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# **"TLL GO THE LIMIT AND THEN SOME": GUN MOLLS, DESIRE, AND DANGER IN THE 1930S**

CLAIRE BOND POTTER

In the spring of 1934 three young women were being held in the county jail in St. Paul, Minnesota. Marie Conforti, Jean Crompton, and Helen Gillis had been captured on April 24 at Little Bohemia, Wisconsin, when federal Division of Investigation agents had sprung an attack on the Dillinger gang hide-out there. The men—John Dillinger, Homer Van Meter, Tommy Carroll, John Hamilton, and Lester Gillis (a.k.a. "Baby Face" Nelson)—had escaped, as Conforti later described it to a federal agent, "deserting us."<sup>1</sup> The debacle at Little Bohemia was the most spectacular failure of J. Edgar Hoover's war on crime in the early 1930s: not one male member of the gang was captured, a Civilian Conservation Corps worker was killed in the crossfire, and two agents were murdered as the bandits shot their way out of the dragnet. Amidst a storm of public criticism and charges of incompetence, task force chief Melvin Purvis brought the bandit women back to St. Paul for questioning. Unlike John Dillinger's sweetheart, Evelyn "Billie" Frechette, who was awaiting trial on conspiracy charges in the same jail, these gun molls were interrogated extensively and then released.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout several days of interrogations Crompton, Conforti, and Gillis steadfastly insisted that they were not gun molls; ironically, this contributed to the popular belief that they were. They refused to admit that they knew their male companions were federal fugitives. They identified the gang members by aliases and claimed to be on a pleasure jaunt, not a "getaway" vacation. They did not know how their male

friends had earned the money to pay for gifts and trips to the country. Despite these denials, newspapers around the country published front-page pictures of the alleged gun molls in riding breeches, leaving no doubts in the accompanying text that the women were, in fact, who they claimed not to be. One crime writer articulated what any consumer of bandit culture would know when he wrote in 1936 that "the crooked woman is loyal to her man, as a rule, and gets a perverse pleasure out of refusing to answer questions even when she knows the agents have the answer."<sup>3</sup>

Silence, and breaking silence, are both themes and methodological problems when studying the gun molls of the 1930s. Consider, for example, this letter addressed to the three molls by Marge Suskie of Niagara Falls, New York:

Good Girls: Don't talk. I hope John Dillinger never get[s] caught. Wish I could help him. If prayers help any he'll never be caught. P.S. I'll go the limit and then some. If you get this, please ans. and let me know. But perhaps you'll laugh and call me a damned fool. Maybe I am but I'd sure like to know you and help you just the same. this sure is a dead town.<sup>4</sup>

Although she praises the molls for not "talking" to the police, Marge does want them to talk—to her. In fact, one reading of the letter would argue that, by leaving the world of work and duty, the bandit women have "spoken" to Marge already—"this sure is a dead town."

Marge Suskie's yearning for adventure sparked a minor investigation which permitted her a brief identity as a criminal connection of the Dillinger gang. Bureau agents were surprised to discover that the author of this hard-boiled letter was a virginal, nineteen-year-old housekeeper who, according to one employer, had "always conducted herself in an orderly manner." Although Marge said she was afraid of gangsters, she also admitted that "she personally would like to have the experience of being a 'gunman's moll.'" If the women contacted her, she would have to "render them what assistance she could." Marge's aunt also admitted that her niece "would like to be a 'gangster's moll.'" Movies and radio stories had given Marge this idea, she said, and it was a popular notion among the girls in Niagara Falls.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1932 and 1935, when J. Edgar Hoover and the federal Division of Investigation carried out a nationwide cam-

paign against bandit crime, gun molls were arrested, interrogated, and often publicly tried as accomplices to federal crimes. Other women, such as Bonnie Parker, were identified by police as dangerous killers in their own right. As Alan Block notes, despite the existence of sexually integrated gangs throughout the twentieth century, the history of crime in the United States has left women virtually uncounted as active members of criminal organizations.<sup>6</sup> Sources from the 1930s portrayed molls as unimportant: "Dumb, But Not So Beautiful," quipped journalist Herbert Corey, dismissing them as a sexual sideshow to the main event of J. Edgar Hoover's war on male "public enemies."<sup>7</sup>

To be a gun moll in the 1930s meant linking one's fortunes to a gang through partnership with a male bandit who made his living by robbing banks, kidnapping, gun running, small-time protection rackets, and hits for hire. These men supported, and were supported by, women who themselves became classified as felons by the federal government. Integral to the success of their gangs, they made good money, lived fast lives, and were committed to a code of female honor which penalized "snitches" and "stool pigeons." This study focuses on molls who were members of three prominent gangs of the period: the Dillinger mob of southern Indiana; the Barrow gang (otherwise known as Bonnie and Clyde) of western Texas; and the Barker-Karpis gang of northeastern Oklahoma. These women differed in many ways; however, they all expressed their choices and beliefs in a common language of love and kinship that begs for interpretation.

Close readings of rhetoric, language, and particular tropes (specifically those surrounding family, heterosexual partnership, and female identity) both link gun molls to larger themes in the history of women and expand our understanding of how gender ideologies shape female experience.<sup>8</sup> For example, female bandits created households and relationships with their bandit lovers which drew on the language and structures of conventional marriage. However, few of these women were actually married to the men they traveled with; many gang members, female and male, were married to other people altogether. The language they used is and is not what it seems to be. As Judith R. Walkowitz has pointed out in a different con-

text, women "are bound imaginatively by a limited cultural repertoire, forced to reshape cultural meanings within certain parameters."<sup>9</sup> Gun molls "spoke" to other women in a common language which depended on a fixed set of cultural assumptions, while it also disrupted them. They imagined a new realm of home and family in an outlaw world that emphasized female honor rather than social obligation, romance rather than domestic security.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that they were socially marginal, bandit women were not entirely sexually marginal; they were not prostitutes. Thus, the appeal of molls to a "sob sister" like Marge Suskie was complicated. When Marge wrote that letter, she entered a matrix of desire and danger which both frightened and engaged her. As she entered the gang in her imagination, she assumed a personality that was the opposite of who she seems to have been: participatory and adventurous, rather than a shy consumer of melodramatic fictions. Marge's immediate familiarity with the molls invites the historian to use her as a medium to uncover their shared symbolic world.

The popular description "gun moll" (I have not yet found an instance in which a female bandit described herself as a moll) references rich histories of criminality and sexuality. Previous to the twentieth century, the moll was either an independent sex worker or a resident of a disorderly house. More important, a "moll" or "molly" was not necessarily a woman: "she" was often male, a man masquerading as a woman and/or someone of another class.<sup>11</sup> Add to this heady sexuality, undefinable except by what it is *not* (heterosexually male), the phallic power which a gun invokes and the gun moll becomes a location where desire and danger, female and male, familiar and transgressive sexualities, intersect.

Bandit women in the 1930s generated anxiety and excitement among their publics by moving back and forth: between classes, identities, genders, and sociosexual roles. However, they were consistently recognizable to their audiences as women—however perverse—by embedding their behavior in the il/logic of heterosexual passion. Bandit women themselves used passion to bridge the contradiction between their assertion that they lived for love and the knowledge that the price of that love was paid in blood. As one moll wrote to her "hus-

band," who was on trial for his life on multiple counts of bank robbery and murder: "Gee honey, I sure was glad to . . . hear that you are o.k. and still in love with me . . . just tell me how much you love me and that is all that is necessary for a while."<sup>12</sup>

As we shall see, bandit women made extraordinary choices, most frequently articulating them in terms of a recognizable Depression-era role: that of the wife, whose devotion to her husband and gang-family surpassed other commitments. Yet, bandit women were obviously different from "straight" women, both because of their participation in violent crime and because of the necessity for literally reinventing their identities on a regular basis. In addition, federal laws passed in 1934 made aiding and abetting fugitives a crime in itself so that cultural value systems which required women to "stand by their men" were inverted in the case of the criminal woman, transforming gun molls from "loyal wives" to enemies of the state.

Thus, many of the molls who became notorious during the war on crime emphasized how much they were, despite everything, like other women. This was both a strategic deception (in court or in interrogation) and an actual explanation of the choices they made. Because "normal" standards of behavior and social ideals were invoked with such frequency by gun molls, I will sort these ideas into two categories: heterosexual love, the reinvention of marriage, and the meaning of family; and power, sexuality, and the codes of honor which ruled a female bandit's moral world. Within these categories, gun molls both established their similarities to "straight" women, by suggesting that their crimes were the logical consequence of romantic love for a man gone wrong, and contested conventional roles accorded to women in general during the Depression years.

### **LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND FAMILY: BECOMING A MOLL**

Federal agents were easily convinced that Marge Suskie was not on the verge of joining the Dillinger gang, probably because she did not fit the scientific definition of a woman prone to crime. Dominant thinking about female criminality, characterized by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's 1934 study of reformato-

ry inmates, *Five Hundred Delinquent Women*, was heavily influenced by Cesare Lombroso's biological-positivist school of criminology. Lombroso, and those who followed him, argued that female delinquency could be understood by studying convicted women and determining how they "deviated" from "normal" female biological development.<sup>13</sup> Lombroso's original work, published in 1895, was enhanced by Progressive-era studies which argued that biologically healthy individuals could be made emotionally abnormal by an unhealthy environment and that this could have subsequent genetic consequences. As the Gluecks concluded in their chapter on the family background of the reformatory women they studied, "our women offenders were most unfortunate in their biologic, social and economic background. From a soil so unfavorable, we can scarcely expect a hardy fruit."<sup>14</sup>

This focus on biological and social causation inevitably linked female criminality to "perverse" sexualities, gender confusion, and a desire for male power. Writing a decade after the war on crime, Hans von Hentig characterized criminal women as very male in their physical and emotional attributes. They were often "extremely muscular," reflecting "a masculine streak."<sup>15</sup> He cited various studies which showed women with red hair to be more prone to irregular or delinquent sexuality and to taking part in organized criminal life.<sup>16</sup> These ideas were widespread during the Depression. The famous snapshot of Bonnie Parker, one leg swung up on a car bumper and a cigar jammed in the side of her mouth, was reproduced frequently because it identified her as what audiences "knew" she was—a woman who became a moll because she wanted male power.<sup>17</sup>

Over twenty women were eventually prosecuted by the federal government for gang-related activity, and although they do not fit the criminologist's stereotype, they have a good deal in common. A moll was relatively young: most frequently, she was also native born, of European descent, and the child of farming parents or skilled workers. Using the women of the Dillinger gang as one sample, Evelyn Frechette was twenty-five, Mary Longnaker was twenty-three, and Helen Gillis was twenty-one. Bessie Green, at thirty-six, was considered to be much older by the other girls.<sup>18</sup> Like most other young women during the Depression, whether married or single, each gun

moll had a work history, usually in service jobs. Their labor often put them in the way of criminals. Opal Long fell in with the Dillinger gang while working as a soda fountain attendant in a Chicago hotel, and Marie Conforti fell in love with Homer Van Meter after she waited on him in a dime store. In a few rare cases, a gun moll had a minor celebrity career in her own right: Bessie Green, for example, was the manager of St. Paul's Alamo night club, and Jean Crompton first met Tommy Carroll when she sang in a popular Chicago club under the name "Radio Sally."<sup>19</sup>

In short, previous to becoming gun molls, some of these women had made ambitious and independent choices. Several (including Evelyn Frechette) had migrated from rural areas to Chicago;<sup>20</sup> several (including Jean Crompton, Evelyn Frechette, and Bessie Green) had married, divorced, and were living with friends. As one historian has noted, although single women came to the cities in search of work from World War One onward, many were forced to return home as the Depression worsened.<sup>21</sup> These women, however, stuck it out alone: none of them were living with parents when they were introduced to bandit life. We should also note that none of these women worked in factories, despite the fact that industrial laborers were paid better, had regular hours, and were subject to less sexual harassment from male supervisors. Instead, future molls worked in nightclubs, retail, and food service: jobs where they would meet men—and men with money to spend.

In post-Prohibition cities, the hotels and restaurants these women worked at operated on the rim of organized crime. They served as primary places of business—card games, liquor distribution, numbers rackets, markets for hijacked goods and sex—as well as temporary homes for itinerant bandits and unmarried wiseguys.<sup>22</sup> Despite later disclaimers that they didn't know their boyfriends were felons until they had fallen in love, women who worked in these places knew the score. In fact, the number of molls who later recalled having met their bandit lovers through another girl at work suggests informal recruitment systems played as large a role as "chance" meetings. Evelyn Frechette, for example, was at her waitressing job when a woman, as she recounted it in court, "came over there after me. . . . She told me to come over to her house where they were



going to have a party. I went along and she introduced me" to Dillinger. Soon the two were spending "three or four nights a week" together as "intimate friends."<sup>23</sup>

When the federal government began filing conspiracy charges against bandit women in the spring of 1934, it became important for prosecutors and defense attorneys to establish how women became gun molls in the first place—what they knew about bandit men, when they knew it, and whether they consciously chose a life of crime. In her trial, Evelyn ("Billie") Frechette argued that when she first met Dillinger she didn't even know his real name, or as the prosecutor put it, "what sort of a man John Dillinger was." What—or rather, who—Dillinger was, and why it mattered, became the focus of the following exchange:

A. Well, on my way down [to Florida] he explained everything to me.

Q. He told you that he had no legitimate occupation, did he not?

A. Well, he didn't tell me that exactly, no.

Q. He told you he was a bank robber, didn't he?

A. No, he did not.

Q. What did he tell you he was?

A. He just told me who he was—well—that those fellows that he introduced me to were his gang, and he told me what his name was, and what he had been doing, and everything. He didn't say exactly that he was a bank robber.

Q. And what did Dillinger tell you his gang did for a living?

A. Robbing banks, I suppose.

Later, Billie corrected herself and said that Dillinger had only said he "had a racket" but that she hadn't asked what it was. When pressed for an explanation as to why she had remained with the bandit, because she must have at least suspected he was a criminal, she replied, "Well, I got so I loved Mr. Dillinger."<sup>24</sup>

In her testimony, Billie Frechette framed a narrative that was articulated through the images of conventional romance—a chance meeting through friends blossomed into a passionate affair, which deepened into love as she and Dillinger grew to "know" each other. And yet, as the prosecutor reminded Billie,

her lover was really a felon, a fugitive, and a murderer. In a moment which then both disrupted the conventions of the romantic narrative and the logic of prosecution, Billie declared that even as she became more familiar with Dillinger she did not "know" these things to be true. In fact, she implied a more complex analysis: that regardless of the information available, women could not really "know" men unless they loved them. However, once she was in love a moll could no longer use what she knew to make moral choices.

Unlike a number of male witnesses who claimed to have assisted bandits out of fear, all gun molls for whom I have evidence cited love and choice in their decision to join criminal men. Contemporary reports do not portray molls as exploited or abused by men (although certainly some of them were) but, rather, as women who saw bandit life as a reasonable, if not strictly legitimate, way to get out of dead-end jobs and enjoy life. This is most apparent in their confessions to federal agents, perhaps because those men pressed them to recognize another variety of self-interest and turn state's evidence against their lovers. Interrogations by special agents are documents of defiance, in which gun molls legitimated their participation in bandit crimes through apparently conventional language about affection, romance, and heterosexual partnership. Evelyn Frechette declared that she "was deeply in love with [John Dillinger] and intended to marry him one day"; and another moll told federal interrogators that "she would definitely not inform" on her husband because she had a child and she wanted to keep the family together.<sup>25</sup>

Although bandit gangs depended on biological family for support, particularly when members were wounded or on the run, the gang itself was an important social unit. Romance was the glue and the logic that created "gang families" out of multiple kin and fictive kin relationships. A survey of Division of Investigation records shows that many gun molls were related to each other, creating a network of obligations between their men which bound different gangs together, often across regional lines. Serial relationships with different men, women remaining peripherally involved with old lovers, bigamous and legal marriages, and unmarried partnerships in which the couple referred to each other as "wife" and "husband" all represent ways

in which complicated alliances between dangerous men were cemented by romances with women.<sup>26</sup> These alliances then became a conduit for secure business transactions. For example, when the Dillinger gang needed a physician in Chicago in the spring of 1934, Jean Crompton got in touch with her little sister, Delores Delaney, Alvin Karpis's eighteen-year-old lover. Karpis and Fred Barker then came to Dillinger's assistance. The two women were also siblings of "Babe" Reilly, thus tying both gangs into a St. Paul gambling syndicate through Babe's husband, Pat.<sup>27</sup>

Gun molls' alliances highlight the suspiciously fictitious (and powerful) nature of all families, because authentic and pretended kinship groups served as equally good disguises for bandit gangs.<sup>28</sup> By claiming identity as a "family," a loosely organized group of young adults not only diverted suspicion but also became invisible to a certain extent. At the posh White Bear Lake Resort, Ma Barker, Fred Barker, and Alvin Karpis were known as the "Hunter family," and later in Chicago as the "Anderson family."<sup>29</sup> Interestingly enough, Division of Investigation agents discovered that "family" and heterosexual convention also made an excellent cover for a surveillance team, because irregular households always drew scrutiny. Defending the use of agents' wives as "disguises" in one operation, one agent in charge wrote that "it is highly unusual for two men to rent an unfurnished house" and that the residence "should be made to resemble as closely as possible an ordinary residence inhabited by ordinary occupants."<sup>30</sup>

Gang families were often constituted in ways that contradicted the actual marital status of their members, who were not infrequently married to other people they had not seen in years. Given the difficulties of filing for divorce while a federal fugitive, bandit codes recognized several kinds of intimate relations between women and men as marriages. The fierce, and often violent, competition between men in bandit gangs undoubtedly created a need for rules about sexual possession, and marriage was a set of words and symbols which were readily intelligible by any newcomer to gang life. More important, however, bandit marriages created hierarchies among the women which permitted them to articulate personal status and acquire property. For example, Bessie Green told federal

agents that Evelyn Frechette, Dillinger's moll, was not very popular with the other women "because she is inclined to lord it over" the others.<sup>31</sup>

Gun molls profited, financially and materially, from their alliances with bandit men. They acquired the illusion of class mobility through minor celebrity status, leisure, and luxury goods that would not have been available to them as waitresses and dime-store clerks. If desire and danger defined the symbolic world of female bandits, fast and plentiful money was central to how they experienced it. Bessie Green, the companion of a lesser member of the Dillinger gang, was carrying \$1,100 when she was picked up by federal agents in St. Paul; a search of her safety deposit box revealed another \$4,000 in cash.<sup>32</sup>

Although significant funds had to be put aside for bribes, bail bondsmen, lawyers, and "political contributions," bandits spent generously on vacations and presents for their "wives." In December 1933, the Dillinger gang rented a house in Daytona Beach, Florida. According to one witness, they spent two weeks in "a mansion on a beach, with a beautifully round living room that contained four fireplaces." Pleasures that were available to comparatively few Americans in the heart of the Depression could be bought with stolen cash: the men played golf and lounged around the house while "the girls would ride in their bathing suits on horseback."<sup>33</sup>

In an era when both middle-class and working-class women were entering (or reentering) the labor market out of necessity, leisure was one reason why molls might have found a life of crime a reasonable alternative.<sup>34</sup> The Florida vacation also demonstrates how they might have experienced brief forays into the leisure class as value received for their work in the gang. Evidence shows that molls in all gangs were expected to perform the tasks their more law-abiding sisters did: cooking, cleaning, and laundry.<sup>35</sup> However, the women of the Dillinger gang had a strong sense of comparable worth and felt that they had earned their share of leisure as well as the loot. "While they were there," Bessie Green told federal agents, "the girls . . . loafed and played most of the time, none of them working, and their meals all sent in." Opal Long, a gang girlfriend who was "usually rather industrious and ambitious and [would] cook and fuss around the kitchen . . . had laid down

the law to the boys and told them that she too was on vacation, and all their meals were sent in because she wouldn't cook."<sup>36</sup>

Lists of bandit belongings, made by federal agents after a successful raid, also demonstrate that women possessed wardrobes of expensive clothes and other luxury items. A raid on a Dillinger gang hideout revealed, for example, that Evelyn Frechette had established her own checking account under a false married name in February 1934. Assorted clothing labels showed that she favored a number of middle-class department stores, Marshall Fields among them.<sup>37</sup> Dillinger spent liberally on pretty clothes for his girlfriend: although he lived sparsely, she had five times as many articles of clothing. Evelyn owned, among other things, two pairs of bedroom slippers, one pair of casual shoes and two pairs of dress pumps, five hats (one from Paris designer Jean Patou), three pairs of gloves, seven slips, eight nightgowns, three silk dressing gowns and three pairs of silk pajamas, and eighteen dresses. Her household supplies also included two bullet-proof vests, an assortment of automatic weapons and ammunition, linen, road maps, a getaway chart, a hot water bottle, and five "Dousche bags."<sup>38</sup>

The marriage model which prevailed in bandit gangs also protected a moll's property interests, promising some security against the day her bandit lover was killed or jailed. For example, when Earl Inman was shot and killed after a bank robbery, Fred Barker turned a full share of the loot over to Earl's lover, Helen Ferguson, "stating that the money belonged to Earl."<sup>39</sup> Male bandits often went to considerable trouble and expense to protect a woman's right to her "husband's" property: when freelance hit man and bank robber Gus Winkler was killed in Chicago, other members of the Barker-Karpis gang conducted negotiations with Capone syndicate enforcers on behalf of the "widow" to obtain money that Gus had been owed.<sup>40</sup> Alvin Karpis banked substantial funds (which were never found by federal agents) against the day of his capture or death. A Division of Investigation report noted Karpis's statement that Delores Delaney and his infant son "have been taken care of; that he has made provisions for them and that his son is assured of at least a college education."<sup>41</sup>

### **"I TOOK THE 'RAP' LIKE GOOD PEOPLE": POWER, SEXUALITY, AND HONOR**

In a memoir written some years later, Emma Parker pointed to the bandit slang her daughter Bonnie began to use after she met Clyde as a moment which signified "a strange and terrifying change taking place in the mind of my child."<sup>42</sup> Although many parents protected their children from the law (the Barrows, Parkers, and Dillingers in particular), relatives of bandits were usually working people, and with a few exceptions, not criminals. Often asked by reporters and police to comment on behavior that they neither condoned nor understood, parents of women in particular turned to pseudopsychological explanations that hinged on love for the wrong man. By doing so, they consciously or unconsciously played into popular beliefs that sexually transgressive women were powerless to regulate their social conduct.<sup>43</sup> As we shall see, however, gun molls skillfully negotiated pleasure and power in their relationships with men. The basis of that negotiation was a code of honor that regulated female behavior in relation to both the gang and the "straight" world.

Other than money, a gun moll had access to another kind of capital: what she knew, or conversely, what she could claim she did not know. When a moll's lover was dead or jailed, she reverted to a potentially more self-interested position: should she cease to benefit within the bandit family, she could cross back over to the "straight" world with valuable and damaging information. As I have shown, bandit gangs went to great lengths to insure against this, by extending financial benefits which might insure silence: in the best sense of the word, knowledge was power. Once gun molls began to face conspiracy charges, a credible ignorance became just as valuable a commodity. Bandits sometimes left their companions bequests that included exoneration from gang crimes. Tommy Carroll, as he was dying in a Waterloo, Iowa, hospital, asked an attendant to give his money and belongings to twenty-one-year-old Jean Crompton. "Take care of the little girl," he said; "She doesn't know what it's all about."<sup>44</sup>

Knowledge of felonies that could send bandit men to the electric chair also may have permitted gun molls to negotiate the business of sex as well or better than women in the "straight"

world. Evidence shows that bandit women demanded that men take responsibility for the consequences of intimacy by locating physicians and paying for abortions.<sup>45</sup> In 1934, at least three women out of six in the Dillinger gang probably terminated pregnancies. Evelyn Frechette spoke to one witness of having had an operation for a mysterious gall bladder complaint, which was cured in a few days at a private clinic.<sup>46</sup> Marie Conforti told of staying in Chicago with "female trouble" and added that Homer Van Meter had sent her money for an operation to "take care of it."<sup>47</sup> Molls expected that men would make money available for abortions, regardless of other problems. For example, when Harry Pierpont was on trial for his life in Lima, Ohio, he received a letter from Mary Kinder asking that he instruct his lawyers to give her money. "I need it," she wrote, "and *very bad*. You understand what for, don't you. [I] Need [to be] taken care of. It has been a long time, nearly three months."<sup>48</sup>

As I argued earlier, bandit women and men described their illicit relations in a language of family that publicly subverted "straight" relations. Unmarried women referred to themselves as "wives"; bandit men referred to their molls as "wife," "the little girl," or "the little woman."<sup>49</sup> In a decade where reductive interpretations of Freud framed popular interpretations of female and male sexual deviance, gun molls signaled yet another kind of erotic inversion by referring to their lovers in public as "Daddy," a slang term of the day which nevertheless suggested that the uncertain lives of bandit women were compensated for by deep intimacy. Bandits often discussed their erotic lives with hostages, emphasizing their own power by invoking the hot sexuality of their consorts. After one jail break, a hostage reported that John Dillinger boasted that "he had not seen his 'mama' in over a month, and was going to have a good time with her tonight."<sup>50</sup>

Women had certain kinds of autonomous power in gangs (such as the power to betray or to turn state's evidence), but most of what women had was granted by men in return for emotional and practical support. Women rarely acted with independence or acquired property on their own, nor were they permitted to contradict male partners. Bandit romances (like relationships in the "straight" world) were laced with explicit

and implicit violence. Men could find it a topic of great hilarity when women gave as good as they got: "Is your wife still Breaking Victor records on your head?" teased Alvin Karpis, in a note to an associate.<sup>51</sup> However, women must have gotten the worst of domestic violence, and although gun molls rarely spoke about battering, it occasionally surfaced. Men who regularly killed for money, we can assume, might also use force to control their home lives. When agents asked Jean Crompton whether she knew that her boyfriend's associates were federal fugitives, she claimed that she never asked him questions like that "for fear that Tommy would slap her down. She stated, however, that Tommy had never slapped her except on one occasion when they had a quarrel and she threatened to leave him." Another witness stated that Evelyn Frechette often appeared to be bruised on the face and arms.<sup>52</sup>

As Marge Suskie's response to the molls of Little Bohemia suggests, however, desire and danger were opposite sides of the same coin. Popular crime novels of the period, such as James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1936), argued that violence could be the flip side of tremendous physical and emotional passion. Linda Gordon has shown domestic violence to be a fairly common experience for noncriminal women in this and other periods, and many molls may have understood battering as part of normal spousal conflict.<sup>53</sup> Interrogations of gun molls rarely mention quarrels within gangs, and captured women avoided and evaded questions that might lead to apparent betrayal or disloyalty.

Silence was central to the code of female honor, something that was understood among relatives and friends of gang members as well. Women often physically threatened those who violated this code and helped the "laws." In the final days of the Bonnie and Clyde manhunt, Dallas police tapping Emma Parker's telephone heard this outraged exchange with Clyde Barrow's mother about the possibility that Raymond Hamilton's moll, "that stool pigeon Mary O'Dare," would turn state's evidence and betray their children:

[Mrs. Parker] said . . . that [Mary] would get them all caught before it was all over. [Mrs. Barrow] said yes I know that she will . . . she had better not show her face around them again if she wants to live and do well. . . . [Mrs. Parker] said if you let her come in your house I'll never come to see you again. [Mrs. Barrow] said I've got a big iron here if she starts in my



house I am going to hit her over the head with it. . . . I am not going to let that dam[n] hussy sit her foot in my house.<sup>54</sup>

Whether or not the two mothers were prepared to do violence to Mary, this dialogue demonstrated their family loyalty to the police they knew were listening. It was also a device to tacitly remind and reassure each other that they weren't "stool pigeons."

When a moll did break her silence it was usually in hopes of reducing her own sentence or parlaying information into a parole for her bandit lover. As one federal investigator noted about Barker-Karpis moll Edna Murray's cooperation in one trial, "[she] has expressed her willingness to testify in any future prosecution. . . . The [Division], of course, is advised that the Murray woman is presently serving a twenty-seven-year sentence at the Missouri State Penitentiary." Mary O'Dare did turn stool pigeon to try to gain Ray Hamilton's release.<sup>55</sup> She chose her time carefully, however, after the Barrow gang was decimated and the police dragnet was closing in on Bonnie and Clyde.

There were unwritten rules about when, and under what conditions, gang members were allowed to talk. For example, Gus Winkler's widow wrote her memoirs for several true crime magazines. She regarded this as quite different from appearing as a government witness and was "incensed" when she received a subpoena for Alvin Karpis's trial. She told federal agents that such testimony "would not only be embarrassing to her, but would undoubtedly endanger her life." She informed them that she would only appear as a hostile witness. Frances Nash and Gladys Sawyer, two other Barker-Karpis molls, also expressed their firm belief that they would be "knocked off" should they appear on behalf of the government. After Bonnie Parker was killed, her aunt, Mrs. E.M. Stamps, told the press that she had once called "the laws" on the famous pair and "From that day to this I have lived in mortal fear of my life."<sup>56</sup>

Turning state's evidence was a risky decision in many ways. If a woman gained her release, in addition to worrying about physical punishment, she would be cut off from her economic and social networks. A stool pigeon might be even less safe in jail, where molls let other inmates know that she was not to be trusted. After Wynnona Burdette and Delores Delaney gave

evidence against Arthur "Doc" Barker and Alvin Karpis, they were returned to prison where Delores took preemptive action and

furnished all the inmates of the institution with the information that Wynnona Burdette was cooperating with the government and had made written statements, giving her a reputation of being a suspected "snitch." . . . The Delaney woman, by her misrepresentations as to Wynnona's attitude and her own attitude to the government, has caused her a great deal of embarrassment and worry; that because of the inimical attitude of the other prisoners her stay at Milan has become most unpleasant.<sup>57</sup>

Many women also gave up information unintentionally. A federal interrogation strategy which shows up periodically was to casually inform a captured moll that the government "already knew" about a bank job or a kidnapping. Evelyn Frechette may have fallen for this tactic when she was picked up in Chicago and held for several days without being officially arrested. Later, in court, Frechette repudiated the government's case and claimed to have undergone what was commonly known as "the third degree." Federal agents, she said, had grilled her day and night without sleep or food, struck her "a couple of times," and flooded her face with bright lights to force a false confession.<sup>58</sup>

The public threats that molls made should be seen as both produced by real codes of female honor and as strategies for negotiating their extreme vulnerability outside the gang "family." Captured women announced their love and continuing loyalty through the newspapers, and by doing so, sent a message to free gang members and potential prison mates that they weren't "talking." When Ford Bradshaw, a fugitive Oklahoma bandit, was killed by a deputy sheriff on March 4, 1934, he was accompanied by a young Muskogee woman named "Boots" Moody (who was, in fact, wearing riding pants and boots). Boots "screamed and threw herself across the bandit's blood-soaked body. 'My daddy,' she wept. 'He's all I had in the world.'" As she was taken away by officers, Boots swore vengeance on the deputy, saying that she would "see to it that you got yours" when she was released.<sup>59</sup>

Bandits has a reputation for nearly magical powers of evasion: when one was captured or killed, former gang members hastened to distance themselves from charges of betrayal. Accusing someone else of being the snitch was one strategy. Tom-

my Carroll's legal wife, Viola, when informed of his death, told reporters that Tommy was "the finest fellow in the world. He was always good to me, and if he left me because he was crazy over another girl, then that's all there was to it." If Jean had been "planted" by the cops to trap Tommy, however, Viola promised that it would be "just too bad for her."<sup>60</sup>

The moll's code of honor is probably articulated best by Bonnie Parker, who is the only woman in my sample to have died with her lover. While cooling her heels in a Texas jail in 1930, Bonnie wrote a melodramatic poem which drew on her initial experiences with the Barrow gang. "The Story of Suicide Sal" suggests one possible narrative for bandit women which contains many of the themes I have described. In it, Bonnie relates the fall of Sal, a southern woman who "left her old home for the city/To play in its mad dizzy whirl,/Not knowing how little of pity/It holds for a country girl." In her migration from country to city, Sal is introduced to a new and confusing realm of urban pleasures. Desire and danger mix, as she describes falling in love with "Jack" and helping him set up the bank job that lands her in jail:

I got on the "F.B.A." payroll  
 To get the "inside lay" of the "job";  
 The bank was "turning big money!"  
 It looked like a "cinch" for the "mob."  
 Eighty grand without even a "rumble"—  
 Jack was last with the "loot" in the door,  
 When the "teller" dead-aimed a revolver  
 From where they forced him to lie on the floor.<sup>61</sup>

Bonnie's use of language particular to the gang articulates a chosen life of risk and violence, in which love and easy wealth combine for heightened sensation. She also signals a series of important reversals in hierarchy. Whereas the "inside lay" invokes female sexual vulnerability, it is a secret position of power: the lowly bank secretary is really a potent gang member, whose boyfriend forces other men to "lie on the floor." That the bank is "turning big money" makes it a sure bet for the robbers, not the investors and bank officers.

These reversals rob the tale of any alternative moral context which could free Sal from the rules of the bandit code. When she is jailed, she sees that honesty and virtue are meaningless

qualities that are assigned by those in power. Prosecutors offer Sal the option of claiming that she has been duped, turning her partner in, and going free (a choice Bonnie was facing at the time she wrote the poem). The gun moll disdains their deal and instead "took the 'rap' like good people," thereby inverting the notion of who good people really are. Her actions are predicated, of course, on the understanding that Jack will break her out of jail: instead, he simply finds another lover and never contacts her again. Sal is paroled eventually, and the story ends as she guns down Jack and his new moll and is then herself executed by the mob.

In this poem are, among other things, the framework of a bandit code which is explicitly dependent on a notion of female honor.<sup>62</sup> Sal does not question the correctness of covering for Jack, even if she has to go to jail. Her obedience to him depends on his correct behavior, however. By betraying her, Jack forfeits her loyalty. Even this does not free Sal from the bandit code which has become her life: she vows to kill Jack and his new lover, knowing that the price of her vengeance will be death, one way or another. "I'll 'bump 'em' if they give me the 'hotsquat,'" she vows on leaving prison, signaling that an honorable life has death as its ultimate price.

In "The Story of Suicide Sal," which was eventually published around the nation, Bonnie Parker stated explicitly that the context of her life was murder and theft. Audiences were fascinated and repelled by the bloody bank shoot-outs women participated in: thus, no matter how well gun molls used the language of conventional marriage and romance, their partnerships were inevitably perceived as perverse. Costumes that crossed gender boundaries contributed to this understanding by bringing bandit women's sexual identities into conflict with a more conventional symbolic canon. For example, riding breeches were particularly popular among bandit women, connoting a tinge of masculine adventurism as well as aspiration to the leisure styles of upper-class women. The Dillinger girls were captured in breeches and riding boots at Little Bohemia, "Boots" Moody wore them, and so did Blanche Barrow. Pants simultaneously symbolized a gun moll's freedom from gender norms and turned those norms on their head: after all, were not these mannishly dressed women attractive to extremely

powerful (and presumably, sexual) men?

Gun molls' penchant for crossing back and forth between criminal and "straight" vernaculars heightened public curiosity. In the same way that the appearance of a "normal" family could disguise a gang, molls used female sartorial conventions to acquire cultural invisibility. Taking the role of a housewife, a bandit woman would explain her "husband's" travel and odd hours by alluding to the poor economy and the scarcity of decent jobs. "Ma" Barker's most effective disguise was to "pretend" to be exactly who she was—an elderly lady keeping house for her boys. Costumes were also effective in helping a moll disguise her movements. Louis and Margaret Meidlinger, caretakers of the St. Paul apartment building where John Dillinger lived, reported having seen the dark-haired Evelyn Frechette and a blonde woman: the Meidlingers never guessed that they were the same person.<sup>63</sup> Women could alter their appearances far more radically than men could by simple techniques associated with modern feminine life. Whereas witnesses noticed deliberate disguises in men such as wigs, dyed hair, and makeup, these forms of artifice were taken for granted in women. Their disguises seemed "natural" and were therefore impenetrable.

As a wife or a girlfriend, a moll performed vital tasks. In fact, fugitive gangs could not have operated without women: because gender symbolism informed public life, a female accomplice was necessary to certain commercial transactions. During the weeks preceding the Lima jailbreak, Mary Kinder and other Dillinger gang molls bought clothes for the fugitives, purchased cars, and rented apartments. Whereas a clerk might remember a man buying clothes that were not his size, many women shopped for their husbands and male relatives. A "home maker" in the literal sense, the gun moll's ability to create realistic and unobtrusive dwellings was critical to the fugitive life. To stay ahead of police raids and evade surveillance, the gang needed several different homes, all well-supplied for a quick getaway. As a Chicago police officer reported to Melvin Purvis, head of the Dillinger task force, the gang was "occupying different apartments at practically the same time . . . living in one for possibly two days, and then moving over to another for a short time, and switching back from one to another."<sup>64</sup>

This last image, of gun molls rushing back and forth be-

tween households, is a fitting metaphor for the many contrary social positions they occupied. Molls, like many "straight" women, were deeply imbedded in conventional heterosexual relations and drew their aspirations, language, and desires from an established female narrative. Yet, as other evidence argues even more forcefully, they also disrupted fixed notions of feminine identity and a gender-appropriate behavior which supported that narrative. Gun molls violated gender codes by participating fully in male commerce and male honor systems and by successfully exploiting the language of conventional family and femininity on behalf of an inverted value system. They tested the limits and limitations of female identity—and in doing this, they implicitly questioned the naturalness of fundamental social categories: marriage, heterosexual love, and female honor. Disruption of these foundational categories was central to the moll's identity, but "straight" gender conventions dominated the signals she sent and her public's interpretations. After pumping hundreds of bullets into Bonnie Parker's body, Texas Ranger Frank Hamer looked down on the frail corpse and commented without irony, "I hate to burst a cap on a woman, especially when she was sitting down. However, if it wouldn't have been her, it would have been us."<sup>65</sup>

As the example of Marge Suskie shows, the gun moll's many disruptions could be both titillating and disturbing to audiences, offering a cultural space to test the limits of gender and female identity. Suskie, as her mixed feelings about bandits illustrates, knew well that such disruptive behavior was inherently dangerous. A visit from the Division of Investigation undoubtedly made her aware that the simple act of writing a letter *as if she were a moll* was "going the limit and then some." Yet, evidence suggests that many women attempt to disrupt the narrative they are given and that we need to learn how to read them. As one example, in 1934 a mother wrote in despair to syndicated columnist Dorothy Dix about her high-living daughter, "When I remonstrate with her, she tells me to shut up. . . . Oh, Miss Dix, I don't believe you know this generation of young people as they are"; and another echoed, "Shall I allow my daughter to 'sass' me with impunity?"<sup>66</sup>

Because the "gun moll" alternately abided by and "sassed" gender systems, she is an important location for the study of

possibility in women's narratives and a window on the multiple meanings of the words which connect female experience to social and sexual institutions. Although gun molls and other criminal women are by definition unlike the majority of (law-abiding) women, as Mary S. Hartman wrote in the preface to her book on Victorian murderesses, "it is their very familiarity which makes them disturbing. They are uncomfortably ordinary."<sup>67</sup> Like some other historians of crime, I have argued that gun molls were deeply embedded in the commercial and sexual cultures that all women of their period inhabited. If we are to take criminal women seriously as historical subjects, we must emphasize the ways that they articulate their identities as ordinary and make that foundational to our interpretive framework.

## NOTES

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1. Interrogation of Marie Conforti (a.k.a. Rose Ancker), contained in report by D.L. Nicholson, 14 May 1934, Federal Bureau of Investigation 62-29777-1410. All Division of Investigation case records from this period come from the Federal Bureau of Investigation Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C.
2. Imprisoned, these women were yielding few clues as to the whereabouts of their men; free, however, they might lead federal surveillance teams to gang hideouts. Federal files show a number of these instances, suggesting a semiofficial strategy of using girlfriends as bait. As one example, Sam Cowley reported that a Barker gang member had been released because "wherever Mary Eaton is Bill Weaver is bound to be close." See Sam Cowley to J. Edgar Hoover, 12 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-1115. The FBI files are also full of reprimands to agents for "losing the tail," arguing that molls took steps to foil their pursuers.
3. Herbert Corey, *Farewell, Mr. Gangster!* (New York: D. Appleton Century Co., 1936), 194.
4. Marge Suskie to Jean Crompton, Pat Cherrington, and Marie Conforti, April 1934, FBI 62-29777-1406.
5. Investigation of Marge Suskie, FBI 62-29777-1406. This last comment is consistent with the claims of John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman that the 1930s was a

period of "sexual liberalism," in which sexuality was increasingly seen as a source of pleasure outside of the marriage convention. See their *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 239-42. For changes in standards of female propriety, see Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 63.

6. See Alan Block, "Searching for Women in Organized Crime," in Susan K. Datesman and Frank R. Scarpitti, eds., *Women, Crime, and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 192-213. Indeed, as late as 1975, one social scientist posited that the "phenomenon of female criminality" was a product of the more general demand for female equality in the 1960s; see Freda Adler, *Sisters in Crime: The Rise of the New Female Criminal* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 1.

7. See Corey's *Farewell, Mr. Gangster!* Corey uses this phrase as the title for his chapter on gun molls.

8. My readings of these texts have been immeasurably strengthened by methodological questions posed by other feminist historians; in particular, see Ann-Louise Shapiro, "History and Feminist Theory, Or Talking Back to the Beadle," in *History and Theory*, 31 no. 4 (1992): 4; Joan Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Terry Castle, "Marie Antoinette Obsession," *Representations* 38 (spring 1992): 1-38.

9. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

10. My thinking about the implications of gender for codes of honor has been influenced by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); Nell Irvin Painter, "'Social Equality,' Miscegenation, Labor, and Power," in *The Evolution of Southern Culture*, ed. Numan V. Bartley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 47-65; Nancy MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism," *Journal of American History* 78 (December 1991): 917-48; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

11. See Jeffrey Weeks's discussion of homosexual subcultures, "Inverts, Perverts, and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in his *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1991), 46-67, esp. 54.

12. "Mrs. Harry Pierpont" [Mary Kinder] to Harry Pierpont, in N.B. Klein to J. Edgar Hoover, 16 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-588.

13. Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck, *Five Hundred Delinquent Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934). See also Cesare Lombroso, *The Female Offender* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1895), and Carol Smart's analysis of the biological-positivist school in *Women, Crime, and Criminology: A Feminist Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 27-36.

14. Glueck and Glueck, 73. Debates in the 1930s over "three-time loser" laws, which mandated castration or execution for three felony convictions, were based on the belief that criminality was due to inheritable biological defects.

15. Hans von Hentig, *The Criminal and His Victim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 46. The association of femininity and masculinity with particular physical and psychological traits made its way into official government policy by 1921. Allan Berube has shown that guidelines for an Army physical in the interwar period included detection of homosexual orientation through the "'anatomical' stigmata of degeneration"—in other words, physical traits associated with the opposite sex. See



Berube's *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 12-14.

16. Von Hentig, 50.

17. On a related note, this set of beliefs about Bonnie's sexuality seems to have defined her lover, Clyde Barrow, as well. Although there is no evidence to show that Clyde was anything but a functioning heterosexual male, contemporary accounts and all subsequent portrayals claim that he was homosexual, impotent, or both.

18. See report by D.L. Nicholson, 2 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-299 and report by N.B. Klein, 10 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-447; report by Peterson, 2 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1097; H.H. Clegg to J. Edgar Hoover, 13 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-568. Evelyn Frechette had a Native American parent; her darker skin is mentioned frequently, showing her to be singular in this criminal world.

19. N.B. Klein to Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Detroit, 10 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1514NR110; interrogation of Marie Conforti, report by D.L. Nicholson, 14 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1219; report by D.L. Nicholson, 9 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-466; H.H. Clegg to J. Edgar Hoover, 4 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1177; report by Clegg, 3 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1219.

20. *U.S. v. Clayton F. May, Evelyn Frechette, alias Billie Frechette, and Mrs. A. Salt, alias Mrs. A. LaDelle, pt. 1256*, U.S. District Court, St. Paul, Minnesota (Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota), 578-80.

21. Ware, 10-11.

22. See Humbert S. Nelli's discussion of the reinvestment of capital by organized crime into gambling and legal liquor distribution in his book, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 219-53.

23. *U.S. v. Clayton F. May*, 584-85.

24. *Ibid.*, 615-16.

25. Interrogation of Evelyn Frechette, report by D.L. Nicholson, 10 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1351; interrogation of Helen Reilly, report by D.L. Nicholson, 11 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1356.

26. Lester and Helen Gillis represent one instance of a "normal" family being involved with the bandit life. Whenever possible, Gillis—a.k.a. "Baby Face" Nelson—traveled with his wife, two young children, and his mother; see H.H. Clegg to J. Edgar Hoover, 19 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1041.

27. Bessie Green confession, S.P. Cowley to J. Edgar Hoover, 12 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-1115; H.H. Clegg to J. Edgar Hoover, 4 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1177.

28. My thinking on this issue is influenced by Jeffrey Weeks, "Pretended Family Relationships," in *Against Nature*, 134-56, which argues for the constructed nature of all family organizations; and David Herlihy, "Family," *American Historical Review* 96 (February 1991): 1-16, which defines family as a network of patrons and dependents.

29. *St. Paul (Minn.) Dispatch*, 22 Apr. 1936, interrogation of Isabelle Born, 21 Apr. 1936, FBI 7-77-401.

30. C.W. Stein to J. Edgar Hoover, 31 Mar. 1936.

31. S.P. Cowley to J. Edgar Hoover, 12 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-1115.

32. Report by D.L. Nicholson, 9 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-466.

33. Statement of Bessie Green, in H.H. Clegg to J. Edgar Hoover, 13 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-560.

34. Many historians have shown that despite efforts to remove women from the work force in the 1930s, their participation increased steadily. Susan Ware has characterized jobs for women in this period as featuring "long hours and low wages" (27). For an explanation of the entry of middle-class women into the labor force, see Winifred D. Wandersee-Bolin, "The Economics of Middle-Income Family Life: Work-

- ing Women during the Great Depression," *Journal of American History* 71 (June 1984): 60-74.
35. See deposition of Mrs. Saunders, informant, report by D.L. Peterson, 2 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1097; deposition of Mrs. Emil Wanatka, witness, W.A. Rorer to Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Chicago, 3 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1131; and interrogation of Evelyn Frechette, report by D.L. Nicholson, 10 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1351.
36. Statement of Bessie Green in H.H. Clegg to J. Edgar Hoover, 13 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-560.
37. Susan Porter Benson's *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986) argues that all department stores were defined by middle-class values, despite the existence of several interactive cultures within the store. My comparison is to the places that poor and rural people purchased clothes and notions during this period—the five-and-dime, mail order house, chain store, or small-town emporium.
38. Report by D.L. Nicholson to J. Edgar Hoover, 9 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-466.
39. Werner Hanni to J. Edgar Hoover, 3 Mar. 1936, FBI 7-77-401.
40. Report by John L. Madala, 19 May 1936, FBI 7-77-1738.
41. Report by S.K. McKee, 8 May 1936, FBI 7-77-697.
42. Emma Parker and Ruth Barrow Cowan, *The True Story of Bonnie and Clyde*, ed. Jan I. Fortune (New York: Fawcett Crest books, 1968), 83.
43. See Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 110.
44. *Tulsa Daily World*, 8 June 1934. Police soon discovered that Jean had a long "rap sheet," headed up by her arrest at Little Bohemia.
45. Bandits from Oklahoma and Texas had a higher incidence of childbearing and rearing. There is no evidence of abortion and a high instance of couples having children and making arrangements to keep them. Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd had a son he visited regularly. Lester and Helen Gillis bought a home and had two children who sometimes traveled with the gang and sometimes were left with family members. Alvin Karpis, another Oklahoma bandit, also chose to have a child with Delores Delaney. Both mother and child benefited from Karpis's attachment to middle-class norms: when he was hiding out in Atlantic City with Delores in mid-January, 1935, Karpis took her to an obstetrician. "We've got plenty of dough," the physician recalled him saying; "See that the little woman has the best of everything" (see *New York Times*, 25 July 1936). See also n.41, on savings for Baby Karpis's education.
46. Report from D.L. Nicholson, 30 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-1148. The clinic belonged to Niles Mortenson, a St. Paul abortionist who was later prosecuted for harboring Dillinger.
47. Interrogation of Marie Conforti, report by D.L. Nicholson, 14 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1410.
48. Marie Kinder to Harry Pierpont, intercepted and reproduced in N.B. Klein to J. Edgar Hoover, 16 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-588.
49. Letters from Clyde Barrow to Bonnie Parker were addressed "To my darling little wife," and signed "your daddy" and "your loving husband." Until her death, Bonnie was still legally married to a small-time hood named Roy Thornton. See Parker and Cowan, 72-76.
50. Report by T.F. Mullen, 9 Mar. 1934, FBI 62-29777-115.
51. Alvin Karpis to Ed Konvalinka, 28 July 1936, intercepted letter reproduced in C.W. Stein to D.M. Ladd, 11 Aug. 1936, FBI 7-77-1028.
52. Interrogation of Jean Crompton, report by D.L. Nicholson, 14 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-1410.

53. Linda Gordon has argued that by the 1930s most poor women felt entitled to protection from male violence. As "outlaws," however, gun molls were cut off from the social service and community networks that might have reinforced or generated such a belief. See her *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence, Boston 1880-1960* (New York: Viking, 1988), 252-64.
54. Log book of Dallas City Police Department wiretaps on Barrow and Parker households, 18 Apr. through 30 Apr. 1934, Texas History Collection, J. Erik Jonsson Central Library, Dallas, Texas. See entry for 28 Apr. 1934, 56-57.
55. E.J. Connelley to J. Edgar Hoover, 6 July 1936, FBI 7-77-789; Barrow and Parker wiretaps, 57.
56. Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Kentucky to SAC St. Paul, 6 July 1936, FBI 7-77-900; and E.A. Tamm to J. Edgar Hoover, 15 July 1936, FBI 7-77-948; *Tulsa Daily World*, 24 May 1934.
57. E.J. Connelley to J. Edgar Hoover, 6 June 1936, FBI 7-77-789.
58. *U.S. v. Clayton F. May*, 160, 620, 636.
59. *Tulsa Daily World*, 4 Mar. 1934.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Parker and Cowan, 83.
62. See Wyatt-Brown.
63. Report by D.L. Nicholson, 9 Apr. 1934, FBI 62-29777-466.
64. Melvin Purvis to J. Edgar Hoover, 31 May 1934, FBI 62-29777-226.
65. *Tulsa Daily World*, 24 May 1934.
66. *Ibid.*, 20 May 1930; 28 Dec. 1929.
67. Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), ix.