

FBI History

Famous Cases

John Dillinger



During the 1930s Depression, many Americans, nearly helpless against forces they didn't understand, made heroes of outlaws who took what they wanted at gunpoint. Of all the lurid desperadoes, one man, John Herbert Dillinger, came to evoke this Gangster Era, and stirred mass emotion to a degree rarely seen in this country.

Dillinger, whose name once dominated the headlines, was a notorious and vicious thief. From September, 1933, until July, 1934, he and his violent gang terrorized the Midwest, killing 10 men, wounding 7 others, robbing banks and police arsenals, and staging 3 jail breaks -- killing a sheriff during one and wounding 2 guards in another.

John Herbert Dillinger was born on June 22, 1903, in the Oak Hill section of Indianapolis, a middle-class residential neighborhood. His father, a hardworking grocer, raised him in

an atmosphere of disciplinary extremes, harsh and repressive on some occasions, but generous and permissive on others. John's mother died when he was three, and when his father remarried six years later, John resented his stepmother.

In adolescence, the flaws in his bewildering personality became evident and he was frequently in trouble. Finally, he quit school and got a job in a machine shop in Indianapolis. Although intelligent and a good worker, he soon became bored and often stayed out all night. His father, worried that the temptations of the city were corrupting his teenaged son, sold his property in Indianapolis and moved his family to a farm near Mooresville, Indiana. However, John reacted no better to rural life than he had to that in the city and soon began to run wild again.

A break with his father and trouble with the law (auto theft) led him to enlist in the Navy. There he soon got into trouble and deserted his ship when it docked in Boston. Returning to Mooresville, he married 16-year-old Beryl Hovius in 1924. A dazzling dream of bright lights and excitement led the newlyweds to Indianapolis. Dillinger had no luck finding work in the city and joined the town pool shark, Ed Singleton, in his search for easy money. In their first attempt, they tried to rob a Mooresville grocer, but were quickly apprehended. Singleton pleaded not guilty, stood trial, and was sentenced to two years. Dillinger, following his father's advice, confessed, was convicted of assault and battery with intent to rob, and conspiracy to commit a felony, and received joint sentences of 2 to 14 years and 10 to 20 years in the Indiana State Prison. Stunned by the harsh sentence, Dillinger became a tortured, bitter man in prison.

His period of infamy began on May 10, 1933, when he was paroled from prison after serving 8 1/2 years of his sentence. Almost immediately, Dillinger robbed a bank in Bluffton, Ohio. Dayton police arrested him on September 22, and he was lodged in the county jail in Lima, Ohio, to await trial.



The many faces of John Dillinger

In frisking Dillinger, the Lima police found a document which seemed to be a plan for a prison break, but the prisoner denied knowledge of any plan. Four days later, using the same plans, eight of Dillinger's friends escaped from the Indiana State Prison, using shotguns and rifles which had been smuggled into their cells. During their escape, they shot two guards.

On October 12, three of the escaped prisoners and a parolee from the same prison showed up at the Lima jail where Dillinger was incarcerated. They told the sheriff that they had come to return Dillinger to the Indiana State Prison for violation of his parole.

When the sheriff asked to see their credentials, one of the men pulled a gun, shot the sheriff and beat him into unconsciousness. Then taking the keys to the jail, the bandits freed Dillinger, locked the sheriff's wife and a deputy in a cell, and leaving the sheriff to die on the floor, made their getaway.

Although none of these men had violated a Federal law, the FBI's assistance was requested in identifying and locating the criminals. The four men were identified as Harry Pierpont, Russell Clark, Charles Makley, and Harry Copeland. Their fingerprint cards in the FBI Identification Division were flagged with red metal tags, indicating that they were wanted.

Meanwhile, Dillinger and his gang pulled several bank robberies. They also plundered the police arsenals at Auburn, Indiana, and Peru, Indiana, stealing several machine guns, rifles, and revolvers, a quantity of ammunition, and several bulletproof vests. On December 14, John Hamilton, a Dillinger gang member, shot and killed a police detective in Chicago. A month later, the Dillinger gang killed a police officer during the robbery of the First National Bank of East Chicago, Indiana. Then they made their way to Florida and, subsequently, to Tucson, Arizona. There on January 23, 1934, a fire broke out in the hotel where Clark and Makley were hiding under assumed names. Firemen recognized the men from their photographs, and local police arrested them, as well as Dillinger and Harry Pierpont. They also seized 3 Thompson submachine guns, 2 Winchester rifles mounted as machine guns, 5 bulletproof vests, and more than \$25,000 in cash, part of it from the East Chicago robbery.

Dillinger was sequestered at the county jail in Crown Point, Indiana, to await trial for the murder of the East Chicago police officer. Authorities boasted that the jail was "escape proof." But on March 3, 1934, Dillinger cowed the guards with what he claimed later was a wooden gun he had whittled. He forced them to open the door to his cell, then grabbed two machine guns, locked up the guards and several trustees, and fled.

It was then that Dillinger made the mistake that would cost him his life. He stole the sheriff's car and drove across the Indiana-Illinois line, heading for Chicago. By doing that, he violated the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act, which made it a Federal offense to transport a stolen motor

vehicle across a state line.

A Federal complaint was sworn charging Dillinger with the theft and interstate transportation of the sheriff's car, which was recovered in Chicago. After the grand jury returned an indictment, the FBI became actively involved in the nationwide search for Dillinger.

Meanwhile, Pierpont, Makley, and Clark were returned to Ohio and convicted of the murder of the Lima sheriff. Pierpont and Makley were sentenced to death, and Clark to life imprisonment. But in an escape attempt, Makley was killed and Pierpont was wounded. A month later, Pierpont had recovered sufficiently to be executed.

In Chicago, Dillinger joined his girlfriend, Evelyn Frechette. They proceeded to St. Paul, where Dillinger teamed up with Homer Van Meter, Lester ("Baby Face Nelson") Gillis, Eddie Green, and Tommy Carroll, among others. The gang's business prospered as they continued robbing banks of large amounts of money.

Then on March 30, 1934, an Agent talked to the manager of the Lincoln Court Apartments in St. Paul, who reported two suspicious tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Hellman, who acted nervous and refused to admit the apartment caretaker. The FBI began a surveillance of the Hellman's apartment. The next day, an Agent and a police officer knocked on the door of the apartment. Evelyn Frechette opened the door, but quickly slammed it shut. The Agent called for reinforcements to surround the building.



John Dillinger's Colt .380

While waiting, the Agents saw a man enter a hall near the Hellman's apartment. When questioned, the man, Homer Van Meter, drew a gun. Shots were exchanged, during which Van Meter fled the building and forced a truck driver at gunpoint to drive him to Green's apartment. Suddenly the door of the Hellman apartment opened and the muzzle of a machine gun began spraying the hallway with lead. Under cover of the machine gun fire, Dillinger and Evelyn Frechette fled through a back door. They, too, drove to Green's apartment, where Dillinger was treated for a bullet wound received in the escape.

At the Lincoln Court Apartments, the FBI found a Thompson submachine gun with the stock removed, two automatic rifles, one .38 caliber Colt automatic with twenty-shot magazine clips, and two bulletproof vests. Across town, other Agents located one of Eddie Green's hideouts where he and Bessie Skinner had been living as "Mr. and Mrs. Stephens." On April 3, when Green was located, he attempted to draw his gun, but was shot by the Agents. He died in a hospital eight days later.

Dillinger and Evelyn Frechette fled to Mooresville, Indiana, where they stayed with his father and half-brother until his wound healed. Then Frechette went to Chicago to visit a friend--and was arrested by the FBI. She was taken to St. Paul for trial on a charge of conspiracy to harbor a fugitive. She was convicted, fined \$1,000, and sentenced to two years in prison. Bessie Skinner, Eddie Green's girlfriend, got 15 months on the same charge.

Meanwhile, Dillinger and Van Meter robbed a police station at Warsaw, Indiana, of guns and bulletproof vests. Dillinger stayed for awhile in Upper Michigan, departing just ahead of a posse of FBI Agents dispatched there by airplane. Then the FBI received a tip that there had been a sudden influx of rather suspicious guests at the summer resort of Little Bohemia Lodge, about 50 miles north of Rhinelander, Wisconsin. One of them sounded like John Dillinger and another like "Baby Face Nelson."

From Rhinelander, an FBI task force set out by car for Little Bohemia. Two of the rented cars broke down enroute, and, in the uncommonly cold April weather, some of the Agents had to make the trip standing on the running boards of the other cars. Two miles from the resort, the car lights were turned off and the posse proceeded through the darkness. When the cars reached the resort, dogs began barking. The Agents spread out to surround the lodge and as they approached, machine gun fire rattled down on them from the roof. Swiftly, the Agents took cover. One of them hurried to a telephone to give directions to additional Agents who had arrived in Rhinelander to back up the

operation.

While the Agent was telephoning, the operator broke in to tell him there was trouble at another cottage about two miles away. Special Agent W. Carter Baum, another FBI man, and a constable went there and found a parked car which the constable recognized as belonging to a local resident. They pulled up and identified themselves.

Inside the other car, "Baby Face Nelson" was holding three local residents at gunpoint. He turned, leveled a revolver at the lawmen's car, and ordered them to step out. But without waiting for them to comply, Nelson opened fire. Baum was killed, and the constable and the other Agent were severely wounded. Nelson jumped into the Ford they had been using and fled.

When the firing had subsided at the Little Bohemia Lodge, Dillinger was gone. When the Agents entered the lodge the next morning, they found only three frightened females. Dillinger and five others had fled through a back window before the Agents surrounded the house.

In Washington, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover assigned Special Agent Samuel A. Cowley to head the FBI's investigative efforts against Dillinger. Cowley set up headquarters in Chicago, where he and Melvin Purvis, Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago office, planned their strategy. A squad of Agents under Cowley worked with East Chicago policemen in tracking down all tips and rumors.

Late in the afternoon of Saturday, July 21, 1934, the madam of a brothel in Gary, Indiana, contacted one of the police officers with information. This woman called herself Anna Sage, however, her real name was Ana Cumpanas, and she had entered the United States from her native Rumania in 1914. Because of the nature of her profession, she was considered an undesirable alien by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and deportation proceedings had been started. Anna was willing to sell the FBI some information about Dillinger for a cash reward, plus the FBI's help in preventing her deportation.

At a meeting with Anna, Cowley and Purvis were cautious. They promised her the reward if her information led to Dillinger's capture, but said all they could do was call her cooperation to the attention of the Department of Labor, which at that time handled deportation matters. Satisfied, Anna told the Agents that a girlfriend of hers, Polly Hamilton, had visited her establishment with Dillinger. Anna had recognized Dillinger from a newspaper photograph.

Anna told the Agents that she, Polly Hamilton, and Dillinger probably would be going to the movies the following evening at either the Biograph or the Marbro Theaters. She said that she would notify them when the theater was chosen. She also said that she would wear an orange dress so that they could identify her.



Special Agent in Charge Melvin Purvis

On Sunday, July 22, Cowley ordered all Agents of the Chicago office to stand by for urgent duty. Anna Sage called that evening to confirm the plans, but she still did not know which theater they would attend. Therefore, Agents and policemen were sent to both theaters. At 8:30 p.m., Anna Sage, John Dillinger, and Polly Hamilton strolled into the Biograph Theater to see Clark Gable in "Manhattan Melodrama." Purvis phoned Cowley, who shifted the other men from the Marbro to the Biograph.

Cowley also phoned Hoover for instructions. Hoover cautioned them to wait outside rather than risk a shooting match inside the crowded theater. Each man was instructed not to unnecessarily endanger himself and was told that if Dillinger offered any resistance, it would be each man for himself.



John Dillinger's Wanted Poster

At 10:30 p.m., Dillinger, with his two female companions on either side, walked out of the theater and turned to his left. As they walked past the doorway in which Purvis was standing, Purvis lit a cigar as a signal for the other men to close in. Dillinger quickly realized what was happening and acted by instinct. He grabbed a pistol from his right trouser pocket as he ran toward the alley. Five shots were fired from the guns of three FBI Agents. Three of the shots hit Dillinger and he fell face down on the pavement. At 10:50 p.m. on July 22, 1934, John Dillinger was pronounced dead in a little room in the Alexian Brothers Hospital.



Biograph Theater

The Agents who fired at Dillinger were Charles B. Winstead, Clarence O. Hurt, and Herman E. Hollis. Each man was commended by J. Edgar Hoover for fearlessness and courageous action. None of them ever said who actually killed Dillinger. The events of that sultry July night in Chicago marked the beginning of the end of the Gangster Era. Eventually, 27 persons were convicted in Federal courts on charges of harboring, and aiding and abetting John Dillinger and his cronies during their reign of terror. "Baby Face Nelson" was fatally wounded on November 27, 1934, in a gun battle with FBI Agents in which Special Agents Cowley and Hollis also were killed. Dillinger was buried in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, Indiana.

For more information:

- [Byte Out of History story: The Fall of John Dillinger and the Rise of the FBI](#)
- [The Last Steps of John Dillinger](#)
- [Dillinger Crosses a Line](#)
- [FBI case records](#)
- [Wanted poster](#)

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