

WANTED: JOHN DILLINGER

HIS LIFE, DEATH, AND BURIAL

INTRODUCTION

In a little over a year, he and his gang's escapades, and the efforts of the authorities to stop them, contributed to the premature deaths of twenty six people, the wounding of another nineteen, prison convictions for twenty three of his associates, the robbery of at least \$359,332, as well as more than a million federal, state, and local tax dollars spent pursuing justice. Despite such an ignominious career, or rather, because of it, even now, many decades after his death in 1934 at the hand of the FBI on the streets of Chicago, the grave of John Dillinger continues to attract more public interest than those of most of our other more worthy residents. That you are reading this is proof.



Why this fascination with John Dillinger, a fascination which caused thousands to flock to the Biograph Theater in the hours after his shooting, "turning the neighborhood into a carnival of the macabre, with some dipping handkerchiefs and scraps of newspaper, even hems of dresses, in the dead man's blood[?] The next day police avoided a riot only by allowing thousands more to file through the hot, reeking, fly filled basement of the Cook County Morgue to view the corpse of a man whose exploits, style, and cockiness had created his legend even as he lived. For there was an irony to Dillinger that puzzled and fascinated even the most law abiding citizen. Despite his reputation as a robber and gunman, Dillinger seemed to possess a fairly conventional value system. ... Mindful of his image, he displayed gallantry and even playfulness when circumstances permitted, and took no obvious pleasure in violence. His admirers, and he had many, considered him crooked but not twisted. These

qualities were all part of the truth, myth, and legend of John Dillinger, as widely if not always accurately portrayed. ... [and made him] the darling of circulation managers. Dillinger and the FBI [made] one another famous - or maybe infamous, since Dillinger humiliated his pursuers all the way to the Biograph. ... Dillinger's spectacular robberies, jailbreaks, gunbattles, elusiveness, and impudence provided Americans with an exhilarating game of cops n' robbers that ...made J. Edgar Hoover a household name, and created the legend of the FBI. The Justice Department did the same for Dillinger, who demonstrated that if Crime Does Not Pay, it can still be a shortcut to immortality." (From *Dillinger: The Untold Story*)

HIS LIFE

His death may have made the headlines, but his birth passed virtually unnoticed. John Dillinger was born on June 22, 1903 in a bungalow at 2053 Cooper Street (now called Caroline Avenue, near the I-70 and Keystone/Rural exit), the second child of John Wilson Dillinger and Mary Ellen "Mollie" Lancaster Dillinger. Their first child, Audrey, was already 14 years old. Mr. Dillinger ran a grocery store at 2210 Blaine Avenue and was a deacon at Hillside Christian Church.

Unfortunately, Mollie Dillinger died in February 1907. Mr. Dillinger, having known his wife was on her death bed, came to Crown Hill on February 21st and purchased a 16' by 20' family plot where Mollie was laid to rest one week later. The naturally distraught three-year-old Johnnie Dillinger pulled a chair to the

side of her casket, and standing on it, kept shaking his mother as if to wake her. Eighteen-year-old Audrey, now married and pregnant with a child who would be buried in the same plot by June, did her best to be little Johnnie's mother. She and her husband, Emmet Hancock, lived in Maywood, an area centered around Kentucky and Tibbs Avenues. Johnnie, as the family always called him, attended School 38 until he dropped out of school in the 8th grade, and did nothing more criminal than tying the neighbor's outhouse to a passing train. When Mr. Dillinger married Elizabeth Fields shortly before 1920, and moved to her Mooresville home, Johnnie quickly took his place as big brother to her children: Hubert, Doris, and Frances. He enjoyed hunting alone and was the star pitcher on a local baseball team. When a broken romance caused him to leave town and join the Navy, he didn't like the regimented life, and deserted after five months, coming back to Mooresville, explaining to his family that he had been discharged due to a bad heart.

The Navy apparently did not miss him badly enough to pursue him, and Johnnie began working odd jobs around town and married 16 year old Beryl Hovious when he turned 20. But the pool hall with the guys was more of an attraction than married life, and one of his closest pals was Edgar Singleton, who had done some time in the state penitentiary. On September 6, 1924, after some especially hard drinking, Johnnie and Ed jumped Frank Morgan, a Mooresville grocer, as he was walking home. Morgan's answered cries for help caused the pair to flee, but Dillinger brought attention to himself the next day by asking about Morgan's condition and the pair were arrested two days later.

However, Mr. Morgan could not make a positive ID. The law officers, pretending they had more on him than they really did, tricked the still naive Dillinger into a full confession and he was given the maximum sentence, 10 to 20 years for assault, and 2 to 14 years for conspiracy to commit a felony. The more savvy Singleton pleaded innocent and was back out on the street in two years. In later years, as the Dillinger legend grew, this disparity in their sentences was surmised to have contributed to his becoming a criminal. Even Indiana Governor Paul McNutt guessed it might have made Dillinger bitter enough to do just about anything..

Upon sentencing, Dillinger was sent to the State Reformatory at Pendleton. He didn't seem to want to be reformed. He practiced for later years by trying to escape, but failed. He received visits from his family, but after 4 years, his wife divorced him on June 20, 1929. When he was denied parole one month later, he requested he be sent to the State Penitentiary at Michigan City. There he renewed his acquaintance with reformatory pals Henry Peirpont and Homer Van Meter, later to be members of his gang, and joined the baseball team.

With each passing year, fewer and fewer seemed to care if he continued to pay for his crime. By 1933, even his sentencing judge and his victim had joined 182 fellow townsman in a petition requesting his release. So on May 22 he was set free and by nightfall, he was back at the family home in Mooresville, but the death of his stepmother, Lizzie Dillinger, just hours before his arrival, spoiled the family joy over his release

Dillinger was restless. Apparently he had used his time in Michigan City to study crime. By early June he had robbed his first bank, probably in New Carlisle, Ohio on June 10th. It was to be the first of many that summer, exactly how many is hard to say for sure. As his legend grew, it became almost fashionable for a bank to say they had been robbed by Dillinger and his gang. But the most reliable sources have him involved with robberies at the thread mill in Monticello, Indiana on June 24th; at the Bide-A -Wee Tavern in Muncie, Indiana on July 15th; the bank at Daleville, Indiana on July 17th; possibly a bank in Rockville, Indiana on July 19th; the First National Bank in Montpelier, Indiana on August 4th; possibly a bank in

Gravel Switch, KY on August 8th; Bluffton, Ohio on August 14th; Grand Haven, Michigan on August 18th; and the State Bank on Massachusetts Avenue in Indianapolis on September 6th.

Also during this time, Dillinger threw some guns over the Michigan City prison walls in accordance to a plan worked out with Pierpont even before his parole. On September 26th, Pierpont and nine others used these guns to make their way out of prison only to find that Dillinger had been arrested in Dayton a few days before while making one of several visits to Mary Longnacre, the sister of a fellow prisoner, and was now in jail in Lima, Ohio.

This proved to be just a minor detail. Stopping to rob a bank in St. Mary's, Ohio on October 3rd, Pierpont, John Hamilton, and three others descended upon the jail on October 12th. In the ensuing gun battle, local Sheriff Jesse Sarber was killed, but Dillinger was set free. Then on October 14th and 21st, the gang raided the Auburn and Peru, Indiana police stations to boost their arsenal and cache of bullet proof vests.

On October 23rd the gang pulled off one of their biggest robberies, \$75,000 from the Central Bank & Trust in Greencastle. This robbery, like several others to follow, may actually have been prearranged by shady bank officials with underworld connections in order to cover up bank losses. The state had had enough, and on October 26th, Governor McNutt called up the National Guard to help police capture the gang, who by now were hiding with their various girlfriends in Chicago.

Dillinger's girlfriend was Evelyn "Billie" Frechette, of French-Indian descent, who had been born on an Wisconsin Indian reservation in 1907. Rather sophisticated given her background, and with a husband firmly in prison, she proved a ready, willing, and faithful companion until her own capture the next April. On November 15th, she accompanied John while he sought medical treatment in Chicago for a ringworm condition. Thanks to her savvy observation of a trap being sprung, and her driving skills while Dillinger shot at police out the back window, the loving couple managed to escape.

November 20th found the gang robbing a Racine, Wisconsin bank of \$27,000 and on December 13th they were able to leisurely devoid 90 safety boxes of their contents at the Unity Trust and Savings Bank in Chicago. But the police noticed gang member John Hamilton driving a suspicious car the next day and when he killed a policeman in the process of getting away, the gang decided a winter in Chicago would be too hot for them.

So they went to Florida, having no trouble crossing Indiana and its thousands on their lookout. They rented an ocean front home in Daytona and settled in for a month's vacation. Even their use of a tommy gun to ring in the New Year during a beachside celebration didn't attract enough attention to get them in trouble, though they were accused of robbing a Chicago nightclub and killing two police officers that very same night.

Even they were incapable of being in two places at once, but Dillinger and Harry Pierpont did manage to drive from Florida to Chicago on January 14th in order to pull off a bank robbery scheduled in East Chicago on January 15th. The robbery did not go smoothly. A bank officer sounded an alarm and Dillinger and John Hamilton had to shoot their way out of the bank. Officer William P. O'Malley died as a result of the gun battle. Dillinger's legend as a "good" bad guy was so strong that some accounts of the robbery blamed the dead O'Malley for falling into Dillinger's deliberately low line of fire. Dillinger himself supposedly later told his attorney, Louis Piquett, "I always felt bad about O'Malley getting killed, but only because of his wife and kids. He had it coming. He stood right in the way and kept throwing slugs at me. What else could I do?" (From *Dillinger: The Untold Story*)

Abandoning their bullet ridden car in Chicago, Dillinger and Pierpont made their way across country with Evelyn Frechette in her new car. There was a gang meeting planned in Tucson, Arizona, but again luck did not go their way. A fire burned down the hotel where the rest of the gang was waiting and the fireman fighting the blaze recognized them from pictures in the crime magazines they read to while away the hours back at the firehouse. So the trio arrived to a police welcoming party and were promptly arrested on January 25th.

Several states wrangled for extradition. When Indiana won, Dillinger was put on a plane and flown to Chicago on January 30th. From there he was escorted to the Crown Point Jail, which was so pleased to have him as prisoner, they threw a little party of their own, with beer furnished by the Sheriff, Mrs. Lillian Holley, and the Chief of Police. At one point Dillinger himself was paraded out for the photographers. Standing in the midst of his jailors and future prosecutors, he took on the air of one having a good time with old friends. Without thinking about it, he hammed for the cameras by leaning in a friendly manner against Lake County Prosecutor Robert Estill. Estill, who had already told the press he would seek the death penalty for Dillinger's involvement in Officer O'Malley's death, responded to Dillinger's friendly presence by slipping his arm around John's shoulder while they both smiled for the cameras. It was a photo his opponents liked to show again and again in the next campaign and Estill was not re-elected.

While Dillinger was being the friendly prisoner, his attorney Louis Piquett was playing legal hardball. He won a continuance in the case until March 12th. Aware of Dillinger's desire to escape, he tried to convince John that he could have him acquitted by getting several witnesses to testify that he was still in Florida on January 15th. But Dillinger trusted his own abilities more than the courts, and using Piquett as a go between, arranged to break out of jail. It was Piquett, with the help of an insider, who managed to smuggle in the famous wooden "gun." On March 3rd, using this "gun", a piece of wood made to look like a revolver, Dillinger managed to lock up thirty of the guards before using their real guns and the sheriff's Ford to make his get away. He even managed to meet with Piquett once or twice in Chicago before going into hiding in St. Paul, Minnesota. His embodiment of "the traditional American virtues of courage and resourcefulness" during this escape won him more admirers, never mind the illegality of it.

Not wanting to let his public down, he began to rob banks again; the Securities National Bank in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on March 6th; and the First National Bank of Mason City, Iowa, on March 13th. By March 31st, the police had tracked him to his St. Paul hideout and he and Evelyn again had to shoot their way out of a trap. But this time he had been wounded, and had to continue laying low while he recuperated.

Nothing heals a man faster than real home cooking, so on April 7th, despite being the object of "greatest manhunt in U.S. history," he and Evelyn arrived at the Dillinger home in Mooresville for a day's stay. Audrey baked him three of his favorite coconut cream pies, the reason he had come, he told her, and he posed for a snapshot in front of the house, holding his infamous wooden gun, which he gave to Audrey, in one hand, and a real tommy gun in the other. A pair of agents who had the house under surveillance, did not seem to attach much significance to this. There was no way, they reasoned, that could be the real John Dillinger standing there.

However, when the couple arrived back in Chicago on April 9th, a tip from an informant led to the capture of Evelyn Frechette on the city streets. John, who had been waiting just across the street, saw what was going on and managed to get away unnoticed. He and Van Meter held up the Warsaw, Indiana police station on the 12th to replenish their arsenal, and using Louis Piquett and his contacts, he began fishing

around for a doctor who could do some plastic surgery to change his appearance.

But there were other matters to be taken care of first. A gang meeting was scheduled at a remote hunting lodge in northern Wisconsin called Little Bohemia. The owner, suspicious of his guests, tipped off the local police, who in turn called Melvin Purvis, the FBI chief in Chicago. Agents flew in from both Chicago and St. Paul to do battle with the gang. It was more or less a draw. One agent and one citizen were killed, four wounded, and only three of the gangsters' girlfriends were captured. London papers, possibly making fun of the FBI's seeming inability to get their hands on Dillinger, told their readers that he was now being pursued by Indians with bows and arrows. But the battle did manage to scatter the gang members to the four winds for good. And as Dillinger, Hamilton, and Van Meter were subsequently approaching St. Paul along the Minnesota backroads, Hamilton, sitting between Dillinger, who was driving, and Van Meter, who was riding shotgun, was mortally wounded.

Dillinger and Van Meter went into serious hiding. For most of the next month, the pair lived in a trailer which they drove back and forth across Northern Indiana. Still, every crime from California to Bedloe's Island, and even a few in Scotland, were attributed to this now badly shaken duo. Probably their greatest achievement during this time, and their only worthy one, was being the impetus behind some tough anti-crime bills in Congress that gave more power to J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI.

By May 27th, Dillinger felt comfortable enough to return to Chicago. Piquett had arranged for him to stay with Jimmy Probasco, a small time crook and bar owner, who could use Dillinger's help to pay his rent. The next day, again through Piquett's connections, Drs. Wilhelm Loeser and Harold Cassidy, performed plastic surgery on Dillinger at Probasco's home at 2509 N. Crawford Ave. (now Pulaski Avenue). During the procedure, after reviving Dillinger from a near overdose of ether, Dr. Loeser cut away three moles from his forehead, a scar from his upper lip, tried to tighten the skin over his face and jaw, and smoothed out the dimple in his chin.

Dillinger used most of the month of June to recuperate. To further alter his looks, he dyed his hair black, grew a moustache, and took to wearing glasses. Soon he felt good enough to take in an occasional Cubs game at nearby Wrigley Field and once he came back to Indianapolis in an unsuccessful search for an informer.

By June 30th he was ready to get back to work, robbing the Merchants National Bank at South Bend of almost \$30,000. But again things did not go as smoothly as planned. Several people were wounded, including gang member Homer Van Meter, who had been forced to fight a duel in the street until he managed to kill his foe, Police Officer Howard Wagner. They did manage to make it back to Chicago though and the relative safety of their hideouts.

HIS DEATH

Now more than ever aware that this kind of life could not go on forever, Dillinger began making plans with Van Meter for one last job that would set them up for life, the robbery of a mail train toward the end of July. He left his hideout with Jimmy Probasco and moved into the apartment of Anna Sage (born Ana Cumpanas in Romania) a brothel madam whom he may have known in East Chicago even before his prison days. Anna wasn't his real interest, but one of her "ladies" Polly Hamilton, was. She had become John's girlfriend now that Billy Frechette was behind bars.

Anna, however did have a special interest in John. She and her boyfriend, a corrupt East Chicago policeman named Martin Zarkovich, approached Melvin Purvis and the FBI hoping to cash in on all of the

rewards on Dillinger's head, plus win some goodwill to fight possible deportation proceedings. On a record breaking hot Sunday, July 22nd, the temperature hovering over 105, she notified Purvis that John planned on taking she and Polly to see the new Clark Gable gangster picture, *Manhattan Melodrama*, that night at the Biograph Theater, "Cooled by Refridgeration," just around the corner from her apartment.

As the movie began, at least twenty federal agents gathered outside the theater. At 10:35, as they crowd emerged, Purvis gave the signal and Dillinger was shot, apparently without any real attempt to capture him. One bullet entered through the back of his neck, coming out just under his right eye. A second tore into his left side. Dillinger managed to take only a few more stumbling steps, probably more from momentum than meaning to, before falling face to brick in the alley beside the theater. Two other women were wounded slightly in the hail of gunfire.

An ambulance was dispatched, making only a passing stop at a nearby hospital before proceeding on to the Cook County Morgue. Dillinger was dead. The spectacle we have already described began to unfold outside the Biograph and then at the morgue itself, as thousands wanted to share in this moment of the triumph of the forces of good over evil.

Word traveled fast. By midnight a procession of Mooresville citizens had made their way to old John Dillinger's small farmhouse at the outskirts of town to notify him of his son's death. He was soon joined by John's sister, Audrey Hancock, and her family. That morning, Mr. Dillinger, John's step-brother Hubert, and town undertaker E.F. Harvey left in the hearse to pick up Dillinger's body in Chicago. Roughly treated by the crowd at the morgue that night, they came back for the body on Tuesday, apparently embalming him at the McCready Funeral Home at 4506 Sheridan Road in Chicago before making the long trip back. Sources differ, but he was apparently displayed at Harvey's Funeral Parlor in Mooresville that night until 2:00 am.

HIS BURIAL

In the meantime, Crown Hill began making preparations for his burial. A score of plot owners protested, but there wasn't really anything the cemetery could do. Superintendent Raymond E. Siebert explained: "The cemetery has no legal right to object to the burial of Dillinger in the family lot. John Dillinger, Sr. has owned the lot for several years and his wife is buried there. He is a man who bought property from us, and as owner of that property, has a legal right to bury the body of his son there." In fact, he had owned the property for 27 years and already buried his parents, two wives, and two grandchildren there. It was only natural he would plan on burying his son there as well.

On Wednesday, July 25th, the body was taken to John's sister's house in Maywood where a private funeral service was held in the midst of about 2500 onlookers gathered in the neighborhood outside. The Rev. Charles W. Fillmore, a retired Disciples of Christ minister conducted a simple service which included the hymn "God Will Take Care of Him."

When the service concluded, the family departed in five different cars and began the usually solemn parade to the cemetery. But this parade was anything but usual and had to pause several times while police cleared a path through hordes of press and bystanders. When they finally arrived at Crown Hill, they found, much to their pleasure, that only the funeral party was going to be allowed in. The five thousand who had planned on attending but now found themselves locked out had to crowd together in the 104 degree humid heat and hope for a glimpse of the proceedings over the fence along Boulevard Street. As the family gathered under a tent at the grave site, the clouds burst and the words of Rev. William Evans, pastor of the Maywood Church of Christ, were lost in the thunderclaps and clatter of the rain

pounding the canvas. Lightning flashes lit the scene as the casket was lowered into the grave at 3:15 p.m.

Cemetery caretaker George White had brought his nine year old daughter to see what he considered “a very historic occasion.” She watched from the relative comfort of a nearby car as everyone else got drenched. After the family left, the crowds began pouring in, taking whatever flowers they could lay their hands on. Latecomers had to settle for handfuls of mud. Finally the police pushed the throngs away and a 24 hour watch was established by the cemetery “for an indefinite period of time.” Officially this was done because of rumors the gang would try to rob his body, but the young White recalls that the real fear was of the general public.

Mr. Dillinger was also gravely concerned. According to Howard T. Wood, a later Executive V.P. of Crown Hill, he came back a couple of days later to insist that extreme measures be taken. The \$165 wooden casket, covered with rose-colored cloth, was unearthed and then reburied beneath a mixture of concrete and scrap iron. Four giant concrete slabs, reinforced with chicken wire were also placed in “stepped gradations” above the casket.

Through the years there has been speculation that he did this because he knew that it was not really his son buried there in the family plot. He wanted to be sure no later autopsy could prove what he supposedly knew: that the real John Dillinger was alive and well somewhere in hiding having pulled off his greatest escape ever and duping the FBI into killing the wrong man.

This is another example of the myths that continued to grow up around Dillinger. The truth is that Mr. Dillinger had already seen enough human nature to be worried for his son’s body, and time would continually prove him correct, at least in ways smaller than outright grave robbery. A newspaper report in 1943, almost ten years after Dillinger’s burial, says that “there has been no grass growing on the plot of ground” because of the many people who constantly visited the grave. On April 30, 1959, Audrey Hancock gave permission for the Blakely Granite Company “to replace the headstone on John Dillinger’s grave. The new stone will be exactly like the old one (with the exception of the damage now evident on the old marker.)” A third headstone was placed there in 1990, just a few years after Mrs. Hancock’s death at the age of and her burial in a quiet section of the cemetery away from the still frequently visited grave of her brother.

While you are at Crown Hill, we could encourage you to visit the graves of the many other famous people buried here, not just the infamous John Dillinger’s. He shares this cemetery with 195,000 other dearly departed, including President Benjamin Harrison; vice presidents Thomas Hendricks, Charles Fairbanks, and Thomas Marshall; eleven Indiana governors, including Oliver P. Morton; fourteen U. S. Senators; inventor Richard Gatling; businessmen Eli Lilly and L.S. Ayres, and many other figures too numerous to mention important in the history of our city and state. Also, no visit to the cemetery is complete without taking in the view from Crown Hill at the monument of Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley. Look past John Dillinger, there is so much more to see.

John Dillinger
June 22, 1903 – July 22, 1934
Crown Hill Cemetery
Lot 44, Section 94

Researched and written by Tom M. Davis, Crown Hill Cemetery Tour Developer and Guide
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