



Text Version of Audio Story: Lady in Red

It was a wooden gun whittled right there in the prison cell — the escape-proof prison cell. Some people will say it was whittled there. Others say it was smuggled into the jailhouse. No matter where it came from, Public Enemy Number One, John Dillinger, used it as a persuader to escape from the escape-proof cell in the Crown Point jailhouse in Indiana.

John Dillinger, in spite of his bank robbing and murderous crime sprees, was fast becoming an American folk hero of the 1930s. His daring exploits and his confident attitude made him the most charismatic gangster of his time. It was a time when banks were falling. People were losing their life's savings, and then the banks were turning around and foreclosing on people who couldn't pay. When John Dillinger would rob a bank, he would also often steal and destroy bank documents such as mortgage agreements. It's pretty hard to foreclose on the family homestead without the proper mortgage agreements.

Many Americans, especially in the Midwest, saw Dillinger as a modern-day Robin Hood. Even local police, judges and prosecutors were enamored with Dillinger. Even when he was arrested and placed in the escape-proof jail, the police and prosecutors lined up to have their photo taken with him.

Back in Washington, D.C., the government had recently formed a new criminal investigations division especially to deal with gangsters like Dillinger. J. Edgar Hoover, director of the fledgling Federal Bureau of Investigation, wanted Dillinger in a bad way. If Hoover and his boys could capture, or better yet, kill Dillinger, it would be a feather in the cap of J. Edgar Hoover. It wasn't that Americans feared Dillinger, quite the contrary. Remember, he was their Robin Hood. It was more that Dillinger was so smart ... wily ... cunning. If the FBI could get Dillinger, it would prove Hoover's skills as a master crimefighter — hence Dillinger's distinction as public enemy number one.

The FBI may have even made Dillinger out to be worse than he really was in an attempt to publicize their good works. There are many who argue, even today, that John Dillinger wasn't the cold-blooded killer legend remembers him as. Let there be no doubt: When Dillinger came to town, banks were robbed and people died. He was a murdering thug with little if any conscience. But again, that's not why the FBI wanted him. Hoover wanted that feather. Hoover's government men — or G-men, as they were called — and John Dillinger played cat-and-mouse all over the Midwest, finally meeting for a final showdown in Chicago.

Dillinger invited a young lady out for a date. She set him up. She was in trouble with the law herself and faced deportation back to the old country. She needed something to make a deal with. She had an ace. What better bargaining chip than the most notorious, most wanted man in America? The G-men, with the help of the woman, set a trap. The date would be for a night at the movies.

Dillinger had had plastic surgery to alter his appearance. The FBI wanted to know from the woman how they'd recognize him.

"I'll be on his arm and wearing a red dress," she said.

The government men stood by outside the movie theater, waiting for the woman whose appearance that night would become the origin for a well-known phrase. John Dillinger would come out of the movie house arm-in-arm with the woman responsible for coining the phrase "The Lady in Red." Once spotted, the FBI moved in. In the ensuing hail of gunfire, the story and life of Public Enemy Number One, John Dillinger, would come to a bloody end in an alley beside the Biograph Theater in Chicago, Illinois.

From somewhere behind the radio, I'm the American Storyteller with the music of Johnny X.