G-men that the gangsters were planning to head back to Chicago via the Northwest Highway.

### **Bullets rain up and down Northwest Highway**

Inspector Samuel P. Cowley, who was the first lieutenant during the ambush and shooting of Dillinger in July, had been assigned to search for Nelson. On November 27, Cowley sped up the Northwest Highway in response to the tip that the gangsters were headed his way.

in the rear. It had pulled up almost alongside of the Ford V-8 in which two bandits and a girl were riding, when the Ford turned into the park entrance and stopped. The agents' car whizzed by and stopped about 75 feet east of the entrance. Both bandits and the girl jumped out of the car, the latter running toward the football field and throwing herself on the ground in the tall grass.

"The bandits stopped down on the west side of their car with guns leveled over the hood, covering the agents' automobile.... As the Hudson stopped in the middle of the highway, Cowley jumped out through the right

from hiding and climbed into the machine. Their car turned northwest, and the bandits escaped."

Stunned at what she had just witnessed, Kramer called the Barrington village offices and reported the shootout to Police Chief Ernest Baade. When he and his deputies got to the scene, they found special agent Hollis dead where he lay in a ditch on the north side of the highway. Cowley was still alive but mortally wounded, suffering in another ditch on the south side of the street. He was transported to Sherman Hospital in Elgin, where he died several hours later.

towed to Schauble Bros. & Collins garage—word had spread like wildfire about the shootout, and hundreds of Barringtonians came to gawk at the gangster vehicle that had carried Baby Face Nelson to town. Barrington historian Arnett C. Lines also reported in his history of Barrington that all the boys "hurried out after school to the Northside Park at the Northwest Highway entrance and dug the bullets out of the telephone poles."

### **Nelson's body found in Niles**

As for Nelson himself, he had also been mortally wounded in the Battle at Barrington. His accomplices Chase and Gillis

dragged him into the federal agents' Hudson and sped off with the dying gangster inside. The FBI moved in quickly, issuing an all-points bulletin for the car that read, according to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*: "Attention all police cars: be on the lookout for a dark blue Hudson sedan in which two men and a woman who killed Federal Agent Herman E. Hollis are trying to escape. Car is latest 1934 model, with Illinois license 79-976. Wheels are wooden, with aluminum hub caps. Be sure of the license number before you shoot, as the automobile is a Department of Justice car, and Department of Justice agents are traveling in cars like it."

The gangsters had fled from the scene back toward the northwest and away from Chicago. Later, it was said that a young boy in Wauconda had found a map of the Bangs Lake area, which included detailed drawings of cottages there and was believed to be a hideout of Baby Face Nelson. Police had staked out the lake, hoping that the fugitives might show up there. But they never did.

Nelson was dying from the nine bullets that the federal agents had plowed into him, and Helen Gillis, his wife, was desperate to save his life. Eventually that evening, she and Chase turned around and drove Nelson to the home of a priest in Wilmette, whom they had met earlier that year when they were using false names. To their despair, the priest had found out who the gangsters were, and he refused them aid or refuge. The pair drove recklessly around the north suburban area that night, stripping Nelson's clothes and

packing his wounds with wads of cotton and torn bed sheets. Around 8 p.m. that evening, Nelson took his final breath inside the stolen Hudson.

Gillis and Chase knew that they had to make a desperate escape. They wrapped Nelson's body in a blanket and stuffed his clothing into a pillowcase. They drove to Niles, where they tossed the clothes into a field of prairie grass. Then, they drove north on Gross Point Road and dumped Nelson's body at the entrance to

Gillis and Chase throughout the Chicagoland area and the north-northwest suburbs for the next several days. Finally Nelson's widow, Helen Gillis, was arrested on Thanksgiving night. She was eventually sentenced to a year and day for violating her parole after she had pled guilty to harboring John Dillinger at the Little Bohemia Lodge the previous April. She was not charged for her involvement in the Battle at Barrington.

John Paul Chase escaped the

he was never tried on that count. In 1966, he was paroled, and he worked as a custodian until he died in California in 1973.

### Memorial at Langendorf

Today, if you drive west from Hough Street on Northwest Highway and turn left into the north entrance to Langendorf Park, you will come upon a small, circular garden mound featuring an American flag. At the base of the flag is a large rock, where a plaque details the Battle at Barrington and memorializes the three federal agents who died during the deadly spring, summer, and fall of 1934—the year that some of Chicago's most notorious gangsters held much of the Midwest, with Chicago and its suburbs at the epicenter, in a near state of paralyzed frenzy.

The FBI itself initiated the memorial plaque at Barrington in the early 1990s, and it was dedicated on July 1, 1993. It spells out the heroism of special agents W. Carter Baum, who died at Little Bohemia that April, and special agent Herman E. Hollis and inspector Samuel P. Cowley, who died at the hands of Baby Face Nelson at the Battle of Barrington on November 27, 1934. It was a day that is long remembered in the lore of Chicagoland gangster tales, a day that brought a touch of the "untouchables" to Barrington. U



*This memorial plaque at Langendorf Park details the 1934 Battle at Barrington and honors the federal agents who died.*

St. Paul Cemetery. The Hudson was now on its last legs, with bullet holes riddling the gas tank and steering mechanisms. The pair headed north on Skokie Boulevard and reached Winnetka Road, where they turned west. The car finally gave out at this spot. The fugitives abandoned the agents' vehicle and vanished into the night.

Police continued to pursue

Chicago area in early December and made tracks for his home state of California, where he was arrested on December 30, 1934, a little more than a month after the shootings. In early 1935, he was convicted of the murder of federal agent Samuel Cowley, and he served a life sentence at Alcatraz and, later, Leavenworth prisons. He had also been indicted for murdering Hollis, but

*Patty Dowd Schmitz is the senior editor of QUINTESSENTIAL BARRINGTON magazine and a Barrington-based freelance writer, editor, and communications strategist. Many articles from the 1934 editions of the CHICAGO DAILY TRIBUNE and the BARRINGTON REVIEW were consulted during the research for this feature story.*