



# Taking Down A "Public Enemy"



## **DILLINGER & PURVIS**

The outlaws of the 1930s, especially John Dillinger, have been romanticized by popular culture. But these heavily armed criminals were dangerous and unpredictable, and they had to be hunted down by a new generation of well-armed lawmen, including FBI Agent Melvin Purvis.

BY JIM WILSON



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ost of us think of bank robbery and bank robbers in connection with the frontier days of the American West. But one of the earliest—if not *the* earliest—bank robberies was committed in 1831 by one Edward Smith to the tune of more than \$200,000. And he did the deed on Wall Street, in New York City.

Regardless, it took those stylish boys from Missouri, the James and Younger Gang, to turn bank robbery into a regular source of income. Jesse, Frank and Cole learned their hit-and-run tactics from their guerilla service with Capt. William Clark Quantrill and Bloody Bill Anderson during the War of Northern Aggression, as Southerners were inclined to refer to the Civil War. The same tactics they used on Union soldiers worked quite nicely after the war, when Jesse and the boys decided that some of the banks needed to be relieved of their assets.

Today, many historians suggest that the ways of the American frontier were over and done with by the year 1900. They may suggest that, but they never convinced Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch, Henry Starr,

the Newton Gang and many other outlaw groups who continued robbing. The James/Youngers may have started the bank robbery trend, but the man who put the finishing touches on the art form (if any criminal act can be called such) was John Dillinger.

John Herbert Dillinger was born on June 22, 1903, in Indianapolis, Ind. His mother passed away in 1907, and John grew up with a chronic resentment for authority and a distinct lack of interest in working for an honest living.

During a stint in the Indiana State Prison, Dillinger associated with several career criminals. Then, as now, prisons tend to be the finishing schools for those inclined to live a criminal life, and Dillinger was no exception. Even before his release, John Dillinger hooked up with a group of bank robbers, including Harry Pierpont, Harry Copeland, Walter Dietrich, and a young fellow named Lester Gillis. Gillis would come to be known as “Baby Face” Nelson.

*Thompsons, such as this Colt-made Model of 1921 (above), were on both sides of the Melvin Purvis (top, l.) manhunt for “Public Enemy No. 1” John Dillinger (l.).*

Beginning in 1933, Dillinger and his newfound associates undertook a series of bank robberies in the Midwest. From 1933 to 1934, Dillinger and his gang robbed approximately a dozen banks, taking away loot totaling about \$300,000. That's a lot of money today, so one can imagine how much it was in those early Depression days.

Dillinger put numerous finishing touches on bank robberies. He and his gang meticulously cased the banks before pulling a heist, paying special attention to the number of entrances and the number of guards employed. In addition, they drove every possible

escape route that could be used to make their getaway. Just prior to the robbery, they would steal a get-away car and then ditch it as soon as possible, making the rest of their escape in legally purchased vehicles.

Finally, John Dillinger seemed to realize that the gang should avoid unnecessary shooting. Robbing a bank was one thing, but killing innocent people would really bring the heat down on them. It was to be avoided if at all possible. Legend has it that this caused friction between Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson, because Nelson really seemed to enjoy shooting people. John Dillinger would rather awe the crowd by

*These lawmen guarded Dillinger at the Crown Point Maximum Security jail. When the outlaw escaped using a wooden pistol, he took two Thompsons with him.*



Photo courtesy of Tracie Hill, *The Ultimate Thompson Book*

## In "Public Enemies" The Tommy Gun Stars Again

Depending on your perspective, it's hard to tell who is the real star of the new Michael Mann film "Public Enemies" from Universal Pictures—Johnny Depp or the Model 1928 Thompson he clutches in the poster promoting the film. The fascination with "G-Men vs. Bandits" of the 1920s and early '30s persists to this day. There have been a number of Hollywood movies telling the romantic side of the "motorized bandits" such as Bonnie and Clyde and John Dillinger. Despite the romantic legends that have grown around such Great Depression outlaws, we cannot forget they were bank robbers and killers.

My hopes are high for "Public Enemies," but Hollywood will no doubt take license with the story. I hope it will not reach the level of "Pearl Harbor," in which the Japanese empire declares war on an American love triangle.

But the new movie "Public Enemies" promises to bring the guns of the outlaws and lawmen who chased them to the big screen yet again. Released after this was written, all I've seen so far are the trailers and some publicity stills for "Public Enemies" starring Depp as John Dillinger and Christian Bale as FBI agent Melvin H. Purvis. "Public Enemies" made its debut on July 1. Of course, the Thompson stars, but a bank

robbery scene depicts Depp (Dillinger) leaping a counter with a pair of blued Colt Government Models. Other scenes provide glimpses of a Winchester self-loading rifle and what appears to be a Mauser bolt-action with a butterfly bolt handle in the hands of Bale. There's also at least one appearance in the trailer of my favorite gun from the era, the blued-steel-and-walnut U.S. Model of 1918 Browning Automatic Rifle (which the real Dillinger purloined from National Guard armories and employed as a serious tool in his robberies).

According to Tracie Hill, lead author of *Thompson: the American Legend* and the just-released *The Ultimate Thompson*



*The U.S. Model of 1918 Browning Automatic Rifle in .30-'06 Sprg. had the punch to penetrate car doors. Dillinger's gang stole BARs from National Guard armories.*

vaulting over a bank counter and playing the Robin Hood character to the hilt.

Bank robbers of the Dillinger era used a wide assortment of arms. Many of them are known to have still been carrying the old Colt Single Action Army. The most common handguns, however, were the various double-action revolvers made by Colt, Smith & Wesson, Harrington & Richardson, Hopkins & Allen, and several others. Shotguns, of course, were very popular, too. They used Winchester pumps, Remington semi-automatics and a wide assortment of double-barrel shotguns.

For the most part, Dillinger and his gang preferred to use the autoloading pistols that were beginning to gain in popularity. The Colt Government Model or M1911 in .45 ACP was the gun they liked the best. But some had begun carrying the M1911 in the then-new high-velocity .38 Super cartridge.

The gun that really made bank crowds take notice, however, was the Thompson submachine gun. Invented by John T. Thompson in 1919, this compact arm quickly became popular with military, civilian law enforcement and bank robbers. There is no way of knowing how many were chosen by civilian law enforcement and bank robbers. The Thompson fired the same .45 ACP cartridge as the M1911 pistol. It was a little longer than 33", weighed about 10 lbs., and had a 10.5" barrel. It had a cyclic rate of 600 to 1,200 rounds per minute, depending upon the particular model. The Model 1921 and 1928 Thompsons used 20-round detachable magazines; however, they could also be fitted with 50- and 100-round drums. In addition, the Thompson's wooden buttstock could be removed.

For all the intimidation effect that the Thompson had, it was ineffective in penetrating the tough steel of that era's automobile bodies. For that, crooks and lawmen alike preferred to use the Browning Automatic Rifle, commonly called the BAR. John M. Browning designed the BAR for our military in 1917. The most popular model was designated the M1918 and was chambered for the .30-'06 Sprg. cartridge. From 1918 to 1919 alone, almost 100,000 BARs were manufactured by Colt, Winchester, and Marlin-Rockwell.

For all of its model variations, the Model 1918 is the one that saw the most use during the Dillinger days. This gas-operated rifle weighed about 16 lbs. and had a 24" barrel. Detachable-box, 20-round-capacity magazines were standard, although 30-round magazines were eventually offered. From the BAR, the FMJ .30-'06 Sprg. round generated some 2800 f.p.s., and it had a cyclic rate of 550 rounds per minute.

Although the BAR was a bit too long and heavy to be easily carried into a bank, it was just about perfect for raids, ambushes and roadblocks, regardless of which side of such affairs a person happened to be on. As an example, when Bonnie and Clyde were ambushed in Louisiana, there were several BARs in the outlaws' car. The lawmen in the ambush posse also used at least two to good effect. Law enforcement officers got their Thompsons and BARs through regular supply channels. Dillinger and his men got theirs by robbing police stations and National Guard armories.

The man who would prove to be John Dillinger's nemesis was named Melvin Horace Purvis, Jr. He was born in South Carolina on October 24, 1903. Purvis took a law degree from the University of South Carolina and

*Book*, the American Thompson Ass'n worked with the film's producers to get the sights and sounds of the legendary "Tommy Gun" just right. The American Thompson Ass'n is an NRA-affiliated gun-collecting organization that is dedicated to promoting the study, memory and appreciation of the gun designed by John Taliaferro Thompson. You need not have a rare Colt 1921 Thompson in your collection to join the TCA, and the organization puts on a yearly show and shoot in Newark, Ohio, scheduled for August 14-15. For information contact: TCA (Dept. AR) P.O. Box 8710, Newark, OH 43055, or go to [www.nfatoy.com](http://www.nfatoy.com).

—MARK A. KEEFE, IV, EDITOR IN CHIEF

Universal Pictures "Public Enemies" publicity still



AMERICAN RIFLEMAN

joined the FBI soon thereafter. To say that, in the beginning, Purvis was not cut out to deal with bank robbers is somewhat of an understatement. But it really wasn't Melvin Purvis' fault.

In the 1930s, the FBI was a very new organization. J. Edgar Hoover received congressional approval for his agents to carry guns and make arrests. Unfortunately, his organization was full of lawyers and auditors who might have been good investigators, but were about the furthest thing from gunfighters imaginable. It would take gunfighters to put a stop to the likes of Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd and John Herbert Dillinger. Melvin Purvis had the determination, and he would get the gunfighters, but not before the FBI would have to deal with some serious embarrassment.

Early in 1934, Dillinger and his crew were surprised and arrested while vacationing in Arizona. Dillinger waived extradition and authorities returned him to Indiana to face multiple charges. On March 3, 1934, John Dillinger escaped from the Crown Point, Ind., jail. Legend has it he made his escape using a fake gun that was whittled out of a piece of wood. Some say this was Dillinger's own handiwork, and others say someone sneaked it into the jail. Regardless, John Dillinger was on the run again.

In April 1934, the FBI got word that the Dillinger Gang was hiding out at the Little Bohemia Lodge, in northern Wisconsin. Supervising Agents Melvin Purvis and Hugh Clegg put together a team assigned to make the arrests. And here is where their lack of law enforcement experience really showed itself.

The FBI failed to get a diagram of the sprawling rural lodge. They also failed to make a scouting mission to identify and cover all of the possible escape routes. Finally, they never considered that non-combatants could be present.

Members of the FBI team drove up to the Little Bohemia Lodge after dark. As they approached the building, they saw a trio of men exit and get into a waiting vehicle. When the vehicle's occupants ignored commands to halt, the agents opened fire, killing one of the men. All three later proved to be innocent bystanders.

About that time, a man ran out of a nearby cabin and headed for the woods. Agents exchanged shots with him, but neither side sustained injuries. It was later learned that the person was Baby Face Nelson. Nelson ran through the woods to a nearby house and had another shootout with agents, this time killing FBI agent Carter Baum before making his escape.

At some point during the incident, Dillinger and the rest of his crew sneaked out the back door of the lodge, made their way to the lake, and disappeared into the darkness. The FBI agents guarded the lodge until dawn, at which time they discovered that they were guarding an empty building.

It was about that period when J. Edgar Hoover started recruiting gunfighters into his organization. From the Texas Rangers he got Doc White, Tom White

*This cache of guns (l.) was recovered after the Dillinger gang clashed with FBI agents at the Little Bohemia lodge. When Dillinger was taken down by the FBI, he was armed with a Colt Model 1908 pistol in .380 ACP.*



Photo courtesy of Tracie Hill, *The Ultimate Thompson Book*



and Gus Jones. He later brought in men like Jelly Bryce, from Oklahoma, Walter Walsh, Charles Winstead, Ed Hollis and Clarence Hurt. Such lawmen knew how to conduct investigations, but their specialty was tracking down fugitives. In the Western phrase, they had “seen the elephant” and knew the smell of gunsmoke.

Not long after the Little Bohemia debacle the FBI became convinced John Dillinger was hiding out in Chicago. Melvin Purvis was assigned to lead the investigation and he would be augmented by some shooters.

In July, a local police detective introduced Purvis to a woman calling herself Anna Sage. Sage told him Dillinger and his girlfriend lived in her apartment house. She further told Purvis that they often went to the movies together, and Sage could let them know the next time that occurred.

On the evening of July 22, 1934, Anna Sage told Melvin Purvis that John Dillinger, his girlfriend and she would be going to the movies. And she named two possible theaters. With no better plan available, Purvis split up his team so that both movie houses were covered.



*The U.S. Model of 1911 Pistol or Colt Government Model was the preferred sidearm of the Dillinger gang. Ironically, Charles Whitehead used a .45 to end Dillinger's life.*

At the Biograph Theater, Purvis stationed his men so that they could intercept Dillinger regardless of the direction he might take when leaving. On the south side, the closest direction back to Sage's apartment, Purvis stationed Charles Winstead, Ed Hollis and Clarence Hurt. Purvis himself would stand near the entrance so he could personally identify Dillinger. Anna Sage said she would be wearing an orange dress (not red,

## Outlaws And G-Men Remembered

Our fascination with the G-men and outlaws of the 1930s has been represented through major movies, books and documentaries. Now it is expressed through a pair of semi-automatic-only Thompson Model 1927A1 carbines made by Auto-Ordnance in Worcester, Mass., and embellished by America Remembers. The first is the “John Dillinger ‘Public Enemy Number One’ Tribute Thompson,” with both its upper and lower receivers plated in 24-karat gold. Both sides of the upper receiver are engraved with images of Dillinger and the lawmen who chased him down, as well as period newspaper headlines and wanted posters. The walnut buttstock, pistol grip and fore grip are well-figured with a high-gloss finish. Except for the 16"-long finned barrel and magazine, just about every

component of the Dillinger Thompson is gold-plated, including the compensator, actuator, safety and trigger.

The Melvin Purvis tribute, made with the authorization of the Purvis family, isn't as flashy as the Dillinger gun, as its receiver is a high-polish blue with 24-karat gold engraving depicting Purvis and aspects of his remarkable career. The compensator, rear sight trigger and actuator knob are gold-plated. The Dillinger gun comes with a 50-round drum, and the Purvis tribute comes with a 30-round stick magazine. The editions will be limited to 500 Dillinger and 300 Purvis Thompsons.

*For more information contact: America Remembers (Dept. AR), 106 Timber Ridge Drive, Ashland VA 23005; (800) 682-2291; [www.americaremembers.com](http://www.americaremembers.com).*

—MARK A. KEEFE, IV



*America Remembers is offering two embellished Thompsons commemorating Purvis and Dillinger. Obviously, the flashy gold-plated gun (above) is The Dillinger tribute.*



as the newspapers claimed), and Purvis would alert his teams by lighting a cigar.

For once, the stakeout went exactly as planned. Dillinger and the two women came out of the theater and headed south. Purvis lit his cigar. Agents Winstead, Hollis and Hurt closed in.

The agents later said that as they were closing in on Dillinger, they saw him hunch down and peer over his shoulder. At the same time, Dillinger's hand went to his pocket, where he was reportedly carrying a .380 Colt Pocket Auto. He never got it out.

The three FBI agents fired six shots, with three of those shots coming from Charles Winstead's .45. Dillinger was hit four times. The killing shot was apparently the one that hit him in the back of the head and exited out of his right eye. All those at the scene agreed the killing shot came from Charles Winstead's M1911.

The "King of Bank Robbers" was dead. But Melvin Purvis still had plenty of work to keep him busy. In October 1934, Purvis led a group of FBI agents and local officers on a hunt for Charles Arthur "Pretty Boy" Floyd, the Oklahoma bank robber. Responding to reports of a suspicious person in the area around East Liverpool, Ohio, the officers jumped Floyd as he was

fleeing a farmhouse. In the ensuing gun battle, Floyd came up the loser.

One by one, the Dillinger Gang and other bank robbers were either brought to justice or killed. And Melvin Purvis got the lion's share of the credit. Legend has it J. Edgar Hoover became quite jealous of the press Purvis received. Melvin Purvis soon felt the FBI boss was pressuring him to resign. So, in 1935, Melvin Purvis left the FBI for good.

In February 1960, Melvin Purvis died in his home of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Hoover put out the word that it was a suicide; however, Purvis may have been cleaning a handgun and failed to unload it.

As the 1930s came to a close, the notorious bank robbery gangs were being put out of business. They were not Robin Hoods, but rather crooks who needed to be brought to justice and were brought to justice. The FBI's baptism of fire molded it into a much tougher, more capable organization. It could conduct investigations, but it could also swap lead with the best of the criminal element.

Movie director John Ford once said, "When fact becomes legend, print the legend." But the fact is that the dash and flair of John Dillinger just wasn't a match for the tenacity of a lawman like Melvin Purvis. 🦋