Gangster Connections?

By Ellen James

As we drove through the trees on the winding, rutted path up to the mansion I couldn’t help but wonder how much of what I had heard about this house was true and how much was the product of fertile imagination.

The house, most often called the Gangster Mansion, but sometimes the Archer House or the Haunted House, was built in the late 1930’s by Mr. Wilkins K. Archer for a summer home. It was very lavish for the time, and for some odd, much-speculated-at reason, it was built so far into the woods that it was impossible to see from the main road, and nearly inaccessible.

The house is a white, wood-framed ranch style—an unusual architecture for the time. It was built of all quality materials with walnut woodwork and specially cut cypress siding brought in from the South. The plastering inside is rough Spanish stucco, and the maple floors are laid out in unusual patterns. At the time it was built, the house cost more than $50,000. Replacement value today would be more than $200,000.

Olive Tharp, owner of the house, recalls, “The downstairs bath originally had a German silver sink, which was stolen between the time I purchased it (the house) from Ann Archer (Mr. Archer’s wife) and the time I moved here.” The house was also filled with many antiques, including a baby grand, which Mrs. Tharp still has.

The house has fourteen rooms, three of which are baths. It has two sets of stairs, a front and a back, with two maids’ rooms at the head of the back stairs. There are four fireplaces, two made from stone taken from the farm itself. The house has 52 windows and four outside exits. It is a grand and impressive house for any era.

Archer himself is a character swathed in mystery. It is generally thought that his luxurious income was from real estate holdings, one of which was a posh night club in Chicago, but he was also related to the Armour Packing Company family. Some say he was a feed grinder after moving to this area, others say he hauled rock, and there is still another story that he bought a local car dealership. Those that believe that he was a gangster say these operations were a cover for money brought in from bootlegging.

All sorts of rumors circulate about the house

Legend has it that this house was the headquarters for Archer’s gangster friends who needed a stopping place between Kansas City and Chicago. Some of the rumored visitors were Al Capone, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Bonnie and Clyde. Many physical characteristics of the house contributed to this theory. Its location, hidden always in the trees on a dead end road, was a suspicious one for such a lavish home. Nearly all the rooms have views in all directions (the better to see if someone is sneaking up on you). There are unusually wide archways, presumably in which to hide.

All sorts of rumors circulate about the house. People today claim that there is a tunnel leading out of the basement of the house. Olive, who has owned the house since 1942, says she has searched and found no such tunnel, but she does say she has had trouble with one of the basement walls collapsing. Variations on a story that Al Capone was shot at the house also circulate. Nothing can be proven, or disproven.
One Kirksville resident tells a story about visiting the house with Archer’s son, Don, when they were in high school. The two, along with some other high school friends, were looking unsuccessfully for someplace to play pool when the young Archer offered the use of his own pool table.

The boys drove out to the house, but when they arrived, there were several luxurious cars with out-of-state license plates sitting in the driveway. Don told his friends to wait outside, that he had better see if it was all right with his dad for them to come in. Sounds of a party could be heard from the house. When Don returned, he said they would have to leave, and muttered something like, “I guess I should have known better.”

This story is fuel for suspicion, but again, it doesn’t prove that Archer was involved in anything illegal.

If it is not certain that the Archer House, in particular, was a haunt for gangsters, it’s certain that northeast Missouri in general was one.

Johnny Tomich, lifelong resident of the area, tells stories of several personal experiences with gangsters. He tells of his father awakening him one snowy winter night, in the mid-1920’s, when he was in his early teens. There was a well-dressed stranger downstairs looking for someone with horses to pull his car out of the snow.

The Tomich’s had a good pair of horses, so Johnny harnessed up the team and drove them out to Highway 63 to where the stranger’s car was. The young Johnny was very much impressed with the car, and remembers to this day the expensive Chrysler convertible with side curtains. He was able to pull the car out of the snow, and he pulled it quite a distance to help the stranger avoid any more trouble.

Telling Johnny not to run off, the stranger opened his trunk. He asked Johnny if his father liked nice shirts. Johnny answered that his dad even liked old shirts, so the stranger handed Johnny three boxes to give to his father. The stranger then asked if Johnny’s father would drink whiskey. Johnny said yes, he probably would, and if he didn’t, the neighbors would. So the stranger gave Johnny a fifth of whiskey for his father.

Then he told Johnny to hold out his hand. Johnny says “He just reached down in his pocket and said ‘now this is for you’. He just put his hand out there and said, ‘I’ll just put it in your hand, and you stick it in your pocket. So I put my hand out there, and he put something in my hand. It was bills, you know, I stuck it in my pocket.”

Upon arriving home, Johnny gave his father the whiskey and the three boxes. Each contained two silk shirts. Johnny pulled his own reward out of his pocket. It was a fifty dollar bill.

Soon after this, Johnny was working at the Bee Hive, a popular gathering place which was said to have the best food in town. Johnny was waiting tables when the same stranger came in as a customer. Johnny says he felt an inkling of recognition. “I kept eyeballin’ him, I thought he looked familiar.” When he finally spoke, he asked Johnny to bring him a meal from the restaurant every day. He left the number of a room in the Travelers Hotel, and Johnny delivered his noon meal every day. Johnny had instructions not to tell anyone about it, and to only bring the meals himself. He did this for about a month, and was paid five dollars a day for it.
Johnny began to pick up information about the man. "Fred Burk was this fella's name an' he was Public Enemy No. 1!" Johnny claims that according to True Detective magazine he was one of the ten most wanted men in the United States at that time. During this month, Johnny saw the same car he pulled out of the snow sitting in front of the bank on the square. Not long after Mr. Burk told Johnny he would no longer need the meals, the bank was robbed, and the culprits escaped without punishment. Johnny at least "suspected" that Burk was involved in the robbery. "He was spottin' these banks, and I figure he was one of 'em."

Not long after, Burk was captured near Green City. While he was in jail, Burk asked Parker if he had ever gone out looking for him following an anonymous call—Parker admitted that he had. Killer Burk just laughed, and said that he had been waiting there at the turnoff hiding behind a hedge. He said that he had had a gun, and intended to take this opportunity to get rid of Parker, but for some reason decided not to.

Johnny tells another interesting story about the gangster involvement in Kirksville. He was still working at the Bee Hive, and he and a co-worker were renting a room together at 315 W. Pierce. One day Johnny's roommate (we'll call him Tom) asked Johnny for a favor. Tom asked Johnny to stay at the Stephenson Hotel for three days, because some special friends were coming to visit. Johnny agreed. Tom said the visitors would pay them well, but he gave Johnny instructions not to come home, and not to tell anyone about the visitors.

Tom was from a small town nearby, and hometown connections had asked him to harbor a carload of outlaws who broke out of a prison in Kansas.

News about the escape crowded the airways, and law enforcement officials believed the escapees were near Kirksville, but no one noticed their touring car parked on Pierce Street. After three days they were gone, and Tom and Johnny were well paid for their trouble.

Johnny's bill at the Stephenson Hotel was paid with money left over. Tom was previously unable to fulfill his dream of attending the American School of Osteopathy on his $7 a
week salary at the Bee Hive, but the services he provided for the gangsters earned him enough money to put him through the medical school.

After graduating, Tom moved to the Southwest and started a practice. He is now a very successful doctor, has his own hospital, several ranches, and breeds high-quality cattle. Today he is one of the richest men in that part of the country, due, at least in part, to lending his room to some gangsters for three days.

The Kirksville area is saturated with stories such as this. Some people scoff at the idea of big-time gangsters in Adair County, and many totally reject the possibility that the Archer House was their hideout. There are people who knew them who say the Archers were average, everyday people, and the stories about gangsters were invented to scare away vandals and robbers.

To Olive, who gave us most of our information about the house, there is nothing sinister about the place. She is restoring it, and finishing up some of the things the Archers never did. In fact, she tells us, "It may seem strange to say you can have a love affair with a house, but I have had with this one since I bought it at age 22." She is obviously very fond of what she calls her "country home."

For many years Olive had to be away from the house that was so dear to her, so she wrote this verse to console her when she was lonely for it:

This is the house I must leave now,
And though I surrender the key—
The loveliest part I keep in my heart
And carry along with me.

The unusually wide archways, presumably for hiding purposes, provide fuel for gangster rumors.

About the legends surrounding the house, Olive said, "It may or may not have been a gangster mansion, but to me it's a beautiful house placed in a jeweled, peaceful setting of nature at its best. The woods are teeming with wildlife. From my windows I watch the birds, wild turkey and deer.

"If the house could talk, what secrets could it tell? But then, if it could tell the secrets of its past, there would be no more aura of mystery."

In spite of the doubts and the contradictions, the stories and legends live on. Just as it has become impossible to separate the fact from the fiction, it has become impossible to separate this house from the legends that surround it.

Johnny Tomich has had several experiences with gangsters locally. He once assisted Fred Burk, Public Enemy No. 1 at the time, by pulling his car out of the snow. Later Johnny was well paid for taking lunch to Burk every day when he stayed at the Traveler's Hotel, reportedly casing a local bank for a robbery job.