

## Ormand Family Activity



I'd always known that the famous 1930's bank robber and gangster John Dillinger was captured in Tucson. Well, ever since I had even heard of John Dillinger. I've known for a few years now that Tucson (or rather, parts of Tucson; namely, the Hotel Congress, where the events started to unfold) commemorate this event downtown. But "Hotel Congress" is synonymous with "Party Scene", so I always just wrote this off as another opportunity for the young club-hoppers to put on fakey clothes and be decadent\*. But when I found a few public announcements of the event, including

- <http://www.santacruzheritage.org/node/264>,

I changed my mind and resolved to check it out. Being a downtown proponent and history-minded and observing the 68-degree January Tucson weather didn't hurt, either.

Previously, I was also possessed by the "yes, this happened here in Tucson, so Tucson is trying to milk the one noteworthy event that happened here" cynicism. But really... Dallas does the same thing with the Kennedy assassination year round. Why should I object when my home town tries to do something more "real" than the annual over-the-top Dia Del Muerte celebration?

So downtown we went.

One of the little-known facts about downtown Tucson is that the cops don't check the parking meters on weekends. Yes, it's official; the little signs on the meters say so. There are many metered spots on the streets and parking lots all around the Museum of Art, and it's a pleasant walk through Presidio Park and the Main Library grounds to get to Stone and Congress, and a short few blocks after that to arrive at the Hotel Congress. The irritating thing is that almost all of the few shops and restaurants downtown choose to be closed on Saturday! The *one day of the week* when they might expect shoppers!

At the Hotel Congress, we found a lot of activity. Some kiddie carnival rides. Vendors selling crafts and stuff across the street at the train

station. The hotel staff dressed up in period clothing.

[\* And actually... yes... we saw a bit of that party crowd. Some young women in 30s style dresses and hats, and some young men in three-piece suits with creased pants down to their sneakers and long curly hair under their fedoras.]

We also saw our very engaging guide from the Titanic Exhibit (across the street at the Rialto building) dressed up with a shawl and hat... passing out Titanic flyers!

But mostly it was the car show. The antique Ford car clubs from the area (Tucson and Mesa, mostly) had their goodies on the street.

Like this two-door coupe with a rumble seat. An unpleasant place to be when it rained. Not that this is much of a worry in southern Arizona. Blowing dust was bad for the passengers, I'll bet, and back then, the streets were not paved.





Little yellow truck that reminded Jerri of a truck her dad told her about.

A model T truck with its engine cowl lifted, Many of the cars were showing off their engines (a common practice at car shows, of course) - little tiny engines. Very simple, easy to work on. An oil can for manually lubricating linkages is clipped inside the engine compartment.



The antique car people do the best they can with what they have. When they can't get original parts - like an authentic sheet metal truck bed - they reconstruct with other materials, like wood. And do a very nice job.

A '31 Arizona license plate. I note the absence of renewal stickers. The fun thing about this car show was that if you mentally screened out the people in modern clothes and the asphalt pavement and the high-rise MLK Apartment building across the street, you could get an image of what Tucson might have looked like when it was these kind of automobiles, with their tall thin wheels and bucket headlamps, that were parked along the streets and outside the shops.



Hood ornaments used to serve as handles for the radiator cap. Not too many cars have hood ornaments anymore. Maybe Mercedes Benz or Lincolns. Probably not even those anymore.

An unusual hood ornament.





And not all Fords. There was a period Chevrolet, and a 40's Chevrolet, and this dramatic little Chevrolet racecar. Faith is being dramatic herself.

Sometimes the owner would start the rattley little Ford engine, and even rarely pull out and drive around. I thought it would have been grand fun, and an opportunity for the owners, for them to sell rides around town in their little cars. Down Congress to Stone and Cushing Street and back. I would have gone! In a flash!



(And much cheaper, and therefore more attractive, than the rides on vintage airplanes sold when a B-17 or B-26 or P-51 flies into Tucson International or Ryan Field.)



Another non-Ford - a Pearce Arrow, with a much more powerful engine, more representative of what gangsters would use. A very dramatic vehicle. Later, we saw a lady wearing period upper-class clothes (including a fur stole) sitting in the driver's seat; probably the owner, or related.

Very authentic looking.

More Faith being dramatic by these dramatic automobiles.





According to the schedule (available from a blonde in a dress and a hat sitting behind a table under a little canopy tent), there are events starting at 1:00 in the Hotel lobby, particularly the "Tour of Dillinger's Downtown". We started off thinking this was a tour of the hotel, which I wouldn't have half minded, since the only other way to see upstairs is to stay at the hotel. By all accounts, the hotel is a "niche" thing for people who enjoy staying in historic hotels (like me) and who either appreciate or at least don't mind it if their room and the rest

of the hotel reverberates to the bands playing in the Club Congress downstairs until three in the morning (not like me). But it isn't a tour of the hotel (which they *do* have, but it has a fee, and they are sold out by the time we understand this), but a walking tour of Congress to see the notable sights of the Dillinger Gang Capture event. The tour is led by about three Tucson history buffs, who have a little PA loudspeaker but could never seem to use it correctly, but it was interesting all the same. The tour included: the train station (where all the gang members except for Dillinger himself (who was flown out on an airplane, the first criminal to be so treated) were put on a train to their trial in Indiana), the site of the Grabe Electric Company store (where a gang member was sent to buy a police radio, and was apprehended) (the store - and the building it was in - are no longer there; it's a vacant lot waiting for Rio Nuevo to do something with it), the site of Charlie Chase's nightclub (where the gang would go for entertainment), the Fox Theatre (where John Dillinger, who was an avid movie fan, would go), and the Pima County Courthouse (where the extradition trial was held).

The City had reserved the courtroom in the old Courthouse for the tour. We sat in the audience or the jury box and watched newsreel clips on a big-screen TV set up for the purpose. As I sat there, it dawned on me that I had been in this very courtroom when I sat on a jury for a DUI case a few years ago!



After the video, the guide explained some interesting things about the trial. Like, how the judge jumped when a photographer's flashbulb popped behind him. And how everyone jumped when a policeman stood up and his .45 fell from his lap and clattered on the floor! It seems that everyone was worried that the rest of the Dillinger gang might show up and

rescue the captives by violence - they didn't understand at the time that the Tucson Police had arrested *all* the members of the gang!

After that, Judge Castillo, who presides in this courtroom and just happened to be looking in when our tour was there, commented that, in the day, there might have been two cases a day in Pima County, and the courtroom was sufficient. Nowadays, there are something like 175,000 cases filed every year in Pima County, more than the old Courthouse can handle, and even though he (as judge) had done what he could to modernize the facilities while preserving its historicity, it is inevitable that the County Courts will be moved out of the building, and he hoped that the room would be preserved as it is.



Faith points to the jury box where the gang members were seated for their trial. News photos from the trial show the gang standing in front of the ornate ventilation grille on the wall. How weird to think that I had been a juror sitting in the same box where the Dillinger gang was sitting in 1934. Kind of a "deja-vu" thing!



We learned something else. Several years ago, when a large Hollywood studio was producing *Public Enemies*, starring Johnny Depp as John Dillinger, they approached the City of Tucson for permission to film on-site at the Hotel Congress and the Fox Theatre and the Courthouse, providing millions of dollars and jobs for hundreds of locals. The City Council didn't say yes... and they didn't say no. So the company finally gave up and went elsewhere. Everyone on the tour rolled their eyes because it sounds so much like the incompetent city council we have now that is bungling Rio Nuevo (among everything else).

The most architecturally striking building in downtown. Part of the original Presidio wall remains embedded in the County Treasurer's office and is visible to the public. Looks pretty much the same as it did back then.



Except maybe the fountain was running. And there probably wasn't the blue line (can't really see it here) marking the location of the original wall.

The wing opposite was the county jail at the time, and the women in the gang had a second-story view into the courtyard.

The guide takes us outside to the north side of this same wing. John Dillinger's cell was on this second-story corner room, now some county office. The guide told us a couple more interesting stories. Cele Peterson (a locally famous fashion dressmaker) was a little girl then, and she remembers standing outside this window with other girls throwing



pebbles at the window to get Dillinger to look out (what is it about girls and evil men?). The pebbles falling down had formed a little pile where the A/C unit is now. The other story was how the Tucson Police, who had captured the gang and was keeping them in the sub-standard "Seeping Sewer" city jail in the basement of City Hall, were nervous about turning them over to the Pima County Sherriff's department, which had a reputation for not being professional and taking bribes, and that maybe the gang could escape under those conditions. Didn't happen, but I see that the reputation for being unprofessional could still be applied, considering the current sherriff's public remarks at the press conference after the recent shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

At this point, the tour went to its last stop at the downtown facility of the Arizona Historical Society, where the Tucson Police Department was showing the weapons and other articles from the capture. Ordinarily these are shown at the little exhibit at Police Headquarters, along with other things, and I've still got a mind to visit there sometime. Plus, its about time for the "re-enactment" at Hotel Congress, so we leave the tour and go back.

The "re-enactment" was... can I say "interesting"? "Entertaining"? It's what you get when the stunt actors who normally perform Wild West shows at Old Tucson or Trail Dust Town put on 1930's era suits and dresses and hats, and hold prop Thompson machineguns and .45 automatic pistols... along with their usual revolvers and shotguns. There wasn't much shooting, but there was a lot of fake brawling, and they mostly stuck to history. One good part was simulating the Hotel Congress fire with fog machines blowing "smoke" out of several of the

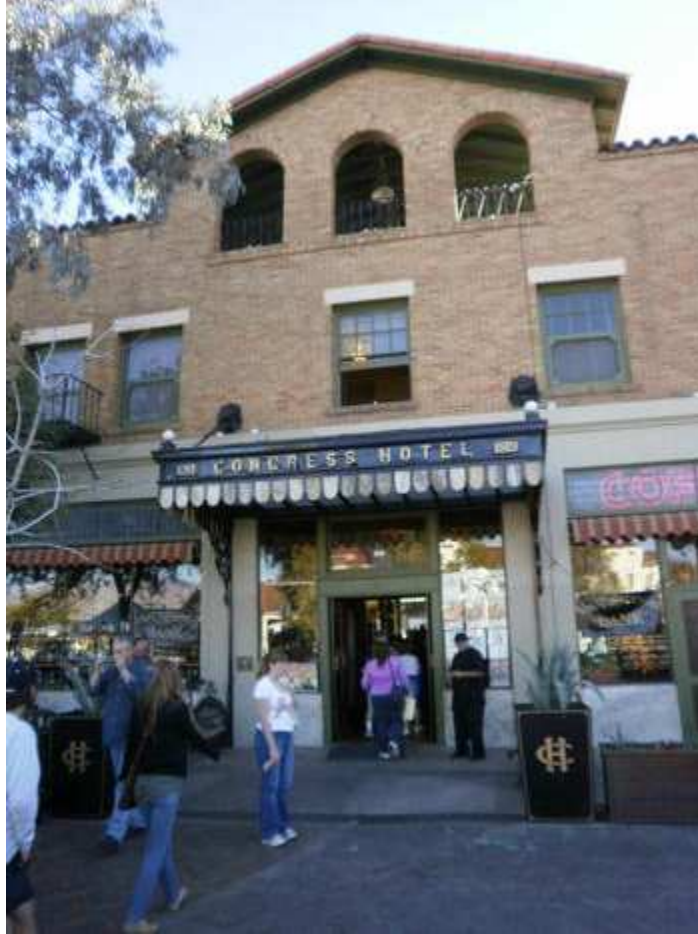
hotel windows, and the "firemen" getting a ladder from a prop firetruck and setting it up underneath the balcony. Kind of too much unnecessary slapstick comedy, though. Another good part, they would drive some of those Model A Fords in and out of the patio area to deliver gang members and policemen to the scene. It was classic Tucson fun, sitting in bleachers for an hour watching this and laughing at Tucson inside jokes. And it was free.



After the show (3:30pm), it's lunchtime! The little craft fair in front of the train station has a barbecue stand and a hot dog stand, but we elect to go inside and get something from Maynard's Kitchen. Cheese pizza, a personal lasagna, and bottled cream soda, enjoyed out in the patio on the depot side of the station while the Union Pacific freight trains rumble past. When we're done, we carry our bottles out (Tucson is supposed to be such a "green" city, but has no public recycle bins!) and look over the fair. Thankfully buying nothing other than a bag of Kettle Korn. And visiting the hoosegow - can't celebrate a criminal's

capture without having a touristy hoosegow!

The crowd is thinning from the hotel now, allowing this shot from the hotel patio, which is about the only time this tourist is going to get a shot of the hotel from the back side. The hotel used to be three or four stories, but it seems it was not rebuilt after the fire. I'm just glad they rebuilt *anything*, which is out of character for Tucson and its lack of concern for its own history. Inside is the entrance to the Cup Cafe, a very nice-looking and *very* busy restaurant (which I learn is indeed open on Sundays), and we also peek into the "Tap Room", where "Club Congress" proper is located; empty now, but probably not for long. The



daytime events are more "family-friendly", but starting around 5:30 or 6:00 is the "Speakeasy" event - when I'm sure my original prejudices about Dillinger Days and the the reputation of Hotel Congress as the core of the party scene in downtown Tucson would be justified.

We leave back down Congress Street, and stop in (still carrying our bottles) at Xoom Juice, where Charity's friend Rachael mixes us up some smoothies. She says business has been crazy today! Too bad it has to take a special event like Dillinger Days to attract a crowd downtown.



The next day (after church services), we pop in on 2nd Avenue and look at Number 927, the rented house where John Dillinger himself was arrested by policemen posing as door-to-door salesmen. It is just a house, and being lived in, in the pricey University neighborhood, with

only a plaque on the wall to indicate its significance. Which is still more than I got in that courtroom!