A FOOL PROOF PLAN GONE AWRY: JOHN DILLINGER’S ESCAPE FROM LITTLE BOHEMIA LODGE

BY: BRANDON HENNING

MAY 16, 2007
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
WHY JOHN DILLINGER? .......................................................... 1

CHAPTER I
CRIME, GANGSTERS, AND G-MEN IN THE EARLY 1930’s. ............. 2

CHAPTER II
THE INCIDENT AT LITTLE BOHEMIA LODGE ........................... 5

CHAPTER III
AFTERMATH OF LITTLE BOHEMIA ...................................... 21

CONCLUSION
1934: “CRIME DOES NOT PAY” .......................................... 24

WORKS CITED ..................................................................... 31

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS
Map of Wisconsin and Manitowish Waters............................... 6
Map of the S-Curve Slip ....................................................... 10
Map of Dillinger Raid at Little Bohemia ................................. 17
Wanted Poster for John Dillinger .......................................... 25
INTRODUCTION

There were many gangsters during the Prohibition and Great Depression eras. Criminals such as Al Capone, and Bonnie and Clyde were sought after by local, state, and national law enforcement for their crimes. Sure, all of these gangsters committed crimes, but no one received the notoriety of the American public like John Dillinger. Only one gangster, John Dillinger, earned the title “Public Enemy Number One.” John Dillinger robbed banks, engaged in high speed pursuits, and also killed law enforcement officers. Which leads one to wonder, what makes John Dillinger one of the most popular outlaws of all time? This paper will focus on what made Dillinger wanted more than any of the other notorious gangsters in United States history during the 1930’s and to what extent the Department of Investigation and J. Edgar Hoover went to get their “Public Enemy Number One.”

John Dillinger came into the spotlight during the early 1930’s, a time when the United States was deep into the Great Depression. Americans were down on their luck and looking for a hero. Imagine the Department of Investigation’s surprise when outlaw hero, John Dillinger, became the fascination of the American people. Dillinger held the attention of the American people due to his poise, bravery, and self confidence, even when he was in the face of death.¹ In the early 1930’s, the United States government was unpopular and many Americans sympathized with Dillinger’s lifestyle. He grew up in a broken home and rose from a kid growing up in a small town in Indiana and soared into

greatness. People all over the nation read stories about Dillinger’s disregard for law through police evasion, bank robbery, and other crimes.

Dillinger became popular in a short period of time. In 1933, a year before his death, Dillinger was still a low priority on the federal agenda.² He wouldn’t become exceedingly popular until his escape from the Crown Point jail in Indiana on March 3, 1934. Dillinger gained national attention by breaking out of the jail with a wooden pistol and eventually sent a picture of him with the pistol to an Indianapolis newspaper.³ Soon after his breakout, Dillinger continued to rob banks throughout the Midwest. But something was very different. Instead of being afraid of these bank robbers, people began to embrace the Dillinger gang. People began taking souvenir photographs with the gang and became excited when Dillinger would curse and fire shots in the air.⁴

Perhaps the American public wanted to be like Dillinger—they fell in love with his charisma in the face of danger and how he always seemed to get the best of law enforcement, especially the Department of Investigation.

CHAPTER I
CRIME, GANGSTERS, AND G-MEN IN THE EARLY 1930’s

The Department of Investigation was founded in 1908 by Attorney General Charles Bonaparte and remained relatively quiet throughout the years.⁵ (The Department of Investigation was a part of the Justice Department and would eventually be renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation or FBI in 1935 by J.

---
³ Potter, 144.
⁴ Potter, 144.
Edgar Hoover). Bonaparte found it very difficult to start up this new investigation department. Congress ruled against many attempts in 1907 and 1908 by Bonaparte to create the department. Many people claimed that the DOI was simply a “spy system” that was under the power of the government to do its bidding. Charles Bonaparte took advantage when Congress was not in session and gathered a few Secret Service agents to create the Department of Investigation.

However, when the “Midwestern Crime Wave” began in 1933, the DOI was catapulted into national prominence. One particular incident started the infamous attack on the nation’s most infamous gangsters. On June 17, 1933, several gangsters killed four Department of Investigation members while the agents were transferring bank robber Frank Nash from Kansas City, Missouri. Unfortunately for the gangsters, they accidentally killed Nash and other innocent people as well. The American public and the Department of Investigation were horrified. Many became worried that the same ruthless killings could happen to them and people began making more of an effort to help law enforcement organizations. J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the DOI, immediately went into action. He made a speech to the International Association of Chiefs of Police about starting a nationwide manhunt to take down all of the Midwestern gangsters. Hoover promised, “Sooner or later the penalty which is their due will

---

8 Gentry, 168.
After the incident at Kansas City and a push for Congress to pass major crime bills, the Department of Investigation shifted their main focus from to taking down gangsters. Hoover recruited new agents who were well-trained with handling firearms. He was completely overhauling the DOI and getting ready to make his move against the deadly, but popular outlaws in the Midwest.

J. Edgar Hoover’s key addition to the DOI was the hiring of Melvin “Little Mel” Purvis. Although Purvis wasn’t even five feet tall, his demeanor and skills made him a perfect fit for Hoover’s new look of the Department of Investigation. He was full of confidence and an excellent marksman as well. Even Purvis himself stated, “I never doubted that my application would be accepted; I had a complete and ignorant confidence in my abilities.” After a few years of being in charge of the Dallas, Texas DOI office, Purvis was promoted to work at the office in Chicago, Illinois. His promotion allowed him to become the lead man in the Department of Investigation’s hunt for John Dillinger.

John Dillinger prospered at a time when banks were very unpopular with the American public so bank robbers were not particularly viewed as terrible criminals. The daring robberies and unfathomable getaways were alluring and stimulating, especially if the robbers were handsome and polite. Many banks were foreclosing on farms and homes around the nation; taking everything the American people had left. Dillinger was known to tip well and spend a lot of money so from one standpoint, he was helping to rejuvenate the sluggish economy.

---


J. Edgar Hoover was particularly interested in catching John Dillinger and the American public’s approval of Dillinger flustered Hoover. A special operation was put in order with the code name JODIL, which was the Bureau’s telegraphic shorthand for John Dillinger.\textsuperscript{11} In early April of 1934, Hoover flooded Indiana and Ohio with agents in hopes of catching Dillinger. He pressured all of Dillinger’s relatives to be informants by claiming that harm might come to them if they didn’t help the government catch Dillinger.\textsuperscript{12} Hoover was closing in on Dillinger. He found Dillinger’s girlfriend, Billie, and tried to set up a trap to get Dillinger. Unfortunately for Hoover, his plan didn’t work as Dillinger saw her being taken into custody.\textsuperscript{13} Dillinger had to get out of the area.

When Dillinger fled the Chicago area to take the heat off him and his gang, he traveled to a lodge in Northern Wisconsin. However, a tip arrived from the lodge to Melvin Purvis on the location of Dillinger and Hoover finally had his chance to take down his “Public Enemy Number One.”

CHAPTER II
THE INCIDENT AT LITTLE BOHEMIA LODGE

On April 20, 1934, the gang left Chicago in three cars headed on a 400 mile trip to northern Wisconsin and a resort called Little Bohemia.\textsuperscript{14} It would not officially open until May, so there would be many rooms available, which was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{note13} Potter, 149.
\bibitem{note14} John Toland, \textit{The Dillinger Days} (New York: Random House, 1977), 262.
\end{thebibliography}
perfect for the Dillinger gang. The lodge was located 13 miles south of Mercer, Wisconsin on Little Star Lake in Manitowish Waters.

It had been built a few years earlier by Emil Wanatka, an emigrant of Bohemia, who was known to be friendly with bootleggers and gangsters during the Prohibition era. Wanatka previously owned a bar in Chicago, but sold it, and now only possessed Little Bohemia. Wanatka was a good friend of Louis Cernocky, who was the owner of Louis Place, a club, in Chicago. Dillinger was also a friend of Cernocky and asked him to write a letter telling Wanatka that the men arriving were good friends of Cernocky’s and should be treated well.15

---

The gang would leave at different intervals throughout the day to prevent an attempt to capture the entire gang at one time. One of Dillinger’s gang members, Homer Van Meter, left first that day. He was to enter the lodge first to make sure it would be a safe hideout for the gang, find rooms for everyone, and search the local area for escape routes. At 1:00 pm, Van Meter and a few other gang members arrived at the lodge. He had his car backed into the parking area so he could leave quickly if an escape was necessary. Van Meter did not have the note from Cernocky with him, but told Wanatka the letter would be arriving with the rest of his guests. Later in the afternoon, Van Meter also noticed a small embankment on the edge of the Little Star Lake that would serve as a great escape route if necessary.

A few hours later, Dillinger and his gang arrived at the lodge. Dillinger was given a room on the second floor of the lodge while notorious gangster, Lester Gills, (also known as “Baby Face” Nelson) got a room in a nearby cabin. Nelson got into an argument with Dillinger regarding room placement, but Dillinger wouldn’t budge. At this time, Dillinger was growing tired of Nelson’s outlandish behavior and was afraid he might kill members of the gang for his own personal gain. Dillinger planned on kicking Nelson out of the gang as soon as possible. After a steak dinner prepared by Wanatka’s wife, Nan, a poker game was set up. Six gang members including Dillinger and Nelson sat down with Wanatka to play cards. The gang introduced themselves around the table as their aliases. Nelson called himself Jimmy and Dillinger was called Johnnie. The

---

game was going along fine until Dillinger won his first pot. As he reached for the winnings, Wanatka noticed a Colt .45 in a shoulder holster. Then it hit him. A man named Johnnie, guns, and very suspicious behavior. Wanatka excused himself from the table and went into the kitchen to look at the newspaper. Sure enough, he confirmed that he was indeed housing famous outlaw John Dillinger and his gang at Little Bohemia. He told his wife Nan about Dillinger and she almost became hysterical. But she calmed herself down and Wanatka went back to the poker game.

The next day, Emil Wanatka approached Dillinger and asked him to come to his office to talk in private. Dillinger went along and Wanatka asked if he was indeed John Dillinger. Dillinger then said, “You are not afraid are you?” “Don’t worry,” Dillinger told him. "I want to sleep and eat a few days. I want to rest up. I'll pay you well and then we'll all get out.” Wanatka wasn’t so convinced that it would be that easy. He warned Dillinger that the Little Bohemia Lodge was all he had and he was not interested in a shoot out.

Right before lunch, Wanatka and three gang members did some target practice behind the lodge. Surprisingly, Wanatka out shot all three gang members. Meanwhile, “Baby Face” Nelson was playing catch with Wanatka’s little son, but his son quit because Nelson was intentionally throwing the ball so fast that it hurt his hand.

---

20 Toland, 264.
Times around the lodge had become very tense. Every time the phone rang, one of the gangsters eavesdropped. Every time a car came, Wanatka had to explain who it was to Dillinger. Every time someone from the lodge went into town, a gangster went with them. Wanatka was afraid for Nan and his ten-year-old son. "Baby Face" Nelson was known to be a really dangerous gangster and made Wanatka particularly afraid for his family and staff. Emil Wanatka knew he had to do something. Luckily for him, the son of Nan’s brother, George La Porte, was having a birthday party. Wanatka asked Dillinger if it was ok to take his son to the party and Dillinger agreed. However, the famous gangster sent Homer Van Meter to follow Wanatka, to make sure he didn’t tell anyone about Dillinger’s gang hiding out at Little Bohemia.

After a while, Emil Wanatka made a trip home from the party with his son. He started to feel more resentful about having to obey orders in his own lodge and he had enough of the Dillinger gang.⁴¹ Wanatka decided to write a letter to a man he knew in the U.S. Attorney’s office in Chicago. He gave the note to his wife while they ate an early dinner away from the gang in a separate dining room. Nan slipped the letter into her corset and decided to make another trip to her nephew’s birthday party. She received permission from Dillinger to go and much to her surprise; he wasn’t adamant that a gang member go with her. Intensely relieved, Nan and her son got into the car and drove away. But she was worried that Dillinger would follow her, so she kept pulling the choke to kill the engine.⁴² All of a sudden, Nan noticed that a car was following her. She didn’t think too

---

⁴² Toland, 265.
much of it and continued on past the house where the birthday party was held to travel to nearby Mercer, Wisconsin to mail the letter. However, when she slowed down, the car following her slowed down as well. She caught a glimpse of the driver; it was none other than the ruthless “Baby Face” Nelson.

She panicked, but came up with a plan quickly. Her other brother, Lloyd La Porte, lived on an S-curve right up the road. As she went into the second part of the curve, she accelerated in an attempt to lose “Baby Face” Nelson. It worked and Nan pulled into her brother’s driveway. He immediately got in, and she backed out and continued on without Nelson noticing the newly acquired passenger.

The S-Curve Slip
Then, she gave the letter to her brother and pulled the same trick at the next S curve where she dropped off her brother just outside the town of Mercer, Wisconsin. Nan stopped into a candy store and was under the watchful eyes of Nelson the entire time. As she left the store, she saw her brother, Lloyd, who had just sent the letter without Nelson seeing him. Nan drove by, picked him up, and traveled to the birthday party.

When Nan arrived, the members at the party could tell something was wrong. She took a few of her family members into a bedroom and told them all about Dillinger and Little Bohemia. Henry Voss, Nan’s step-brother, knew that they would need to come up with a plan. It was Saturday; the letter would not be sent out until Monday and then would take a few more days to arrive. Voss was worried that Nan and her family would be dead by then. He felt the local sheriff’s office was not up to handling the Dillinger crowd and they would contact the Chicago office of the Department of Investigation. Voss would drive to Rhinelander, Wisconsin, a town 50 miles south of Little Bohemia, to call the Chicago DOI office. Nan did not immediately approve of the plan, so she told Voss that she would ask her husband, Emil Wanatka, if he approved of the plan. She told Voss to come by the lodge tomorrow and she would give him a pack of cigarettes. If Wanatka approved, there would be a note in the pack.

---

24 Toland, 267.
The next morning, Henry Voss showed up and asked Nan if he could have a pack of cigarettes since he forgot his. She gave him a pack of Marvels and the gang didn’t suspect a thing. Soon Voss and Lloyd La Porte were on their way to Rhinelander. Unfortunately, the roads were bad from a snow storm and the fifty mile drive took one and a half hours. Once they arrived, Voss and La Porte found the nearest phone and called the U.S. Marshall Office in Chicago. Melvin Purvis, head of the Chicago DOI office, was at home on his day off when the call came in from Rhinelander. The U.S. Marshall Office called Purvis at his home and told him that a Henry Voss was calling claiming he knew where Dillinger was. Purvis called back the number he was given, Voss answered and said, “The man you want most is up here.” He refused to confirm it was the famous gangster until Purvis asked him if he meant John Dillinger. Voss disclosed that Dillinger and his gang were at the Little Bohemia Lodge in Manitowish Waters, Wisconsin.

Melvin Purvis was ecstatic. Like J. Edgar Hoover, Purvis enjoyed being in the eyes of the American public. He immediately found out that the nearest airport to Little Bohemia would be in Rhinelander so he advised Henry Voss to stay there. He wanted Voss to wear a handkerchief around his neck so he would know who to speak to. Purvis contacted Hoover and told him to fly all available agents to Rhinelander for a surprise attack on the Dillinger gang. Hoover sent reinforcements from the DOI office in St. Paul and Assistant DOI Director, Hugh

---

Clegg, would be in charge of the Little Bohemia raid. Purvis got all of his men from Chicago ready to go. He chose to take eleven Department of Investigation agents on the plane and the others would drive. The flight would take three hours and a fifty mile drive to the lodge was all that stood between Dillinger and the fast approaching DOI agents.

Meanwhile, John Dillinger and his gang were getting ready to move on. It looked like the Department of Investigation would miss out on catching Dillinger yet again. Earlier in the day Dillinger sent gang member Pat Reilly and one of the gang’s girls to St. Paul to purchase more ammunition. He asked for an early dinner so that they could all get on the road. It was a Sunday afternoon and the bar was filled with patrons for Little Bohemia’s Sunday special dinner. Around 4:00 that afternoon, Nan’s sister, Mrs. Voss, drove up to tell her sister that her husband Henry had gotten in touch with the DOI. Nan told her that the gangsters were leaving early that evening and were waiting for Reilly and the other gang girl to get back so they could leave. Mrs. Voss left soon after to relay the information to her husband who was meeting with DOI forces at Rhinelander airport.

When Reilly finally arrived later that afternoon, he pulled into the driveway, but didn’t see the other cars. Luckily for the Department of Investigation, Dillinger moved two cars out of sight into a garage after Reilly left for an immediate escape if necessary. However, this move would eventually prove costly for the Dillinger gang. Since Dillinger didn’t plan on leaving until Reilly arrived, Dillinger

---

kept waiting at Little Bohemia. Reilly got spooked and thought that the gang had left or, worse, had been captured and the authorities were lying in wait, so Reilly backed out and decided not to return until after dark.\textsuperscript{29}

Nan Wanatka saw Reilly back out and leave that afternoon from her position in the kitchen window and was excited. She thought that Dillinger’s gang would finally be taken down. It was past 6:00 and Dillinger began to wonder where Reilly was. At this time, the DOI agents landed at Rhinelander. Mrs. Voss hadn’t made it to Rhinelander yet so the DOI planned to conduct the raid early the next morning at 4:00 A.M and travel to the outskirts of Little Bohemia once the rental cars for the agents that flew in from Chicago and St. Paul arrived. At four in the morning, Emil Wanatka was to hide all the innocent people in the basement so no one would get hurt. Finally, Mrs. Voss arrived and told the DOI agents that Dillinger was going to leave as soon as Reilly returned. Hugh Clegg was stunned. He knew it would take over an hour to make it to the lodge and he only had one car for seventeen DOI agents. Clegg borrowed five cars from a few local people and before the agents left, he sketched out a plan to capture Dillinger. Clegg told his plan to the DOI agents. "Three agents wearing bullet-proof vests would storm the main door of the lodge. A group of five would flank the lodge on the left in a line all the way to the lake and intercept anyone who tired to break through. A similar group would do the same on the right. Thus the gang would be trapped on three sides. The fourth side, the lake, was impassable." \textsuperscript{30} It seemed like a “fool-proof plan” or so Clegg made it seem.

\textsuperscript{29} John Toland, \textit{The Dillinger Days} (New York: Random House, 1977), 271.

\textsuperscript{30} Melvin Purvis, \textit{American Agent}. (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1938) 8.
Considering how little time the Department of Investigation had to plan an attack, the arrangement was good. However, it did not take into consideration three landscape issues which were missing from the map they received from Henry Voss. Some of the details left out included, a ditch on the left of the lodge, a barbed-wire fence on the right, and a steep bank near the lake, which could mask an escape along the shore. Nor did it occur to Voss to warn Purvis about Wanatka’s two watchdogs.  

The DOI was on their way, but would have problems before they arrived. After thirty two miles of driving on muddy and hole-filled roads, two cars broke down and eight agents were forced to ride on the running boards of the remaining automobiles. The cold weather and darkness combined with the wind almost made the agents fall off the vehicles, but everyone would make it to Little Bohemia.

A half an hour later, the DOI received information from Henry Voss that Dillinger had not left Little Bohemia yet. Hugh Clegg knew he had to attack as soon as possible. He quickly reminded the agents of the plan again and ordered all cigarettes to be put out. All of the agents rode in the three remaining cars with their lights off as they headed toward Little Bohemia. However, Pat Reilly was arriving back from St. Paul and coming from the opposite direction. Fortunately for the DOI, he got spooked again and parked a few miles away from the lodge and waited. Clegg, Purvis, and the other agents arrived at Little Bohemia. Clegg had two cars barricade the exit to the lodge so Dillinger couldn’t escape. All of the agents checked their weapons and began to set Clegg’s plan into motion. As

the agents quietly approached the brightly lit lodge, suddenly, Wanatka’s two
watchdogs barked frantically. The agents ran to their positions, believing that the
element of surprise was gone and Dillinger would know something was
up. Dillinger didn’t even look up from his card game because the dogs had
barked so frequently during their visit that the gang members were used to the
noise.32

Then John Dillinger got a lucky break. Three of the bar’s customers, two
Civilian Conservation Corps workers and a gas salesman, chose that particular
moment to pay up and go home. At the same time, two bartenders went out on
the porch to see what was bothering the dogs. The three customers walked to
their car in the parking lot. Inside the car were John Hoffman, the gas station
attendant and the two CCC workers from a nearby camp named John Morris and
Eugene Boiseneau. The agent saw these five men leaving the lodge at separate
exits and assumed it was Dillinger’s gang getting ready to escape.

As the agents moved in, Hoffman started the automobile and the radio,
which had been left in the on position, blared loudly. The three people inside the
car could not hear the warnings of the DOI agents because of the loud music.
So Clegg and Purvis, believing the three men to be members of the gang
attempting to flee, ordered the agents to shoot out the tires.33 However, the
unprepared agents blasted away at the automobile, hitting all three occupants
with their fire instead of the tires. Hoffman ran bleeding from the car and hid in

33 Toland, 277.
the nearby woods. Morris stumbled back into the lodge and had a drink while Boiseneau did not move; he was killed instantly.\textsuperscript{34}

Obviously, the shots from the guns alerted the Dillinger gang to someone’s presence. From a second story window, Homer Van Meter returned fire on the approaching DOI agents, but it lasted for only a few seconds. Since the gang laid out a careful escape plan the day they arrived, Dillinger and other gang members followed the plan to perfection. They ran down to the back of the lakeshore and turned right while only “Baby Face” Nelson turned left.

Nelson apparently wasn’t listening when the plan was hatched and went the wrong way. Unfortunately for the agents, the incomplete map from Voss would haunt them. Some fell into the drainage ditch on one side and others became entangled in the barbed wire on the other side. By the time the agents made it to the lake, all of the gang members were gone.

However, Clegg and Purvis still believed Dillinger was in the lodge. Pat Reilly finally showed up at Little Bohemia, but he was ordered out of his car by the Department of Investigation agents. He refused and instead attempted to back out of the driveway. The DOI began shooting at Reilly’s radiator and tires and managed to hit a tire. However, Reilly got onto the road and continued on with his flat tire. At that time, the wounded CCC worker, John Morris, crawled across the lodge floor to the telephone and picked up the receiver. Alvin Koerner, the local exchange operator came on the other end. Morris said, “Alvin, we’re at Emil’s! Everybody has been knocked out!”

Emil Wanatka heard Morris upstairs and went up to help him. Koerner connected them to the DOI and they instructed that Wanatka and everyone come out with their hands up. Three gang girls refused to leave the lodge, but Clegg ordered his men to stop firing and let the girls come out. If they did not, he threatened to fire tear gas into the lodge. Meanwhile, Wanatka and Nan Wanatka’s brother, George La Porte, were driving John Morris to the CCC camp for medical attention. On the way there, La Porte came across a man trying to stop his car, but he didn’t slow down. It was a good thing La Porte didn’t stop, because the man who tried to stop the car was gang member Homer Van Meter.

Dillinger and another gang member came out of the woods as soon as La Porte drove past. The gang needed a car as soon as possible. They saw a truck parked in a driveway across the street and went up to the home and knocked on the door. An elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, answered the door and had no choice but to let Dillinger and his gang member in. A gang member pulled the telephone out of the wall so the couple could not call for help or tell anyone they had seen the gang. Dillinger could tell the couple was afraid, but reassured them that no harm would come to them. All he wanted was a car. A carpenter, who lived with the Mitchell couple, owned a Ford Coupe and Dillinger told him to get in the car because Mrs. Mitchell was sick and needed a doctor. Once in the car, he was forced to drive the gangsters toward St. Paul, Minnesota.

“Baby Face” Nelson wandered around the woods before coming across a resort run by a Mr. and Mrs. Lang. He forced them into their own car and drove toward the makeshift DOI headquarters down the road. However, the headlights went out so Nelson needed a new car. He came up to a home the Lang’s said was owned by an Alvin Koerner. Ironically, it was the same Alvin Koerner who ran the telephone exchange between the injured Morris and the Department of Investigation. George La Porte, Emil Wanatka, and two bartenders showed up at Koerner’s house as well, but Nelson was already there. He had the Lang’s and Koerner’s up against the wall hostage when La Porte, Wanatka, and the bartenders entered the home. One of the bartenders, who had been pleased with Nelson’s big tips, entered and said, “Hello Jimmy.” (This was Nelson’s alias)

“Never mind the bullshit, just line up against the wall with the rest of them, said Nelson.”

Wanatka told Nelson to put the gun down, but instead he took La Porte’s car with Wanatka and Koerner as hostages. Nelson told Wanatka to drive, but Wanatka kept pretending like he didn’t know how to start the car. Just then, a car with two DOI agents and a local constable approached. Before Nelson had arrived at Koerner’s house, Mr. Koerner saw someone approach and called the DOI to tell them someone he did not know was coming to his door. However, Purvis believed the gang was still in Little Bohemia; he believed this was the Department of Investigation’s chance to capture a gang member and ultimately, John Dillinger.

A vehicle containing DOI Agents W. Carter Baum and J. C. Newman, and local constable Carl Christensen arrived. Agent Newman stepped out of the car and stated that he was looking for Mr. Koerner. At this time, Nelson hopped out the car and aimed his automatic pistol at the three men. Seeing Newman on the running board of the car, Nelson said, “I know you bastards are wearing bulletproof vests so I’ll give it to you high and low.” He shot Newman in the forehead, but the agent lived. Baum died instantly and Christensen was wounded eight times, but would survive. Nelson seemed to go crazy. He fired at anything that moved. Luckily, Koerner escaped back into his house and Wanatka hid in a snow bank. Nelson got into the DOI Ford and drove away. Miraculously, Newman got up and went to Koerner’s house for help. But Koerner wouldn’t let him in because he feared it was a trick by Nelson.

---

39 Toland, 282.
Emil Wanatka ran to Little Bohemia just down the road for help. When he arrived, Purvis asked Wanatka for his name and address, instead of helping Wanatka. He drove back to Koerner’s house to try to help the injured agents. Wanatka picked up Baum’s dead body and brought him to the nearby CCC camp. Then, he went back to Little Bohemia where the DOI were still expecting Dillinger or some members of his gang to be inside. Early in the morning, J. Edgar Hoover released a statement claiming that the Department of Investigation had Dillinger surrounded in Northern Wisconsin. However, Wanatka told the agents surrounding Little Bohemia that Dillinger left last night. Tear gas was still pouring from the lodge and the three gang girls came out. Six agents went into the place, but found no one else. The DOI had lost Dillinger and his gang again. Nan Wanatka was hysterical and for years she had an intense paranoia that members of the Dillinger gang would come back and kill her. The shootout at Little Bohemia was over.

CHAPTER III

AFTERMATH OF LITTLE BOHEMIA

What happened at Little Bohemia? How could Dillinger escape? Purvis blamed it on Emil Wanatka’s barking dogs. Hoover blamed it on the “three drunken members of the Civilian Conservation Corps” that came out of the lodge. This was a sorry effort on Hoover’s part to cover up the mishap at Little Bohemia and pass blame onto someone other than the DOI. Eventually, Hoover would blame Purvis for Little Bohemia, even though Hugh Clegg was first in

command. Everyone seemed to have forgotten about Henry Voss’ incomplete map. If the map would have been accurate, the agents would have been able to devise a better attack plan, and possibly captured John Dillinger. John Dillinger could have also done a few things differently to prevent a shootout. Perhaps if John Dillinger would have kicked “Baby Face” Nelson out of the gang before the trip to Little Bohemia, the Wanatka’s wouldn’t have been frightened enough to contact the police. Nelson’s killing mentality, cruelty to Wanatka’s son, and scary stalking techniques of Nan all factored in the Wanatka’s choice to alert the DOI of Dillinger’s presence at Little Bohemia. Also, sending Pat Reilly to get ammunition caused the gang to delay their departing time. Reilly made it back to the lodge before the DOI agents arrived, but Dillinger hid the cars in the garage so Reilly got spooked and left the lodge area for a few hours. Any single event, or combination of events, could have been the one to set off the shootout. As evident above, it is all up to whose opinion one receives on the Little Bohemia incident to determine what exactly went wrong.

After Little Bohemia, the DOI came under massive criticism from local and national regions. 42 It was one of the worst public relations fiascoes in the Department of Investigation’s history. Local residents said they could have helped capture Dillinger if they would have asked for their help. A group of locals said, “If they’d only let us help them, we’d a got Dillinger. But they were high hat and didn’t want any local talent.” 43 Emil Wanatka was also upset about the condition of his lodge after the shootout. Bullet holes riddled the lodge, broken

---

glass was everywhere. He was only given thirty dollars from the government to repair his lodge. Wanatka was not the only local cheated by the government. A Rhinelander Ford dealership had to sue the DOI to get money to pay for the taken, abandoned, and damaged cars since they would not pay.44

Melvin Purvis later said that he attempted to resign to take the blame for the mishap at Little Bohemia, but it didn't go through. Talk was also going around about the possible demotion of J. Edgar Hoover if Dillinger wasn't caught soon. It was a disaster. The Department of Investigation had killed an innocent man and wounded two others, one agent was killed, one wounded and a third lawman nearly dead. Senator Schall of Minnesota said, “The Department needs more detectives and fewer politicians.”45 That seemed to be in reference to Hoover’s desire to be liked by the American public. Will Rogers summed it up best about the DOI’s faux pas at Little Bohemia: "Well, they had Dillinger surrounded and was all ready to shoot him when he came out, but another bunch of folks came out ahead, so they just shot them instead. Dillinger is going to accidentally get with some innocent bystanders some time, and then he will get shot."46

The Department attempted to hide their shame and one-up Dillinger when U.S. Assistant Attorney General Joseph Keenan in Washington DC said, “I don’t know when or where, but we will get him.”47 A few days later, a report came out in the New York Times that Dillinger was killed in Northern Wisconsin. Although,

45 Jeffery King, The Rise and Fall of the Dillinger Gang (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2005), 188.
the article did not specify who the source was, it may be assumed that this was an attempt by J. Edgar Hoover to show the American public that he had triumphed over John Dillinger. This attempt obviously failed because Dillinger was sighted robbing a bank in Ohio a few weeks later with Homer Van Meter.\footnote{Matera, Dary, The Life and Death of America’s First Celebrity Criminal. (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2004) 284.}

However, one cannot overlook the benefits the DOI gained from Little Bohemia. The shootout and escape of the Dillinger gang led many Midwestern communities to give funds to equip their police departments with better machine guns and faster cars. That act showed a public turning point against Dillinger. The American public was now afraid for their own lives, just as the Wanatka family and other victims of the botched Dillinger raid at Little Bohemia feared for their own lives. They realized that they could be the next victims of the Dillinger gang and began to trust law enforcement. Another benefit to the DOI was the disorganization of the gang. After the shootout, “Baby Face” Nelson went south to Chicago while Dillinger, Homer Van Meter, and other gang members went west. The backbone had been broken and the gang would never reach the formidable power it once had before the incident at Little Bohemia.\footnote{G. Russell Girardin, Dillinger: The Untold Story. (Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994.) 151.} The Department of Investigation immediately went on the offensive and responded by assembling their forces and making a final push to take Dillinger down.

CONCLUSION

It now seemed like a prime time for the DOI and J. Edgar Hoover to get their self-proclaimed “Public Enemy Number One.” Hoover passed down new commands on how to conduct the Dillinger raids. He would like to have Dillinger
captured alive, but he knew that was a very unlikely request. The Attorney General told the G-men "Shoot to kill – then count to ten!" Hoover doubled the size of the DOI Dillinger squad and also offered a substantial reward of $10,000 for the capture or killing of John Dillinger.

Six weeks later, Dillinger was labeled "Public Enemy Number One" by Hoover. It was the only time in the history of the DOI or FBI that a criminal was labeled as the number one most wanted in America. Nowadays, the FBI releases its Top Ten Most Wanted, but they never label a "Number One" suspect. Now, Dillinger was publicly classified as an enemy of the American people instead of being their "Public Hero Number One." Although Dillinger was.

---

still featured in many newspapers, the Department of Investigation began to gain more support from the American people.

The year 1934 was arguably Dillinger’s best and worst year of his life. He had escaped from an “escape-proof jail” and executed a great escape at Little Bohemia. However, 1934 would be his last year alive. He was betrayed in Chicago by a woman named Anna Sage. She talked to Melvin Purvis and agreed to give up Dillinger for $10,000 and a termination of her deportation to Romania (also known as Rumania). As Dillinger was coming out of a theater, Purvis yelled, “Stick ‘em up, Johnny. We have you surrounded.” Dillinger pulled a gun, but was shot and killed before he could fire a shot. There are conflicting reports regarding whether or not Dillinger even pulled a gun, but nonetheless “Public Enemy Number One” was dead. After Dillinger’s death, Purvis immediately called J. Edgar Hoover to tell him the good news.

Soon after Dillinger was dead, members of his gang went down one by one in 1934. Homer Van Meter was killed by agents on August 22nd while he was resisting arrest. Pat Reilly didn’t die, but spent time in prison. “Baby Face” Nelson finally met his demise by Department of Investigation agents on November 27th. By the end of 1934, all of Dillinger’s gang was either in a coffin or a jail cell.

However, Purvis would become the media superstar Dillinger was. Purvis spoke freely to reporters about the shooting of Dillinger, which is a DOI no-no since it was department policy to not speak to the media. The media gave Purvis

---

the credit for creating the plan and firing the deadly bullets that finally took down Dillinger. The truth of the matter was that Purvis never even fired a shot, but Purvis never admitted that he was not the agent who killed Dillinger at that time. “Little Mel” Purvis had become more popular than Herbert Hoover overnight. Purvis even had his own cereal and cartoon. More than 200,000 children joined the Melvin Purvis Junior G-Man Corps in the 1930s. Since their original hero was dead and his gang was in disarray, America focused their efforts on the life of Melvin Purvis. As stated before, Purvis loved the spotlight and continued to relish in it after Dillinger’s death. This did not sit well with J. Edgar Hoover.

Like Purvis, Hoover loved the spotlight and was angry that a new enemy had taken the place of Dillinger in the hearts of the American public. In public, Hoover congratulated Purvis for all of his efforts. However, in private, Hoover would show disdain for the popular agent. He tried to find a way to demote or fire Purvis, but he was afraid of the public’s reaction. So, Hoover tried to make Purvis resign though unbearable DOI treatment. He sent the agent on numerous “special assignments” which took Purvis away from the public’s eye. Anytime the media brought up Dillinger and Purvis, Hoover stressed that it was a team-effort and not the abilities of one man. Hoover blamed all the deaths of Little Bohemia on Purvis, even though he was not the man in charge of the raid. Not even a year after Dillinger’s death, Purvis resigned. Many believed it was due to the differences between him and Hoover or perhaps the broken promise to Anna Sage. Instead of $10,000 and U.S. Citizenship, she ended up with $5,000 and deportation.
In one final effort to make sure Purvis didn’t make headlines, Hoover announced the arrest of a major extortionist on the day Purvis resigned. It didn’t work and headlines went to “the man who became the Nemesis of Public Enemies…Melvin Purvis, arch enemy and captor of some of the worst criminals of modern times.” 52 Even Purvis himself couldn’t escape the horrors that followed Dillinger. Ultimately, Purvis committed suicide in 1960 when he learned that he had inoperable cancer.

In 1935, J. Edgar Hoover renamed the Department of Investigation to the Federal Bureau of Investigation as we know it today. Perhaps this was a way of moving on by Hoover. Dillinger was dead, Purvis had resigned, and the Midwest Crime Wave was at an end.

After the death of Purvis, Hoover altered and sometimes deleted Purvis’ actions in FBI accounts of the Dillinger case. Instead, Hoover turned to slain Department of Investigation agent, Sam Cowley, to be the face of the FBI. This worked great because Cowley was dead, so it was impossible for him to steal Hoover’s glory. Also, honoring a fallen agent who died in the line of duty would make the Bureau look good. Hoover turned Cowley into the epitome of the corporate G-Man hero.” 53

Melvin Purvis once wrote, “Dillinger must have been born under an evil star; those whose lives touched his either went to prison, committed suicide, or were killed by law-enforcement officers while resisting arrest.” 54

The legacy of John Dillinger still lives on to this day. There are newspaper articles and books regularly written about one of the most famous gangsters of all time. Around the Midwest, there are many of his personal effects in museums and other notable locations. Even Little Bohemia has recovered into a very successful restaurant. A vacation to the Wisconsin northwoods and specifically to Little Bohemia is worthwhile. When you walk into the restaurant, the walls are littered with newspaper articles about the Dillinger raid. The restaurant has a case with some of Dillinger’s belongings that he left at Little Bohemia when he fled. Also, you can actually see the original bullet holes in the windows since they just placed another panel of class behind the hole-filled window.\(^5\)

The death of John Dillinger signified the end of the Midwestern Crime Era. Ever since his death in 1934, we have not seen any great outlaw hero quite like John Dillinger. He was a rare gangster combination of likeability, intelligence, charm, and politeness. Dillinger was one of the best outlaw heroes the world had ever seen; never again would the world see such a gangster hero. However, the era in which Dillinger raided banks made him into a media superstar. Today, stealing from banks typically makes the public angry because someone is stealing your money. However, during the Great Depression, the banks controlled a lot of money and the American public loved reading about Dillinger’s bank robbery escapades.

Also, the importance of Little Bohemia can not be overlooked. John Dillinger’s miraculous escape from the lodge increased his popularity among the

\(^5\) (If the historical value doesn’t attract you, they have the best cheeseburger I have ever had as well as many other great entrees.)
American public for a few weeks. Even when it seemed like Dillinger had no way out; he simply could not be caught. Dillinger and his gang were outnumbered, out-gunned, and out-positioned, but that did not matter. Their cleverness and readiness for an escape made them a superior force against the unprepared DOI agents. The DOI had the notorious gangster within their grasp, but Dillinger still managed to slip away without a scratch. Dillinger and his gang were the underdogs at Little Bohemia, but still came out on top. And so, the Dillinger legacy went on.

However, like all famous gangsters, villains, criminals, whatever you want to call them, they always get caught. They may escape at times, but the law finally catches up with them. Perhaps the next time you are sitting around with a bunch of your friends and think about robbing a few banks, just remember, it is not 1934 and “Crime does not pay.”
WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


