



American Outlaws: The Life and Legacy of John Dillinger

Charles River Editors

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*Comprehensively covers Dillinger's most notorious robberies and prison escapes.

*Includes pictures of Dillinger and important people and places in his life.

*Includes a Bibliography for further reading.

"I will be the meanest bastard you ever saw when I get out of here." - John Dillinger

America has always preferred heroes who weren't clean cut, an informal ode to the rugged individualism and pioneering spirit that defined the nation in previous centuries. The early 19th century saw the glorification of frontier folk heroes like Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. After the Civil War, the outlaws of the West were more popular than the marshals, with Jesse James and Billy the Kid finding their way into dime novels. And at the height of the Great Depression in the 1930s, there were the "public enemies", common criminals and cold blooded murderers elevated to the level of folk heroes by a public frustrated with their own inability to make a living honestly.

Two months after Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933, a petty thief who had spent almost a decade behind bars for attempted theft and aggravated assault was released from jail. By the end of the year, that man, John Dillinger, would be America's most famous outlaw: Public Enemy Number One. From the time of his first documented heist in early July 1933, until his dramatic death in late July of the following year, he would capture the nation's attention and imagination as had no other outlaw since Jesse James.

His exploits were real, and in many cases impressive, but Dillinger's importance and legacy have always been partly symbolic. The country was in a panic over a supposed crime wave that some historians believe was more perception than reality, but a new breed of criminal targeting the nation's already vulnerable banks was a potent illustration and metaphor of the way society's institutions and morals seemed to be coming undone. And in the mind of the public, the outlaws of the 30s were very different from the gangsters of the 20s; they hailed from the farm country of America's nostalgic past, not the corrupt cities of its unsettled present and scarier future. Much was made of Dillinger's roots in the farming town of Mooresville, Indiana, even though he came of age in Indianapolis, and was very much a city boy at heart.

Ultimately, the story of Dillinger and the era's other famous criminals--Bonnie and Clyde, Baby Face Nelson, Pretty Boy Floyd--would largely be seen as a story of America's fall from grace. Just before Dillinger was released from prison in 1933, a feature article ran entitled "The Farmer Turned Gangster."

America saw in Dillinger what it wanted to see, and even in Dillinger's lifetime it was nearly impossible to separate myth from reality.

Even still, Dillinger would never have become the mythical figure he became if J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI hadn't actively marketed him as "Public Enemy Number One," and if he hadn't died in a way that was almost scripted for Hollywood. Dillinger's figure looms so large in American history and popular culture that it's easy to forget that his starring role in the daily news lasted for less than a year.

American Outlaws: The Life and Legacy of John Dillinger looks at the life and crime of the famous outlaw, but it also humanizes them and examines their relationship. Along with pictures of Dillinger and important people, places, and events in his life, you will learn about the infamous public enemy like you never have before, in no time at all.

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