

Don't Call Us Molls: Women of the John Dillinger Gang

by Ellen Poulsen

From Chapter 13, entitled, "On A Long, Hard Trip"

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Behind tightly closed doors in their Lexington Avenue apartment, Mr. and Mrs. Hellman had scattered their personal effects all over the apartment. Evelyn by then, had amassed a dazzling trousseau. The garish wardrobe bore a striking contrast to her former austerity, when she'd left Tucson wearing the same striped shirtwaist and leather jacket she'd been arrested in.

In St. Paul she'd bought nightgowns, slips, shoes and undergarments in her favorite color, pink. She had scores of kimonos, silk pajamas and nightgowns, mostly in black or pink. Her wardrobe included at least thirty dresses. These ranged from black velvet and silk evening gowns, to plain grey wool and black shirtwaists. In the 1930's, women did not wear slacks on the street. Casual lounging pajamas served the purpose of comfort and flexibility, but only within the confines of one's home. Evelyn had everything from bathing suits and beach pants to mufflers. Her outer wear included five pairs of gloves, several coats, jackets and hats. And she had her costumes, a nurse's uniform and the bushy blonde wig.

Included also, were an assortment of house dresses. These came in a domestic array of flower patterns, red and white stripes, checks and gingham. These sweet, floral shirtwaists served as props; The Hellmans never asked for the vacuum cleaner, as tenants usually did. And unlike the other women in the building, she never went to the basement to wash the clothes.

Dillinger's wardrobe was no less opulent. Contrary to his reputation for grey pinstripes, he'd stuffed his closet with a chinchilla man's overcoat.

On the day that Evelyn returned from Indianapolis, she'd decorated with the collection of photographs given to her by John's family. She put her personal touches into the effort, by adding a toy pistol they'd picked up, no bigger than a woman's little finger. Carved into the little pistol and colored with chalk was the legend "Souvenir of 1934." On the

back of one photo, Audrey Hancock, Dillinger's beloved sister, had written, "John Dillinger in cherry tree 10 or 11 years old," while another said, "John, after the death of his mother, 3 1/2 years."

In these photos, in the domestic scattering of Evelyn's gingham house dresses, this pair of fugitives expressed the yearnings that all young couples experience. If the white picket fence wasn't what they'd opted for, they would at least have glimpses of the life they might have had. Dillinger and his Billie had gone through several aliases in the past several months. In choosing the name "Hellman," they were listing a deeply subjective metaphor for their existence -- the "man of hell" and his misses.

Yet as "Mr. and Mrs. Hellman," they consummated the highest potential of their relationship. Evelyn would dress in her black velvet and lace nightgown, a hardened night person. They would make love in the early hours of a shade-darkened morning, while the legitimate world existed outside their windows in some far-away dream. They must have sensed the nagging diminishment of time. Unknown to them, one of their closest friends had a posse' of agents watching her every move.

Opal Long was again being followed. The conglomeration of agents from the Cincinnati office had been spying on the woman when she'd lived at Russell Clark's family home in Detroit. The surveillance, which had started as a furtive, peeping-Tom activity, had intensified, with the Clark family members moving from one house to another. It also had become mired in the familiar jealousy between law enforcers. Matt Leach, who also had men watching Opal Long, wouldn't cooperate with either the local police or Federal agents. Tenacity paid off, as they developed a clear concept of the woman's habits and personality traits, as far as they could perceive from a distance. When she left Detroit for St. Paul, her shadow team followed her.

Enroute she'd stopped in Chicago to have a drink in the U Tavern on State Street with Larry Streng, her old friend. He'd been confiding information to an informant. With his easy affability, he allowed a great deal of information to leak into the wrong hands.

Through the Streng intelligence, the Justice Department learned that the recent wounds suffered by Dillinger and Hamilton had not been

serious, and that the gang had plenty of money after the Mason City and Sioux Falls bank jobs. Some of the mob had been "shot up a little in these jobs," Streng had said, "but not serious enough for medical attention." As careful as Opal had always been, she was now unwittingly helping the agents by confiding in Larry Streng. In Chicago, Opal was trailed to the Commonwealth Hotel by agents who intercepted her telegrams to Mae Clark in Detroit. On March 19, they broke into her room. Besides installing a wire tap on her phone, they plundered her meager possessions. They broke into embarrassed laughter at the discovery of her vibrator, before listing it on their inventory sheets like wizened accountants. Through a March 29 wiretap, they learned she was checking out. On the train to St. Paul, this fox had attracted a horde of hounds.

In spite of her poor eyesight, Opal's reflexes had sharpened as a result of being constantly tailed. The usually cagey woman made a critical mistake in thinking she'd eluded her pursuers. They trailed Opal Long into St. Paul. They knew that she would meet Dillinger, to beg money for Russell Clark's defense.

Sources:

4. The source of the photos that Evelyn brought back from Indianapolis, the family of John Dillinger, was reported by Bess Green: H.H. Clegg, St. Paul, to Director, 15 April, 1934, FN -560; Telephone interview with Mary Gallagher, niece of John Dillinger, by author, February 1, 1999; Apartment inventory: H.H. Clegg, St. Paul to Director, Washington, D.C., 31 March, 1934, DF-380; The surveillance on Opal Long noted her movements and activities during March, 1934. This intelligence was augmented through the unintentional omissions of her friend, Larry Streng, to the Bureau informant, and was recorded in the following: Melvin Purvis, Chicago, to Director, Washington, D.C., 1 April, 1934; DF-385;

J.J. Waters, Chicago, to File, 4 April, 1934, DF-314; H.H. Clegg, St. Paul, to File, 29 March, 1934, DF-211; Purvis, Chicago, to Director, Washington, D.C., 2 April, 1934, DF-260; Purvis, Chicago, to Director, 6 April, 1934, DF-390; Matthew Leach's role in the surveillance of Opal Long: H.H. Clegg, St. Paul, to Director, Washington, D.C., 21 March, 1934, DF-200.