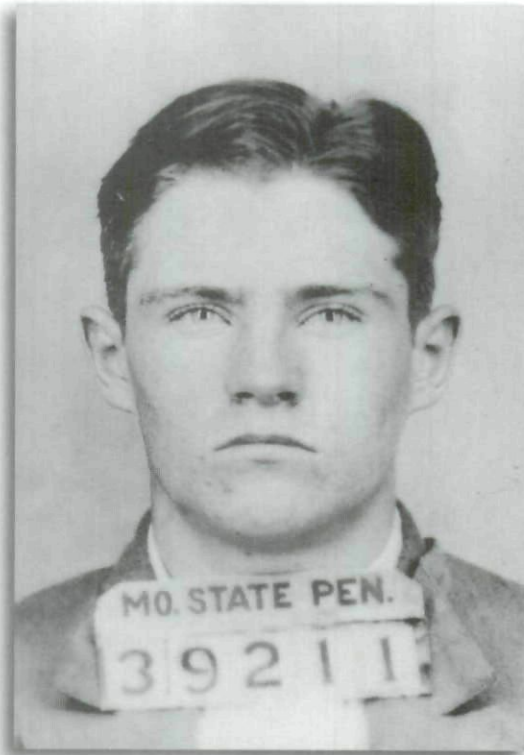


"In the Eyes of Men": Ben and Stella Mae Dickson, Bank Robbers

Matthew Cecil

In the early 1930s, Americans grew convinced that a wave of lawlessness was sweeping the nation. Even as fear mobilized society to declare war on crime, the public closely followed the real-life dramas of criminals and detectives whose exploits were often sensationalized in the news and entertainment media. The comparison of bank robbers like John Dillinger with Robin Hood helped to feed the image of certain criminals as romantic-action heroes. Such stories provided entertainment for people seeking an escape from the hardships of the Great Depression. In 1938, two bank heists in South Dakota helped to feed the national fascination with the underworld. For seven months after the robberies of the Elkton Corn Exchange Bank in August and the Brookings branch of the Sioux Falls-based Northwest Security National Bank two months later, law enforcement officials pursued suspects Ben and Stella Mae Dickson throughout the Midwest. The daylight holdups and daring escapes of these small-time criminals set in motion a massive manhunt and gave the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) an opportunity to showcase its work as a modern crime-fighting agency.¹

1. Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp. 32, 50, 122-23; Kenneth O'Reilly, "A New Deal for the FBI: The Roosevelt Administration, Crime Control, and National Security," *Journal of American History* 69 (Dec. 1982): 642. For more information on the development of the FBI and its public image, see Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 185-86; Athan Theoharis, ed., *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), p. 303; and Matthew Cecil, "Defending a Myth: The Development of FBI Public Relations," presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, Calif., 29 May 1999.



Barely twenty-one years old at the time of this 1931 mug shot, Ben Dickson was already doing time in the Missouri State Penitentiary for bank robbery.

Part of the public fascination with the case lay in the resemblance of Ben Dickson and Stella May Dickson to the boy and girl next door. Ben Dickson, age twenty-seven, was a charismatic character, an intelligent young man turned criminal who attended night school and took correspondence courses between bank heists. The son of a respected Topeka, Kansas, high school chemistry teacher, Dickson had served time in the Kansas State Reformatory for car theft and spent seven years in the Missouri State Penitentiary for bank robbery. After his parole in 1937, he met Stella Irwin, a stylish and pretty fifteen-year-old, at a Topeka roller-skating rink. Introducing himself as Johnny D. O'Malley, an insurance salesman from Chicago, he quickly won her affection and eventually told her his real identity. Within weeks of their meeting, however, he fled to Cali-

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This 1937 photograph depicts Stella Mae Irwin as she looked at the time she met her future husband at a Topeka, Kansas, roller-skating rink.



fornia to avoid an assault charge. When he sent Irwin money to join him there, she did. A police judge in Pipestone, Minnesota, married the couple on 3 August 1938 as they vacationed with Dickson's family at nearby Lake Benton.²

Three weeks later and just a day before Stella Mae Dickson's sixteenth birthday, a group of girls were playing on Elk Street in Elkton, South Dakota, a small town just across the Minnesota border. Betty Walsh, then age twelve, later told FBI special agents that at 2:00 P.M. on 25 August 1938 she saw a young woman get out of a dirty, oil-streaked 1936 Ford that bore Cal-

2. Frederick L. Collins, *The FBI in Peace and War* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943), pp. 43-45; Louis Cochran, *FBI Man: A Personal History* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1966), pp. 184-85.

ifornia license plates.³ The young woman's manner and actions attracted the attention of Walsh, thirteen-year-old Jean Severson, and another unidentified girl. According to Severson, the young woman "had a pronounced hip movement when she walked" and wore men's overalls, a straw hat, and dark glasses. She also carried something in a newspaper-wrapped package about the size, Walsh reported, of a machine gun. At the time, Walsh joked with her friends that the woman must be a gun moll.⁴ Because of her shabby attire, however, the girls concluded more realistically that she might be a hitchhiker or a hobo. When the girls approached her, Dickson covered her face with her hat. "Further attempts to draw the woman into conversation were fruitless," the *Brookings Register* later reported, "and the trio, after noting the look of anger on her face, walked across the street into a store."⁵

At 2:30 P.M., cashier Robert Petschow stood behind the counter at the first teller window of the Elkton Corn Exchange Bank. He and bookkeeper Elaine Lovley were the only two employees in the building. Petschow cashed a twenty-two-dollar check for Mrs. Walter Hurd, and as he handed her the cash he looked up and saw a shabbily-dressed man pointing a gun through teller window number two. "This is a holdup," the cashier reported the man as saying before instructing Hurd to stay where she was. At that moment, the bank door opened and fourteen-year-old Harold Belson entered. The robber, later identified as Ben Dickson, ordered Belson to stand next to Hurd. Dickson then reportedly grabbed the frame of the teller window and swung himself over and behind the counter. "How much money is in the bank?" he asked. Petschow replied that there was about fourteen hundred dollars in cash. Dickson quickly produced a white sugar sack and ordered Petschow to fill it with the counter change.⁶

Dickson then turned his attention to the vault at the rear of the building. When informed that the time lock would not open

3. Special Agent V. P. Keay, Saint Louis, Mo., Investigative Summary, 22 Apr. 1939, p. 15, File 29-100-651, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Record Group (RG) 65, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited NA).

4. Special Agent Chapmon Fletcher, Aberdeen, S.Dak., Investigative Summary, 31 Aug. 1938, p. 18, File 29-100-589, RG 65, NA.

5. *Brookings Register*, 29 Aug. 1938.

6. Fletcher, Investigative Summary, 31 Aug. 1938, p. 2.

until 3:00 P.M., the robber announced that he would wait and reached under the bib of his overalls to check his pocket watch. He then asked if there were any other employees at the bank, and Petschow replied that one worker was out on an errand. Dickson instructed Petschow not to raise his hands, go near the counter, or attempt to set off any alarms. Even though the Corn Exchange Bank had been robbed in 1931, it had no electric alarm system. There were no firearms in the building, and using the bank's two electrically discharged gas guns did not appear to be an option for the besieged employees.⁷

Having assessed the situation, Dickson next instructed Petschow and Lovley to act naturally and continue working. He planned to herd any entering customers into the lobby and hold them there until the time lock opened. The first individual to enter the bank was farm hand Theodore J. Schroeder. Lovley's sister Shirley followed pool-hall owner T. J. Herney. Stella Mae Dickson was the next to arrive.⁸ She was supposed to be standing watch outside but "got worried and went into the bank to look for him," she wrote in an April 1939 confession. "When I went in, Johnny [Dickson's alias] was standing on the inside of the partition and was ordering people in the bank around and made them lie on the floor. He gave me orders and told me what to do so people in the bank would not think I was with him."⁹ While Stella Mae obediently stood at the front of the bank holding what witnesses said appeared to be a gun under a newspaper, nine more customers, along with bank president Lester Foreman, entered. Petschow repeated instructions as ordered: "This is a hold-up, just do what this man tells you, and everything will be all right." Dickson met the customers in the lobby and sent twelve men and one boy to lie on the floor behind the counter. He allowed the two women to sit down in the lobby.¹⁰

During the nearly thirty-minute wait for the time lock to open, several events occurred that news accounts would later refer to as "Robin Hood" incidents.¹¹ Roy Kramer, owner of the local filling station, arrived at the bank carrying a deposit book

7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Keay, Investigative Summary, 22 Apr. 1939, p. 15.

10. Fletcher, Investigative Summary, 31 Aug. 1938, p. 3.

11. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938.

and two checks, which Ben Dickson confiscated. After seeing Kramer's account balance, however, Dickson handed the checks and bank book back, apparently deciding that Kramer could not afford to be robbed. John E. Dunn, the local postmaster and druggist, brought in fifty dollars in bills and fifteen dollars in change. Dickson took the cash and inquired about Dunn's account balance, which, the druggist replied, was perhaps twenty-five dollars. After consulting the bank ledger, Dickson asked Dunn why he had so little money. "Is your business any good? It must be pretty bad. You can keep this," he said returning the cash. "You probably need it as badly as I do."¹² Maurice Campbell, manager of the city liquor store, underwent similar questioning. Campbell carried thirty dollars to deposit in a city account. Dickson kept the money, reasoning that the cash belonged to the city, not to Campbell.

At 3:00 P.M., Dickson ordered Petschow to enter the vault. Finding the lock still unopened, the two men returned to the front of the bank where Dickson warned his hostages that there could be trouble and they should keep quiet. "This applies to you, too," Dickson told his wife. After a minute or so, the vault lock opened, and Dickson emptied currency into the sugar sack before moving the hostages into the vault and down an inner staircase to a lower compartment. When Foreman tried to enter ahead of Lovley, Dickson pushed him aside, saying, "Don't you know ladies are always first?" As he shut the door on the hostages, Dickson failed to secure the latch properly. In less than ten minutes after Ben and Stella Mae Dickson left the bank, a customer entered and quickly freed the prisoners.¹³

At 3:15 P.M., William S. Gordon of the South Dakota attorney general's office called FBI Special Agent Werner Hanni in Aberdeen to report the robbery. Because the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation insured the Corn Exchange Bank, the holdup was a violation of the National Bank Robbery Act and came under FBI jurisdiction.¹⁴ Gordon's telephone call thus precipitated an eight-month-long investigation that eventually

12. Fletcher, Investigative Summary, 31 Aug. 1938, p. 14.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

14. Director J. Edgar Hoover, Washington, D.C., Interesting Case Memorandum, 1 Sept. 1939, p. 7, File 7-2561, RG 65, NA.

involved hundreds of FBI agents, engaged the organization's highest leadership, and generated more than six thousand pages of documentation as the agency used the robbery to its public-relations advantage.

The Dicksons absconded with \$2,187.64 and drove a carefully planned, meandering route on country roads to the family farm just over the state boundary near Tyler, Minnesota, where Dickson's mother, Alma Johnson, had grown up.¹⁵ "We did not stop en route," Stella Mae Dickson recalled in her confession. "When we got to the farm we parked the car out near the barn and Johnny walked up in the trees. He said he was going to hide the money." Several days later, the couple left for Topeka, Kansas, where they stayed with Stella Mae's parents before returning to southwestern Minnesota in October.¹⁶

After spending several weeks on the run, the couple planned their next robbery for Brookings, located a few miles northwest of Elkton. Home to South Dakota State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts and a population of more than five thousand residents, Brookings was one of South Dakota's largest towns in 1938. The two-story Northwest Security National Bank anchored the southwest corner of the intersection of Fourth Street and Main Avenue, the so-called Taylor's Corner and the town's busiest shopping area. From the large granite pillars framing the entrance to the end of its half-block depth, the bank building was one of the most imposing structures in Brookings.¹⁷

At 8:25 A.M. on 31 October 1938, thirty-five minutes before the bank was scheduled to open, assistant manager John Torsey left his desk full of paperwork to walk to Tidball's Drug Store for a Coca-Cola. Upon returning, he noticed a black car with either Minnesota or Michigan license plates parked one door down from the bank, he later told FBI investigators. He saw a blonde woman sitting in the front passenger seat, and a small, athletic man standing outside the car talking to her.¹⁸ For this

15. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

16. Keay, Investigative Summary, 22 Apr. 1939, p. 16.

17. Collins, *FBI in Peace and War*, p. 49; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 31 Oct. 1938.

18. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938; Special Agents R. L. Nalls and Chapmon Fletcher, Aberdeen, S.Dak., Investigative Summary, 10 Nov. 1938, p. 8, File 29-100-651, RG 65, NA. Some files in Record Group 65 carry duplicate numbers, as do this one and Keay's 22 April 1939 investigative summary.

heist, Ben and Stella Mae Dickson were dressed formally, perhaps in an effort to confuse those who might link them to the Elkton robbery. Ben Dickson sported glasses, a grey herringbone suit, a brown hat, and a gold signet ring on the little finger of his left hand, while Stella Mae wore a salmon-colored coat over a green dress. One witness later recalled her as "pretty and neatly dressed."¹⁹

As Torsey unlocked the door to reenter the bank, he felt a poke. "This is a shotgun in your back and this is a holdup," he reported Dickson as saying. The robber told Torsey to remain calm and walk in as if nothing unusual were happening. Once inside, Torsey and Dickson turned right and entered the bank offices, which were separated from the public area by a partition.²⁰ Already at work were bank manager Richard M. ("Dick")

19. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938.

20. Nalls and Fletcher, Investigative Summary, 10 Nov. 1938, p. 8.

The target of the Dicksons' daring robbery in the fall of 1938, the Northwest Security National Bank building in Brookings now houses an eating establishment.



DePuy, teller Curtis Lovre, and bookkeeper Dorothy Coffey.²¹ Lovre later told a reporter for the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* that he left his chair at the check-posting machine and approached Dickson, who told him to sit down and "act natural." Dickson also ordered Coffey to sit down and told all four employees that their lives were in their own hands. "This money's insured," he said. "So just behave yourselves."²² At a knock from Stella Mae, Dickson motioned for Torsey to let her into the bank. She took her post in the lobby, a revolver in hand. Dickson told his wife to keep an eye on the employees, who later told authorities that she paced nervously up and down the narrow public area of the bank throughout the robbery.²³

According to the special investigators' report, Dickson then handed DePuy a white pillowcase and ordered him to the rear of the building to open the vault. When DePuy told Dickson he did not know the lock combination, the robber called Torsey back. As the assistant manager reached to pull a light string, Dickson, apparently concerned that the action would trigger an alarm, said, "Pull it if you want, but if it is anything but a light, I'll let you have it." Once the area was lit, Torsey opened a small safe that stood outside the vault and scooped two thousand dollars cash into the pillowcase. Informed that a time lock secured the main vault until about 10:30 A.M., Dickson announced that he would wait for it to open as scheduled.²⁴

In the meantime, the men returned to the work area of the bank, where Dickson asked about the building's arrangement and how much money was kept in the tellers' cash drawers. Torsey then removed most of the cash, leaving enough small bills to allow business to proceed. Insurance agent John Hanten, who had an office in the building, and bank clerk Robert Flittie arrived at 9:00 A.M. and were told to remain calm. At that time, Dickson noticed the buttons and electrical wires of a rudimentary alarm system underneath the teller windows. He quickly ordered Torsey to cut the wires, which were connected to buzzers in the clothing store and pool hall next door.

21. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938.

22. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 31 Oct. 1938.

23. Nalls and Fletcher, Investigative Summary, 10 Nov. 1938, p. 9.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

In contrast to the Elkton robbery, customers were allowed to come and go, transacting business as usual while the Dicksons waited for the time lock to open. Ben Dickson stood behind the counter near DePuy, who sat at his desk. Stella Mae remained in the lobby, her revolver hidden under a newspaper. Dickson warned the tellers not to try passing alarm notes to customers and threatened to shoot if he saw anything suspicious. He ordered employees to tell customers he was a bank inspector.²⁵

Between 9:00 and 10:30 that morning, more than fifty customers entered the bank, transacted business, and left. Charles ("Tim") Monahan recalled entering the bank twice during the holdup, once to pay off a note and another time to change a large bill. He recalled seeing a well-dressed, pretty blonde girl but otherwise noticed nothing unusual.²⁶ With Dickson holding a gun aimed at his side, DePuy "worked under terrific pressure" and granted numerous loans.²⁷ Two of the manager's regular coffee-break companions stopped to invite him to join them at a cafe down the street. Depuy told them he "couldn't get away now."²⁸ When Coffey saw her sister enter the bank, she ducked behind the counter, afraid that she would fail to keep up the pretense. The Brookings robbery featured its own "Robin Hood" incident. During a quiet moment when no customers were in the bank, Dickson asked Hanten how much his topcoat had cost. When Hanten replied twenty-five dollars, Dickson took the coat and ordered him to take the amount from the cash drawers. Hanten later tried to return the money, but DePuy insisted he keep it.²⁹

At 10:30 A.M., Dickson and Torsey checked the time lock, which had not yet opened. While they waited, Dickson told the assistant manager to clean out the few remaining silver pieces from the small safe. When Torsey suggested that the robbers might not want to be burdened with such heavy items, Dickson replied that he wanted everything. Soon, the time lock clicked open, and the men loaded the vault's money and securities, except for five hundred dollars in mutilated bills that Torsey

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 15, 29.

26. Interview with Charles ("Tim") Monahan, Brookings, S.Dak., 14 Oct. 1995.

27. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938.

28. *Brookings County Press*, 3 Nov. 1938.

29. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct., 7 Nov. 1938.

missed, into another pillowcase. Dickson, Torsey, and DePuy carried the two heavy sacks to the front of the bank and added the money from the cash drawers. Dickson then ordered Torsey to carry the seventy-five-pound load to his car. As DePuy helped his employee struggle with the awkward bags, Dickson chuckled and held the bank door open.

After DePuy deposited the pillowcases in the vehicle's left rear seat, Dickson ordered the men to stand on opposite running boards. By now, Stella Mae Dickson had joined the group. Ready to make a getaway with their hostages on the running boards, the Dicksons discovered their car had been blocked in. They waited while an elderly man slowly moved his adjacent vehicle and then quickly drove south on Main Avenue, turning east on Third Street. Two blocks later, in front of the Revell Apartments near the Brookings County Courthouse, Dickson stopped and freed the hostages. As the car sped away, Torsey and DePuy saw Stella Mae smiling broadly and waving good-bye. The two men stopped at the Beatrice Creamery, one block east of the bank, to call police. The fugitives took a roundabout route through Brookings to US Highway 14, which they followed east some thirty miles to the vicinity of the Dickson family farm in Minnesota. Employees of the White Eagle Filling Station on the corner of Sixth Street and Medary Avenue in Brookings reported that Stella Mae scattered roofing nails as the car sped through the intersection.³⁰

Newspapers immediately noted similarities between the Brookings and Elkton robberies. In both instances, the robbers were a young man-and-woman team. Both cases involved the theft of a large amount of cash and securities. In the Brookings robbery, the Dicksons escaped with \$17,592.99 in cash, plus stocks valued at more than sixteen thousand dollars. Authorities never recovered the stolen money.³¹ The couple badly needed the funds. "Two days before we robbed the bank at Brookings, South Dakota, we slept in the Buick in the barn at the farm in Tyler, Minnesota, because we had run out of money and did not have funds with which to pay rent," Stella Mae

30. Nalls and Fletcher, Investigative Summary, 10 Nov. 1938, pp. 10-13, 30; *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938.

31. *Brookings Register*, 31 Oct. 1938; Indictment, 24 Mar. 1939, *People of the United States v. Benjamin James [sic] Dickson*, Indictment Number 3728, U.S. District Court, District of South Dakota, Southern Division, File 29-100-589, RG 65, NA.

Dickson later recalled. "Johnny told me that he took part of the money we got at Brookings . . . and hid it. He never did tell me where he hid that money. I recall that he kept at least \$2,000 of it because he always had about that much money on him."³²

The robbery of the Northwest Security National Bank, like that of the Elkton Corn Exchange Bank, came under the purview of the FBI. Within days, FBI investigators had uncovered solid links between the two holdups and Ben Dickson's earlier theft of a car in Kansas City, Missouri. Authorities managed to trace the Dicksons firmly to a point just north of Elkton before losing their trail. Later they learned the pair had spent the night of the robbery at the farm near Tyler. Twenty-four days later, authorities sighted them again as they visited family in Topeka for Thanksgiving. After two high-speed chases in which both parties exchanged gunfire, the Dicksons stole a car in Michigan, forcing its driver and his companion to drive them to Indiana. There, they freed the hostages, purchased a car, and drove to New Orleans.³³

Despite a massive publicity campaign in which the FBI issued nearly one thousand news releases nationwide, agents lost track of the pair.³⁴ No productive leads turned up until the spring of 1939, when authorities located Ben Dickson in Saint Louis, Missouri. At seven o'clock on the evening of 6 April 1939, four FBI special agents waited outside the Yankee System Hamburger Shop near Forest Park in midtown Saint Louis. Inside the restaurant, Ben Dickson sat with a "woman in brown" identified in FBI files as "Naomi," the sister of one of Dickson's former penitentiary cellmates. A paid informant, "Naomi" had set up the meeting, although the FBI later denied that any paid informant had been present that day. As Dickson left the shop, one of the special agents shot him twice, and he died on the sidewalk while Stella Mae waited in the car one-half block away. According to FBI accounts, Dickson emerged from the building, crouched, and reached for his weapons, prompting

32. Keay, Investigative Summary, 22 Apr. 1939, p. 18.

33. Ibid., p. 19; Collins, *FBI in Peace and War*, pp. 53-56.

34. The Dickson case file (number 7-2591, RG 65, NA) includes more than one thousand letters sent to newspapers and radio stations under J. Edgar Hoover's signature, copies of FBI case memoranda released to news organizations, and hundreds of news clippings.

agents to fire in self-defense. The only citizen to witness the shooting, Yankee System waitress Gloria Cambron, offered a different account. She reported that the agents had confronted Dickson as he left the shop and that he had not reached for his guns but rather had turned and run to an apartment door north of the shop. According to Cambron, Dickson was struggling to open the locked door to escape up the inside stairs as two FBI bullets struck him in the side and back.³⁵

Internal FBI memoranda corroborated Cambron's version of the story. In a "Personal and Confidential" letter to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, Gerald B. Norris, the special agent in charge of the case, recounted that one agent shot Dickson "twice in the body, one bullet entering his shoulder and going down through his body toward the front and the other going from one side of his body to the other." According to the letter, no other agents fired their weapons. Furthermore, Norris wrote, the bullet that struck Dickson's side entered under his right arm and also passed toward the front of his body.³⁶ If, as bureau officials publicly claimed, Dickson was directly in front of the agents, it seems unlikely a bullet could have entered his shoulder from the back and moved with a trajectory toward the front. In addition, if Dickson was indeed reaching for his guns, it would have been difficult for a bullet to enter his body under the right arm, which would have been at his side. If, however, the victim had been attempting to open the apartment door to the north of the hamburger shop, as Cambron claimed, he would have been turned in such a way that agents might have fired bullets that struck with the described trajectories.

Norris's handling of the events following the shooting offers insight into the centralized nature of FBI public relations. In the moments after the shooting, Saint Louis police officers placed two of the special agents under what Norris described as "technical arrest."³⁷ When detectives arrived at the scene and began asking questions, Norris refused to answer until he had conferred with his supervisors in Washington, D.C. "All of this in-

35. Special Agent in Charge Gerald B. Norris, Saint Louis, Mo., Investigative Summary, 8 Apr. 1939, p. 2, File 7-2561-616, RG 65, NA; *Topeka Daily Capital*, 7 Apr. 1939.

36. Norris to Hoover, 7 Apr. 1939, File 7-2561-604X, p. 3, RG 65, NA.

37. Quoted in Assistant Director Edward A. Tamm, Memorandum for the Director, 7 Apr. 1939, p. 1, File 7-2561-618X, RG 65, NA.

formation," Norris told Hoover in another Personal and Confidential letter, "was furnished to the bureau before it was given out to any other sources."³⁸

By 8 April, Cambron had publicly told her version of the story several times and was scheduled to testify under oath at the coroner's inquest.³⁹ FBI Assistant Director Edward A. Tamm, however, directed Norris "that this woman should be brought into the office and given a good scare and that she should be told that she has been quoted in the newspapers as telling some stores [*sic*] that were not true and that if we are going to have to prosecute her for perjury or something, we will do so."⁴⁰ In the end, Cambron did not testify. Officials at the inquest absolved the FBI of blame in the matter, and the agency had a free hand to craft the story of Dickson's shooting. The bureau's public-relations officials did just that, issuing a series of radio scripts, interesting case memoranda, and commercially distributed books containing its version of the Dickson story. Typical of these efforts was the memoir of former special agent Louis Cochran, who recounted the Dicksons' crimes in detail but made no mention of either Cambron or the mysterious "woman in brown."⁴¹

Stella Mae Dickson drove away from her husband's shooting wanting only to get home to her mother. Leaving her car in a rented garage, she hired a man to drive her to Kansas City, Missouri. Even as the frightened young woman ran home, the FBI warned the public to be on the lookout for a dangerous fugitive. A *Kansas City Journal* news article quoted special agent Norris calling the teenager "just as tough a customer as Benny was," while the *Kansas City Star* reported, "Estelle Dickson is wanted just as badly as her husband was."⁴²

Government agents arrested the unarmed Stella Mae Dickson as she stepped from her driver's car in downtown Kansas City, less than a block from FBI offices there. Having recognized her, the driver had turned her in. Easter shoppers crowd-

38. Norris to Hoover, 7 Apr. 1939, p. 5.

39. Norris to Hoover, 11 Apr. 1939, p. 1, File 7-2561-735X, RG 65, NA.

40. Tamm, Memorandum for the Director, 9 Apr. 1939, p. 2, File 7-2561-729, RG 65, NA.

41. Cochran, *FBI Man*, pp. 181-88. See also Collins, *FBI in Peace and War*, pp. 41-58, and "The Bennie Dickson Case," radio script, 25 Mar. 1955, pp. 1-9, File 7-2561-901, RG 65, NA.

42. *Kansas City Journal*, 7 Apr. 1939; *Kansas City Star*, 7 Apr. 1939.

ing the sidewalks remained unaware that authorities had captured a "public enemy" in their midst.⁴³ "I knew the minute he stopped he was going to get a federal man to arrest me," Dickson later told an agent. "I didn't care. I just sat in the car. I knew if I got out and tried to get to Topeka by myself I wouldn't get there alive, and I wanted to see my mother."⁴⁴ Dickson's mother, Hattie Redenbaugh, was not surprised that her daughter surrendered without incident, despite the FBI assertions that the sixteen-year-old was "extremely dangerous." "I knew Estelle would be taken, and I knew exactly the way she would act," Redenbaugh told reporters. "By that I mean that I knew they would find Estelle unarmed and that she would offer no resistance."⁴⁵

Upon her arrest on 8 April, Stella Mae Dickson carried seventy dollars and wore three rings, among them her wedding ring set with seven diamonds. In addition, she carried a key to a New Orleans apartment and a poem her late husband had penned: "In the eyes of men I am not just/But in your eyes, O life, I see justification./You have taught me that my path is right if I am true to you."⁴⁶

The FBI moved quickly to obtain a statement from the young woman. After a physician's examination, agents questioned her in detail. Alone and without parental or legal guidance, she agreed to furnish a confession. In a sixteen-page statement, Dickson acknowledged her part in the two bank robberies but denied any knowledge of stolen cars and maintained that her husband had instigated all of the couple's crimes.⁴⁷ Together with her mother and stepfather, Dickson appeared before a federal commissioner in Kansas City on 10 April 1939, a meeting reporters were allowed to peer in on from the office door. Authorities advised the young woman to waive a removal hearing and proceed directly to South Dakota, where she would face bank robbery charges in federal district court at Sioux Falls. The commissioner set bond at twenty-five thousand dollars, return-

43. *Kansas City Journal*, 11 Apr. 1939.

44. Keay, Investigative Summary, 29 Apr. 1939, p. 27.

45. *Kansas City Journal*, 11 Apr. 1939.

46. Keay, Investigative Summary, 29 Apr. 1939, p. 27.

47. *Ibid.*



Reporters peering through the office door of United States Court Commissioner Charles H. Thompson (far right) caught this glimpse of Stella Mae Dickson with her mother and an FBI agent (far left). The man second from the right is unidentified.

able at Sioux Falls. Dickson faced the possibility of life in prison on each count of bank robbery.⁴⁸

Dickson's initial confession had suggested that she had willingly participated in the crimes, but after a discussion with her attorney and her parents, she issued a second "confession." It contained few factual changes but carried a tone befitting a coverture defense. Under the principle of coverture, a woman or child could avoid prosecution if he or she had been following the direction of an authority figure like a husband or father in committing a crime. "Johnny planned each of these bank robberies and I was with him during each robbery only because he told me to go with him," she stated on 13 April 1939. "I did not plan to go into either of those banks but did go into each

48. *Kansas City Journal*, 10 Apr. 1939.

of them because Johnny staid [*sic*] in each bank so long I got worried about him and went into the banks to look for him." She now added that Ben Dickson "frequently got mad at me and said if I left him he would kill me and said he would kill anybody who helped me leave him."⁴⁹ Dickson was known for his temper, but there is no record of his ever having threatened to kill anyone. In an FBI news release attributed to Hoover, the agency expressed skepticism over the revised confession, calling it a scheme devised by Dickson and her attorneys to avoid punishment.⁵⁰

Less than one week after her capture, officials ordered Dickson extradited to South Dakota. Her imminent arrival in Sioux Falls created a stir. After newspaper stories announced that she would arrive by train, crowds gathered daily at the Milwaukee Railroad depot downtown to await a glimpse of the former fugitive.⁵¹ Fearing an incident at Sioux Falls, state officials transported her instead to the newly constructed city jail in Mitchell, seventy miles to the west. The *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* described Dickson's arrival there on 15 April: "Dressed in a blue checkered sport coat, a print dress, wearing a wide-brimmed, black hat," the paper reported, "she walked down the courthouse corridors with long strides."⁵² On 20 April, Brookings bank employees Dorothy Coffey and John Torsey, along with two of the three Elkton girls, arrived in Mitchell and identified Dickson as the woman they had seen in connection with the two robberies. "FBI agents dressed Estelle in the clothes found in an abandoned Dickson automobile in order to help witnesses identify her," the *Brookings Register* reported.⁵³

During the legal negotiations that followed, Dickson protested her innocence under the coverture rule. In May, federal marshals took her to Sioux Falls, where her attorney, Chet Morgan of Mitchell, discussed the case with United States Attorney George Philip. In contrast to the FBI depictions of her, the local newspaper described Dickson as looking "more like a school girl than a gun moll waiting the proceedings of the court on charges of bank robbery including the taking of hostages, a pos-

49. Keay, Investigative Summary, 29 Apr. 1939, pp. 30-32.

50. Hoover, Interesting Case Memorandum, 20 Sept. 1948, p. 20, File 7-2561, RG 65, NA.

51. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 15 Apr. 1939.

52. *Ibid.*, 16 Apr. 1939.

53. *Brookings Register*, 20 Apr. 1939.

sible capital offense. She is a small girl, short and not very heavy, and wore a small black hat set back on her blonde hair, which made her appear no older than the 16 years she claims."⁵⁴ Under pressure from Hoover and the Justice Department, United States District Court Judge Alfred L. ("Lee") Wyman brought prosecutors and the defense together on a plea agreement. On 21 August 1939, Dickson, then seventeen, pleaded guilty to two counts of bank robbery in Federal District Court in Deadwood, South Dakota. Wyman, citing Dickson's youth and the corrupting influence of her husband, sentenced her to two concurrent ten-year terms at the United States Women's

54. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 19 May 1939.



The girlish appearance of Dickson, who faced charges of bank robbery and hostage-taking, surprised and enthralled people who had followed the exploits of the outlaw couple.

Reformatory in Alderson, West Virginia. She arrived there to begin serving her sentence on 27 August 1939.⁵⁵

Beginning with two South Dakota bank robberies, the case of Ben and Stella Mae Dickson had created attention-grabbing headlines across the nation. With the death of Ben Dickson, the silencing of witness Gloria Cambron, and the subsequent conviction of Stella Mae Dickson, the FBI avoided an entangling investigation and freed itself to rewrite the story of these "public enemies." In short, the public fascination with criminals and the stories of small-time outlaws like the Dicksons provided the FBI with a ready opportunity to improve its public image in the war against crime.

55. *Ibid.*, 21 Aug. 1939; Hoover, Memorandum for Assistant Attorney General Rogge, 21 Sept. 1939, p. 1, File 7-2561-852, RG 65, NA. Further details regarding Dickson's incarceration have been withheld by the United States Bureau of Prisons under provisions of the Privacy Act. Her current whereabouts are unknown.

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