



Colts and the Motorized Bandits of the '20s and '30s

by T.J. Mullin

"Baby Face" Nelson bought at least six Colt-made Thompson submachine guns.

At the time the motorized bandits of the late 1920s to the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 were active, some people viewed them as modern-day Robin Hood characters. Others more properly viewed them as sociopaths with a violent nature who stole from people and put everyone at risk with their violent actions. Today with the gloss of some 80 years, they seem almost quaint and harmless in comparison to the criminals who today operate in our cities.

But I am not interested in discussing the nature or behavior patterns of the motorized bandits of that time but rather their weapons. Since we are dealing with criminals who stole money from banks or kidnapped people for ransom, it is not surprising that most of the weapons that were used by and subsequently captured from these bandits were stolen. A quick review of the handguns recovered from the likes of the Dillinger Gang, "Baby Face" Nelson, Alvin Karpis, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, and that "charming" pair of losers, Bonnie and Clyde, will show a hefty percentage of M1911 autos involved, most with their serial numbers and other identifying characteristics roughly removed. Sometimes they had been stolen typically from National Guard Armories where security was lax. Similarly, Browning Automatic Rifles (M1918) likewise showed up frequently and they, too, traced their origin to National Guard Armories. Although, interestingly enough, in his statement to the Bureau of Investigation Agents about the shooting of two agents in November 1934, John Paul Chase, who was in the car with "Baby Face" Nelson, claimed he used a Colt Monitor machine rifle, not the

more common BAR. The going "underworld" price at the time was \$5,000 for this weapon of the depression era. I find it interesting to hear of its use. It was certainly an effective weapon. I found it much more lively and nimble than a standard BAR, when I shot one while writing one of my books on police firearms.

Other Colt-made products of the commercial nature, however, do show up rather frequently and one type in particular seems unusual in my mind, unless you give them credit for skill development greater than that usually found when dealing with the normal criminal class.

The Thompson submachine gun was, of course, made by the Colt Firearms Company for the Auto Ordnance Corporation in 1921-1922. Some 15,000 were made, and at between \$175 and \$225 per unit, they were not by any means cheap since that is roughly \$18,000 in 2013 money. While early sales were made to individuals, it seems that the company imposed limitations on the sales after a short period. Certainly the popular myth that you could buy a Thompson at the local hardware store is not accurate except in a strict, technical sense since such an expensive item was not likely to be stocked at hardware stores. This is especially so when you consider that the market was extremely limited for such a weapon and its competition were inexpensive, double-barrel, and repeating shotguns, along with a hacksaw.

While a few captured Thompson submachine guns were actually purchased and then resold to criminals, it seems that most were stolen from police departments. Many little (and big) agencies would buy them. Isolated small police



Service .45s stolen from National Guard Armories were commonly found among captured gangster arsenals of the 1930's period.

an M1911 bearing serial number 18,001 and the other was a standard commercial Government Model .45 with the serial number removed by filing. According to the October 26, 1934, FBI memorandum on the subject, "This pistol, however, had distinctive markings, including welding, upon the firing pin and upon the safety guard. The gun also bore an unusual shield on the right side of the firing pin." It was obviously converted to machine pistol format likely by Lebman, the famed gunsmith of San Antonio. Both were carried fully loaded and found with a round in the chamber, likely carried in "condition one" or "cocked and locked" by Floyd and thus he did not have a chance to shoot them prior to his death that day.

While a few other handgun and shoulder weapon manufacturers were represented in the list of captured weapons of the period, the Smith & Wesson Heavy Duty .38 was the most obvious example. An example bearing serial number 40399 was captured at The Little Bohemia shoot-out scene. It had been stolen from an Indiana police officer. Colt-produced firearms, whether long or short guns, were clearly the most popular and most often captured. Among the Colt products also seized at Little Bohemia was .38 Super Colt serial number 14130. It was originally shipped to Wolf and Klar in Fort Worth, Texas. This weapon was sold by them to San Antonio gunsmith Lebman who sold it to Nelson. Ultimately he sold the members of the gang a number of guns. According to statements given by Lebman to the Bureau of Investigation on April 29, 1934, after his shop had been raided in the aftermath of the Little Bohemia raid but before either Dillinger or Nelson were killed, Lebman had sold a variety of weapons to gang members. While the serial numbers are lost to us for the most part, a few found in Lebman's shop awaiting delivery are known.

What we do know is that in June 1933 when the gang drove down from St. Paul, Minnesota, where they were staying at the time (St. Paul was a well-known gangster hideout town at the time), two .38 Super Colt Pistols and two .380 Colt pistols obtained from Wolf and Klar by Lebman were sold to Nelson or gang members. In September 1933, they visited again and another pair of .38 Super and .380 Colt pistols were similarly obtained and sold. Nelson inquired about getting a Thompson submachine gun and Lebman obtained five of them in El

Paso, Texas, from a John Stockmeyer and shipped them in October 1933 to Nelson for \$400 down and \$900 in COD charges, or \$1,300. That's \$117,000 in today's money, according to my calculations.

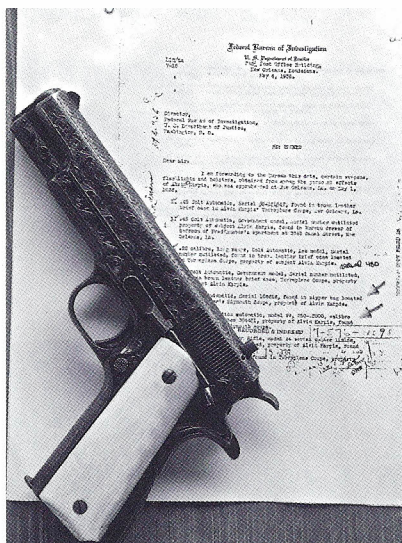
Prior to that October shipment, Lebman sold another .38 Super and a .25 Colt Auto to Nelson in September 1933. He also bought a Thompson from a deputy sheriff for \$150 and resold it to Nelson for \$300. Interestingly enough, this turned out to be an M1927 semi-only model which Nelson returned to be re-converted into a selective fire model. That was done by Lebman but it was not shipped back to Nelson, being seized from Lebman's shop in the April 1934 raid. By this time, the serial number had been mutilated, likely by Nelson.

During the upcoming winter season, Nelson visited San Antonio and met with Lebman, actually celebrating Thanksgiving at his home that November of 1933. The Nelsons

stayed a month and bought two more .380 Colts before returning to the north. Within a year, Nelson would be dead.

During the Bureau's raid of Lebman's premises, a number of Colt products were found, including a .45 Auto with a mutilated number but so-called secret number (no doubt on the slide under the firing pin stop) of 173697. It had been obtained from Wolf and Klar in November 1933. Originally sold by Lebman to a gang member, it had been traded back to Lebman for a .38 Super. Another Colt .45, bearing serial number 161971, had been built into a machine pistol with a forward grip assembly on order from the gang but remained undelivered. Similar weapons were later captured from gang members by the Bureau and are on display today. Lastly, an M1911 bearing U. S. property marks and number 77149, nickel plated, was found in the Lebman shop. It seems everyone thought it stolen but perhaps not for we know some were sold by the government to individuals. At the time of the raid, it seems everyone made quite the deal about it, however.

While many firearms at the time were stolen from the National Guard, police agencies, or taken out of cars where they had been left not adequately secured, some were surprisingly actually purchased for offensive or defensive purposes and a few were acquired with the specific goal of using them as skill developers or to understudy to the main "battle gun."



An Ace .22 is not often thought of as a gangster gun but two of the leading 1930s gangsters had them when captured – one was even legally purchased!