

Back from the Dead

A 60-year-old manuscript surfaces—with new revelations about the exploits of a legendary outlaw

by Paul Engleman

In 1934, a chance encounter with a notorious underworld attorney prompted G. Russell Girardin, then a young advertising man, to write a book about the legendary outlaw John Dillinger. In 1990, another chance encounter—this one with a Chicago writer and Dillinger expert who sought out Girardin to ask a few questions—prompted the retired executive to pull the manuscript off a bookshelf in his North Side home. Girardin's visitor, William J. Helmer, was as surprised to see the manuscript as Girardin was to find Helmer at his door. The two became instant collaborators, and now, 60 years after Dillinger was killed in a flash of gunfire outside the Biograph theatre, *Dillinger: The Untold Story* will finally be published by Indiana University Press.

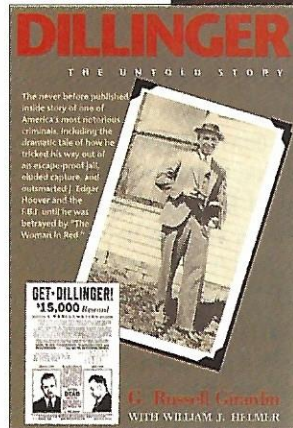
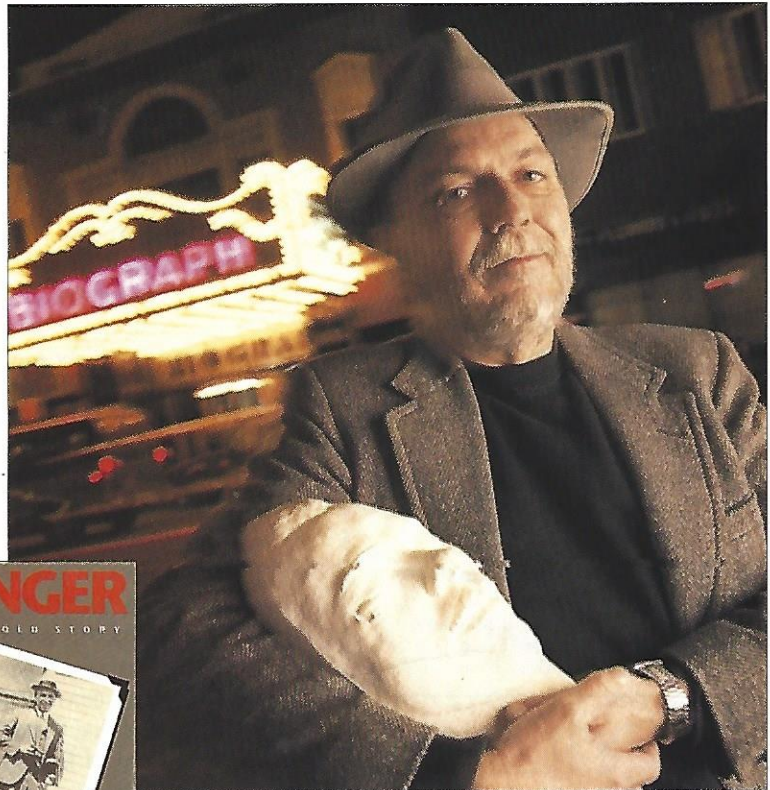
The making of the book has the makings of a Hollywood movie with a storybook ending. But in a tone befitting its gangster subtext, the scenario also has some of the ironies essential to film noir: Girardin did not spend his life desperately searching for a publisher, and he died before his book was published.

The attorney with whom Girardin crossed paths in the fall of 1934 was Louis Piquett, a man Bill Helmer describes as “a P. T. Barnum of the legal profession—or maybe its W. C. Fields.” Girardin met Piquett a few months after the attorney’s most notorious client, John Dillinger, had been killed. As a result of his association with the nation’s first Public Enemy Number One, the slippery Piquett was in hot water, and he had come to the Loop office that Girardin shared with an attorney to seek her counsel for his upcoming trial on charges of harboring Dillinger. A few days later, Girardin approached Piquett with the idea of collaborating on a story about Dillinger.

Piquett readily agreed. According to Helmer, “Piquett’s efforts on Dillinger’s behalf earned him little in the way of money but much in the way of grief, including a stay in prison.” Piquett put Girardin in touch with private investigator Arthur O’Leary, who had served as Piquett’s go-between with Dillinger. When Girardin interviewed him, O’Leary was already in prison in Waukegan.

Girardin’s accounts of those interviews, entitled “Dillinger Speaks,” ran as a series in Hearst newspapers from October 1936 to January 1937. Girardin also had a book contract, but when the syndicate that had bought the series demanded a share of the advance, he put the manuscript away and went on with his advertising career. In his spare time he wrote about Japanese and Chinese history and art.

If Girardin had decided late in life to seek someone to help polish and publish his manuscript, it is doubtful he would have found anyone more qualified than the stranger who came to his door in the



summer of 1990. Bill Helmer had been an editor at *Playboy* magazine for 20 years and had produced a book called *Playboy's Illustrated History of Organized Crime*. He is also a founding member of the John Dillinger Died for

You Society, an Elvis-like fan club created by Helmer and some friends when he was a graduate student at the University of Texas. Despite the lack of a well-defined mission statement, Helmer says, the society has about 2,000 members, all fairly indifferent.

Helmer’s most profound genetic trait is an interest in gangsters. “My daddy wanted to be a bootlegger and he had a one-night career at it in the twenties,” he says. “When I was growing up, he told me tales about going to speakeasies in Chicago and seeing guys guarding the doors with machine guns. Though he clearly embellished it for my benefit, I found it all quite fascinating.”

A fascination with machine guns served Helmer well in the late sixties when he got a master’s degree in history at Texas, “despite” writing a thesis entitled “General John T. Thompson and the Gun That Made the Twenties Roar: A Case Study in Culture and Tech-

Coauthor William J. Helmer with a death mask of John Dillinger at the theatre where the gangster was gunned down on a steamy summer night

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nology." His thesis found a commercial afterlife when it was published in 1969 by Macmillan under the title *The Gun That Made the Twenties Roar*.

Helmer first came across G. Russell Girardin's by-line in 1987 while researching a book on gangsters. At the University of Texas library, which houses the morgue of the defunct *New York Journal-American*, he found the Girardin clippings and circulated copies among fellow "Dillingerologists," including Joe Pinkston, the founder of the John Dillinger Museum in Nashville, Indiana.

Despite the volumes of information—much of it inaccurate—that have been reported about Dillinger over the years, Helmer says there have been only two serious full-length biographies about the Indiana farm boy who became a hardened criminal after serving eight years in prison for a relatively minor offense. Pinkston, whom Helmer regards as the leading authority on the outlaw, coauthored one of them, *Dillinger: A Short and Violent Life*, with Chicagoan Robert Cromie in 1962. Since opening his museum in 1975, Pinkston has been steadily accumulating information for a definitive Dillinger biography. His research led him to call Helmer four years ago and request his help in tracking down Girardin.

"I had assumed that Girardin had long since gone the way of Dillinger," Helmer says. "It didn't occur to me that he might still be living here. And it certainly didn't occur to me to check with Directory Assistance. That was Pinkston's idea."

It turned out to be a good one. Girardin had an unpublished number, but Helmer found a way "to penetrate the electronic vault of the phone company." To his astonishment, Girardin lived only a few blocks away. Although frail and in his 80s, Girardin's recall for names, dates, and details was "simply amazing," Helmer says. "When he showed me the manuscript, I commented that it was a Dead Sea Scroll to Dillinger historians. He liked that a lot." Helmer found his partner to be "an elegant, sharp-witted gentleman. He would get up every morning, put on a business suit and tie, and go off to his study as if he were heading for an office downtown."

Girardin went through the manuscript page by page, elaborating on questions that Helmer raised and adding footnotes. Soon after he finished, he had a stroke and died several weeks later.

The conclusion of Girardin's work marked the beginning of Helmer's. Besides editing the original manuscript, he verified as many details as he could. This entailed two trips to Washington, D.C., to pore over 36,000 pages of FBI documents—many of them confusing and contradictory, some simply false. He wrote a preface, epilogue, and chronology, as well as chapter introductions and historical notes, material that makes up a quarter of the book.

Dillinger: The Untold Story reveals the details of the outlaw's most legendary exploit—his escape from the Crown Point, Indiana, jail—confirming suspicions that the jailbreak was done with a wooden pistol, not an actual gun as maintained by the FBI, and tracing its origins to a German woodworker on Chicago's Northwest Side. The authors disclose that Dillinger's relationship with betrayer Anna Sage, the devious woman in red, went back to mutual contacts in the East Chicago Mob and was not the result of a chance encounter. There's also the revelation that at least two of his bank robberies were most likely prearranged with the banks.

The idea that a university press such as Indiana would publish a book about a famous gangster might sound as peculiar as a major university's approving a master's thesis about a machine gun.

"We are a scholarly press and it is somewhat unusual," says IU editor Bob Sloan. "But if you look at our regional history titles, it turns out to fit reasonably well. If this had been a straight Dillinger biography, we probably wouldn't have been interested. But because there was this unique manuscript behind it all, we were much more willing to say yes to it. And in the meantime, Bill did a tremendous amount of work filling in the gaps."

The press is committed to a first print run of 7,500 copies—2,000 or fewer is customary for an academic publisher—and the book will be in stores by May. Plans are in the works for a promotional tie-in with a possible re-enactment of the Dillinger killing at the Biograph on July 22nd, the 60th anniversary of his death.

There is plenty in the book to satisfy the merely curious and enough new material to whet the appetites of most Dillingerologists. But true diehards will have to wait for the publication of the book Joe Pinkston is writing with Tom Smusyn. At last count the manuscript was 1,200 single-spaced pages.