

MACK

Toledo's Notorious Mother Mack and Her Crime Family

"The state considers the Mack fence ring the most dangerous the county has ever had."¹

The name Mother Mack appears briefly in only a few of the many news articles clipped and pasted into the two personal scrapbooks of Toledo Captain of Detectives Lewis B. Tracy. The scrapbooks chronicle Detective Tracy's career with the Toledo Police Department from about 1898 until his death in 1921, in particular the period when he was formally in charge of Toledo's crime-infested Tenderloin (red-light) district. The mentions of Mother Mack, aka Mary Mack, aka Kate Mack, eventually pointed the way to a much larger story about the Mack family and a surprising number of links she and her family had to an array of infamous criminals of the era, including the Urbaytis brothers, Harry Plummer and the Cowboy Hill Gang.



Kate "Mother" Mack, Ohio Penitentiary prisoner #36870, 1906-1909.

During the period between 1900 and 1920, Mother Mack was a fixture in the Toledo underworld. A Welsh (or possibly Irish) immigrant named Catherine (Mulvahill) McDonald, Mother Mack was a small-time thief, fence, ex-con, saloonist, resort (brothel) operator and matriarch of the family business referred to in Toledo newspapers as the "notorious Mother Mack gang." She and her family were prolific criminals who were in and out of jails and prisons as they plied their nefarious trade in the area of the Tenderloin and the Clover Leaf railway spurs just south of the city, with sometimes tragic results for both the victims and the perpetrators. The Toledo police, particularly Detective Tracy, knew Mother Mack and her family very well, as did authorities throughout northwest Ohio. The tentacles of the Mack family reached far across northwest Ohio.

Married to Timothy McDonald (hence the abbreviated Mack), Mother Mack was bad news for anyone who came in contact with her. Like a spider at the center of an intricate web of crime, many major crimes committed in Toledo and northwest Ohio during the early twentieth century were traceable in some way back to Mother Mack, her family and her cohorts:

- The 1905 fatal stabbing of William Murphy in Toledo.
- The 1905 imprisonment of a 15-year-old boy in the Ohio Penitentiary for perjury.
- The 1907 robbery of the Waldcutter Store in Toledo.
- The 1908 fatal shooting of Toledo Police Sergeant James F. Boyle.
- The 1910 death of Mother Mack's son, Ted, in a shootout with police.

- The 1914 H. C. Thew jewelry store robbery in Lima.
- The 1914 safe-blowing in Brailey, Ohio.
- The 1914 attempted hit at the Harry Plummer residence on Oakwood that resulted in the death of one of the gunmen.
- The daring 1914 jail-break from the Allen County Jail in Wauseon.
- The 1915 sensational "Plummer Silk Trial" and charges of corruption within the Toledo Police Department.
- The 1915 escape from the Lima State Hospital for the Insane.
- The 1919 murder of a New York Central railroad detective.
- The 1920 Delta bank robbery.
- The 1921 million-dollar Toledo post office robbery.
- The 1922 Holland Bread Company payroll robbery.

All had links in some way back to the Mack family.

Even Mother Mack herself did time behind bars. Convicted of perjury involving her possession of stolen goods in 1906, she spent four years in the grim Ohio Penitentiary at a time when that prison still held female prisoners. Her son, "Big John" Mack, a jail-breaker, safe-blower, gunman and thief, was charged with the first-degree murder of Toledo Police Sergeant James F. Boyle in 1908. Another son, Ted Mack, after spending many of his teenage years in and out of the Toledo Workhouse and the Ohio Reformatory as prisoner #2297 for pocket-picking in 1905, was shot dead in 1910 at the age of 21 by Toledo police while robbing boxcars. Mother Mack's husband, Timothy, died in the Toledo Hospital for the Insane. A brother-in-law, Tim O'Connell, drowned suspiciously in the Maumee River in 1907.

Records, sometimes confused over the years by various aliases, indicate that Mother Mack and her husband Timothy Mack (born McDonald) had four children, all born in Ohio: John Joseph, born January 5, 1887; Ted (Theodore C. McDonald), born July 1, 1889; Nellie, born 1892, and Ethel, born, 1896. Ethel married Oliver J. Heath January 12, 1914. Nellie married Rothwell Gerdes February 7, 1916.

Mother Mack's story reflects the turmoil of an era of rapid growth in Toledo when the Tenderloin was thriving, crime was rampant, alcohol-consumption was out of control and the city was struggling to clean up the underworld menaces that plagued its good citizens. A life of crime always seems to be accompanied by tragedy and grief. Mother Mack saw her share of both.

¹ "Mack's Alibi Proved a Stumbling Block." *Toledo News-Bee*, January 17, 1905, page 8.