

The Restorer

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LAST MINUTE PHOTOS

(CHANGED DAILY)

SPRAYED BY SHOT



Police and U. S. Agents believe that this light car is the one in which John Dillinger, ace gangster of the nation, escaped through a cordon to get his freedom. The machine, spattered with blood and bullet holes, was found in St. Paul, Minn. The car started from Manitowish, Wisconsin.



PICTURE FROM
DAILY RECORD

BOSTON'S HOME  PICTURE NEWSPAPER



DILLINGER ESCAPES POSSES

The Model A Ford Runs (Away) Again

The John Dillinger Getaway Car Restoration

TWO KILLED, FIVE WOUNDED

By Richard MacLean

The buzz surrounding the July 2009 release of the movie *Public Enemies* has rekindled interest in gangster stories and the beautiful cars of the 1930s. Starring Johnny Depp as John Dillinger, the action thriller portrays one of the country's wildest periods in outlaw bank robberies, escapes and car chases. What few will realize is that the actual escape car Dillinger drove in making one of his getaways from the FBI is in the movie. This article depicts the story behind that legendary getaway car.

An Infamous Crime Spree

From September 1933 until July 1934, Dillinger and his gang robbed banks and in the process, terrorized the Midwest, killing 10 and wounding seven others. He staged three jail breaks, stealing police weapons and making a mockery of the police. It was his escape from the county jail in Crown Point, Indiana, that brought him within FBI jurisdiction.

In that escape he used a wooden gun replica to bluff guards and made off with two machine guns as well as the sheriff's car. He drove across the Indiana-Illinois state line on his way to Chicago and in so doing, violated the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act, a federal offense. J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director, became actively involved – some say obsessed – in the nationwide search for Dillinger whom he designated as public enemy number one.

The heat was on and Dillinger and his gang needed to lay low. Dillinger's lawyer, Louis Piquett, also represented the owner of Little Bohemia Lodge, located off Highway 51, in Manitowish Waters, Wisconsin. (Some believe that Dillinger did not carve his fake gun, but instead believe that it was slipped to him in prison by Piquett.) A deal was cut to rent rooms for three days for \$500, or nearly \$8,000 in today's dollars. On April 20, 1934, Dillinger, Lester "Baby Face Nelson" Gillis, Homer Van Meter, Albert "Pat" Riley, John "Red" Hamilton and Tommy Carroll arrived in three separate cars accompanied by two girlfriends and two wives.

The danger associated with renting the rooms to such famous criminals, plus the enormous reward on Dillinger (nearly \$160,000 in today's dollars), may have led the financially strapped owner Emil Wanatka to have his wife tip off the FBI after the rent was paid. They, of course, claimed that they had no idea that it was the Dillinger gang until after the group arrived in three cars, including a Buick coupe and a black Ford.

Dillinger decided to end the stay early and what was supposed to be a carefully executed takedown became a disaster. Special Agent Melvin Purvis of the FBI in Chicago and the task force set out by car in a rush for Little Bohemia after arriving by plane at the Rhineland, Wisconsin Airport. Cars broke down and the FBI and local police did not have sufficient transportation; some made the trip literally standing on the running boards. Purvis was also not fully informed of the other, innocent guests present, the guard dogs and possible escape routes. The agents blocked off the entrance and partially surrounded the lodge; almost immediately the dogs began to bark.

In the pitch dark and intermittent snowfall, the task force did not realize that the three men who were leaving Little Bohemia after having just finished their Sunday dinner were innocent lodgers. Those three men walked out carrying rifles and got into a 1933 Chevrolet Coupe. Two lodge workers observed them drive off with the car radio blasting. When the men drove towards the entrance to Little Bohemia, the agents gave the order to halt, believing the trio was Dillinger and his gang members, but the lodgers could not hear over the radio. Agents opened fire; two were wounded and one was killed.

The FBI Shootout Fiasco

Dillinger was playing cards and had heard the dogs barking, but it was the gunfire that brought the gang into action. Dillinger turned out the lights and ran upstairs with Van Meter to grab money and weapons. Dillinger, Van Meter, Hamilton and Carroll slipped out unguarded doors and windows, slid down the steep shore bank at the rear of the lodge and headed north along Little Star Lake. Witnesses in the lodge later told agents that these four outlaws never fired a shot during their escape from Little Bohemia.

Not so with Baby Face Nelson. Hot tempered and the last to escape the resort, he actually became the aggressor. After exchanging gunfire with



John Dillinger was designated as the FBI's first Public Enemy #1.

Agent Purvis, he disappeared into the woods and fled to a nearby home where he later shot and killed Special Agent Carter Baum and wounded another agent as well as a local constable.

The final tally: one civilian and one FBI agent dead; two civilians and two officers wounded; hundreds of rounds fired (estimates run as high as 500) into the lodge over several hours; three abandoned gangster molls in custody; and not a scratch on a single criminal.

The Getaway Cars

Pat Reilly and Pat Cherrington, girlfriend to John Hamilton, were just returning to the lodge from St. Paul, Minnesota, when the shooting began. They threw their car into reverse and made their escape in a hail of gunfire. Baby Face Nelson would switch cars several times, including a 1933 Plymouth Deluxe he “rented” at gunpoint for \$20 and a 1929 Chevrolet coach he bought for \$165.

Carroll ran through the woods and two miles down the highway until he came to the Northern Lights Resort where he stole a Packard. Dillinger, Van Meter and Hamilton separately made their way to U.S. Route 51 where they spotted several cars in front of Mitchell’s Lodge. Edward Mitchell and his wife answered the door and were confronted by the three men demanding a car, specifically the Model T Ford out front. Mitchell told them that the Ford would not start, nor would the hired hand’s truck. Only the 1930 Model A Ford Coupe was in running condition.

The car belonged to Robert Johnson, who lived in a nearby cottage. They knew it was slow and only had a top speed of around 45 mph, but the escapees could not be choosy. In short order, Johnson, now a hostage, had a gun pointed at him and was ordered to drive the three outlaws out of town. Once they reached Springfield, Wisconsin, they let their hostage go and gave him seven dollars for his trouble before heading to Minnesota after eluding authorities one more time near Ladysmith, Wisconsin.

In Wisconsin their luck began to change, at least for John Hamilton. With the regional police already alerted, the trio was spotted in their Model A with Wisconsin license plate number 92652 near Hastings, Minnesota, by sheriff’s deputies. Deputy Norman Dieter leaned out the window of the pursuing police car with a .30-.30 rifle and shot a round



1934 photograph of Robert Johnson, his wife, and his 1930 Coupe.

that punctured the rear fender and seat, hitting Hamilton in the back. Dillinger, seated in the middle, broke out the rear window of the Model A with the butt of his Thompson and returned fire. For nearly 50 miles, the cops and gangsters traded almost 40 rounds until the gang lost them and headed for Chicago. Looking for a doctor to treat Hamilton and a faster car to outrace the police, they stole a 1934 Ford V8 and ditched the slower Model A near Mendota, Illinois. In Chicago they tracked down Dr. Joseph Moran who had treated Hamilton for an earlier gunshot wound. This time the doctor refused and Hamilton died sometime between April 26-30 in an Aurora safe house owned by the Karpis-Barker gang.

A Gruesome Discovery and Long-Awaited Restoration

The Model A was impounded by the FBI and the Wisconsin police for investigation purposes and later released to the owner, Robert Johnson. With its broken window, rifle bullet hole in the rear quarter panel, multiple dimples from other bullet impacts and especially bloodied seat, Johnson had no enthusiasm for repairing the vehicle and gave it to his brother, Howard. He intended to repair and restore the vehicle but never got around to it. It was parked in storage from 1935 until 1963 at which point he sold it to Alfred Love for \$1,400, a premium in 1963.

Love moved it from Wisconsin to Chicago, Illinois, where it was put in running condition, but not restored. Later the Model A was given to Love’s eldest son, Paul and moved to Hinsdale, Illinois. In 1971 the father and son found out that writer/director John Milius was filming the movie *Dillinger* (1973) starring Warren Oates and transported it to the movie set for possible use, but the critical Little Bohemia scene using the car was deleted from the script. After the father and eldest son died,



Prior to restoration, the Coupe was documented photographically. This view clearly shows the broken rear window, the bullet hole and rear bumper cross bar. All items that appear in the period

DILLINGER ESCAPES POSSES AFTER TWO RUNNING FIGHTS; TWO KILLED, FIVE WOUNDED



TELLS OF DRIVING DILLINGER Carpenter Aroused From Bed Is 'Glad to Be Alive' to Give Story.

By ROBERT JOHNSON,
Farmer, Whose Auto Was Commandeered by Three of Dillinger's Gang.

PARK FALLS, Wis., April 23 (AP).—Being aroused from a sound sleep and being forced at the point of pistols to act as chauffeur for John Dillinger and two of his outlaw pals is an experience that doesn't happen often in the life of a peaceful small-town carpenter and I will be just as happy if it never occurs to me again.

I live at Mitchell's Resort, near Manitowish, Wis. Last night Dillinger and his two companions came to my cottage and hollered to wake me up.

"What do you want?" I yelled down.

"Mrs. Mitchell [the wife of the resort owner] is sick and needs a doctor right away," they said. "We want you to get your car out and drive after a doctor."

Well, I didn't suspect anything, so I dressed—just put on my everyday working clothes and my bedroom slippers—and went out.

There stood three men facing me with guns. I don't know much about guns, but two of them were revolvers and one was a sawed off shotgun, or probably one of those machine guns.

"Get your car and drive us," they said, sticking their guns into me.

I only got a little coupe, a 1930 model. Two of them got in the seat with me and the other got in the rumble seat. I saw the "Mrs." looking out the window when I drove off, but I guess she didn't know what was happening.

"Now, mind your own business and drive as we tell you and everything will be all right," they said.

They told me to drive as fast as I could make her go.

They kept those guns against me all the time and made me travel the side roads. I was running low on gas, so they made me stop at a station—I think it was Springstead. The place was closed, but one of the men got out and rapped on the door.

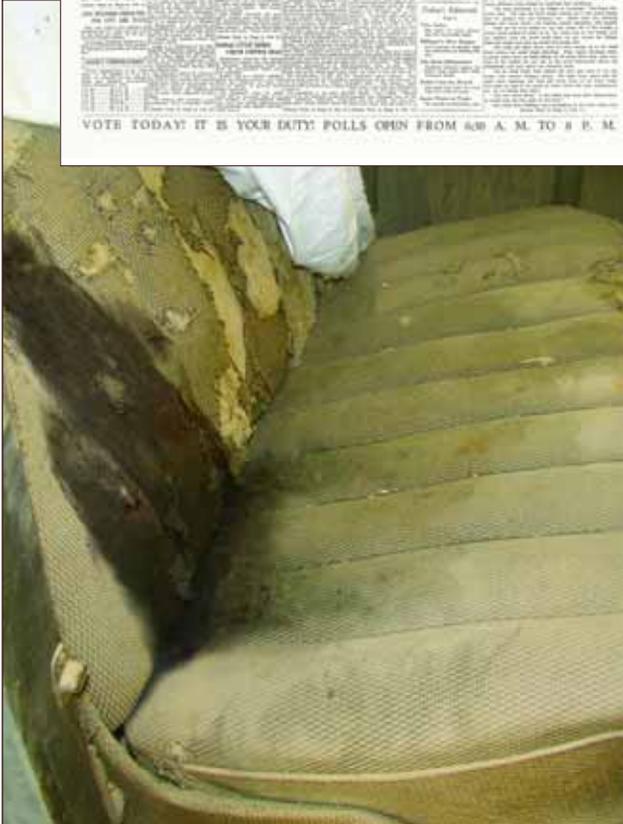
When the attendant came out they ordered gas and oil, and I

couldn't say a word, for there was a pistol against my ribs.

Then we got going again. They seemed to know the roads and told me to stop and get out. They said "so long," and drove away. I walked about an hour until I came to the Pixley Power Station, about ten miles south of Park Falls, and then phoned for help.

So here I am at Park Falls, and glad to be alive to tell about it.

Above: Richard Johnson's first-hand account as published in the *New York Times*.



The seat in 2007 was just as it was after the 1934 shootout.

it was transported to Phoenix, Arizona, where the youngest son and current owner, Mark Love, lives.

Once again, Hollywood was interested in the Dillinger legend and Love contacted Universal Studios. A contract was signed to use the restored car plus hire Love and his son Matthew as extras with Mark as one of the vintage car drivers. The long-awaited full restoration was begun in February 2007 and completed in January 2008, just in time for 45 days of shooting on the sets in Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana.

Mark Love had some misgivings about restoring the car, "I knew that it had value left as is, unrestored. But my father and brother's dream was to someday restore the car and actually drive it around, not leave it in some museum. Plus, Universal Studios needed the car in multiple scenes and not all shot up. So I figured I'd catalogue the damage and bring the car back to life as my family originally intended."



The Dillinger Coupe after restoration and a stint as a movie car.

The pre-restoration condition was thoroughly documented in pictures. One of the most valuable and revealing is a rear view showing the cracks in the smashed rear window that perfectly matches the period photograph published in the *Boston Daily Record*. Famous cars (as well as guns) command premium prices, as this one did in 1963. Anyone can put a round through the rear of a Model A, but to break the window in the precise spider web pattern is all but impossible.

The picture also reveals multiple dimples in the trunk and rear quarter panel. Over 100 are present. Love speculated that they must be bullet impacts, but was puzzled that they did not go all the way through. A retired, now part-time forensic examiner with a state police crime laboratory (his name could not be revealed since it is against department protocol) provided some clues after examining the high-resolution photograph.

“I started my career in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and knew a number of the old-timers on the police force from that era. They had to provide their own service weapons and some had .38 revolvers and a few even carried .32 and .25 automatics. They also had shotguns. The police were so underpowered that a heavy wool coat would stop rounds if fired on from a distance. These are definitely bullet impacts, mostly from a shotgun, it appears.”

But perhaps the grimmest evidence of authenticity was offered by the restorer Dave Sanchez of Dave’s Restoration in Phoenix, Arizona. “We normally would have welded up the bullet hole so you could never even

tell that it was there. Mark wanted us to use only Bondo® so that the damage could be verified in the future. But we had to completely replace the original cotton stuffing on the seat. The driver’s side was fine, but the passenger’s side had been totally saturated with blood that had hardened into a nasty looking black mass.”

Almost immediately Love began displaying the restored Model A at car shows surrounded by a display of other period memorabilia called *Dillinger Years*, a Phoenix-based display company (www.DillingerYears.com). The most recent show was at the Western Thompson Collectors Association Show and Shoot at the General Joe Foss Shooting Complex in Buckeye, 30 miles west of Phoenix, Arizona.

These collectors of real “Tommy Guns” were, of course, interested in all of the variations of Thompsons on display (think of it as the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance, only with extremely expensive guns instead of cars). But the real hit was the Dillinger car and not some rare gun or even the Thompson with the serial numbers obliterated by a real outlaw. Everyone wanted their picture taken in front of it holding their guns. In gratitude, the organizers provided a Model 1921 Thompson with a 50-round “L drum” for Mark Love to shoot. Ownership of these highly regulated submachine guns requires local law enforcement approval, federal registration and an FBI background clearance.

To the amazement of this seasoned gun group, Love had never shot a gun in his entire life. Most shooters start with a .22 rifle; he started at a whole different level, akin to learning how to drive for the first time in a Lamborghini instead of the family clunker. “I was surprised at the lack of recoil compared to what I had expected. It was actually easy and fun to shoot.”



This 1934 Illinois license plate is the movie prop provided for the car.



Johnny Depp drove the Coupe in the movie, although the car did not portray its own roll in the Little Bohemia incident.



Restored and refinished, the Coupe runs well today!

Another view of the theater display.



DILLINGER GANG BELIEVED HIDDEN HERE; ONE MOBSTER SHOT; BLOODY CAR FOUND



Part of the display used in movie theater for the release of "Public Enemies" starring Johnny Depp.



The interior today is much nicer.