

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

DILLINGER

Here in America, Ford recently has lost a little legend and the long-deceased marque Hudson has gained some. According to the book, “Dillinger, The Untold Story,” John Dillinger, Public Enemy No.1, who supposedly favored Ford’s 1932 crop of hot and fast

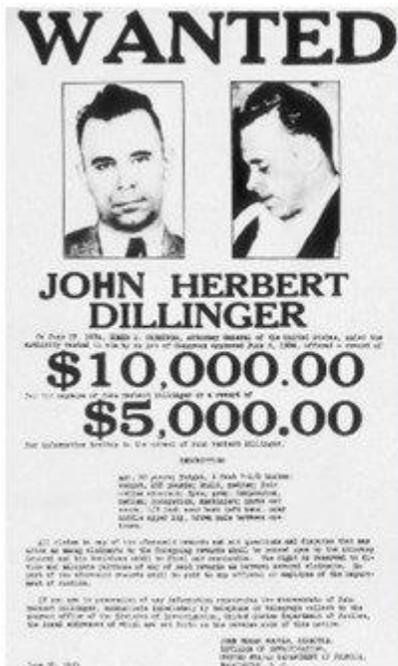


V8 flatheads, actually didn't. According to “Dillinger,” Dillinger’s actual bank robbery vehicle of choice was Hudson’s model Essex-Terraplane 8. And all those admiring letters sent by Public Enemy No. 1 to Henry Ford? Apparently Dillinger never mailed them.

Dillinger’s standing as the worst, probably most dangerous, crook of all time, remains unchallenged.

He'll always be remembered as the prototypical bank robber, the far-ahead-thinking hoodlum who was first to realize that the era of running the law ragged on hot-blooded stallions was finished: a really up-to-the-minute desperado must loot by automobile,

and even employ shady racing drivers to chauffeur his getaway cars.



So impatient was Dillinger to get on with a life filled with truly big-time crime that he began the enterprise by going over the wall at the Indiana State Prison. His date of escape was 26 September 1933. Accompanying him were murderers, embezzlers, and an assortment of other violent

hoodlums, all destined to be known as members of “the Dillinger Gang.”

You don't, however, achieve the status of Public Enemy No. 1 without acquiring overwhelming firepower. So Dillinger began paying criminal calls on the only rival organizations in possession of all the dangerous weapons of destruction he and his fierce tribe of bank- robbers required.

Which is to say, he and his growing gang of goons played a novel trick on the law by stealing all the firepower they needed from the heat ... from the cops themselves. And then this same now-well-armed gathering of thugs devoted their accumulation of machine-guns and sawed-off shotguns into a violent orgy of bank robberies, random killings, and high-speed getaways which lasted through the next 13 months.

A tradition has come down that Dillinger was obsessed with stick-ups and his gun molls, and so he was, but he had other concerns. The Depression 1930s was the deadly decade of armed robbery, bootlegging, random slaughtering, and, of course, celebrity status for the criminals who were responsible for carrying out all of the mayhem. Even though Dillinger basked in the glory of his newspaper rating of Public Enemy Number 1, he always faced stiff readership popularity from his gangster rivals, themselves infamous robbers and automotive fanatics.

Among them: Baby Face Nelson, who occasionally raced the dirt tracks; empty-headed



Clyde Barrow and his cold-blooded killer of a girl friend Bonnie Parker; Ma Barker and her family of murderers; Machine-Gun Kelly, the kidnapper; and, last but not least, Pretty Boy Floyd, hit man, and unlucky Jelly Nash, initiator, and unintended victim, of the great Kansas City massacre.

Unlike most of them, Dillinger was a terrible driver. Although Public Enemy No. 1 once bragged that he could back up at top speed for a whole city block without hitting anything, during his rookie attempt in a stolen getaway car he knocked down a fence.

This was why, to shore up his gang's reputation, and his own, Dillinger began hiring disenchanted racing drivers as wheelmen: thanks to the Great Depression, lots of them were seeking work. Among them was Edward Willis Shouse, a.k.a. Ed Shouse. Before becoming a prime part of the Dillinger Gang, Shouse could be found racing in the Indiana hub of Vigo County, whose other racing drivers included Wilbur Shaw, later to be the Indy 500's three-time winner, and then the Brickyard's president.



Shouse chose a radically different career path from Shaw's. He stood trial for auto-banditry -- grand-theft auto -- and was locked away inside Dillinger's old Indiana State Prison, where he was expected to rot for the coming half-century. Shouse met Dillinger instead, escaped with him, but next did the unforgivable, going ga-ga over Billie Frechette, Public Enemy No. 1's bewitching half-caste gun moll. This caused Ms. Frechette to collect a shiner and Shouse, fearing for his own skin, to run for his life – Public Enemy No. 1 never shared his women.

Hilton Crouch (“...an automobile racing driver before he forsook the straightaway of the race tracks for the crooked ways of crime...”) got put behind the wheels of many a Dillinger getaway wagon. His stint with Dillinger was an unhappy one, even though, at the Hoosier Motor Speedway, he'd raced fast enough to worry Howdy Wilcox and as fast as Louie Schneider, who continued on to win an Indy 500. But all that fate had in store for Crouch was incarceration at Marion's county jail.

Forced out of, in turn, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, and St. Paul, Dillinger settled



down on the coast of Florida at, Daytona Beach. His stay there was brief. Using his favorite means of transport, a stolen Hudson Essex Terraplane 8, he sped the length of the continent to heat-stricken Arizona, where he was captured, in Tucson, on the desert floor, with a Boston bull-terrier, a rabbit's foot for luck, a Tommy gun concealed in a trombone case, and the ever-loyal Billie Frehette.

What quickly followed was a wild bidding war breaking out among the four warring states clamoring to execute Public Enemy No.1 Defeating Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio, Indiana won the privilege, bringing Dillinger home to lock him away in a third-floor maximum - security cell where he was guarded by 50 heavily-armed bulls.

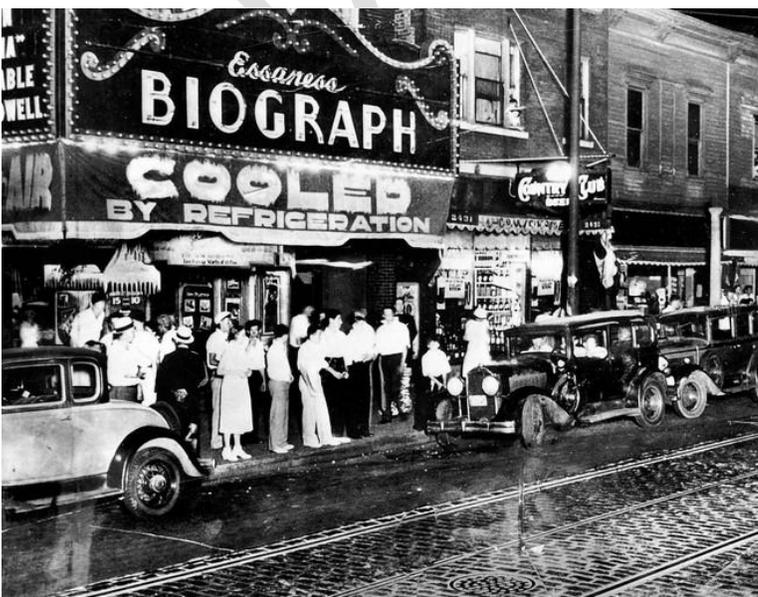
The electrocution sweepstakes were only beginning, and, immediately, they turned against Dillinger. Because Public Enemy No. 1 had had the nerve, and maybe the wit, to escape from stir driving the warden's own Buick, with the warden's mother-in-law among his hostages, there was universal outrage. Nobody thought the break-out was funny.

For 13 long months, John Dillinger had enjoyed a career making the agents of the law look like idiots. Now he had vigilantes, volunteer sharp-shooters from the 540th National Guard and even top crime-buster J. Edgar Hoover all gunning for him.

Retribution at last was coming. In fact, the whole Dillinger Gang was getting rolled up

and shot, and so was Public Enemy No.

1. On July 22, 1934, in North Side Chicago, a hungry posse of well-pleased G-men shot Dillinger dead just as he was emerging from the Biograph Theatre movie house.



His betrayal occurred at the hands of a femme fatale. But not Billie Frechette, who remained ever loyal. Newspapers named Dillinger's turncoat the Lady in Red, even though she was dressed in orange. In a cruel twist, for ratting out Public Enemy No.1., she wasn't rewarded but punished:: deported to Egypt as an undesired alien, she met her own strange demise in Cairo.

The Dillinger Gang's two racing-drivers-turned-bank-robbers, Shouse and Crouch, both met sad ends. Shouse was captured on 2 December 1933, and after serving 16 years of very hard labor disappeared into the murk of the underworld. Crouch, who never renounced a life of crime, was a far harder case came the day he was getting transferred out of the Marion County can, his jailers interrupted him while he was in the middle of sawing off two window bars and the chain that fastened his cell door. -JS