

# The FBI and the Thompson Submachine Gun

by Robert "Bo" Ramsour II

(Larry Wack, Walt Merritt, Bill Matens and Dr. John Fox assisted the author in preparing and submitting this article.)

The words, "Thompson submachine gun," bring to mind shootouts between 1930s gangsters and FBI Agents or G-men — with the Tommy gun, Chopper, Heater, Chicago Typewriter. The Depression years saw a wave of bank robberies, killings and shootouts with authorities, made possible in part by progress. The new Ford V-8 engine made for a fast get-away car. The lightweight and concealable, rapid-fire Thompson became the weapon of choice for the new-age gangster who could now out-run and out-gun the police and the G-men.

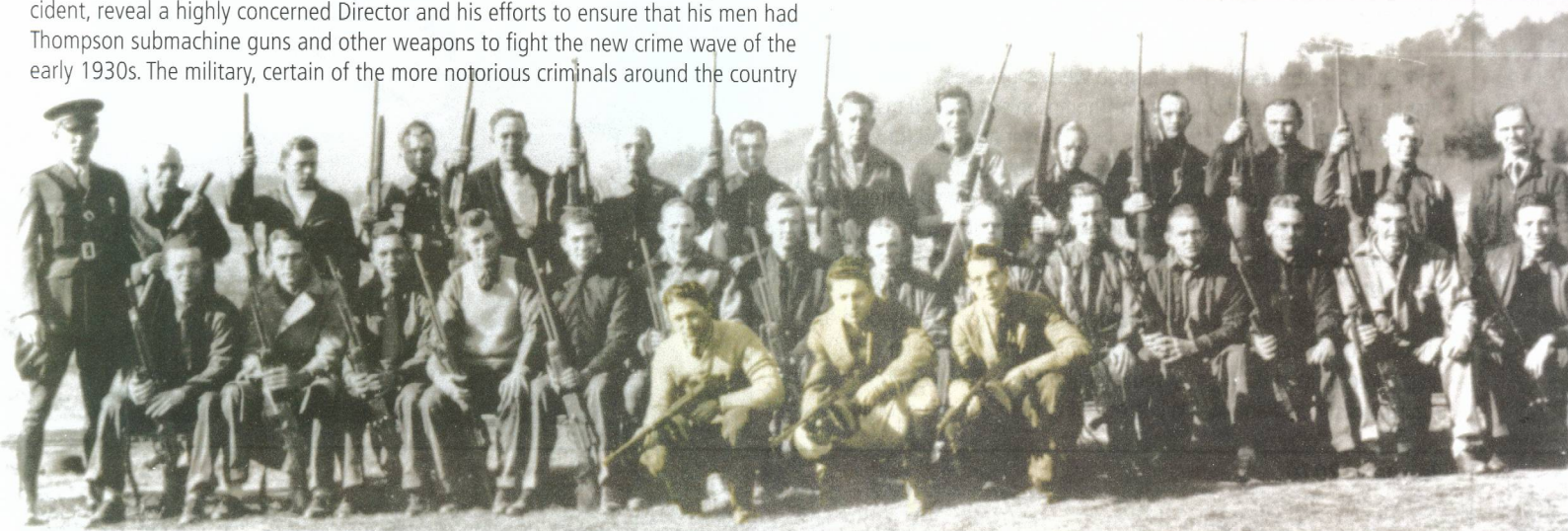
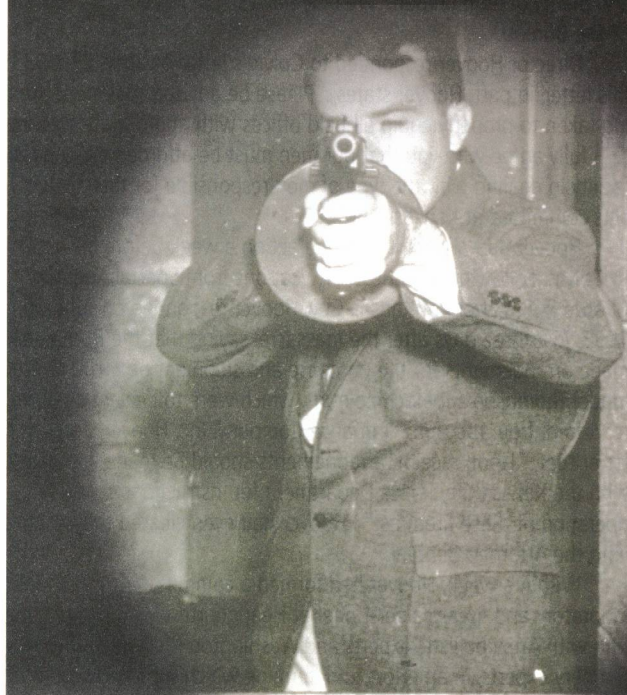
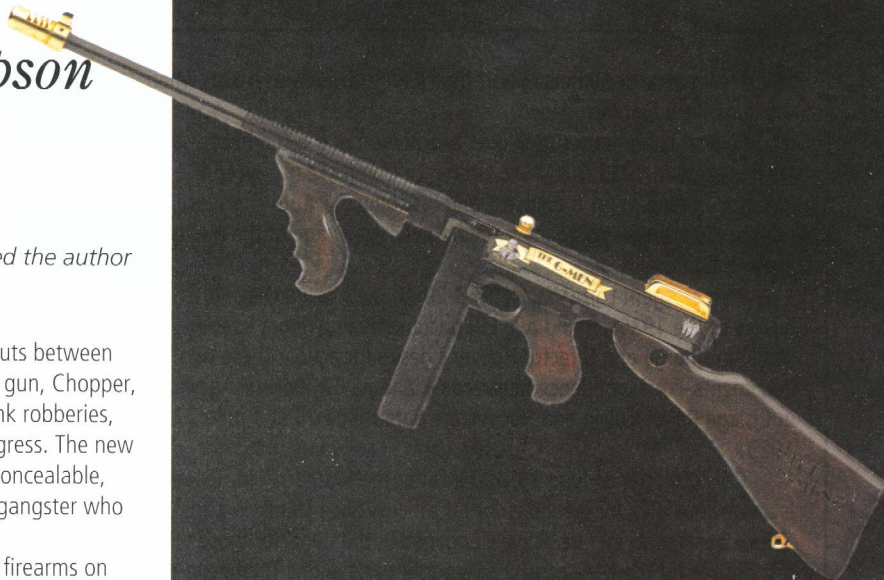
It was generally thought by the public that Agents did not carry firearms on duty before 1934, the year that Public Law 402 was passed authorizing Agents to carry firearms and make arrests. That legislation was needed because of the increasing number of Agents traveling state to state, and encountering different gun laws in those states, and to preclude the need to have a U.S. Marshal or police officer present at every arrest. Although the Bureau does not know exactly when Agents began carrying weapons, one item of evidence exists that shows the practice may date back to 1917.

In a 1955 letter to *the Grapevine*, Roy McHenry wrote that he had served in the Bureau from 1917 to 1920. From McHenry's letter: "The fact is, long before the passage of the Act, as early as 1917, to my personal knowledge, handguns were issued to us by the Bureau." He said that along with receiving his Bureau shield in 1917, he also received a Smith and Wesson automatic, which he kept until 1920. His letter also included information about target practice and procurement of ammunition.

In addition to McHenry's information, some pre-1934 weapons authority is found in a 1929 training manual, provided by FBI Historian Dr. John Fox. This manual reads, in part: "Section 11, Firearms: Employees are instructed: That they are legally entitled to carry firearms for defensive purposes and that they are never to use such firearms except for strictly defensive purposes."

While some previously published material seems to indicate that the FBI acquired the Thompson submachine gun in 1935, existing documents reveal that not only were Agents carrying Thompson submachine guns (and other weapons) before 1935, but that they were doing so even before the 1934 legislation.

It is generally agreed among FBI historians and researchers that the Kansas City Massacre of June 17, 1933, was the catalyst for J. Edgar Hoover's desire to further equip his men in the field. In that ambush, gangsters attempting to free noted gangster Frank Nash killed one Agent, wounded two Agents, and killed three local officers. Nash was also killed in the ambush. FBI documents following this incident, reveal a highly concerned Director and his efforts to ensure that his men had Thompson submachine guns and other weapons to fight the new crime wave of the early 1930s. The military, certain of the more notorious criminals around the country





and a few police departments had Thompson's as early as 1921, when the guns were first introduced.

Federal Laboratories took over distribution of the Thompson submachine gun in 1928 from Auto Ordnance Company, Inc, when the inventor, Colonel John Thompson, and his company, Auto Ordnance, tried to distance his company from the negative image of the gangster era and the Tommy gun.

Former Agent Larry Wack (1968-2003), who researches FBI history of the 1930s, found two FBI documents showing a Special Agent in Charge and Director Hoover's desire for action. These two documents, correspondence between Oklahoma City Special Agent in Charge Ralph Colvin and Hoover, are dated June 25 and June 27, 1933.

Colvin's letter of June 25, 1933, (after the Massacre) to Hoover, is an obvious plea for weapons for his office. Colvin states, in part, "Since our Agents will be actively engaged in the hunt (for those responsible for the Massacre) ... We ought to have one Thompson submachine gun, a couple of high power rifles ... .45-caliber Colts ... and plenty of ammunition. We only have small, light pistols furnished by the Bureau. ..."<sup>1</sup>

Director Hoover responded to Colvin's letter on June 27, 1933. In this letter, in part, Hoover states, "Please be advised that steps are being taken to properly equip all field offices with appropriate firearms. ... I fully agree with you that our men must be afforded every possible facility in dealing with the type of men responsible for the cowardly acts committed at Kansas City."<sup>2</sup>

Hoover had already taken one action a week before his letter to Colvin. Following a request for weapons from Special Agent in Charge R. E. Vetterli of Kansas City, Hoover responded on June 20, 1933, just three days after the massacre, saying that the Bureau had made arrangements for the purchase and shipment of two U. S. Navy model Thompson submachine guns, which were to be sent by air mail to Vetterli from the Auto Ordnance Company, Inc. Hoover states in his letter that, "Upon receipt, arrangements should be made immediately with the Kansas City Police Department for instructions ... as to the operation of these firearms."<sup>3</sup> Hoover had even cleared this purchase with the Attorney General.

Within a week, Hoover had formed a committee of three ranking laboratory and firearms personnel at Headquarters who were conferring with Army ballistic experts and Washington Metropolitan police gunnery experts, in an effort to determine which weapons would be best for use by Agents. On June 28, 1933, the recommendations were clear and Hoover set the plan into motion. Recommended items were the .38 Special Colt Police Positive Revolver, the Army 30-06 caliber Springfield Rifle, the 12 Gauge shotgun, and the Thompson submachine gun.

In a memo dated June 29, 1933, to J. W. Gardner, General Agent and Chief Clerk, the Director arranged what is believed to be the first large purchase and shipment of Thompson's in Bureau history. Procured from Federal Laboratories, Inc., Hoover arranged for 20 Model 28 Thompson submachine guns with Cutts Compensators attached and accessories for each gun. In part, the memo states, "... The Bureau desires that this order be placed immediately in order that payment therefore be made from the appropriation for the present fiscal year."<sup>4</sup>

In early 1934, violence to FBI Agents and police escalated. In a shooting on March 31, 1934, Dillinger and Homer Van Meter recklessly fired on two FBI Agents and a local officer at the Lexington Apartments in St. Paul, MN. While escaping from the scene, Dillinger

fired upon the officers with a stolen Thompson submachine gun. Hoover knew this incident in St. Paul was nearly a second Kansas City massacre. Documents of 1934 lend evidence to the continuing efforts of Hoover to help his men. Only a few weeks after the St. Paul shootout Indianapolis Special Agent in Charge E. J. Connelly, needed firepower. With the Dillinger gang known to be in Illinois and Indiana in April, and a separate kidnapping in the making, Connelly's request was urgent. In a memo dated April 21, 1934, Hoover's assistant, Clyde Tolson, noted that he had arranged to "borrow ... from Federal Laboratories in Pittsburgh, four or five machine guns, two shields, one gas gun, with appropriate ammunition."<sup>5</sup> It was made clear in subsequent memos that these guns "must be returned" when the emergency is over. Pittsburgh Agents would drive the weapons up to Connelly.

In that same memo, Tolson also tells Hoover that, "Orders are being placed today for an additional shotgun and an additional Sporter rifle for each Field Office and for 30 machine guns — 1 or 2 offices receiving more than one such gun."<sup>6</sup>

The Director also allowed Agents to purchase Thompson machine guns with their own money. In the 1930s, a Colt Thompson cost approximately \$225, plus \$10 for a 50-round drum and \$3 for a 20-round magazine. This is true dedication, as an FBI Agent would have to spend almost a month's salary to purchase this tool of the trade. An Agent's salary was about \$2,800 annually at the time.

The Colt Thompson with a Cutts compensator, one or more 50-round drum magazines and 20-round stick magazines was the model originally ordered by the Bureau. Many were the "over-stamp" model, an original 1921 gun that had been fitted with a Cutts compensator and had the rate of fire slowed to make the gun easier to control. An "8" was stamped over the last "1" in 1921. The FBI model was also fitted with an elegant, dark walnut butt stock and vertical fore grip with finger groove cuts, instead of the plain horizontal fore grip that was fitted to the original Navy model. Additional research using available resources has indicated that approximately 200 Colt Thompson's were purchased from 1933 to 1939.

The consensus is that the Kansas City Massacre was also the single most important factor in the Bureau's establishing an Academy and formal weapons training. Before the FBI Academy was established at Quantico Marine Corps base in 1935, firearms' training was held at military bases. After training was standardized, every Agent was required to qualify with the Thompson once a month at 15, 25 and 50 yards. The Thompson was found to be very accurate, even in the hands of a novice at 50 yards — and with an experienced shooter, deadly at 100 yards.





In the early 1970s the Thompson was dropped as an active Bureau service weapon. After Director Hoover died, President Nixon appointed former Navy captain and personal aide, L. Patrick Gray III, as director. One of Gray's first acts was to approve destroying the FBI's Thompsons. The guns were cut into pieces and buried on the Quantico rifle range.

Today, the most use a Thompson submachine gun will get is to be displayed under a glass case or, in the past, for an FBI live-fire demonstration at Headquarters for tourists.

This classic weapon was the ultimate crime-fighting tool and truly defined the 1930s "Gangster Era." Crime historians consider the Thompson as having been the favorite weapon of both lawmen and gangsters alike. It was compact, concealable and light enough that its tremendous firepower could be unleashed swiftly and with devastating consequences. The Thompson let law enforcement officers rapidly unload a high volume of .45-caliber rounds, enough to stop fleeing criminals and their vehicles, and put the fear of the law into anyone at the other end of the barrel.



#### About the Author

Robert "Bo" Ramsour II, a native of Denver, CO, has been an avid collector and researcher of the Thompson submachine gun since he was 13 years old. He has given talks to gun clubs regarding the Thompson and has visited the FBI several times. He acquired his first Thompson with assistance from former Denver Police Chief Arthur Dill. Colt Firearms Company uses Ramsour to assist people who are looking for information, history, repair parts or accessories for the Thompson. He can be contacted at [ramsour2@aol.com](mailto:ramsour2@aol.com).

*Photos are courtesy of the Robert Ramsour, II and photos from the historic files of the Grapevine.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 SAC Colvin letter to Hoover from Oklahoma City dated June 25, 1933, FBI KC Massacre file, serial 105.
- 2 Director Hoover's letter to SAC Colvin dated June 27, 1933, FBI KC Massacre file, serial 105 also.
- 3 Series of five FBI documents dated June 20, 1933 and resulting involving the purchase/shipment of two Thompson's. FBI KC Massacre file, no serial shown.
- 4 Hoover memo to J. W. Gardner, 66-3760, serial 2.
- 5 Tolson to Hoover memos, April 21, 23, & 30 1934. Dillinger file 62-29777, serials 706, 723, 742.
- 6 Ibid.

