

# **Tucson Fire Department**

## **The Hotel Congress Fire and the Capture of John Dillinger**



**Al Ring**

**Bob Ring**

## The Hotel Congress Fire and the Capture of John Dillinger

In 1934 the Hotel Congress suffered a devastating fire. While helping guests escape from the burning building, two firefighters identified two of the guests as members of desperado John Dillinger's gang, leading to the capture of Dillinger and his entire gang a couple of days later - an event that Tucson still commemorates today.

### Original Hotel Congress

The Hotel Congress was built in 1919 as an upscale hotel for train travelers. The hotel is located at 311 E. Congress Street, at the corner of Congress Street and Toole Avenue, right across from the historic Southern Pacific Railroad Station built in 1907 on Toole Avenue. The hotel fronts on Congress Street with the rear facing the train depot. Fifth Avenue runs along the west side of the hotel, with 10<sup>th</sup> Street along the north side. The original three-story brick hotel, built over a basement, offered 80 rooms for guests on the top two floors, with the first floor (in January 1934) containing businesses, including Blue Bird Beauty Shop, Triplett Brothers Construction Company, the Congress Barbershop, the Art Craft Stationary Company, and the Congress Hotel Cafe.



*This is the Hotel Congress, circa early 1930s, before the devastating fire in 1934. View looking at the southwest corner, bounded by 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Congress Streets.*

## John Dillinger Gang

By January 1934, 30-year old John Dillinger was a “most-wanted” internationally known criminal who for months had terrorized the Midwest with a series of bank robberies, murders, and daring jail breaks. He operated with a gang of three to four professional criminals, employing machine guns, automatic rifles, and bullet-proof vests that far outgunned most police departments from that time period. In the previous seven months, the gang had murdered 10 men, wounded seven, robbed eight banks, staged three jailbreaks, and eluded the FBI and police throughout several Midwestern states. The FBI declared that Dillinger was “Public Enemy No. 1.”

Dillinger and his gang were looking for a place to “lay low,” following their latest series of crimes in Indiana. Between January 21<sup>st</sup> and January 24<sup>th</sup>, four gang members arrived in Tucson by automobile. Charles Makley, traveling with Russell “Art” Clark and his girlfriend Opal Long, arrived on the 21<sup>st</sup> and took adjoining rooms (using aliases) on the third floor of the Hotel Congress. Over the next three days, Harry Pierpoint, with his girlfriend Mary Kinder, and John Dillinger, with Evelyn “Billie” Frechette, arrived. These four (also using false names) stayed at the Arizona Tourist Court at 1749 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

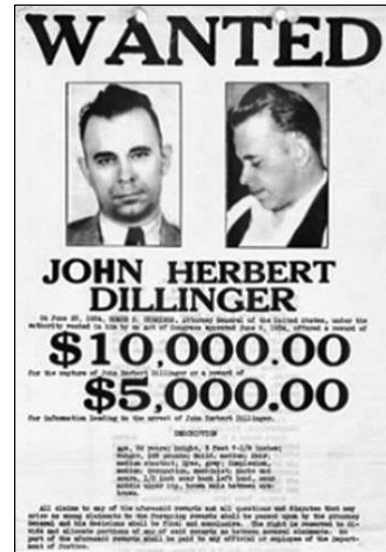
The stage was set for the dramatic events of January 23, 1934. Tucson was a small city of fewer than 35,000 people, protected by police force of around 35 officers. There were no police radios, only two police cars and six motorcycles. Chief Joseph Roberts headed the TFD with 34 firefighters, four fire stations, four pumpers and one aerial ladder truck.

## Hotel Congress Fire

Early on the morning of Tuesday, January 23, 1934, fire broke out in the basement of the Hotel Congress. Apparently, a defective oil furnace had ignited an adjacent stack of aged firewood.

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

“1-23-1934 Congress Hotel ... 15 yr. old bldg. valued at \$250,000, almost total loss. Day clerk Mrs. Helga Nelson stayed at telephone exchange box awakening guests. Box went dead as she finished calling 2<sup>nd</sup> floor guests. P.D. [Police Department] and employees ran thru 3<sup>rd</sup> floor to warn guests. Started in basement when oil overflowed in furnace. ... Flames spread up elevator shaft. 3 general alarms brought every piece of equipment. Roberts = chief. [4] pumpers available; 3 used. [plus aerial ladder truck]. 10 pressure lines with 5 direct off hydrants. Good water pressure. 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. ... 3<sup>rd</sup> floor wrecked, rest of building flooded.”



*John Dillinger's wanted poster.  
(Courtesy of FBI)*

The Arizona Daily Star provided more details:

“While more than 1,000 persons watched, 34 firemen ... battled the blaze for 3 hours in a vain attempt to bring it under control. ... The blaze was centered on the two top floors of the three-story building. ... As the fire spread over the entire third floor and roof area, every available hose line was put to work shooting streams of high pressure water into the flaming building. ... The blaze was attacked from all sides of the burning edifice ... The aerial ladder truck was placed on the north side of the building where the greatest mass of flames was ... firefighters battled the blaze from the top of the ladder ... at the corners, the three pumpers roared away at their job of boosting the pressure. ... Hoses were run through the first story windows on Congress Street while the second floor on Tenth Street was used as a combating entrance.”

Ladders were used on all sides of the building so that firefighters could help hotel guests escape from the upper floors. TFD records note that firefighters used 339 feet of ladders.



*These headlines from the January 24, 1934 Arizona Daily Star topped stories about the previous day's horrendous Hotel Congress fire. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star)*

Two of the four pumpers employed on the Hotel Congress fire in 1934 fire have been fully restored by the TFD Restoration Committee. The restoration of the 1928 Ahrens-Fox pumper was completed in 2008 and the restoration of the 1923 American LaFrance pumper was completed in 2014. Both of these fabulous machines can be seen today at Fire Central.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A previous "Reflections" article, "Through Two World Wars: 1915-1950," discusses these two pumpers and contains photographs of the completed restorations. Also, other you can find information on all TFD apparatus restorations at "City of Tucson Restorations / Old Pueblo Fire Brigade," <http://opvfb.com/cot-fox/>.



*Firefighters at the corner of Congress Street and Toole Avenue pour water into the third floor of the Hotel Congress. The 1928 Ahrens Fox pumper is at center foreground. The extended aerial ladder can be seen through the smoke at right. Note the ladder and second water stream from Congress Street at left. (Courtesy of Tommy Stefanski)*



*Smoke billows from the roof and third floor of the Hotel Congress in this view from the southeast corner of the building. Again, note the ladder at the center. (Courtesy of Tommy Stefanski)*



*Firefighters stream water into the third floor of the Hotel Congress from Toole Avenue. Note the aerial ladder at right. (Courtesy of Tommy Stefanski)*



*Firefighters laid 4,700 feet of hose to fight the fire. Note the water stream and ladder from Congress Street at center right and the ladder from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue side on the left. (Courtesy of Tommy Stefanski)*

## Capturing the Dillinger Gang

Two unrelated events led to the capture of John Dillinger and his gang in Tucson.

First, the night before the fire in the Hotel Congress, an inebriated Russell Clark, Dillinger gang member and a guest at the hotel, bragged to two other hotel guests, salesmen from New York, about how easy it was to make money - robbing banks with machine guns. That story, combined with the salesmen's observation of how freely Clark spent money and openly carried a gun, alarmed them. They reported their concerns to the Tucson police department.

The second event started as the fire was raging at the Hotel Congress. Firefighters were helping hotel guests on the third floor, including Charles Makley, Russell Clark and Opal Long, escape down ladders. After reaching safety on the ground, Makley and Clark offered firefighters William Benedict and John Freeman a \$12 tip to go back up the ladder and retrieve their luggage. The two firefighters noticed that several pieces of the luggage were very heavy. Later that day, 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 forewarned police who began a surveillance operation at 927 North 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, where Makley and Clark had rented a house, and where the heavy luggage was delivered after the fire.

On January 25, 1934, two days after the Hotel Congress fire, the well planned and executed surveillance led to the arrest of John Dillinger and his entire gang. Makley and Opal Long were followed and arrested inside Grabe Electric Company while shopping for a radio. Clark was arrested at the house at 927 North 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue after an officer posed as a messenger. A fight broke out, with the policemen drawing guns, but Clark was subdued without a shot being fired. Harry Pierpoint, the gang's triggerman, with his girlfriend Mary Kinder, was stopped while driving with out-of-state plates by a gutsy, smooth-talking policeman and duped into going to the police station to get a "visitor sticker" for his car. Later that day, John Dillinger, with girlfriend Evelyn Frechette, was arrested without incident when arriving at the house on 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. The heavy luggage was found to contain machine guns, rifles, pistols, revolvers, and bullet proof vests - far more firepower than Tucson police officers had. Approximately \$26,000 in cash was confiscated from gang members.



*This headline from the January 26, 1934 Arizona Daily Star startled Tucson residents. (Courtesy of the Arizona Daily Star)*

As Tucson historian C. L. Sonnichsen opined later, “It was a great moment. A provincial police department had rounded up the most notorious criminals in the United States without firing a shot. No prison had been able to hold them and lawmen of three states had pursued them in vain.”

### The End of the Dillinger Gang

The remaining Dillinger-gang-related events in Tucson happened quickly.

On January 26, 1934 the Dillinger gang had an Arraignment Hearing in Pima County Justice Court. John Dillinger, Harry Pierpoint, Russell Clark, and Charles Makely were arraigned on fugitive warrants and resisting arrest. Evelyn Frechette and Opal Long were held for possession of a gun. Mary Kinder was held as a material witness and resisting arrest.



*These are the Dillinger gang mug shots from their arrest in Tucson. Clockwise from upper left: Dillinger, Pierpoint, Makely, Clark. (Courtesy of the TFD)*



*The Dillinger gang was arraigned in Tucson in Pima County Justice Court on January 26, 1934. Seated L to R – Russell Clark, Charles Makely, Harry Pierpoint, John Dillinger, Opal Long, and Mary Kinder. (Courtesy of Ancestry.com)*

On January 27<sup>th</sup> Evelyn Frechette and Opal Long were released.

On January 28<sup>th</sup> officials from Indiana and Ohio arrived in Tucson to negotiate extraditions. Arizona Governor B.B. Moeur signed the extradition papers.

On January 29<sup>th</sup> John Dillinger was extradited by airplane to East Chicago, Indiana.

On January 30<sup>th</sup> Pierpoint, Makely, Clark, and Kinder were transported by train to Ohio.

A little more than a month later, on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, using a fake pistol, John Dillinger escaped from the Crown Point, Indiana jail while awaiting trial. 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.

In Ohio, the remaining gang members, Harry Pierpoint, Charles Makely, and Russell Long, were charged and tried for murder, convicted, and sentenced to death. On September 24<sup>th</sup> Makely and Long were shot and killed while trying to escape from the Ohio State Prison at Columbus. On October 17<sup>th</sup> Pierpoint was executed by electrocution at the Ohio State Prison.

Meanwhile, back in Tucson, On March 5<sup>th</sup> the City Council issued a resolution praising the “efficiency of the Police Department” and the “alertness of the Fire Department” in capturing the Dillinger gang.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Rebuilt Hotel Congress**

The Hotel Congress fire on January 23, 1934 destroyed the third floor and roof of the building. Water heavily damaged the first and second floors.

Retaining the original structure and design, the Hotel Congress was rebuilt in 1935/1940 as a two-story hotel, cutting in half the number of rooms available for guests, from 80 to 40. A large, red neon, rooftop sign spelling “Hotel Congress” was added after the repairs.

On October 23, 1971 the Hotel Congress suffered its second major fire - this time confined to the first floor. This fire apparently started when smoldering cigarette ashes ignited rags and paper in a trash container located at the side of the bar. Damage was estimated at \$25,000, the bulk of it in the hotel bar which was destroyed. The second floor received minor smoke damage. Thirty four guest were evacuated, with nine requiring brief hospitalization from smoke inhalation.

The hotel was soon repaired and over the years since has focused on developing and providing entertainment, bringing in money to maintain the building and upgrade the rooms, as well as adding creature comforts like bathrooms and air conditioning.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a **lot** of source data available describing the capture of John Dillinger in Tucson - much of it conflicting. There are disagreements about such basic things as the date of Hotel Congress fire, who was staying where, the timing of events, the names of key participants, and the identification and/or addresses of key locations. We (the authors) have had the advantage of being able to review and assess virtually all of the relevant data on this web site to put together our story.

**"RESOLUTION NO. 1326**

**"WHEREAS, the City of Tucson was recently visited by several members of a notorious bandit gang known as the Dillinger Gang; and**

**"WHEREAS, through the efficiency of the Police Department and the alertness of the Fire Department of this City, the aforesaid members of said Dillinger Gang were arrested and incarcerated;**

**"NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE MAYOR AND COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF TUCSON:**

**"SECTION 1. That the Police Department be and it is hereby commended for its efficient and expeditious action in arresting and incarcerating the said members of the Dillinger Gang, thus eliminating from our City a group of dangerous and undesirable persons; that the Fire Department be and it is hereby commended for its alertness and for its splendid cooperation with the Police Department in causing the apprehension of such a group of dangerous public enemies.**

**"PASSED AND ADOPTED by the Mayor and Council of the City of Tucson, this 5th day of March, 1934.**

**"(Signed) Henry O. Jaastad**  
**Mayor**

*The City of Tucson passed a resolution on March 5, 1934 that honored the efficiency and alertness of the Police and Fire Departments in the John Dillinger matter.*



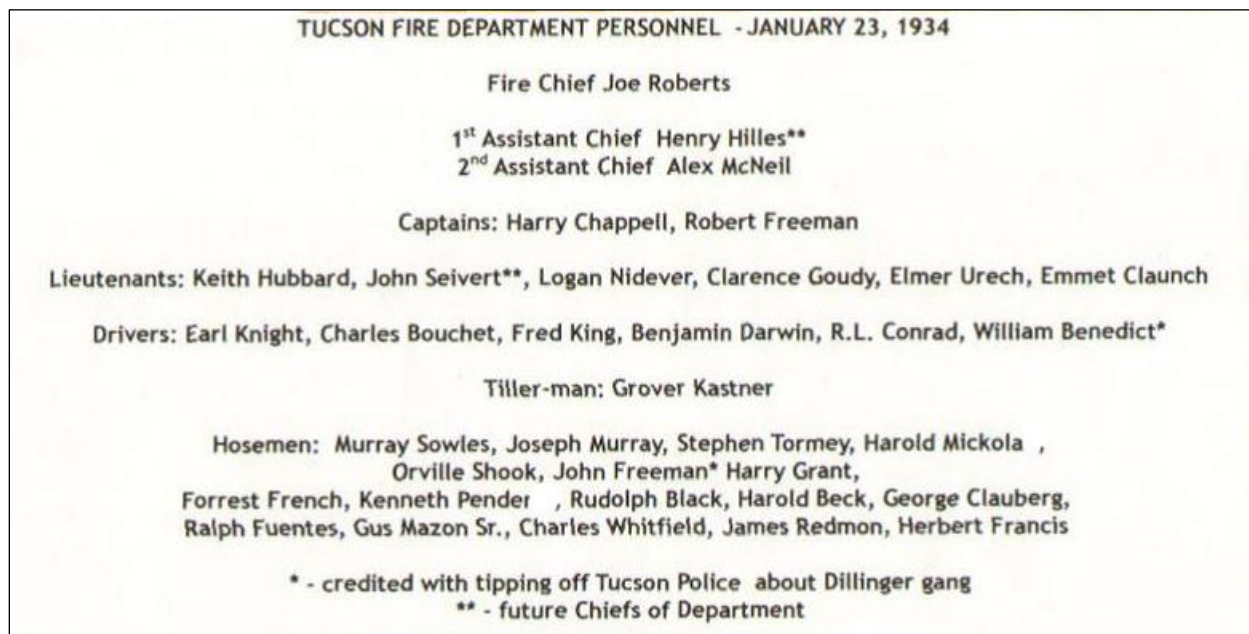
*The Hotel Congress today is a two-story building offering 40 rooms for guests and several entertainment venues. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

In 2003 the historic hotel was added to the National Historic Register. The Hotel Congress received a “Fodor’s Choice” distinction in 2006 and again in 2008, and today offers the Club Congress nightclub, the Cup Café, several bars, and the Copper Hall Event venue.

### **Dillinger Days**

In 1992 the owners of the Hotel Congress started staging a reenactment of the capture of John Dillinger and his gang with a one-act presentation in the Hotel Congress lobby. That presentation grew to become the annual “Dillinger Days” community event that Tucson celebrates annually in January, stressing Tucson’s important role in such an historic event. The Dillinger Days commemoration has expanded to two days and grown to include such activities as the historical reenactment of Dillinger’s capture, a courthouse tour, lecture series, film series, museum exhibits, historic walking tours, and family-friendly activities like vintage car shows, music and culinary events, arts and craft shows, and carnival games.

In 2012 the Greater Tucson Fire Foundation participated in the two-day Dillinger Days tribute. The GTFF prepared a program document and display storyboards, detailing the role of the Tucson Police Department and Tucson Fire Department in the capture of Dillinger. The GTFF also raised funds for the restoration of the 1923 LaFrance fire engine that “was actually on scene at Hotel Congress to battle the historic 1934 fire.”



*The documentation of the TFD’s role in the 1934 Hotel Congress fire included this presentation identifying all 34 firefighters who helped fight the historic fire. (Courtesy of the TFD)*

## Primary Sources

1. "Big event almost held up," Arizona Daily Star, January 22, 2009.
2. Hotel Congress, <http://hotelcongress.com/hotel/>.
3. "Hotel Congress," Wikipedia.
4. "Hotel Congress History," <http://hotelcongress.com/history/>.
5. "Hotel Congress History," <http://www.hauntedhouses.com/states/az/hotel-congress.htm>.
6. Tucson Fire Department Archives / Greater Tucson Fire Foundation, <http://www.tucsonfirefoundation.com/tfd-archive-down/>

Major Incidents: Congress Hotel Fires and Dillinger History, (five files)

Training: Training Papers, "2004 COBRA-Hotel Congress"

## Greater Tucson Fire Foundation

### Thank you for taking an interest in Tucson Fire Department history —

This is one of many sections that contain information, documents, letters, newspaper articles, pictures, etc. They have been collected and arranged in chronological order or by a subject. These items were collected, organized and entered into a computerized database by Dave Ridings Retired Assistant Chief Tucson Fire Department, Al Ring friend of the department, Greater Tucson Fire Foundation and with the help of many friends and fellow firefighters.

All graphics have been improved to make the resolution as good as possible, but the reader should remember that many came from copies of old newspaper articles. This also applies to other items such as documents, letters, etc.

Credit to the source of the documents, photos, etc. is provided whenever it was available. We realize that many items are not identified and regret that we weren't able to provide this information. As far as the newspaper articles that are not identified, 99% of them would have to be from one of three possible sources. The *Arizona Daily Star*, The *Tucson Citizen* and the *Tucson Daily Citizen*, for which we want to give a special thanks.

Please use this information as a reference tool only. If the reader uses any of the information for any purpose other than a reference tool, they should get permission from the source.

Should the reader have additional information on the above subject we would appreciate you sharing it with us. Please see the names and contact information on the 1st. TFD Archives page right below this paragraph.

