

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Fire in Congress Hotel Led to Capture of John Dillinger

Al Ring (my brother and partner in numerous historical-research projects) was a volunteer firefighter for 26 years in St. Mathews, Kentucky, a suburb of Louisville. Now retired in Tucson, Al is working with the Greater Tucson Fire Foundation to document the 130-year history of the Tucson Fire Department (TFD). Over Christmas dinner, Al told an interesting story about the TFD and the infamous desperado John Dillinger. Here are the details:

For ten months in 1933, John Dillinger and his gang terrorized the Midwest with multiple bank robberies, wild chases, daring prison breaks, and violent machine gun battles.

On January 23, 1934 Dillinger and three of his gang were “laying low” in Tucson, two gang members at the Congress Hotel, while the police and FBI were madly searching back east for “Public Enemy No. 1.” Early that morning a fire broke out in the basement of the hotel.

The first alert was by telephone at 7:16 am as recorded in the TFD’s “Daily Report of Fires.” TFD history records, written after the fire, tell the story:

“1-23-1934 Congress Hotel ... 3rd fire in month. 15 yr. old bldg. valued at \$250,000. Day clerk Mrs. Helga Nelson stayed at telephone exchange box awakening guests. Went dead as she finished calling 2nd floor guests. P.D. [Police Department] and employees ran thru 3rd floor to warn guests. Started near oil furnace and oil supply. 3 general alarms brought every piece of equipment. Roberts = chief. [2 ladder trucks] 5 pumpers. ... Flames spread up elevator shaft. 100 guests got out safely. ... Roof fell in at 8 a.m. Cupola over front entrance fell at 8:30 ... extinguished by 10:30 a.m. ... 3rd floor wrecked, rest of building flooded. ”

Firemen helped hotel guests escape from the third floor of the hotel with a ladder. A couple of distraught men offered two firemen a \$12 tip to go back up the ladder and retrieve their luggage. The firefighters remembered that several pieces of the luggage were very heavy.

In the accompanying photo, note the ladder to the third floor of the hotel; this was probably the escape route for third floor guests.

Later, back at the fire station, while reading *True Detective* magazine, the firemen recognized the two men from the fire as Dillinger gang members and wanted fugitives. They reported the luggage incident to the police who began a surveillance operation at the address where the heavy luggage was delivered after the fire.

On January 25th John Dillinger and his three gang members were arrested without incident at three different locations in downtown Tucson. The heavy luggage was found to contain machine guns, rifles, pistols, revolvers, and bullet proof vests - far more firepower than Tucson police officers had.

Dillinger was extradited to Chicago where a month later he escaped jail using a fake carved pistol. Five months after that on July 22, 1934 Dillinger was shot dead by FBI agents while resisting arrest when exiting the Biograph Theater in Chicago.

The Congress Hotel was renovated and today offers 40 vintage rooms, a restaurant with sidewalk seating, nightclub, salon, and banquet room. The building was added to the National Historic Register in 2003.

Since 1992 Tucson has honored the capture of John Dillinger with an annual Dillinger Days celebration, stressing Tucson's role in history. The 2012 Dillinger Days will be held on January 20th and 21st. Three re-enactments will relive the Dillinger gang's last bank robbery in Chicago prior to their arrival in Tucson, as well as the series of events leading to the gang's capture in and around Downtown.

Sources: Tucson Fire Department Records; "Without a Shot Fired: The 1934 Capture of the Dillinger Gang in Tucson," The Smoke Signal, December 2005; FBI website - Famous Cases and Criminals; Dillinger Days website; Arizona Daily Star.



Firefighters stream water into the third floor of the Congress Hotel during the fire on January 23, 1934. (Courtesy of Arizona Historical Society, BN-34507)