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# Willie Sutton

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**William "Willie" Sutton** (June 30, 1901 – November 2, 1980) was a prolific American bank robber. During his forty-year criminal career he stole an estimated \$2 million, and eventually spent more than half of his adult life in prison and escaped three times. For his talent at executing robberies in disguises, he gained two nicknames, "Willie the Actor" and "Slick Willie." Sutton is known, albeit apocryphally, for the urban legend that he said that he robbed banks "because that's where the money is."

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## Life summary

Sutton was born into an Irish-American family in an Irish neighborhood in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. He was the fourth of five children, and did not go beyond the 8th grade of school. He turned to crime at an early age, though throughout his professional criminal career, he did not kill anyone. Described by Mafioso Donald Frankos as a little bright-eyed man who stood at 5 feet 7 inches, he was very talkative, chain-smoked hand rolled Bull Durham tobacco cigarettes, and dispensed mounds of legal advice to any convict willing to listen. Inmates considered Sutton a "wise old head" in the prison population. When incarcerated at "The Tombs" (Manhattan House of Detention) he did not have to worry about assault because Mafia friends looked after him. In conversation with Donald Frankos he would sadly reminisce about the violent and turbulent days in the 1920s and 1930s while he was most active in robbing banks and would always tell fellow convicts that in his opinion, during the days of Al Capone and Charles Lucania, better known as Lucky Luciano, the criminal underworld was the bloodiest. Gangsters from the time period, and many incarcerated organized crime mafia family leaders and made Mafiosi loved having Sutton around for companionship. He was always a gentleman, witty and non-violent. Frankos declared that Sutton made legendary bank thieves Jesse James and John Dillinger look like amateurs.

Sutton married Louise Leudemann in 1929. She divorced him while he was in jail. Their daughter Jeanie was born the following year. His second wife was Olga Kowalska, whom he married in 1933. His longest period of (legal) employment lasted for 18 months.

Sutton preferred the name Bill, but police nicknamed him Willie.

He robbed about 100 banks from the late 1920s to his final arrest in 1952—with several prison terms in between. He was also a master at breaking out of prisons.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## Career in crime

Sutton was an accomplished bank robber. He usually carried a pistol or a Thompson submachine gun. "You can't rob a bank on charm and personality," he once observed. In an interview in the Reader's Digest published shortly before his death, Sutton was asked if the guns that he used in robberies were loaded. He responded that he never carried a loaded gun because somebody might get hurt. He stole from the rich and kept it, though public opinion later turned him into a perverse type of Robin Hood figure. He allegedly never robbed a bank when a woman screamed or a baby cried.

Sutton was captured and recommitted in June 1931, charged with assault and robbery. He did not complete his 30-year sentence, escaping on December 11, 1932, using a smuggled gun and holding a prison guard hostage. With the guard as leverage, Sutton acquired a 13.5-meter (45 ft) ladder to scale the 9-meter (30 ft) wall of the prison grounds.

On February 15, 1933, Sutton attempted to rob the Corn Exchange Bank and Trust Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He came in disguised as a postman, but an alert passerby foiled the crime. Sutton escaped. On January 15, 1934, he and two companions broke into the

Willie "The Actor" Sutton



FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives

<b>Charges</b>	Bank robbery
<b>Description</b>	
<b>Born</b>	June 30, 1901
<b>Died</b>	November 2, 1980 (aged 79) <div>Spring Hill, Florida</div>
<b>Status</b>	
<b>Added</b>	March 20, 1950
<b>Caught</b>	February 1952
<b>Number</b>	11
<b>Captured</b>	

same bank through a skylight.

The FBI record observes:

Sutton also conducted a Broadway jewelry store robbery in broad daylight, impersonating a postal telegraph messenger. Sutton's other disguises included a police officer, messenger and maintenance man. He usually arrived at banks or stores shortly before they opened for business.

Sutton was apprehended on February 5, 1934, and was sentenced to serve 25 to 50 years in the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for the machine gun robbery of the Corn Exchange Bank. On April 3, 1945, Sutton was one of 12 convicts who escaped the institution through a tunnel. Sutton was recaptured the same day by Philadelphia police officer Mark Kehoe.

Sentenced to life imprisonment as a fourth time offender, Sutton was transferred to the Philadelphia County Prison, Holmesburg section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On February 10, 1947, Sutton and other prisoners dressed up as prison guards. The men carried two ladders across the prison yard to the wall after dark. When the prison's searchlights hit him, Sutton yelled, "It's okay!" No one stopped him.

On March 20, 1950, Sutton was the eleventh listed on the FBI's brand new FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives, created only a week earlier, on March 14.

In February 1952, Sutton was captured by police after having been recognized on a subway and followed by Arnold Schuster, a 24-year-old Brooklyn clothing salesman and amateur detective. Schuster later appeared on television and described how he had assisted in Sutton's apprehension. Albert Anastasia, Mafia boss of the Gambino crime family, took a dislike to Schuster because he was a "squealer." According to Mafia turncoat and government informant, Joe Valachi, Anastasia ordered the murder of Schuster, who was then shot dead outside his home on March 9, 1952.

Judge Peter T. Farrell presided over a 1952 trial in which Sutton had been charged with the 1950 heist of \$63,942 (equal to \$620,405 today) from a branch of the Manufacturers Trust Company in Sunnyside, Queens, part of more than \$2 million he was estimated to have stolen from various banks over the course of his career in crime. Sutton was found guilty and given a sentence of 30 to 120 years in Attica State Prison.<sup>[1]</sup>

Farrell suspended Sutton's sentence in December 1969, ruling that Sutton's good behavior in prison and his deteriorating health due to emphysema justified the suspension of the sentence. After the ruling was delivered, Sutton said "Thank you, your Honor. God bless you" and started crying as he was led out of the court building. Sutton still had to receive a suspension of a separate 30-year-to-life sentence he had received in Brooklyn in 1952 and then could be released on parole from a 1930 conviction.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Final years

Willie Sutton stole an estimated \$2 million in his career, and spent more than half his adult life in prison.

A series of decisions by the United States Supreme Court in the 1960s led to his release on Christmas Eve, 1969, from Attica State Prison. He was in ill health at the time, suffering from emphysema and in need of an operation on the arteries of his legs.

Once a free man, he spoke about prison reform and consulted with banks on anti-robbery techniques. In an ironic display, he made a television commercial for New Britain Bank and Trust Co. in Connecticut for their credit card with picture ID on it. His lines were, "They call it the 'face card.' Now when I say I'm Willie Sutton, people believe me." Sutton disliked Jimmy Carter and when Carter ran for President in 1976, Sutton told an interviewer "I've never seen a bigger confidence man in my life and I've been around some of the best in the business".<sup>[3]</sup>

Sutton died in 1980 at the age of 79; before this he had spent his last years with his sister in Spring Hill, Florida. He frequented the Spring Hill Restaurant where he kept to himself. After Sutton's death, his family arranged a quiet burial in Brooklyn in the family plot. According to findagrave.com his plot is under the family name of Bowles at Holy Cross Cemetery.

## An urban legend

Sutton is famously — but apocryphally — supposed to have answered reporter Mitch Ohnstad, who asked why he robbed banks, by saying, "because that's where the money is." The supposed quote formed the basis of Sutton's law, often taught to medical students.

In his partly ghostwritten autobiography, *Where the Money Was: The Memoirs of a Bank Robber* (Viking Press, New York, 1976), Sutton dismissed this story, saying:

The irony of using a bank robber's maxim as an instrument for teaching medicine is compounded, I will now confess, by the fact that I never said it. The credit belongs to some enterprising reporter who apparently felt a need to fill out his copy...

If anybody had asked me, I'd have probably said it. That's what almost anybody would say...it couldn't be more obvious.

Or could it?

Why did I rob banks? Because I enjoyed it. I loved it. I was more alive when I was inside a bank, robbing it, than at any other time in my life. I enjoyed everything about it so much that one or two weeks later I'd be out looking for the next job. But to me the money was the chips, that's all.

Go where the money is...and go there often.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

Nevertheless, the legend has resulted in the "Willie Sutton rule," used in activity-based costing (ABC) of management accounting. The law stipulates that ABC should be applied "where the money is," meaning where the highest costs are incurred, and thus the highest potential of over-all cost reduction is.<sup>[6]</sup>

## In popular culture

Actor Jay Novello portrayed Willie Sutton in "The Case of Willie Sutton", a 1952 episode of the TV-series *Gang Busters*.

A reference to Willie Sutton's apocryphal quote is made in *The Distinguished Gentleman*, a 1992 comedy starring Eddie Murphy.

Sutton's life is the subject of a 2011 documentary film *In the Footsteps of Willie Sutton*.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

The life of Willie Sutton is portrayed in the 2012 novel *Sutton* by J.R. Moehringer.

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## External links

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- Contract Killer: The Explosive Story of the Mafia's Most Notorious Hit Man Donald "Tony the Greek" Frankos by William Hoffman and Lake Headley

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