

***PUBLIC ENEMIES* and Their Firearms**

by Jim Guigli

PUBLIC ENEMIES, a new film from Michael Mann, is taken both accurately and loosely from Bryan Burrough's 550+ page book of the same title. Burrough's book, based on thousands of pages of previously secret FBI files and unpublished manuscripts, covers a compact and unique period in American crime. Between the spring of 1933 and January, 1935, in-and-out-the front-door bank robbery reached its darkly glorious summit, only to be crushed by the ill-fitting boot of the new FBI.

In less than two years, Bonnie and Clyde Barrow, Pretty Boy Floyd, Machine Gun Kelly, Baby Face Nelson, the Barker Gang, and John Dillinger all became famous, and then disappeared, most to Alcatraz or shot dead. Their wars with the law created the FBI and new federal crime laws. American crime was never the same after that.

To fit the two-hour film, some events are embellished and moved in time, and others are combined and retold. The story focuses on Dillinger and FBI Agent Melvin Purvis. The resulting film does well what books cannot, and, I think, will not disappoint those who have read the book.

Besides good material, the film's strength is Michael Mann, a director who pays attention to detail in his films. The use of firearms appeared to be historically correct, and the sound during the many gun battles was accurate, something rare before *FINDING PRIVATE RYAN*. It sounded to me like real gunfire, indoors and out. Mann has taken full advantage of the good sound systems common in today's movie theaters. (Mann's film, *HEAT*, is another example of good sound and attention to detail, while again dramatizing a battle between the almost-good cop and an attractive criminal.)

PUBLIC ENEMIES displays at least a dozen different kinds of firearms of the period, several of which I think mystery writers and fans will find interesting.

First, an early sequence shows the FBI's Purvis firing a bolt action hunting rifle. The rifle shown may have been unique, but was like thousands of WWI surplus German Mauser military rifles converted between the wars by American craftsman. Typically, the military bolt handle would be heated and reformed to a more pleasing shape, the barrel shortened and lightened — or replaced with a different caliber — and the heavy military wood stock would be replaced with lighter American walnut. The rifle Purvis used also had been converted to a double-set trigger — two triggers, one fine and one heavy. The heavy trigger is pulled to set the fine trigger, a trigger too sensitive to rely on the normal safety. The fine trigger allowed effortless release when the shooter was ready.

When the right-handed Purvis was finished shooting, he slung the rifle on his left shoulder, muzzle down and trigger forward. When needed, he could bring the rifle forward with his left hand, and rotate it as he brought the butt up to his right shoulder.

The muzzle-down carry kept rain and dirt from falling into the barrel. This is called “African carry,” and implies that he was used to the field, and may have hunted abroad.

Aside from Purvis’s Mauser, the firearms stars of Purvis’s time and this film all were designed for the US military and WWI:

The .45 caliber Colt model 1911 semi-automatic pistol was the American sidearm of WWI, made famous by Sgt. York.



M1911 pistol

The Thompson sub-machinegun used the same cartridge as the 1911 pistol, the .45 ACP (Automatic Colt Pistol). The Thompson arrived too late to see action in Europe. After the war it could be found in military armories and police weapons lockers. Some were sold to the public.



1927 Thompson

The third star, the Browning Automatic Rifle, or B.A.R., would fire as long as you held the trigger down — just like the Thompson — but it fired a rifle cartridge, the Springfield 30.06, which was developed for America’s WWI bolt action rifle. Why would this gun be desirable if you already had a Thompson?



M1918 B.A.R.

.45 ACP



30.06

When I began to run pistol matches at my gun club, I made some steel targets. I quickly found that quarter-inch thick mild steel would stop most pistol bullets, but would

dimple and bend. Moving to three-eighths-inch thick mild steel solved all my pistol problems. Even .44 magnum, used prudently, would not damage these targets. Then one of our range personnel loaned the targets to a new group for pistol practice. They later decided to see how the steel resisted rifle bullets. We had a lot of see-through holes to weld shut and grind smooth after the targets were returned. It proved what Dillinger, Clyde Barrow, and the others knew: at close range the Thompson could shoot a lot of holes in automobile glass, sheet-metal fenders, and doors, but the B.A.R. could shoot through that same fender and then punch a big hole through the engine block. The B.A.R. was a car stopper, even from a block away. Also, both the police and bank robbers sometimes wore “bullet-proof” vests. The vests were helpful against the .45 ACP bullets but were no match for the 30.06 from the B.A.R.

All three of these firearms stars used quickly removable magazines: the pistol used a seven-round magazine, the Thompson and B.A.R. used twenty-round magazines. There was also a round drum magazine for the Thompson that held fifty rounds.

Best of all, these guns, magazines, and crates of .45 ACP and 30.06 ammunition were waiting in police, military, and National Guard armories. Why pay cash for guns and ammunition when, if you knew how to rob a bank, you could take what you wanted from many of these armories?

PUBLIC ENEMIES, the movie and book, four out of five bullets.



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