

*A Garden Party
With Mae McKenna and Friends*

The time: 1922

The place: Mount Clemens, Michigan

Mount Clemens, Michigan is known as the “Bath City” of America for its healing mineral waters. Thousands of visitors flock to town during the summer months to take a 21-day course of the therapeutic baths at one of the city's 10 bath houses. Visitors are housed at one of 11 major hotels or 46 smaller hotels, guest cottages and boarding houses that support the mineral bath industry.

The entire nation is living under Prohibition, as the manufacture, import and sale of intoxicating beverages has been banned by federal law since January, 1920. Because of easy access to Detroit and Ontario (where liquor is not illegal) via the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair, Mount Clemens is “dry” in name only. Liquor is readily available to those who know where to look.

And so are other vices, like gambling and prostitution. Private casinos and bookmaking establishments exist just below the radar, and a few brothels operate in the area, the largest of them under the shrewd direction of Mae McKenna. Mae operates a house in town across the street from the elegant Park Hotel, where Mount Clemens' wealthiest visitors usually stay, and is about to establish a “resort” on River Road, not far from the new Army airfield in Harrison Township.

The cast of characters




Mae at age 18

Mae McKenna (1880-1944) came to Mount Clemens in 1919 at the age of 39, after the death of her husband, Henry Collins. She operates a well-known brothel at 35 Park St. (opposite the Park Hotel) which is quietly patronized by some of the leading citizens of Mount Clemens. Mae has had numerous run-ins with the law, mostly on liquor law violations, but has never been jailed for operating a house of prostitution – mainly because local leaders comfortably gather in her parlor to drink, smoke and talk politics – and because Mae makes cash contributions to the right political campaigns. Although polite society in Mount Clemens studiously ignores Mae, it is also well-known that she generously and quietly supports all sorts of children's charities.

Julia C. McArthur (1860-1943), is a widow who owns and operates the elegant Park Hotel with her brother, George Kieffer. They inherited the 300-room house from their mother, the late Margretha Kieffer. Julia's husband, the late Benjamin McArthur, managed the hotel before his death in 1899. Julia also owns a resort hotel property in South Carolina, and is very well-traveled. Julia is one of the wealthiest and most influential women in Mount Clemens.

Republican Candidate for
Sheriff



John M. Spaller

John M. Spaller (1881-1959) is the Macomb County Sheriff. He was elected in November 1920, after having served as Supervisor of Chesterfield Township, where he was reared. He has a reputation for not delegating his work to subordinates, and also for taking the unusual step of adding four female deputies to his staff. As sheriff, he has the unenviable job of enforcing the Prohibition laws in a county that shares a waterway border with Canada, where liquor is legal.

Lois T. Place (1891-1978) is a recent divorcee who is starting a new life as a career woman in Mount Clemens after living for several years in Toledo, Ohio. She is new in town, doesn't know very many people, and has just been hired as the librarian at Mount Clemens Public Library.



Major Carl A. "Tooe" Spatz (1891-1974) was graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York in 1914. After a year at Schofield barracks, Hawaii, he entered aviation training in San Diego, California, becoming one of the army's first pilots in 1916. Promoted to the rank of major in 1920, he has just become commander of the 1st Pursuit Group at Selfridge Field. Major Spatz is an ambitious officer and is interested in having his time as commander at Selfridge Field go smoothly. (Note: his name is later spelled Spatz - he added an "a" in 1937).

Maj. Spatz in 1921



The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Sykes (1875-) came to Mount Clemens in 1921 to serve as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Mount Clemens, where he served until 1931. Dr. Sykes was an outspoken crusader for strict enforcement of the Prohibition era liquor laws, a position which made him very unpopular with many of the merchant class in town, who made their living in the hospitality business and continued to serve liquor despite the laws. In 1924, after Sykes had bullied law enforcement officials into padlocking a number of saloons in town, he received threatening letters and then he and his wife nearly died when their milk was poisoned with heavy metals.