

Krans Dedication Talk

Good afternoon. The John Dillinger story has been a significant part of the history of Spider Lake, Wisconsin, now Manitowish Waters, for 90 years now. On the weekend of April 21st through the 23rd, 1934, FBI agents engaged in a raid and attempted capture of the Dillinger gang at Emil and Nan Wanatka's Little Bohemia Lodge. Since that fateful night, people have come from across the country to see the site of that now infamous fire fight between FBI agents and the Dillinger gang.

As a member of the Manitowish Waters Historical Society, I lead tour groups and talk about the events and people involved in that historic weekend. However, today is not a tour talk about Dillinger and his gang of criminals. We are here today to recognize members of law enforcement who were killed or wounded while in the line of duty, and to recognize the loss of life and wounding of innocent citizens at Little Bohemia.

In the darkness of the night of Sunday, April 22nd, a civilian was killed, and two were wounded, and an FBI agent was killed while another was wounded, and the Spider Lake constable was gravely injured in the line of duty.

W. Carter Baum, an FBI special agent from Chicago, was ambushed and murdered just two miles from here by Lester Gillis, aka Baby Face Nelson, a notorious member of the Dillinger gang. In addition to the killing of Baum, Nelson shot and wounded FBI special agent Jay Newman and almost fatally wounded Constable Carl Christensen before he escaped.

Eugene Boissoneau, an enrollee at Civilian Conservation Corps Camp Mercer 660, was shot and killed, and John Morris, the CCC camp cook, and John Hoffman, a gas station attendant, were wounded as they failed to stop their car at the order of the government agents who mistakenly took them for three members of the Dillinger gang.

April 22, 1934 started for Melvin Purvis with a cup of coffee and a series of papers he needed to read on his rare day off as the Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago office of the Bureau of Investigation. He was notified by the U.S. Marshals office that a man, Henry Voss, from a remote northern Wisconsin resort community had information important to the Bureau. Purvis called Voss and was told that "The man you want most is up here!" Voss was too afraid to even say the name Dillinger. Plans were made to meet Voss at the airport in Rhinelander, Wisconsin.

April 22, 1934 started out as a pleasant Easter Sunday for Newman and his family. They had just returned from Sunday worship and were planning their day. His neighbor and coworker Baum was spending the day with his wife and two young daughters. They both would be called to report to work unexpectedly.

At the office, according to Newman, "Purvis informed us that he had received a tip by long distance telephone that members of the Dillinger gang were holed up in a hunting lodge in the forest area of northern Wisconsin, about 50 miles from the small town of Rhinelander, the nearest town having any semblance of a landing field for an airplane." By the late afternoon, three planes were headed for Rhinelander, one from St. Paul, Minnesota and the other two from Chicago.

From his plane, Purvis looked out over the great expanse of woodland and lakes and wondered the fate of his men. The FBI was enroute to capture the Dillinger gang but had little information about what they were about to face. Most of the information needed to set the trap for the Dillinger gang would have to be learned after they landed in Rhinelander and traveled 50 miles to Spider Lake. Purvis said of those in his plane: "Everyone knew that the venture would be no Sunday school picnic. Everyone knew that if there were six members of the Dillinger gang at Little Bohemia, they would not come out with their hands up."

Newman flew in the same plane as Baum and Purvis. They were in a single engine, single prop plane, and the air became turbulent with snow falling as they approached the landing field. The pilots were using basic road maps to guide them into Rhinelander, and they over ran the field. One of the blades broke off the prop and all of the passengers flew out of their seats toward the cockpit of the plane. They came to a stop, and there were no injuries.

Hugh Clegg and his men from St. Paul had already landed, and the planning began. Voss drew a simple map of Little Bohemia but didn't provide crucial information, including: one, Little Bohemia was open to the public while the gang was there. As a matter of fact, they had served 75, \$1 dinner specials that evening. Two, Nan and Emil had two collie dogs that barked anytime anyone drove into the lodge. Three, the terrain was rough and could be a problem for the agents. Four, the lake was below an embankment with a beach that could obscure the view of agents if there was an attempted escape.

Voss told Purvis that the gang was scheduled to leave Little Bohemia early Monday morning. Relieved, Purvis felt that there was time to plan and to study the property to make the raid a success. Voss and a special agent Suran were sent ahead to Voss' Birchwood Lodge while the others got organized and commandeered cars. Suddenly, at 6:30 pm, Voss returned to the airport and related to the agents that he had just met his wife, Ruth, on the highway and that the gang was now planning to leave that night, and that by the time the agents arrived, the gang might already be gone.

Purvis and Clegg moved quickly, but the road north was treacherous and slow, and two commandeered cars broke down enroute. Newman was one of eight agents who ended up having to travel to Little Bohemia on the running boards of one of the cars and hanging on for dear life in the misty frozen night.

They arrived at Voss' lodge and began their pursuit. Carrying the simple map drawn by Voss, the agents' cars crept north on the highway with their lights off as they reached the driveway of Little Bohemia. They blocked the one road to the lodge, and men were directed to the right and left of the lodge, with some moving to the front of the place. Newman, Baum, Purvis and Clegg were to cover the lodge from the front, and the rest began to fan out.

Besides the gang, Boissoneau, Morris and Hoffman were the only customers left in the building when the agents arrived. They spent some time at the bar and when they had their last drink, they walked out on the porch followed by owner Emil Wanatka and employee George Bazso. They talked for a few minutes as Wanatka's dogs Shadow and Prince started to bark, and then the three headed for their car in a hurry to get home. Hoffman backed his car around in the arch of light in front of Little Bohemia and drove into the darkness. The heater was blasting, the radio was blaring, and the windows were closed tight. They headed toward the highway and the armed Federal men were walking toward their car, demanding they halt. Hoffman did not hear the commands or just didn't stop. Agents continued to yell for the car to halt but the car kept coming, and the agents opened fire. The car came to a halt but too late. Boissoneau was dead, and the other two were wounded. Hoffman later stated that, "The radio was playing in the car and then something hit me. I didn't know anything was wrong before that." Hoffman got out of the car and ran to the woods on the right of the building and was found by agents. Morris fell out of the car and limped back into the lodge.

This gun fire alerted the gang, and some began to fire out of second story windows. Baby Face Nelson ran out of the cottage to the right firing into the night, almost hitting Purvis and ran into the lodge. The agents returned fire. Then there was silence. It was believed that the gang was hunkered down inside, and Purvis and Clegg decided to wait until tear gas and more bullet proof vests arrived by car to then storm the lodge.

Inside, the gangsters were on the move and escaped out the rear of the building and down the embankment, and moved on to put many more people in harm's way. Nelson escaped through the woods south of the lodge to the home of Paul and Minnie Lange, kidnapping them and taking their car, which died just along the highway near Alvin Koerner's home. Held by gunpoint, the Langes were led to the Koerner front door, and Koerner let them in, not knowing that Nelson was behind them. Nelson now had six hostages and would soon have more. Just before that knock on the door, Koerner, who ran the town's telephone exchange, had alerted agents at Voss' that a car without lights was parked just outside his home.

In the meantime, back at Little Bohemia, Purvis and Clegg sent Baum and Newman to Voss' to make a call to Rhineland and to Vilas County Sheriff McGregor to hurry re-enforcements to the scene. At Voss', they learned that a Packard car had been stolen at Kuhnert's Northern Lights Resort and that a mysterious car was parked near Koerner's home, so they headed to Northern Lights Resort and then on to Koerner's home.

Carl, the newly elected constable, and Ann Christensen, who ran the Northern Lights Bar across the road from the Northern Lights Resort had a busy Sunday welcoming people from their Easter Sunday drives from as far as the Upper Peninsula. Prohibition had ended, and Ann was known regionally for her wonderful sandwiches. They had quite a crowd that day and as the evening went on, their boss, Mr. Kuhnert at the hotel across the road, noticed his Packard car was missing. Baum and Newman came into their place and talked about the missing car and that they could use Carl's help in making arrests and staging roadblocks. Carl asked Ann to make up sandwiches for the Federal men and told her that they would be back soon. He agreed to join them and travel to Koerner's home to check out the mysterious car.

As they arrived at Koerner's, Christensen noted that the car belonged to George LaPorte who had taken Wanatka to Koerner's for a coat after he had come out of Little Bohemia with his hands up saying that the gang was all still inside. Baby Face Nelson had forced Wanatka and Koerner into LaPorte's car and was about to escape. It was around 11 pm when Nelson jumped out of the car and began to fire at the agents and constable. Nelson shouted, "I know you have bullet proof vests on. I'll shoot you in the head. Get out of that car so I can kill you." Newman pushed open the car door and was shot in the head and fell face first to the ground and lost consciousness. Baum and Christensen fell out of the passenger side of the car and were shot by Nelson next, one killed and the other severely wounded. Nelson escaped in their commandeered Ford. Newman regained consciousness and found Baum dead and Christensen semi-alert with eight gunshot wounds. He struggled to get help, and it wasn't until 3 am that Newman and Christensen arrived at the hospital in Ironwood, Michigan.

In the meantime, Dillinger, Red Hamilton and Homer Van Meter ended up at Mitchell's Resort, located down the road behind me. They entered the house and pulled their phone off the wall. They demanded a car and found one in the garage owned by renter Robert Johnson. They took Robert hostage and made him drive to Park Falls where they let him out and finished their escape.

Tommy Carroll was the thief who stole the Packard and escaped as well. Nelson ended up holding the Catfish Family of White Sand Lake hostages for several days, stealing a car and eventually escaping.

By the end of 1934, all the members of the gang would be dead but not before more senseless killings of innocent people.

During the hard times of the Depression era, the public was enthralled with what seemed like the magical lives of these criminals. Hollywood was creating gangster movies with criminals portrayed by the likes of Clark Gable. As more and more people were caught in the crossfire of the lawlessness of these gangsters, the reality of these people and the harm they brought became real, and the officers of the law, whether local, state or federal, diligently worked to apprehend these criminal men and women in order to protect and defend the people of this country. None of us can ever understand the loss and grief suffered by the people and their families honored here today, but we can thank them and remember their sacrifice.

A note on the anniversary of the death of W. Carter Baum on his officer down page stated: "It is so sad that the names of John Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson are so well known. Your name should be the well-known name."

So, today, we hope to make some new history as we memorialize the names of W. Carter Baum, Jay Newman, Carl Christensen, Eugene Boisoneau, John Morris and John Hoffman. Thank you.

