

JOHN DILLINGER



Based on Bryan Burrough's book *Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI 1933-1934*, the film *Public Enemies* (2009), directed by Michael Mann, depicts the legend of gangster **John Dillinger** and the FBI's attempts to bring him down. The film adaptation stars **Johnny Depp** as Dillinger and **Christian Bale** as **Agent Melvin Purvis**, the man appointed by **J. Edgar Hoover**

to take on Dillinger and his gang. Based on a true story, *Public Enemies* traces John Dillinger's life, which has become mythological over the years. From a broken childhood and bank robberies to murder and prison escapes, Dillinger's sheer audacity continues to intrigue the media and the public today. Perhaps this intrigue lies with the unknown. Despite numerous accounts and historical research, much remains uncertain: how did he pull everything off? How did he escape from jail twice? How did he evade the FBI for so long? And why did he do it all? Conspiracy theories abound. Some crime enthusiasts maintain that Hoover and his new FBI never shot Dillinger and, in fact, staged his death. The Washington Post describes Burrough's book as "a wild and amazing story..." but Burrough is not the first author to be enthralled by Dillinger's unique tale. Several books and movies on Dillinger's life have been released prior to *Public Enemies*, which surely will not be the last.

Early Life and Family

Born into a middle-class family on June 22, 1903, in Indianapolis, Indiana, Dillinger experienced tragedy at the age of four when his mother died. Shortly thereafter, his father moved the family to a small farm in Mooresville, Indiana; he soon remarried. Dillinger's father had several children with his new wife, and Dillinger's upbringing fell mainly to his older sister. Reportedly, Dillinger disliked his stepmother and endured physical punishment from his harsh father. In 1923, Dillinger joined the Navy but grew tired of it quickly, ultimately deserting. He returned to Indiana and told friends and family that he had been discharged. Shortly after his return, he married 17-year-old Beryl Hovius. He was 21 at the time. The marriage lasted a mere two years.



Introduction to Crime

Following the end of his marriage, Dillinger moved to Indianapolis and met Ed Singleton, a former convict, while working at a grocery store. Young and impressionable, Dillinger was taken under Singleton's wing and accompanied him as he committed his first heist: a botched grocery store hold-up. After fighting with the owner during the robbery and knocking him unconscious, Dillinger fled the scene, thinking the owner was dead. Upon hearing Dillinger's gun go off during the brawl, Singleton panicked and



drove away with the getaway car, stranding Dillinger. With no legal guidance, Dillinger pled guilty and received a 10-year prison sentence. Singleton, also arrested, received just 5 years. Dillinger used his time in jail to strategize and plan his revenge against the justice system. With one year taken off his sentence for good behavior, he was released on parole in 1933, four years after the start of the Great Depression. While in jail, Dillinger learned from seasoned bank robbers, preparing for a future in crime.

Within a week of leaving prison he assembled a gang and began executing plans to send arms to his friends at Indiana State Prison for escape. However, on the day of the planned prison break, September 22, 1933, police, on a tip, raided the old house where Dillinger and his newly choreographed gang had set up residence. Dillinger was arrested again. He was immediately transferred to Allen County Jail in Lima, Ohio. The arrest only proved Dillinger's loyalty to his friends and they were quick to return the favor. Dressed as police officers, Dillinger's cronies snuck into the jail and broke him out.

Bank Robberies

All told, Dillinger racked up more than \$300,000 throughout his bank-robbing career. Among the banks he robbed were:

- July 17, 1933 – Commercial Bank in Daleville, Indiana – \$3,500
- August 4, 1933 – Montpelier National Bank in Montpelier, Indiana – \$6,700
- August 14, 1933 – Bluffton Bank in Bluffton, Ohio – \$6,000
- September 6, 1933 – Massachusetts Avenue State Bank in Indianapolis, Indiana – \$21,000
- October, 23, 1933 – Central Nation Bank and Trust Co. in Greencastle, Indiana – \$76,000
- November 20, 1933 – American Bank and Trust Co. in Racine, Wisconsin – \$28,000
- December 13, 1933 – Unity Trust and Savings Bank in Chicago, Illinois – \$8,700
- January, 15, 1934 – First National Bank in East Chicago, Indiana – \$20,000
- March 6, 1934 – Securities National Bank and Trust Co. in Sioux Falls, South Dakota – \$49,500
- March 13, 1934 – First National Bank in Mason City, Iowa – \$52,000
- June 30, 1934 – Merchants National Bank in South Bend, Indiana – \$29,890

The East Chicago robbery on January 15, 1934 is particularly noteworthy. It was at this heist that Dillinger shot a police officer, thereby adding murder to his growing list of charges.

Jail Time

Shortly after the East Chicago robbery, a fire broke out in the hotel where Dillinger and his friends were staying in Tucson, Arizona. Tipped off again, police found and arrested Dillinger. Allowing no room for error this round, the police had him carefully secured and sent to Indiana by aircraft, where he could be tried for murder (he was only guilty of theft in Arizona). He arrived at Chicago's municipal airport on January 23, 1934, where he was greeted by throngs of reporters eager to spread word of the infamous criminal's capture. At this point in time, Dillinger was already a public sensation, due to the media frenzy surrounding him. Authorities placed Dillinger under high security at the jail in Crown Point, Indiana, and treated him as though he had all due intent to try another escape. However, as things settled down, the armed patrol guards on the streets surrounding the prison were dismissed, and indoor guards became more lax. Despite having six armed guards between his cell and the outside world, the leniency of prison regulations permitted Dillinger to spend hours in his cell carving a fake gun out of an old piece of washboard using just a few razor-blades. A replica of his creation is on display in the museum. Dillinger used this gun to escape by taking one hostage and forcing him "at gunpoint" to lead him out of the prison. Dillinger then managed to hijack a car from a nearby alley, and before the prison knew what had

happened, Dillinger was on the road again with two hostages in tow. It was then that Dillinger made the fatal mistake of crossing state borders in a stolen car, bringing his crimes under FBI jurisdiction.

Escape at Little Bohemia Lodge

At the time of Dillinger's escape, J. Edgar Hoover was working on implementing a more credible, reformed FBI and developing a new strategy of assigning "special agents" to cases. Hoover appointed a special squad, led by Agent Melvin Purvis, specifically to track down John Dillinger. Constantly on the move after his escape, Dillinger drove across the Midwest trying to avoid the FBI. Along the way, Dillinger teamed up with his old girlfriend, Billie Frechette. After several close calls with the cops and losing Frechette, Dillinger set up camp at Little Bohemia Lodge, just outside the remote town of Mercer, Wisconsin, hiding out with a cadre of criminals, including "Babyface" Nelson, Homer Van Meter, and Tommy Carroll. Alerted by concerned residents and the inn's owners, the FBI swarmed the house, but again, Dillinger managed to slip away. At this point, Dillinger concluded that he had simply become too recognizable. Seeking a better disguise, he decided to undergo major plastic surgery. It was at this time that he was christened with the nickname "Snake Eyes." The surgery was able to change everything except his devious eyes.

Death

Following Dillinger's last staged bank robbery in South Bend, Indiana, where he killed another policeman, Hoover made the unprecedented step of placing a \$10,000 reward on Dillinger's head. About a month after the announcement, a friend of Dillinger's, an illegal immigrant working at a brothel under the stage name Ana Sage, tipped off the police. She was under the impression that the FBI would prevent her from deportation if she helped them. Sage told officials that Dillinger planned to attend a film at the Biograph Theater in Chicago. Armed agents waited outside of the theater waiting for Ana's signal (a red dress). Upon exiting the theater, Dillinger sensed the set-up and sprinted into an alley where he was fatally shot.



Legends

Several inconsistencies that were discovered upon Dillinger's death have contributed to his legendary status:

- Several witnesses claim that the man who was shot had brown eyes, as does the coroner's report. But Dillinger's eyes were distinctly gray.
- The body had signs of rheumatic heart disease that Dillinger was never known to have had. The body might have also shown signs of a childhood illness that was not recorded in Dillinger's early medical files.
- In 1963 The Indianapolis Star received a letter from a sender claiming to be John Dillinger. A similar letter was also sent to the Little Bohemia Lodge.
- The gun on display for years at the FBI headquarters that was allegedly used by Dillinger against FBI agents outside of the Biograph Theater on the day of his death was not his and was recently proven to have been manufactured years after his death. The original gun was missing for several years, but recently turned up in the FBI's collection.

Is **John Dillinger dead or alive?** Much of the controversy surrounding Dillinger's death has to do with the post-mortem identification of his body. There are some who believe that the individual who was shot and killed by FBI agents on the night of July 22, 1934 outside the Biograph Theatre in Chicago, IL was not John Dillinger, but perhaps Dillinger-look-alike and petty criminal Jimmy Lawrence. Dillinger had in fact been using the pseudonym Jimmy Lawrence around Chicago for quite some time.

There may have been a good reason too for the FBI to cover up a mistake on their part, if in fact it was not John Dillinger who they killed. Just a few months before his death, Dillinger and his gang settled in to the Little Bohemia Lodge in Wisconsin, where they hid out of sight of the authorities. The innkeepers found out who they were harboring but were promised that no harm would befall them. Meanwhile, Dillinger didn't trust them, and made sure that a member of his gang followed them into town, watched their every move, and listened in on all their phone calls and conversations. On one occasion, though, word was transmitted to the FBI that Dillinger was hiding out at the Little Bohemia Lodge, and FBI Agent Melvin Purvis assembled his team to storm the lodge and capture Dillinger. The execution didn't work out as planned, and on top of the entire Dillinger Gang escaping the Lodge unharmed, Purvis and his agents managed to kill several innocent bystanders and lost a member of their team in a gunfight exchange. The incident nearly lost Hoover his title of Director of the FBI and the incident embarrassed the entire Bureau and cast doubt on their ability to maintain order. A second embarrassment of that nature during another Dillinger capture might well have been grounds for dismissal of many of the top FBI officials, and perhaps even graver repercussions for the Bureau.

There were other dubious circumstances surrounding the events that followed Dillinger's death. The informant who notified Purvis where Dillinger would be that evening, Anna Sage, was promised U.S. citizenship in exchange for her information; however, when the dust finally settled, she ended up being deported after all. Another point of contention was that the person who was killed that night was even carrying a weapon. FBI agents claimed to have seen Dillinger reach for a weapon before he set off running into the side alleyway. The FBI even showcased in their headquarters the gun that was supposedly on Dillinger's body the night he was killed. It turns out, however, that the small Colt semi-automatic pistol on display at the FBI was only manufactured after Dillinger's death, making it impossible to have been the one he was allegedly carrying.



G-Men examining Dillinger's corpse

And then there were the autopsy findings, which were equivocal. Forensic analysis of the victim showed that he had stippling patterns on his neck, which is due to close range fire, and when writer Jay Robert Nash conducted his reconstruction of the crime scene in 1970 it showed that Dillinger had to have been in a prone position when he was shot. This would suggest that Dillinger was somehow tackled to the ground and was defenseless. (Note: Nash is not a trained or licensed crime scene investigator or forensic scientist, and the bases of his findings have not been scientifically referenced nor validated). Several physical discrepancies also existed. The scar on Dillinger's face was not present at autopsy, which could have been the result of successful plastic surgery, but upon viewing the victim,

Dillinger's father exclaimed that it was not his son. A close up of the corpse face showed a full set of front teeth, however, it was known through various documented photographs and dental records that Dillinger was missing his front right incisor. The corpse's brown eyes also did not match that of Dillinger,

who supposedly had grey eyes. Finally, the body showed signs of certain illnesses and heart conditions that were inconsistent with prior medical records and Dillinger's level of activity.

The body was, however, positively identified by John Dillinger's sister upon viewing a characteristic scar on his leg. Furthermore, the fingerprints recovered from the victim were also poor in quality, due to the fact that Dillinger had attempted to remove his fingerprints by burning them with acid, but showed consistent features with Dillinger's known fingerprints. The change in eye color can also be explained through post-mortem pigment changes in the eye.

If Dillinger managed to exploit the vulnerability of the FBI and escape death yet another time, this surely would be his greatest escape ever. But, these conspiracy theories are not widely accepted and exist among a small group of individuals not including the law enforcement and scientific communities.

Name _____

SYNOPSIS OF THE ARTICLE JOHN DILLINGER

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