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“No Greater Menace”

Verne Sankey and the Kidnapping
of Charles Boettcher II

Lisa Lindell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Photo: The kidnapppers' hideaway in Buffalo County, South Dakota. Colorado Historical Society.

On January 31, 1934, three federal agents and three policemen converged upon a barbershop on Chicago's North Side. Positioning themselves in the shop's rear room and in a funeral parlor next door, they waited with an expectant air. Before long a bald, unshaven man ambled into the shop, waved hello to the proprietor, and settled into the chair. The barber lathered up the man's face and wrapped it in a hot towel; then, with the customer completely at ease, he turned to pick up his razor and quietly pressed a buzzer hidden beneath the shelf. The special agents and policemen charged out from their hiding places, guns drawn. Two of them pressed the barrels of their weapons against the customer's head. "Don't move, Verne," one of the lawmen said. "You're under arrest."¹

With that, the agents apprehended Verne Sankey, widely considered to be "Public Enemy Number 1." Although his reputation has faded in the intervening decades, Sankey was notorious in the early 1930s, one of the most celebrated gangsters in an era full of them. Sensationalized media coverage, coupled with a federal "war on crime," turned men such as Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, John Dillinger, and Pretty Boy Floyd into household names, fixtures at the top of the much-hyped "Public Enemies List."² Radio listeners and newspaper readers eagerly tracked the careers of these infamous men, greeting each new exploit with a mixture of alarm and fascination. As Richard Gid Powers observes in *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture*, "[N]o sooner was [one] culprit killed or captured than another 'mastermind of crime' was nominated to take his place as 'public enemy number one.'"³

Verne Sankey earned this unofficial title in 1933 after kidnapping wealthy Colorado businessman Charles Boettcher II. For ten months he remained at large while a national audience intently followed the case. No crime, it seemed, engrossed the public quite like ransom kidnapping. The abduction of Charles Lindbergh, Jr.—"the crime of the century"—had dominated the headlines for months in 1932, and it followed a string of earlier kidnappings of wealthy Midwestern businessmen.

The Boettcher abduction fit well within this pattern. Shortly before midnight on February 12, 1933, Sankey and his partner, Gordon Alcorn, both armed, confronted thirty-one-year-old Charles Boettcher and his wife, Anna Lou, as they drove up to the garage of their Denver home. While Alcorn blindfolded Boettcher with adhesive tape and herded him into the rear seat of a Ford V-8, Sankey thrust into Mrs. Boettcher's hands a note demanding a \$60,000 ransom. She would later, quite accurately, describe him to police as

about forty-two years old, five feet seven inches tall, and weighing 150 to 160 pounds, with a sandy complexion and “peculiar round eyes.” She also recalled his tweed overcoat, cap, and handkerchief mask.⁴ With Sankey driving and Alcorn, a twenty-eight-year-old Canadian and fellow railroad worker, guarding the prisoner, a long ride commenced, extending through the night and all the next day. When they finally reached the kidnappers’ remote hideout, Boettcher, his eyes still taped and his wrists bound, was confined in a damp basement.⁵

The kidnappers had targeted Boettcher because of his family’s tremendous wealth. A graduate of Yale and partner in the firm of Boettcher, Newton & Co., the young broker was heir to the fortune accumulated by his grandfather, Charles Sr., a German immigrant who had become one of Colorado’s most successful industrialists. Charles II’s father, Claude, had expanded the family’s wealth by acquiring interests in cement, sugar, packing, mining, railroads, banking, real estate, and utilities.⁶

Given the Boettchers’ high visibility, the kidnapping provoked a strong response in Denver and, indeed, throughout the nation. Colorado governor Edwin C. Johnson urged all citizens to maintain a vigilant lookout for anyone or anything deemed suspicious. The *Denver Post* described Charles Boettcher’s palatial home at 777 Washington Street and his father’s mansion at nearby 400 East Eighth Avenue as armed camps, heavily guarded by police. “Every resource of the city, state and nation must be mobilized to avenge this atrocious and brazen crime,” the newspaper declaimed. “4,000 COMB DENVER IN BOETTCHER HUNT,” reported the *New York Times* two weeks later. Police officers, volunteers from the American Legion and other service clubs, precinct workers, and “an aroused citizenry” had joined forces and were “carrying their search ... to every house in Greater Denver.” The case gave rise to widespread fears over personal safety, particularly among Denver’s wealthy citizens. Permits to carry arms, as well as sharp-shooting chauffeurs, were reputedly in high demand.⁷

With so much attention focused on the kidnapping, Denver police worked the case hard. They had plenty of leads to follow, but all were dead ends. Every time an arrest seemed imminent, a new piece of information cleared the suspect. Tensions developed when the Boettcher family attempted to negotiate on their own with the kidnappers. Boettcher’s father, Claude, told the *New York Times*: “Obviously, the police, the press, myself and family are each actuated by different motives—the police primarily to apprehend the culprits, the press to print all the news, myself and family to accomplish the safe return of my son.”⁸ His threat to act independently of law enforcement

drew a stern rebuke from Denver Chief of Police Albert T. Clark, who warned of the detrimental effect on public safety that could result if the Boettcher family yielded to the kidnapers' demands.⁹

Claude Boettcher thus found himself navigating a precarious course as he worked for the release of his son. Following the instructions of the kidnapers, he placed in the Denver newspapers a personal advertisement reading, "Ready to come home, Mabel"—a sign that he was willing to negotiate.¹⁰ Throughout February, the kidnapers and the elder Boettcher continued to correspond, exchanging thirteen letters in all. Claude Boettcher hired a private investigator, who traveled some twelve thousand miles in a vain attempt to track the abductors. The Colorado legislature got involved as well, considering a bill that would make ransom kidnapping a capital offense, but lawmakers agreed to table the proposal at the request of Anna Lou Boettcher, who feared that such legislation might further endanger the life of her husband.¹¹

Three days after the kidnapping, the Federal Bureau of Investigation entered the case.¹² The FBI, led by J. Edgar Hoover, took on increasing importance during the 1930s, as the federal government steadily increased its crime-fighting activities.¹³ The Roosevelt administration, which came into power a few weeks after the Boettcher kidnapping, launched a national anticrime campaign, with the FBI tackling high-profile cases and vigorously publicizing its successes. "Government Men," or G-Men, became public heroes during this era.¹⁴ Melvin H. Purvis, head of the Bureau's Chicago office, described the G-Men's newfound celebrity in his memoir, *American Agent*: "A considerable portion of the male population of America has a burning desire to serve as special agents in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Special agents...are popular subjects of hero worship. The straight-out factual drama of the government's war on crime, together with highly seasoned motion-picture romanticizations, have excited adventure seekers."¹⁵

While bootlegging, gun running, and gangland violence drew the bulk of federal crime-fighting resources, ransom kidnappings received a disproportionate amount of attention. The 1930s brought a spate of such crimes, most notably the abduction of Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr. On the night of March 1, 1932, the famed aviator's young son was snatched from his second-floor nursery in Hopewell, New Jersey. The case generated intense outrage, which only heightened after the baby's body was discovered in a nearby field in May 1932.

A bill to toughen federal laws against kidnapping had been pending before Congress since late 1931.¹⁶ The Lindbergh tragedy spurred lawmakers

into action. In June 1932 Congress passed the “Lindbergh Law,” which made the interstate transportation of kidnap victims a federal crime. Two years later, in May 1934, ransom kidnapping became a capital offense in cases where the victim was harmed or was transported across state lines.¹⁷

In the interval between these acts of legislation, ransom kidnappings in the United States reached historic heights. With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, bootleggers and other criminal gangs increasingly turned to kidnapping. Twenty-seven cases were reported in 1933, giving rise to perceptions of a kidnapping “epidemic.”¹⁸ Taking advantage of the national apprehension, Lloyd’s of London introduced kidnapping insurance.¹⁹ Law-enforcement authorities seemed powerless to halt this wave of abductions, as perpetrators appeared willing to risk long prison terms and perhaps even death. Certainly Verne Sankey was unfazed by the threat of punishment. An avid reader of true-life detective magazines, he disdained what he considered the bungling methods of the magazines’ featured kidnappers, all of whom were captured eventually and brought to justice. “I decided that I could improve upon the methods,” he later boasted, “and I proceeded to try it.”²⁰

SANKEY’S JOURNEY INTO A LIFE OF CRIME began gradually. Born in Avoca, Iowa, in 1891, he moved with his family as a youth to Wilmot, South Dakota.²¹ Here he, his father, and his older brothers Frank and Floyd entered into what a newspaper reporter would later describe as “the drab life of ... farm[ing].” At nineteen, Sankey set out on his own. Attracted to railroading, he found work on the Grand Trunk Railway (soon to merge with Canadian National Railways), serving successively as a watchman, fireman, and engineer. Proud of his growing salary, Sankey enclosed a photograph of his monthly paycheck, totaling \$218.69, in a Christmas letter to his parents.²²

But Sankey’s gambling spirit and brash self-confidence eventually lured him to the gaming tables. At first he was lucky, and the money flowed freely. He lavished his winnings from cards and dice at the best hotels and resorts. But his luck inevitably turned, and he grew increasingly reckless with money. Former gambling companions recalled one memorable poker game near Casper, Wyoming, that lasted five continuous days and nights; when it finally ended, Sankey had lost \$12,000. He could afford such losses only because he had started in on a lucrative new career: bootlegging. He began smuggling whiskey across the Canadian border within three years after the 1920 enactment of Prohibition. Only once did his illicit activities land him in legal trouble—in 1925, when he was arrested in Detroit Lakes, Minne-

sota, on liquor trafficking charges. The case was forgotten, however, after Sankey posted bond and forfeited it.²³

As the 1920s came to a close and “the easy money tide turned,”²⁴ Sankey turned to bank robbery. In the early 1930s he was suspected of, but never apprehended for, several Canadian bank robberies, including a \$13,000 heist in Regina, Saskatchewan. Also ascribed to Sankey was the October 1932 robbery of a bank in Vayland, South Dakota.²⁵

At around this time, Sankey purchased a ranch in Buffalo County, South Dakota, in the Missouri River foothills. He moved here with his wife, Fern, and their two children, and gave every appearance of having gone straight. The family built a modest white frame house and stocked their land with turkeys, chickens, and cattle, renting out much of the acreage to neighboring farmers. Located on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation, southwest of the tiny town of Gann Valley, the ranch was extremely secluded, miles from the main roads and accessible only via a wagon path. Newspaper reporters would later speculate that Sankey had long intended to use the ranch as a “bandit hideout,” even suggesting that the basement bedroom had been expressly designed as a cell.²⁶

The ranch did not play a role in Sankey’s first kidnapping, however. In the spring of 1932, he and his wife hired a couple from Mitchell, South Dakota, to look after their property, then relocated to Minneapolis. Here Sankey plotted the abduction of Haskell Bohn, the twenty-year-old son of a St. Paul refrigerator manufacturer. On June 30, 1932, Sankey and his accomplice Ray Robinson, a former Canadian National Railways fireman, kidnapped Bohn outside his home as he was leaving for work at his father’s factory. They held him in the basement of the Sankey’s Minneapolis residence for six days, then released him unharmed after Bohn’s father paid a \$12,000 ransom—the same amount, as it happened, that Sankey had lost at the Casper gambling tables over a similar span of time.²⁷ The case would remain unsolved for several months, until Robinson’s arrest in April 1933—and by then Sankey was already sought in connection with the higher-profile Boettcher abduction.²⁸

CHARLES BOETTCHER WAS HELD at the Sankey ranch in the cellar bedroom throughout February 1933, blindfolded and unaware of his surroundings. An accomplice named Arthur Youngberg—who, like most of Sankey’s associates, was a former Canadian National Railways employee—stood guard over the captive while Sankey drove back to Denver to mastermind the negotiations. Although closely watched, Boettcher cleverly left evi-

dence identifying his location, covering the walls with his fingerprints and making a dent with his fingernail in an empty spool of adhesive tape. He also wrote his name on the wall (although the kidnapers apparently removed this evidence) and left a burn-hole in the rug, created by an accidentally dropped cigarette.²⁹

Then, on March 1, 1933, Boettcher was abruptly released. His captors roused him at midnight, drove him back to Denver, and let him out, still blindfolded, in the stockyards district of the city. Making his way to a nearby drugstore, Boettcher called home and then unsteadily sipped a chocolate milkshake while waiting for friends to pick him up.³⁰ Aside from sore eyes and a bad cold, Boettcher was unharmed; he credited his captors with being “as gentlemanly as could be expected under the circumstances,” though he reported they had threatened him with unfortunate consequences if he did “anything to balk them.”³¹ Boettcher did give the police one valuable clue: Momentarily pulling off his blindfold on the return trip, he had spied the Torrington, Wyoming, railroad depot.³²

Surprisingly, the kidnapers had released Boettcher *before* receiving their ransom; Alcorn would later testify that he and Sankey freed Boettcher because they feared that the neighbors would soon become suspicious or that Boettcher himself would discover his captors’ identities. Word of Boettcher’s release spread quickly through the city, aided by three *Denver Post* extras that trumpeted the exciting details. By the time Boettcher arrived home, hundreds of spectators had gathered there, forcing him to sneak into his house through the garage.³³

With his son safely returned, Claude Boettcher, complying with the kidnapers’ instructions, made immediate preparations to pay the ransom. The Boettchers’ chauffeur drove family friend Reuben J. Morse and two private detectives to a specified location fifteen miles north of the Denver city limits on Highway 81, where Morse tossed the ransom money over a bridge into a dry creek bed. The police, keeping a close watch, closed in when Sankey and Alcorn retrieved the money and gave hot pursuit as the still unidentified kidnapers raced away.³⁴ With bullets pelting their car, the outlaws sped to Greeley, where, according to Alcorn’s later testimony, they eluded detection by hiding out in a warehouse. Here the two men separated, each making his own way back to Sankey’s South Dakota ranch. Arriving first, Sankey divided the spoils: reportedly \$32,000 to himself and his wife, \$11,000 to Youngberg, and \$17,000 to Alcorn.³⁵ After burying much of their ransom money on the ranch grounds, Sankey and Alcorn hurriedly departed, catching a ride with Sankey’s brother Frank to the Twin Cities. Alcorn would later

recount that he buried \$15,000 at the ranch, and Sankey had buried \$25,000. Youngberg, remaining at the ranch, buried most of his share as well.³⁶

As it happened, Sankey and Alcorn had gotten away just in time to avoid capture: A few days after Boettcher's release, police in Denver received a tip disclosing the kidnappers' identities. The search for the culprits, previously centered in Wyoming, now converged on the Sankey ranch. The first law-enforcement officials reached the area on March 6, armed with submachine guns and pistols. While making inquiries at a neighboring ranch, they unexpectedly encountered and quickly arrested Arthur Youngberg, who was helping to butcher a steer.³⁷

The arrest of Youngberg, widely known as the caretaker of the Sankey ranch, came as a surprise to nearby residents, who had played card games and listened to radio programs in the ranch house, little suspecting that Boettcher was being held in the basement. They reported that Youngberg had even played Santa Claus at a nearby school the previous Christmas. The community was likewise taken aback to learn of Sankey's alleged criminal activities, although some of his habits—extended trips away from the ranch, mysterious visitors, and his custom of carrying large sums of money—had aroused suspicion.³⁸

Youngberg's arrest followed the apprehensions of three suspects in Denver: Carl W. Pearce, an insurance salesman accused of typing out the ransom notes; Sankey's wife, Fern; and Alvina Ruth Kohler, Fern's sister and a close friend of Carl Pearce. Pearce had boasted about the case to an acquaintance while drinking, providing the police with a major break in the case. With the arrests, the *Denver Post* immediately changed its tone. Charges of police inactivity gave way to effusive praise for Chief Clark and his men; their handling of the case, the *Post* predicted, would "go down in history as one of the best examples of police work ever known in this country." The *Post* also commended the FBI agents for their "vital role" in unearthing "much valuable information from secretly-developed channels." The whereabouts of the gang's ringleaders remained unknown, however. Hopes briefly rose when police intercepted a letter from Sankey and Alcorn, sent to Youngberg from a Minneapolis hotel. But by the time this information was obtained and the lead investigated, the fugitives had fled.³⁹

Police officers remained at the ranch for two weeks, hoping the kidnappers might return.⁴⁰ But Sankey, now hiding out in Chicago, managed to elude the close surveillance and enter the ranch grounds long enough to retrieve much of the ransom money—buried, he later revealed, "in the cow yard about 150 yards from the house." Sankey's barking dog caused him

some tense moments as he dug the money from the frozen ground, as did the turkeys' "awful racket," but the clamor went unnoticed, and Sankey was able to depart without incident.⁴¹ Disappointed police officers soon discovered the empty cache, but Sankey had long since made his getaway. More buried treasure would eventually come to light, however: In April, Buffalo County sheriff Lars Rasmussen unearthed \$9,360—Youngberg's share—buried in a one-pound tobacco can by a fence near the ranch buildings.⁴²

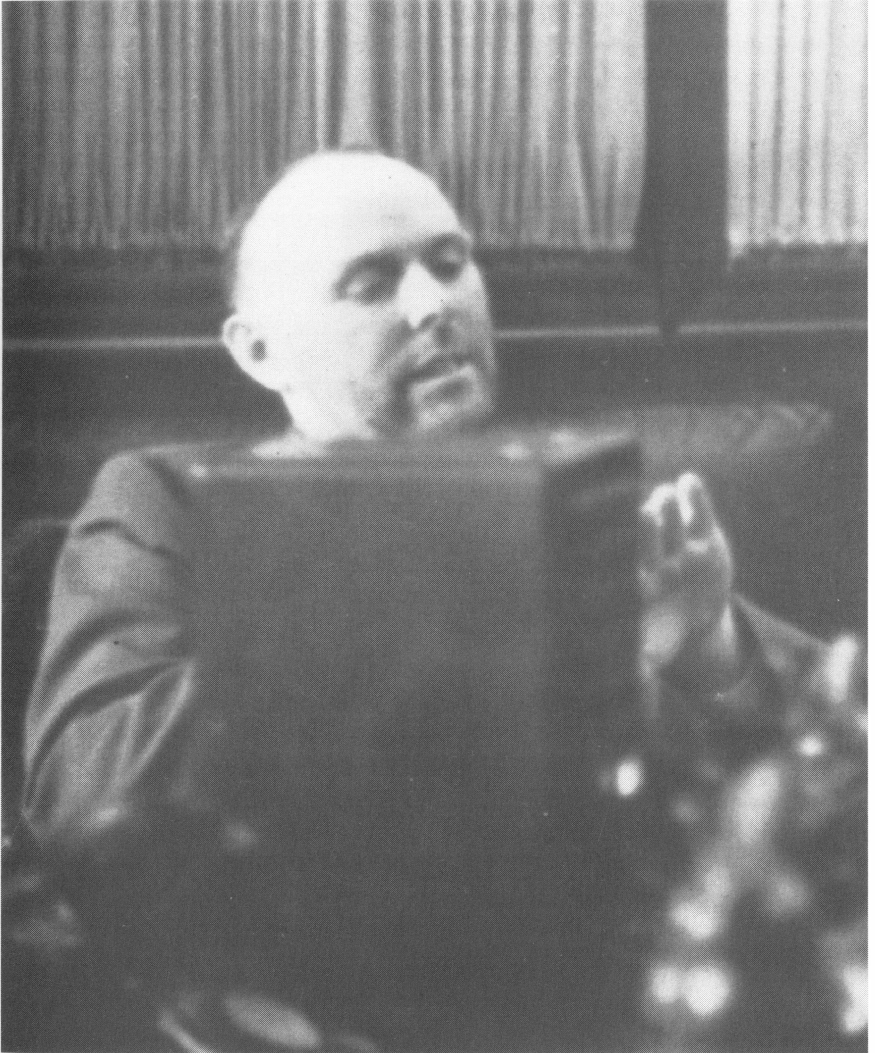
On March 9, police announced the discovery of the kidnappers' bullet-riddled car in a dry creek bed near the Sankey ranch. Six days later, Charles Boettcher visited the ranch and confidently identified it as the place of his captivity. He recognized the heating stove, the furniture, the marks on the window, walls, and floor, even the piece of composition board on which his food had been served. Although Boettcher's positive identification gratified law officials, they were still no closer to apprehending Sankey and Alcorn.⁴³

IN THE FOLLOWING MONTHS, police tied Sankey to three other abductions: the 1932 Haskell Bohn incident; the June 1933 kidnapping of St. Paul brewery heir William Hamm, Jr.; and the January 1934 kidnapping of Edward Bremer, another wealthy St. Paul brewer's son. Suspicions of Sankey's involvement in the latter two cases proved unfounded; the Ma Barker-Alvin Karpis Gang had pulled off those jobs, returning both of the captives unharmed after large ransoms were paid.⁴⁴

With Sankey still at large, prosecutions moved forward against his accomplices. In May 1933, charged under the "Lindbergh Law," Youngberg was convicted of kidnapping and conspiracy to kidnap; he received sixteen years at Leavenworth for each crime, with the sentences to run concurrently. Carl Pearce, convicted of conspiracy to kidnap, got a twenty-six-year sentence, also at Leavenworth. The court dismissed the charges against Alvina Kohler and Fern Sankey, although the latter was immediately re-arrested on charges stemming from the kidnapping of Haskell Bohn. A Minnesota jury eventually acquitted her in that case.⁴⁵

On July 22, 1933, the "kidnapping epidemic" climaxed with the abduction of Charles Urschel, an oil millionaire from Oklahoma City. His captors—George "Machine Gun" Kelly and his gang—demanded a ransom of \$200,000, and after receiving full payment they released their captive unharmed. The FBI went all-out to capture the kidnappers, in part because Urschel was a personal friend of President Roosevelt's. The Bureau's highly publicized manhunt led to over a dozen arrests.⁴⁶ It eventually netted "Machine Gun" himself, who when cornered allegedly bestowed upon

Hoover's men their legendary nickname: "Don't shoot, G-Men!"⁴⁷ Tried under the Lindbergh Law in the fall of 1933, Kelly received a life sentence, as did his wife and several of their cohorts.⁴⁸ "Kidnapping is as bad as murder, if not worse," Judge Edgar S. Vaught said from the bench. "There is no greater menace to the country today."⁴⁹



Verne Sankey shortly after his arrest in Chicago on January 31, 1934. Colorado Historical Society.

ON JANUARY 31, 1934, VERNE SANKEY'S LUCK finally ran out. After nearly a year of false leads, law-enforcement officials received a reliable tip that Sankey, using the name W.E. Clark, frequently patronized a barbershop on North Damen Avenue in Chicago. Special agent Melvin Purvis presided over the capture, which came off without a hitch. Chicago police sergeant Thomas Curtin offered this account:

We watched the place for two weeks. To-day [Sankey] walked in there. We knew he had sworn never to be taken alive and we took plenty of precautions. We let him get all set in the barber's chair, with the big sheet wrapped around him.

Then we stepped in, with guns in our hands, while the barber's back was turned. Donovan [one of the other policemen] laid back, with two pistols, ready for any kind of a break. Lynch and I walked up, one on either side, and pushed the muzzles of our guns up against Sankey's bald head.

I said: "Don't move, Verne. We're police officers. You're under arrest."

With that he started up, and we grabbed him and flung him back on the chair. We gave him a quick frisk and he didn't have a gun. Then we made him stand up. I warned him again about giving us any argument.⁵⁰

"SNATCH RACKET ARTIST TAKEN IN CHICAGO BARBER SHOP," roared the next day's headlines.⁵¹ Police found pills in Sankey's overcoat pocket, lending credence to his claim that he intended not to be taken alive. A search of his apartment revealed a tin box containing over three thousand dollars; a shotgun and two revolvers; and an unsent letter presumably meant for Claude Boettcher (although names were deleted) threatening to kidnap his son a second time in revenge for his having informed police of the first abduction. In addition, the *New York Times* reported, information had been uncovered linking Sankey to a plot to kidnap sports legends Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth.⁵²

Ever eager to exploit a sensational story, newspapers tried to link Sankey to the Lindbergh kidnapping. Possible evidence included a similarity in the handwriting of the Boettcher and Lindbergh ransom notes, as well as a telephone call allegedly made from Minneapolis to New Jersey ten days after the Lindbergh abduction. Moreover, Charles Boettcher, an aviation enthusiast, and Charles Lindbergh were close friends; Lindbergh visited the Boettcher mansion so often that a bedroom suite there was called "Charlie's Room" in

his honor. Joseph B. Keenan, special attorney general and the government's expert in kidnapping cases, fueled the speculation by declaring, upon Sankey's capture: "This means the end of the man who is really America's Public Enemy No. 1." Associating "Public Enemy No. 1" with "Crime No. 1"—the Lindbergh kidnapping—proved to be a natural step for some in the media.⁵³

Melvin Purvis interviewed Sankey immediately after his capture and questioned him about his involvement in the Lindbergh case. "Sankey's temper flared," the federal agent recounted. "He looked at me with bitter, outraged eyes. 'I am a man,' he said. 'I'd kidnap another man. I'd never touch a baby.'" ⁵⁴ Specimens of Sankey's writing were sent to Washington for comparison with Lindbergh ransom notes, and the serial numbers of bills found in Sankey's apartment were cross-checked. But the government could never directly connect him with the Lindbergh kidnapping.

The night after Sankey's arrest, federal agents captured Gordon Alcorn in his Chicago apartment. He was living there with his wife of nine months, Birdie Christopherson, who had married Alcorn under his assumed name (Walter Thomas) and was unaware of his criminal activities. Sankey, too, had begun a new relationship in Chicago, living with a twenty-eight-year-old former waitress, Helen Matern, who knew him only as a wealthy Chicago broker.⁵⁵

The capture of Sankey and Alcorn hardly quelled the public's appetite for the case. On the contrary, interest soared as first Sankey, and then Alcorn, were transported to South Dakota, where they would await trial. On February 2, 1934, the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* described Sankey's arrival in Sioux Falls on a special railroad car, elaborately guarded by ten United States government guards and officers:

The Milwaukee passenger station was lined with hundreds of curious spectators, and officers had great difficulty in forcing their way through the crowd to a nearby car with their prisoner.

With riot guns in hand, the guards rushed Sankey into the car, and under cover of an escorting car loaded with guards, he was whisked to the county jail two blocks away and speedily lodged in a cell, to wait until he was to be taken to the state penitentiary for safe-keeping.

As the cars sped away, the crowd milled and broke, rushing pell-mell after the cars in a hope of obtaining a view of the notorious desperado, but the federal agents were too fast for them. By the time the crowd reached the jail, Sankey was already inside and behind bars.⁵⁶

Alcorn followed the next day on another special train car, shackled, it was noted, with “the same pair of handcuffs that took Al Capone to Atlanta two years ago.” Alcorn, like Sankey, was greeted by large crowds at the train station and was then sped “in spectacular fashion”—with sirens blaring—to the state penitentiary. Melvin Purvis described Alcorn as “a tall, gaunt, dismayed man of twenty-six who looked more like a raw farmhand than a big-time criminal.” But to the *Argus-Leader*, he was a celebrity; the paper compared his “dark handsomeness” to that of Clark Gable.⁵⁷

Such coverage encouraged readers to identify with the kidnappers. The press highlighted both men’s most personable and ordinary qualities, if only to offer a dramatic contrast to their exotic otherness. The *Argus-Leader*, for instance, described Sankey as “a congenial sort of chap” and a “pleasant fellow,” finding “nothing about him which would lead one to believe that he is the deep-dyed criminal he is charged with being.” The paper then proceeded to emphasize how the kidnappers had “plied their nefarious trade and reaped huge sums from distraught parents.”⁵⁸ A paper in Wilmot, South Dakota, characterized the year-long search for Sankey as “the most spectacular manhunt in history.” Perhaps the word most often used to label Sankey was *notorious*. The press variously pegged him as a “notorious outlaw,” a “notorious bad man, a “notorious fugitive” and, sweepingly, as “the most notorious criminal [South Dakota] has ever known within its boundaries.”⁵⁹

The objects of the media’s absorption were held in solitary confinement on \$100,000 bond. Four deputy marshals guarded Sankey and Alcorn, working in pairs in twelve-hour shifts. The prisoners had two options. They could undergo trial, or they could enter a guilty plea, which, under the Lindbergh Law, would mean facing a life sentence in a federal penitentiary. Finally, on February 7, after days of media speculation, Sankey announced his decision: he would plead guilty.

One day later he was dead, having hanged himself in his cell.⁶⁰

LONG BEFORE HIS CAPTURE, SANKEY had made clear his preference for death over imprisonment, and he took advantage of a brief absence by his guards to make good on his intentions. Knotting two neckties together into a noose, he tied them to a crossbar and stepped off his cot. “SANKEY A SUICIDE,” the banner headlines cried. “Death by his own hand, cunningly planned and swiftly executed with dramatic finalty, has closed the case against Verne Sankey.”⁶¹ According to his lawyer, Sankey’s feelings for his children played a part in his decision: He wanted them to remember him as a “kind father rather than as a convict with an ugly prison uniform.”⁶²

The day after Sankey's suicide, Alcorn pled guilty to conspiracy to kidnap for ransom and was immediately sentenced to a life term at Leavenworth. Here he joined accomplices Carl Pearce and Arthur Youngberg, as well as Machine Gun Kelly and the other men convicted in the Urschel kidnaping.⁶³ In September 1934, Alcorn was transferred to Alcatraz, newly redesigned as a federal penitentiary. The facility, according to U.S. Attorney General Homer Cummings, was meant to house "criminals of the vicious and irredeemable type," including "racketeers, kidnapers, and others guilty of predatory crimes."⁶⁴ Al Capone and Machine Gun Kelly also made the trip to Alcatraz, and Alcorn got to know them in the mess hall and during recreation periods; he described Capone, who worked in the shoe repair department, as "always [seeming] to be in the best of spirits and [having] a smile most of the time." But after cooperating with the government in the trial of Fern Sankey, Alcorn began to fear for his safety and requested a transfer back to Leavenworth.⁶⁵



Three members of Sankey's gang—Ruth Kohler (left), Fern Sankey (second from left), and Arthur Youngberg (far right)—leave a court hearing escorted by U.S. Marshal Charles Patton. Colorado Historical Society.

In May 1934 and again in October of that year, Fern Sankey was tried as an accomplice in the Bohn and Boettcher kidnappings. The first trial ended in a deadlocked jury, and the second resulted in her acquittal, despite Alcorn's testimony that she was complicit in the planning of the Boettcher kidnapping.⁶⁶ While testifying at Fern Sankey's trial, Alcorn recounted his experiences on the run. After retrieving the ransom money from the Sankey ranch, the men had buried it north of Chicago, "not far from Evanston." But Alcorn could not rest easy. Goaded by his fears of betrayal, he dug up the money and hid it in his apartment:

I had no intention of stealing the money from Sankey, but I wanted to be sure that he did not get my share, so one evening as I drove up to my garage and got out of the car, I heard a voice say, 'stick 'em up' and of course I put up my hands. It was Sankey—and we stood and argued for awhile, and then he helped me take some parcels up to my apartment.... We counted out each other's share quickly.... Sankey later claimed that he was \$2,500 short, and I claim that I was \$1,000 short. The only explanation of it that I can make is that I may have dropped some of the money when I dug it up.⁶⁷

The dream of riches had brought death to Verne Sankey and life in prison to Gordon Alcorn. Nonetheless, the lure of money continued to entice other gangs, and ransom kidnappings continued to make headlines in the 1930s. Given the actual number of cases, though, the publicity was extravagant. The *New York Times* reported only forty-eight classic ransom kidnapping cases in the United States from 1933 through 1936,⁶⁸ but it covered those cases in exhaustive detail. Indeed, crime in general was nowhere near as prevalent in the 1930s as the hype would suggest. "Statistics now show that there was no crime wave," concludes Richard Gid Powers, "but newspaper headlines then told a different story. Top gangsters were national celebrities. Crime reporters treated gang wars and truces as though mobs were sovereign nations independent of society."⁶⁹

In devoting so much attention to crime, the media were responding to, as well as shaping, popular sentiment. The political, economic, and social changes rocking the nation in the 1930s stimulated a desire for moral order and security and, at the same time, a taste for escapist entertainment. Crime stories satisfied both of these urges. Presented as dramatic and action-packed adventures, they pitted G-men against gangsters, good versus evil; they invited readers to experience a sense of moral satisfaction as well as vicarious participation. And readers were indeed drawn in, as Claire Bond Potter ob-

served in her study of crime and popular culture in the 1930s: "Literature and other texts about crime provided an imaginative space for the public to mingle with and be stimulated by the underworld without actually touching crime or being touched by it."⁷⁰

In its war on crime, the government, too, capitalized on and influenced the national mood. "It is a campaign to wipe out the public enemy and it will proceed until it succeeds," proclaimed Attorney General Homer Cummings.⁷¹ Notably, these efforts were geared to the sensibilities of privileged white citizens. Ransom kidnapping in particular, with its tendency to target wealthy families wielding social and political influence, tended to receive a disproportionate amount of legislative and media attention, while crimes affecting less advantaged societal classes generated a less vigorous response. The war on crime, then, was politically and culturally significant, signaling, as Potter asserts, "a New Deal commitment to enlarging federal intervention without fundamentally disturbing ... race and class hierarchies."⁷²

The federal anticrime campaign was mirrored by similar efforts at the state level. When the national crime prevention measures were passed in 1934, at least twenty-three states had already introduced or passed legislation making ransom kidnapping a capital offense, with many states soon to follow. The Boettcher kidnapping case had a direct impact on the creation of this legislation, speedily prompting ransom laws in Montana, Utah, and Colorado. The latter state enacted a new kidnapping bill within weeks of Boettcher's release, replacing the maximum sentence of seven years with the death penalty.⁷³

In many respects, the Boettcher case served as a microcosm of 1930s crime and the reactions to it in the government, in the media, and in the public. It featured the ransom kidnapping of an affluent businessman, perpetrated by a bandit gang that had also engaged in bootlegging and bank robbery; and it generated sensationalized media coverage, a massive law-enforcement response, and new legislation. Bent on reaping riches and outwitting authorities, Verne Sankey succeeded in snatching more than a wealthy victim. He snatched the attention of a nation captivated by crime.

NOTES

- 1
Melvin Purvis, *American Agent* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1938), 121; "America's New 'Public Enemy No. 1' Arrested," *Literary Digest* 117, no. 6 (February 10, 1934): 38; *New York Times*, February 1, 1934.
- 2
Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), xi-xiii, 3; Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 106-107. For information on the "Public Enemies List," see Powers, 23, 40, 60.
- 3
Powers, *G-Men*, xiii.
- 4
New York Times, February 14, 1933. See also *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 13, 1933. The ransom note reportedly stated, "Don't notify the police. Tell Claude Boettcher he had better get \$60,000 ransom. Follow instructions. Remember the Lindbergh baby would still be alive if ransom had been paid" (*New York Times*, February 14, 1933).
- 5
New York Times, March 2, 1933; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, March 2, 1933.
- 6
Denver Rocky Mountain News, May 4, 1999; *Denver Post*, February 13, 1933. For more on Charles Boettcher Senior, see Geraldine B. Bean, *Charles Boettcher: A Study in Pioneer Western Enterprise* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1976).
- 7
Denver Post, February 13, 1933, February 15, 1933; *New York Times*, February 14, 1933, February 26, 1933, March 19, 1933, sec. 4. In 1959, the Boettcher family donated the Claude Boettcher dwelling to serve as the Colorado Governor's Mansion.
- 8
New York Times, February 20, 1933.
- 9
New York Times, February 21, 1933.
- 10
New York Times, February 14, 1933.
- 11
Mitchell Evening Republican, March 20, 1933; *New York Times*, February 28, 1933; *New York Times*, February 14, 1933; *Denver Post*, February 15, 1933, and March 16, 1933.
- 12
Ernest Kahlar Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America, 1874-1974: The Creation of a Capital Crime* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 79; *Denver Post*, February 15, 1933.
- 13
The agency changed names several times during the period described here. It was called the Bureau of Investigation until July 1, 1932, when it was renamed the United States Bureau of Investigation. Beginning July 1, 1933, it was called the Division of Investigation, before taking its current name in 1935. For simplicity's sake, the agency is referred to herein as the "Federal Bureau of Investigation."
- 14
Potter, *War on Crime*, 9, 109-10.
- 15
Purvis, *American Agent*, 46.
- 16
Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 59-60, 67-72, 77.
- 17
Ibid., 76, 105-106, 123. From 1936 until 1968, when the death penalty provision was

declared unconstitutional and repealed, six ransom kidnapers were executed. Arthur Gooch was the first convict to be executed under the amended Lindbergh Law; he was hanged on June 19, 1936 (Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 117, 137-38, 165).

18

Ibid., 78, 123.

19

New York Times, August 5, 1933.

20

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 9, 1934.

21

Sankey's death record and several newspaper sources listed his birth place as Oakland, Nebraska. However, the source of this information was Sankey's wife, Fern, who may have been attempting to mislead authorities or may simply have been mistaken. Both census records and Sankey's draft registration record list his birthplace as Avoca, Iowa.

22

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 2, 1934; *Toronto Sun*, September 1, 2000; *Wilmot Enterprise*, February 1, 1934.

23

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 2, 9, 1934; *Java (South Dakota) Herald*, February 8, 1934; *Toronto Sun*, September 1, 2000; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, February 5, 1934.

24

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 2, 1934.

25

Ibid., February 2, 1934; *New York Times*, March 8, 1933; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, March 14, 1933.

26

Fern Sankey, like her husband, grew up in Wilmot, South Dakota (*Wilmot Enterprise*, March 9, 1933); *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 1, May 11, 1934; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, March 7-9, 1933.

27

Mitchell Evening Republican, March 9, 17, 21, 1933; *New York Times*, July 1, 1932, July 10, 1932, April 3, 1933, February 1, 1934. The ransom was originally set at \$35,000 but ultimately reduced to \$12,000.

28

New York Times, April 3, 1933. Ray Robinson was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison in Stillwater, Minnesota for his part in the kidnapping (*Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, May 7, 1934).

29

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, May 14, October 23, 1934; *New York Times*, March 8, 1933. Sankey had operated as a rum runner in 1930 and 1931. In November 1932 he moved his family to Denver, ostensibly for his children's education (*Denver Post*, March 7, 1933, March 8, 1933).

30

New York Times, March 2, 1933; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, March 2, 1933, October 25, 1934. The drugstore, operated by Frank Reed, stood at 34th and York (*Denver Post*, March 2, 1933).

31

New York Times, March 2, 1933.

32

New York Times, March 8, 1933.

33

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, October 25, 1934; *Denver Post*, March 2, 1933.

34

Denver Post, March 3, 1933; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, March 20, 1933; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, May 11, 1934, and October 24, 1934.

35

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, May 14, October 25, 1934.

36

Ibid., October 25, 29, 1934; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, February 10, 1934; *Gann Valley Chief*, May 4, 1933.

- 37
Mitchell Evening Republican, March 8, 9, 17, 1933; *New York Times*, March 8, 1933. Youngberg unsuccessfully attempted suicide while in jail in nearby Chamberlain, slashing his throat and wrists with a razor blade.
- 38
Mitchell Evening Republican, March 10, 1933; *Java (South Dakota) Herald*, February 8, 1934; *Denver Post*, March 8, 1933. Neighbors in Denver were also surprised to learn of Sankey's involvement in the kidnapping. Renting a house under the assumed name of Sykes, the Sankeys had lived right next door to an unsuspecting police officer (*Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, October 24, 25, 1934).
- 39
Denver Post, March 7-8, 1933; *New York Times*, March 8-9, 1933.
- 40
Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, March 8, 1933.
- 41
Mitchell Evening Republican, February 10, 1934; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 11 and October 29, 1934.
- 42
Mitchell Evening Republican, March 13, 1933; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, May 12, 1934; also *Gann Valley Chief*, May 4, 1933.
- 43
New York Times, March 10, 1933; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, March 10, 15, 1933. Boettcher's visit to the ranch had been delayed for a few days, because on March 8, 1933, his wife Anna Lou gave birth to a daughter, the couple's second child. Anna Lou died eight years later, the victim of suicide. Boettcher died in April 1963 at the age of sixty-one (*New York Times*, March 9, 1933, and April 16, 1963).
- 44
New York Times, April 3, 1933; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 1, 4, 1934; Potter, *War on Crime*, 176-79.
- 45
New York Times, May 28, 1933; Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 80; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, May 7, 1934.
- 46
Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 83, 85, 91; Powers, *G-Men*, 43.
- 47
Potter, *War on Crime*, 109.
- 48
New York Times, October 1, 1933; Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 92-94.
- 49
New York Times, September 24, 1933.
- 50
"America's New 'Public Enemy No. 1' Arrested," *Literary Digest* 117, no. 6 (February 10, 1934): 38.
- 51
Pierre Daily Capital Journal, February 1, 1934.
- 52
New York Times, February 1, 1934; also *Mitchell Evening Republican*, February 2-3, 1934.
- 53
"America's New 'Public Enemy No. 1' Arrested," 38; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 1, 1934; *New York Times*, February 1-2, 1934. In September 1934, Bruno Richard Hauptmann would be arrested for the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. He was executed under New Jersey state law on April 3, 1936 (Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 106, 115).
- 54
Purvis, *American Agent*, 122.
- 55
Mitchell Evening Republican, February 2, 3, 6, 1934; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 2, 1934.
- 56
Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 2, 1934. Melvin Purvis, in charge of the

party bringing Sankey to Sioux Falls, came down with a case of influenza shortly after his arrival and was laid up in the city for a week (Purvis, *American Agent*, 123). In July 1934, he would gain fame as “the man who got Dillinger.”

57

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 2, 1934, February 3, 1934; also Purvis, *American Agent*, 123. By his own account, Alcorn was actually twenty-eight years old (*Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 10, 1934).

58

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 2, 4, 1934.

59

Wilmot Enterprise, February 1, 15, 1934; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 2, 1934; *Mitchell Evening Republican*, February 2, 1934; *Java (South Dakota) Herald*, February 8, 1934.

60

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 3, 1934; *New York Times*, February 4, 9, 1934.

61

New York Times, February 9, 1934; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, February 9, 1934.

62

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, February 9, 1934.

63

Mitchell Evening Republican, February 9, 10, 1934; Purvis, *American Agent*, 118-19.

64

New York Times, October 13, 1933; Homer Cummings, “Office Memorandum to Special Assistant Joseph B. Keenan,” August 1, 1933, *Selected Papers*, 29, quoted in Powers, *G-Men*, 44.

65

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, October 29, 1934.

66

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, May 18, October 27, 1934; *New York Times*, May 14, 1934.

67

Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader, October 29, 1934.

68

Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 172. From 1874 through 1974, 236 ransom kidnapping cases were reported in the *New York Times* (Alix, 172).

69

Powers, *G-Men*, xii-xiii.

70

Potter, *War on Crime*, 127.

71

New York Times, July 14, 1933.

72

Potter, *War on Crime*, 110, 126.

73

Alix, *Ransom Kidnapping in America*, 194-95; *Denver Post*, February 13, 1933, March 28, 1933.