

'Maybe I'll Learn Someday, Dad, You Can't Win in This Game'

By ALANNA NASH

"Dillinger captured the imagination," Joe Pinkston says. "I guess I wanted to be like him when I was a kid."

Joe Pinkston is an unlikely admirer of that Public Enemy Number One of the 1930's, John Dillinger. At 44, he's a part-time sheriff in Nashville, Ind., and a former Pinkerton detective and criminal investigator for the United States Air Force. But the fact is that Dillinger has long fascinated lawmen in general and this lawman in particular. Nashville, which is 40 miles south of Indianapolis, was Dillinger territory back then, part of the area where he was born and took refuge; now it is Dillinger territory again, courtesy of Joe Pinkston, who has established the John Dillinger Historical Museum in downtown Nashville.

Old radio themes blare from the RCA table radio in the converted Victorian house at Franklin and Van Buren Streets. Headlines shout from yellowed newspapers framed and hung on the walls. In the first room, photographs and documents tell of the first years of Dillinger, who at the age of 12 was stealing coal from railroad cars and selling it to neighbors. There's a letter he wrote in 1924 from the Indiana Reformatory, where he'd been sent, at age 21, for robbing and beating a grocer. In a corner is the original tombstone—chipped by vandals and souvenir hunters—from Dillinger's grave in Indianapolis's Crown Hill Cemetery (an identical replacement now stands in Crown Hill). It is the first hint amid the museum's lively atmosphere of the grim artifacts to come.

The second room holds such items as the rabbit's foot Dillinger gave a reporter when he was arrested in Tucson, Ariz., early in 1934 . . . a detailed plan for a robbery in Dillinger's writing . . . a bullet removed from the leg of a Dillinger Gang victim. Tacked on a wall are the trousers—the bloodstains preserved—worn by the 31-year-old gangster the night of July 22, 1934, when he was shot down outside Chicago's Biograph Theater. Also on display are replicas of the dead man's effects: a .380 Colt automatic pistol, a straw boater, wire-rim spectacles worn for disguise, a La Corona cigar and a pocket watch.

Two special exhibits distinguish the museum from the average small-town repository: Lifelike, detailed wax figures of Dillinger at critical moments of his career. The first, on the main floor, re-creates the frequently-published photograph of the bandit cradling a subma-

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Indiana museum offers Dillinger in photos, artifacts—and wax.



Photographs by Alanna Nash and The Associated Press

chine gun and fingering the "wooden" gun used in his daring escape from the Crown Point, Ind., jail. The second is on the next floor. As the visitor reaches the top of the stairs, he hears the soft strains of a dirge. Then he sees an all-too-realistic reproduction of the funeral parlor in nearby Mooresville on July 26, 1934, the day—as the newspapers of the time declared—that John Dillinger "came home for the last time." Behind a glass partition lies the wax "body" of Dillinger in a custom-made, full-couch casket. There may be grins and wisecracks from visitors in the rest of the museum, but nobody leaves this room laughing.

Joe Pinkston, who established the museum in partnership with Barton N. Hahn, a former F.B.I. agent, is the co-author (with Robert Cromie) of the biography, "Dillinger: A Short and Violent Life." He grew up in Martinsville, hearing the Dillinger saga from residents of Mooresville, just 16 miles away, and from his uncle, who played pool with Dillinger as a teen-ager. Pinkston has spent 25 of his 44 years collecting Dillinger material. He has interviewed virtually everyone connected with the gangster, including his notorious girlfriend Evelyn "Billie" Frechette and the man generally credited with master-minding Dillinger's demise, F.B.I. Agent Melvin Purvis. Many of the museum's exhibits he acquired from the Dillinger family, some of whom still live in the area.

Some visitors to the museum have theorized that Pinkston laid out the museum as a memorial to Dillinger; Pinkston hedges when asked about it. "Dillinger was the type of man who captured the imagination of the public," he says. "The museum is dedicated to the genuine loss and sorrow on both sides of the law during his 14 months in the headlines."

Pinkston insists that he "offers the museum without social or moral comment." Yet his selection of Dillinger quotations, hanging on the museum walls, suggests his own involvement. One vivid example: "Maybe I'll learn someday, Dad, that you can't win in this game."

The Dillinger museum is 16 miles from the Columbus exit of Interstate 65, on State Route 46. It is open every day from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M., March through November, and 1 to 5 P.M. (closed Tuesdays) December through February. Admission is \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children, who must be accompanied by an adult if under 10. Full-time police officers can get in free if they have identification.

At Salt Creek Park Shopping Center nearby there's another museum of sorts, the John A. Hook 1900 Drug Store, filled with the original furnishings of the old-time pharmacy.