

MICHAEL FRANCIS SWEENEY & “THE HOG”

by

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Please note that some of the dates in this document are based on best estimate.
Members of the Sweeney family have reviewed this article for its authenticity. – EJS

Michael Francis Sweeney (1858-1937) was a St. Paul Police sworn officer for twenty-one years, from 1892 until he retired in 1913 to go into private business. He was the first armed guard at the First National Bank in St. Paul and founder of the Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. He was also instrumental in the manufacture of one of the first commercial armored cars in the United States, years ahead of both Brink’s and Loomis.



Sweeney Warning Notice & Special Police Badges

Sweeney’s armored cars would later transport “Doc” Barker¹ and “Creepy” Karpis², two noteworthy and historic lawbreakers, to and from their 1935-36 trials at the Federal Court Building (now Landmark Center) in St. Paul on the charges of kidnapping brewing company executive William Hamm Jr. in 1933 and of noted banker Edward Bremer, heir to the Schmidt Brewery fortune, in 1934. Also transported to and from court was John Dillinger’s gun moll,

¹ **Arthur “Doc” Barker (1899-1939)**, son of “Ma” Barker, was convicted of the kidnapping of Bremer on May 17, 1935, and sentenced to life in prison. Sent to Alcatraz, Barker was shot while trying to escape in 1939, after only four years of incarceration.

² **Alvin “Creepy” Karpis (1907-1979)** pled guilty to the kidnapping of Hamm on July 14, 1936, and to the Bremer kidnapping conspiracy on July 29, 1936, and was sentenced to life in prison. Sent to Alcatraz, Karpis became the “Rock’s” longest serving inmate, eventually being paroled in 1969, after over three decades in prison.

Evelyn Freshette³, for her involvement in the 1934 Dillinger shootout at the Lincoln Court Apartments. Evelyn lived with Dillinger at that St. Paul location and was also the getaway driver, transporting the injured Dillinger from St. Paul to a medical doctor's residence in Minneapolis.



Sheridan, Sweeney & Kerst, Inc. Armored Car; Circa 1930

Almost three decades later another Sweeney armored car, donated to and operated by the Ramsey County Sheriff's Office (RCSO), was utilized to transport wife-killer T. Eugene Thompson⁴ and/or witnesses to and from his 1963 trial in Minneapolis.

Michael Francis Sweeney⁵ was born on a farm in West St. Paul on October 19, 1858. The first eighteen years of his life were spent alternately in doing chores and going to district school. Coming to St. Paul, he was an employee of a produce commission firm for six years and then engaged in business for himself as a railroad contractor and real estate dealer. St. Paul

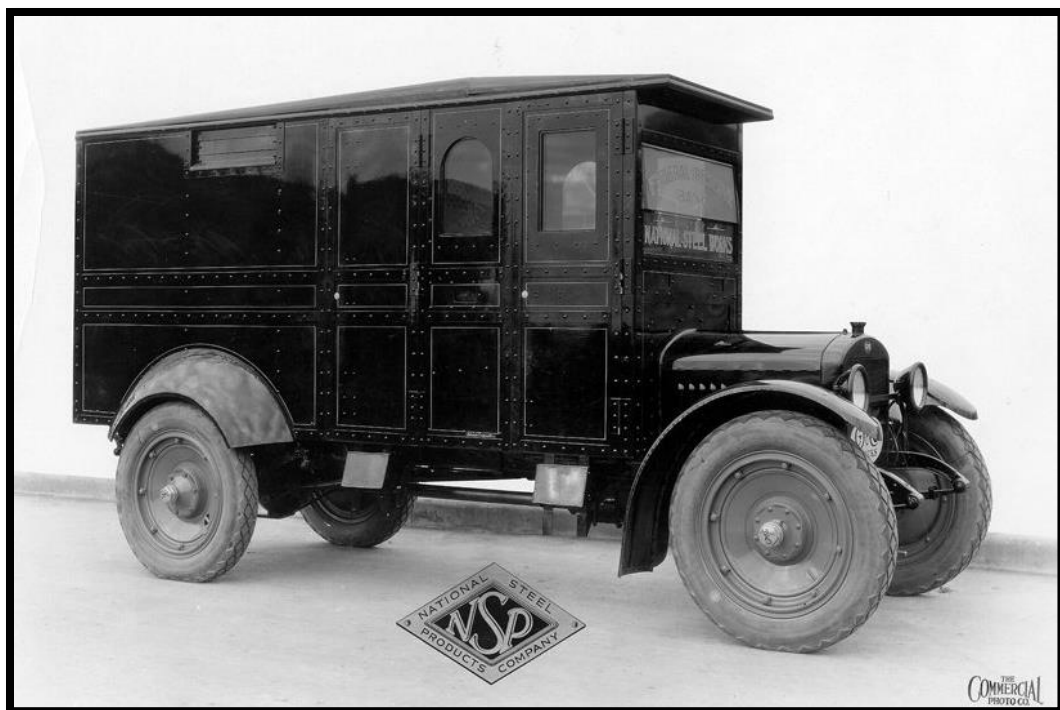
³ **Evelyn Freshette (1907-1969)** was convicted of the Federal Harboring Law on May 23, 1934, and served two years at the Federal Correctional Farm in Milan, Michigan.

⁴ **T. Eugene Thompson (1927-2015)** was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison on October 28, 1963, exactly nine months after his wife's death, in what came to be known as the "trial of the century." Also convicted were **Dick W. C. Anderson** (murder), **Norman Mastrian** (murder), and **Sheldon Morris** (accessory after the fact).

⁵ For a biography and photo of **Michael F. Sweeney** (1858-1937), go to the Saint Paul Police Historical Society website at www.spphs.com, click on the "SPPD History" tab at the top of the page, then scroll down the document list to *History of the Police and Fire Departments of the Twin Cities; 1899*.

personnel records indicate that on January 08, 1892 he was appointed a city Patrolman and two years later detailed as a Special Detective, both at the Rondo Street Substation in what is now known as the Summit-University community. He was promoted to Detective on October 15, 1902 working out of downtown's Central Station, and resigned to go into private business on August 15, 1913. While on the department his chief relaxation was hunting, of which he was very fond, going to North Dakota during the game seasons. Throughout those early years he lived at 344 Martin Street (later renamed Central Avenue), not far from his Rondo Street workstation. Michael died in St. Paul on June 20, 1937 at seventy-eight years of age.

Father of the Modern Armored Car. The first attempts at commercial armored cars were inspired by the combat success of military armored cars in World War I. After the war, a marked increase in violent robberies of payroll clerks and messengers carrying deposits brought about the need for safer ways to transport cash. In about 1918, a Chicago area delivery company called Brink's Incorporated started converting school buses into security vehicles by attaching steel plates to the lower body panels and barring the windows. Each bus was followed by a Model-T automobile filled with armed guards. The first true commercial armored car was put into service on February 01, 1920 by St. Paul Police detective turned private detective, Michael F. Sweeney. Contracting with a Minneapolis garage, Sweeney designed a completely steel-protected armored car for his Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. The side walls and roof were of steel. The glass, "polished plate wired glass". Some of the early versions had concrete poured between the steel skins of the outer and inner side panels and doors for added protection.



Early Armored Car; Circa 1920

The company never lost a cent under the Sweeneys, although there were individuals who tried to abscond with money left in the company's care. According to Pioneer Press staff writer Wayne Wangstad, one incident occurred in 1924, when a Sweeney employee stymied a robbery by shooting a holdup man as he was fleeing with a valise containing \$6,000. And another incident occurred four years later, when a Sweeney armored car was rammed by a stolen dump truck driven by a member of the "Baby Face" Nelson⁶ gang. Tear gas grenades were thrown inside the armored car before the thieves made off with \$15,000. However, the robbery went against the grain of St. Paul's established underworld, which sought tranquility in the city. Three days later, the money was returned.

The First Armored Car Heist in American History. At the beginning armored cars, including those designed by Sweeney, only wore steel plating on their body panels; they retained the wooden floors on the truck chassis on which they were built. This ended on March 11, 1927 when thieves buried explosives in a roadway near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania⁷, and blew up a Brink's armored car carrying \$104,205 in payroll money – equal to at least \$1.5 million in modern currency. And yes, the entry to the vehicle was made through the unprotected wooden floor. Although driver and guards were knocked senseless, no one was killed. The perpetrators, members of an infamous Detroit criminal gang known as the "Flatheads", were tracked down and arrested within a few days. Armored car builders soon switched from using wooden floors in their vehicles to steel.

In the 1930s and 40s, manufacturers experimented with aluminum, which has a distinct weight advantage over steel. The metal was found to fatigue and crack after a short time and was discontinued. The 1970s worldwide fuel shortage spurred manufacturers to try lightweight plastic armor and smaller, more fuel-efficient chassis, but the results were similar to those with aluminum and the traditional steel version that you see today regained its dominance in the industry.

On February 23, 1961 an event took place near a small ranch house outside the city of Redfield⁸, South Dakota. On the front porch 38-year-old bachelor-rancher Donald Blume,

⁶ **Lester George "Baby Face" Nelson (1908-1934)** was an American bank robber, responsible for killing more FBI agents in the line of duty (three) than any other person. He was fatally shot, himself, by FBI agents on November 27, 1934.

⁷ The bandits used stolen black powder to blow up a 60-foot section of what is now **Brightwood Road in Bethel Park**, about 7 miles southwest of Pittsburgh.

⁸ **Redfield** is a city in and the county seat of Spink County, South Dakota. Located northwest of Sioux Falls, the city was named for J. B. Redfield, a railroad official.

officially declared insane by a municipal judge, sat and waited with a high-powered rifle on his lap. He had been waiting there since withstanding a 36-hour police siege the previous August, warning off deputies, firing at an occasional neighbor, daring someone to come and get him. Someone finally did, Highway Patrol officers with an arrest warrant, and “double-ought buck”. Blume’s mistake was on leaving his place of refuge to stay with his nearby parents. Stopped while returning to his ranch to feed his livestock at about 9:45 a.m. on that fateful morning by Highway Patrol officers commanded by Colonel Cullen With, Superintendent of the South Dakota Highway Patrol, Blume exited his automobile, lifted his trusty .30-30, and was felled by an officer’s shotgun blast. A loaded pistol was found in Blume’s overalls. A second rifle (.270 cal. w/telescopic sight) and a loaded shotgun rested on the back seat. Blume had exclaimed “You’ll never take me alive!” He wasn’t.

Close at hand was a retired Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. armored car, just in case. The 25-year-old armored car, six years into retirement, had been hauled out to South Dakota on a transport vehicle at the request of Spink County Sheriff Curtis Buss, to provide support for his deputies who had attempted to arrest Blume on an outstanding warrant the previous August with negative results.⁹

It was the first official act in a new life which was beginning for that particular armored car, at the grand old age of almost a quarter century. Ramsey County Sheriff Kermit Hedman, learning of the aforementioned Redfield incident, approached John J. Sweeney, now head of the detective agency, about the possibilities the vehicle offered. The Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. promptly donated the retired armored car to the Ramsey County Sheriff’s Office (RCSO), to be used as a tactical vehicle in SWAT type incidents. The vehicle, known as “The Hog” to those inside her, is described as a Model D-15-213A 113, 1938 International Harvester Armored Car with a VIN/Chassis No. of D15-14696¹⁰. Originally destined for the scrap heap, the Independent Garage Owners Association of Minnesota¹¹ donated parts and labor for a complete rebuild job. After an extensive restoration taking several months, the official presentation took place at a ceremony marking the opening of a newly completed RCSO patrol station at 3401 N. Rice Street, Shoreview. “The Hog” sported an entirely new interior and a coat of glistening black

⁹ The facts surrounding the **Redfield standoff** have been confirmed by retired Police Officer Richard Gallup of the Redfield Police Department, as well as by the County Coroner’s report, and assorted newspaper articles.

¹⁰ **The International D-line** was introduced in mid-1937 and discontinued in 1940. The engine was a HD-213A L-head six cylinder w/213 cubic inch displacement.

¹¹ Much of the original restoration was conducted by **George Huber**, owner of Hamline Auto Body, and **Ray Heppner**, owner of Heppner’s Auto Body (see photo), both of St. Paul.

paint; all dings and dents removed. It was later repainted to the state mandated County Sheriff's brown¹².



RCSO Tactical Vehicle; Circa 1963

Period publications reported that other features included windshield glass almost three inches thick, heavy steel plates covering its sides, and doors that weighed more than 200 pounds and slammed shut with a dull “whump” like the closing of a bank vault. It was virtually springless, bouncing on uneven roads like a buckboard, and its gas consumption was estimated at about two miles per gallon. Top speed was about forty-five miles an hour. After the official presentation, it went into temporary storage once more, to await an emergency and perhaps an occasional parade. “If we have to use this truck only once in the next 20 years,” Sheriff Hedman said, “and in doing so it saves just one life, all the work involved will have been well worth it.” Hedman offered to lend it to any law enforcement agency in Minnesota, if need for it should arise.

Although we do not know for sure where “The Hog” was transformed into an armored car, the 1938 International Harvester Model “D” truck chassis was manufactured in Springfield, Ohio. In all probability it was then transported to Memphis, Tennessee where it is reported that 85% of the world’s armored cars were fabricated, over the last half of the 20th century. Although they remained in relative obscurity it was there that J. Tom Moore & Sons (and their successor MCT) produced high-security vehicles to transport money, bullion, jewelry and other valuables

¹² 2017 MN §169.98 Subd. 1 (3): Police, Patrol, or Security Guard Vehicle; Colors & Markings.

for the Sweeney Detective Bureau, as well as for Brinks, Garda, Loomis, Wells-Fargo and others using purpose-built International Harvester truck chassis. Paul D. Johnson, a retired forensic artist and member of the Saint Paul Police Historical Society, remembers his dad taking the train down to Memphis in the early 1950's to pick up a new Sweeney armored car and drive it back to St. Paul. His dad worked as a driver for Sweeney's for forty years, as did to a lesser number of years the father of retired police officer Fred Kaphingst, also a member of the Historical Society.



RCSO Tactical Vehicle Providing Transport from Ramsey County Jail to Minneapolis for Trial of T. Eugene Thompson; Circa 1963.

Long time retired, again, and considered to be of scrap value only by the RCSO, the armored car, carrying Minnesota Tax Exempt license plate No. 805-709¹³ (no discernible tabs), was turned over to the Cops n' Rodders Classic Car Club, a division of the St. Paul Police Canine Foundation, an accredited 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, on February 28, 2018. Justification for the donation included the following facts as documented in the transfer papers and in accordance with Ramsey County Administrative Code Section 5.10.83:

- The RCSO has no practical use for the vehicle now or in the future;
- The Vehicle is in need of extensive restoration;
- The Vehicle is taking up valuable space for other RCSO equipment;
- The Vehicle has no monetary value to the RCSO;
- The Vehicle is considered to be of scrap value only; and
- The Cops and Rodders will attempt to restore this vehicle and retain some of the historical value.

It is the intention of the Cops n' Rodders Classic Car Club to restore the armored car to operating condition, retaining its historical value. It will be displayed at club events, as well as public events under the sponsorship of the County of Ramsey and/or the RCSO.



RCSO Tactical Vehicle; February 28, 2018

¹³ **Plates** issued to vehicles that are owned by any political subdivision (Ramsey County), also in this case, vehicles used for disaster response and related activities.

The armored car operation of Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. (a.k.a. Sheridan, Sweeney & Kerst, Inc. and/or Sweeney-Loomis Armored Car Service, Inc.) was purchased by Loomis Armored Car Service, Inc. in 1967. The guard, or security service, portion of the business continued to operate in St. Paul, Minneapolis, St. Cloud, and Duluth for almost two more decades. Closing the door in 1986, the Sweeney family, after three generations¹⁴ and almost seventy-five years of service to greater Minnesota, was no longer in the private detective business.



CHRONOLOGY

October 19, 1858: Birth of Michael F. Sweeney (1858-1937), founder of the Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. in West St. Paul, Minnesota.

January 08, 1892: Michael F. Sweeney (1858-1937) appointed Patrolman (later detailed Special Detective) in the St. Paul Police Department, working out of the Rondo Street Substation.

October 15, 1902: Michael F. Sweeney (1858-1937) promoted to Detective, working out of the downtown Central Station.

August 15, 1913: Michael F. Sweeney (1858-1937) resigned from the St. Paul Police Department to go into private business; forms Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc.

February 01, 1920: Michael F. Sweeney (1858-1937), St. Paul Police detective turned private detective designs a completely steel-protected armored car, the first true commercial armored car in the country.

March 11, 1927: The first armored car heist in American History takes place near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

May 23, 1934: Evelyn Freshette (1907-1969) convicted of the Federal Harboring Law for her involvement in the Dillinger shootout at the Lincoln Court Apartments; transported to court via Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. armored car.

¹⁴ **Deloris M. Sweeney Slawik**, then president and owner, daughter of John J. and granddaughter of founder Michael Francis Sweeney.

May 17, 1935: Arthur “Doc” Barker (1899-1939) convicted of the kidnapping of St. Paul banker Edward Bremer, heir to the Schmidt Brewery fortune; transported to court via Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. armored car.

July 14, 1936: Alvin “Creepy” Karpis (1907-1979) pled guilty to the kidnapping of St. Paul brewing company executive William Hamm Jr. and of banker Edward Bremer; transported to court via Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. armored car.

June 20, 1937: Michael F. Sweeney (1858-1937), founder of the Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. dies a natural death in St. Paul, Minnesota, leaving a son, John J. Sweeney (1903-1996), president of the company.

Circa 1938: The International D-line, including our Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. 1938 International Harvester armored car, was introduced in mid-1937 and discontinued in 1940. The engine was a HD-213A L-head six cylinder w/213 cubic inch displacement.

Circa 1930s and 40s: Armored car manufacturers experiment with lightweight aluminum armor and smaller, more fuel-efficient chassis with negative results.

August 19, 1960: Thirty-six hour police siege of Donald Blume ranch house outside the city of Redfield, South Dakota. Blume, wanted for multiple aggravated assaults, escapes.

February 23, 1961: Attempted arrest and shooting of Donald Blume takes place near his ranch house outside the city of Redfield, South Dakota. Standing by was our Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. armored car, just in case.

Circa 1961: John J. Sweeney (1903-1996) donates the Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. armored car to Ramsey County, Minnesota, Sheriff Kermit Hedman, to be used as a RCSO tactical vehicle in SWAT type incidents.

October 28, 1963: T. Eugene Thompson (1927-2015) convicted of the contract murder of his wife; transported to court via RCSO tactical vehicle (armored car). Also convicted were Dick W. C. Anderson, Norman Mastrian and Sheldon Morris.

Circa 1967: The armored car operation of Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. (a.k.a. Sheridan, Sweeney & Kerst, Inc. and/or Sweeney-Loomis Armored Car Service) purchased by Loomis Armored Car Service, Inc.

Circa 1970s: Armored car manufacturers experiment with lightweight plastic armor and smaller, more fuel-efficient chassis with negative results.

Circa 1986: After three generations, Deloris M. Sweeney Slawik, president and owner of the Sweeney Detective Bureau, Inc. closes the door for the last time. Slawik was the daughter of John J. Sweeney and granddaughter of founder, Michael Francis Sweeney.

February 28, 2018: The Ramsey County Sheriff's Office (RCSO) tactical vehicle is donated to the Cops n' Rodders Classic Car Club, a division of the St. Paul Police Canine Foundation, an accredited 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization.

March 23-25, 2018: The first public showing of the RCSO tactical vehicle takes place at the 51st Annual O'Reilly Auto Parts: World of Wheels AutoRama at the U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis. "The Hog" won first place in its class.

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Circa March 2018



Circa April 2018



**Cops n' Rodders Classic Car Club
RCSO Tactical Vehicle
51st Annual O'Reilly Auto Parts: World of Wheels AutoRama
March 23-25, 2018
"First in Class"**

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