



Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

Mae McKenna and Vice in Mount Clemens

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Among the colorful and interesting characters to be found in the pages of Mount Clemens history is a woman who was known for her illicit businesses, philanthropic community spirit, and political influence exercised through hefty contributions to local campaign coffers. **Mae McKenna**, brothel operator, was well known in Mount Clemens during the bath era, and despite the nature of her business enterprises, was eulogized with a lengthy front page obituary in the newspaper whose predecessor had once savaged her for her practice of vice.

Mae McKenna was born in 1880 in New York City and abandoned at an orphanage when only a few days old. At the age of 5, she was adopted by the Wolters family in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. In 1909, she married a man named **Harry Collins** and was subsequently widowed at a young age. Although her proper name was Mary McKenna Collins, she was always known in Mount Clemens as Mae McKenna.

Mae came to Mount Clemens in 1919, and embarked upon a 22-year career as proprietess of a number of businesses of ill repute, including a brothel known as "Mae's Place" at 35 Park St. Her social circle included distinguished visitors of wealth and influence, which may have accounted for the way in which her business prospered with little harassment from local authorities for many years.

McKenna had one run-in with law enforcement in Macomb County in March, 1924, when she was tried on a Prohibition-era liquor law violation. A hung jury, voting 8-4 to convict, sent the case back for a second trial. The second trial ended in Mae's acquittal on June 14, 1924.

The next year, in Pontiac, she was not so fortunate. Found guilty of providing liquor at a "tea room" she operated in that city, she was sentenced to nine months' incarceration at **Detroit House of Correction**. Again, in 1928, McKenna was charged with liquor law violations for selling a quart of whiskey to an undercover federal agent who visited her establishment.

The end came in July, 1941, when the *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor* railed against local officials for allowing prostitution to flourish unchecked in the city. Mae McKenna's brothel was numbered by the newspaper among three establishments that constituted Mount Clemens' "most apparent civic blots." The *Monitor* called for the permanent padlocking of the McKenna brothel and others, which were, at that date, temporarily closed after an increase in vice raids by local police.

Affronted by the newspaper's rebuke, McKenna responded in a letter to the editor. She asserted that she was a woman of charity, a friend to children and to the unfortunate, and was possessed of great community spirit. She also made a vague threat of legal action against the newspaper.

The response from the *Monitor's* editorial page was unsympathetic. The newspaper asserted that McKenna's largesse was but a "series of sound investments in public approval ... [an] attempt to minimize complaints." At least two of her neighbors apparently agreed, as they were moved to write letters to the editor congratulating the *Monitor* on its crusade against prostitution, and dismissing McKenna's protestations as self-pity over the end of her free ride.

When Mae McKenna died of a heart ailment on February 28, 1944, the *Detroit Free Press* eulogized her as Mount Clemens' "Queen of Vice." The *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader* also offered a lengthy obituary. Soldiers stationed overseas even read the notice of her death in *Yank* magazine. McKenna had no local family and her funeral and burial were held in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

For more information about Mae McKenna, we recommend:

- Vincent, Maurice A. "Wrecking Crews Revive Ghosts of Lurid Past: Urban Renewal Razes Onetime Shady Resorts," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, April 17, 1961, p.1, col.4.
- "News From Home" [death notice of Mae McKenna], *Yank: The Army Weekly*, April 7, 1944, p.18.
- "Mae M'Kenna Succumbs to Long Illness," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, February 29, 1944, p.1, col.5.
- "Queen of Vice Dies in Mt. Clemens," *Detroit Free Press*, February 29, 1944.
- "Vice in the City," [letter to the editor], *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor*, July 24, 1941, p.3, col.5.
- "A Letter From Mae," [editorial], *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor*, July 24, 1941, p.4, col.1.
- "Put Padlocks on Them!" [editorial], *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor*, July 22, 1941, p.4, col.1.
- "Mae M'Kenna Held By U.S.: Former Proprietess of Private Club Must Face Federal Grand Jury," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, May 31, 1928, p.1, col.5.
- "Mae M'Kenna Raid Nets Two Quarts Liquor," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, April 8, 1927, p.1, col.8.
- "Mae M'Kenna Goes to Prison," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 24, 1925, p.1, col.1.
- "Mae M'Kenna Jury Splits Eight to Four," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, March 20, 1924, p.1, col.7.
- "Woman is Jailed on New Charge: Mae McKenna Taken to Jail For Second Time," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, January 15, 1924, p.1, col.8.
- "M'Kenna Makes 'Confidential' Charges, Claim," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, February 19, 1921, p.1.