



Bill Dalton in 1892



Bob Dalton at age 21



Grat Dalton at age of 24. He was 33 when killed at Coffeyville, Kansas, October 5, 1892.



Frank Dalton at age 28 when he was Deputy U.S. Marshall. He was killed November 27, 1887 while making an arrest.

**REIMAGINING KANSAS:
EMMETT DALTON, RON HANSEN, AND
THE GREAT COFFEYVILLE, KANSAS RAID**

by
Gregory L. Morris

In October of 1892, the Dalton Gang rode into Coffeyville, Kansas intent on making criminal history by holding up two banks simultaneously. In 1931, Emmett Dalton, collaborating with journalist Jack Jungmeyer, told the story of the gang and of that raid in his book, *When the Daltons Rode*. And in 1979, Ron Hansen, collaborating in a way with Emmett Dalton, retold that same story in his novel, *Desperadoes*.

One of the many interesting things surrounding the Daltons' raid on Coffeyville and the several stories that have arisen from it, is the way in which Hansen deliberately chose to shape that narrative. Hansen works in *Desperadoes* as he would later work in his second novel, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (1983), in the ambiguous realm between historical fiction and fictional history. In such a realm, distinctions necessarily often blur. Even before Hansen's novel begins, the author describes part of his narrative technique: "Most of this novel is based on verifiable fact. The characters in it represent my interpretation of people who actually lived not long ago. But though care has been taken not to contradict historical testimony, I have not hesitated to distort or invent situations and descriptions whenever it seemed fictionally right to do so." Hansen is, indeed, dutiful to "verifiable fact." As a proper historian might, for example, he includes maps—one of Oklahoma Territory, and another of Coffeyville itself with its buildings numbered and identified, and with its streets and alleys littered with the silhouettes of dead citizens and gangmembers.

Hansen is also quick, however, to acknowledge his sources: Harold Preece's *The Dalton Gang*; David Stewart Elliott's and Ed Bartholomew's *Last Raid of the Daltons*; *The Dalton Brothers and Their Astounding Career of Crime*, reputedly written by Edgar de Valcourt-Vermont; and most curious, Emmett Dalton's own *When the Daltons Rode*. Of course, some of these sources (Preece, in particular)

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are more reliable than others; then, too, some of these sources (Dalton, in particular) are more narratively problematic than others. Moreover, Hansen makes extensive use of these sources, often taking passages of narrative or dialogue essentially wholecloth from them.² As a result, *Desperadoes* becomes a complicated weave of intertextual relationships, as the many sources of this story vie for narrative and historical authority.

Hansen, though, complicates his narrative further by giving over the storytelling voice to Emmett Dalton himself. We already know that Dalton has authored (with Jungmeyer's help) his own book on the gang of which he was a part, has already written the autobiography of both gang and self. And Hansen, to stir up his intertextual stew, quotes from that book and from Emmett as a sort of epigraph to the story Emmett is about to tell:

Of that marauding band I am the sole survivor. The rest have gone these many years, with their boots on. In fact, I am one of the very few yet alive of that whole elder school of border outlaws whose kind rides no more. And now that I am dry behind the ears I have a yearning to tell truthfully the tale of the Daltons and others of the oldtimers whose lives and exploits have been so often garbled, fantastically romanticized, or vaguely related . . .³

Adopting the same narrative approach taken with his "earlier" book, Dalton (with Hansen's chicanery) sets about telling the same kind of "truth" that he sought to tell before. As both Dalton and Hansen know, however, there are varieties of truths to tell and manifold implications to those truths. And as Hansen insists, the purpose of the novel is to get the past both historically and fictionally "right."

Getting it right, however, means resolving what historian Richard Slotkin has called the "dilemma of authenticity."⁴ Like the Western moviemakers of whom Slotkin writes, Hansen, too, works within the bounds of a specific "mythic space": "a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture's myth-ideological tradition. It is also a setting in which the concrete work of contemporary myth-making is done."⁵ Thus, Hansen situates his novel (his "genre space") within a narrative territory (his "mythic space") that is the American West: the West that is both Kansas and California, the West figured in both the literary, historical novel and the Western film.

The historical context of this narration places Emmett Dalton in the actual web of his lived life, as Dalton tells us in the wry voice which will characterize his storytelling:

. . . I have spent these last years in Hollywood, California, where I suppose I will sleep one night and pass on to glory in striped pajamas, with my mouth open and with a dozen medicine bottles on the bedside

vanity. It is 1937 and I am sixty-five years old and not the kind of man I started out to be, but a real-estate broker, a building contractor, a scriptwriter for Western movies; a church man, a Rotarian, a member of Moose Lodge 29, which is a true comeuppance for a desperado of the Old West, for the boy Emmett I was, and something to consider as I stood at night on my kelly-green lawn, a tinkling glass of ginger ale in my freckled, shaking hand.⁴

Dalton's circumstance is real enough. Historically, he did retire and die (in 1937) in California; did marry the woman who waited for him through his prison term; did achieve middle-class respectability; did mix in the Hollywood culture of film and celebrity. (As Harold Preece notes: "Newspaper files in the Los Angeles Public Library indicate that Emmett Dalton resided at 1224 Meyer Avenue, Hollywood. His funeral services were conducted by the Loyal Order of Moose, which Emmett evidently joined after settling down to respectability and Julia.")⁷

Dalton was, in fact, probably one of the first personalities to figure, both directly and indirectly, in and to profit from the cinematic treatment of his own life. In 1918, Dalton wrote and appeared in a nickelodeon film, *Beyond the Law*, in which he played both himself and his brother Bob. Later, in 1940, his own book, *When the Daltons Rode*, was transformed into a "major motion picture" of the same title, starring (as Hansen's Emmett tells us) "Andy Devine, Frank Albertson, Broderick Crawford, and Brian Donlevy [as] Hollywood's latest version of Grat, Bill, Bob, and me."⁸ These "versions" of the self and of the self-within-the-past are what ultimately concern Hansen and his narrator, as they compete with Dalton's own perceived nature of historical truth. What problematizes this perception even more is Dalton's participation in his own drama: Hansen envisions the past—and, specifically, the Western past—as drama, as theater. It is a metaphor which controls both this novel and *Assassination*; and in *Desperadoes*, we see that Dalton, too, recognizes the theatricality of his past life.

This recognition consequently colors Dalton's narration of that life, making Dalton a highly self-conscious teller of his own story. All of these competing accounts—the rival histories, the dime novels, the B-movies, Dalton's own previous stories—put an effective distance between Emmett and his personal past. That distance is both narrative and temporal, for Dalton tells his story from the perspective of a twentieth-century man acutely conscious of historical and cultural change; Hansen frequently has Dalton shift between past and present, and allows Dalton the freedom to intrude upon his own story. Moreover, Dalton embraces that distance as a route to his "truth-telling." Truth accumulates in recollection and in letters from his brother's lover received by Emmett while in prison; this truth, and the delegitimizing of previous truths, becomes the substance of Dalton's story (and of Hansen's novel). Dalton writes revisionist

history, in effect challenging his own youthful impulse to "embellishment," as he calls it.

One of the difficulties faced by Dalton as storyteller, however, is the acquisition of language adequate and appropriate to the task of telling the truth. Here, again, the intertextual tensions bear upon his narratorial act. Dalton consciously spurns the romanticized, inflated diction of the dime novel and the nickelodeon movie, except when he purposely wishes to parody those forms and that diction. Aware, as I have said, of the theatricality of his mythified past, Dalton looks to play upon that popular perception in both the dramatization and language of his story. A particularly good example of this method is Emmett's recollection of the gang's train robbery in *Adair, Oklahoma*, a recollection at once vivid and detailed yet ironically distanced and self-conscious:

I hunched at a back depot window, smelling window putty, and I saw the unsuspecting Katy ticket agent chewing the hairs of his mustache, turning the pages of a Prudential life insurance brochure. Then my brother Bob banged the back door open and the man's head jerked up and seven giants stalked in, spurs clanking and black raincoats shrieking and boot heels pounding the silvery floorboards like we were stallions in heavy lead shoes: a bad nightmare of meanness, the stuff of night chills and story books, the scariest bunch of desperadoes that ticket agent ever saw.

A coat tree wobbled and little Newcomb kicked it over, a branch snapping off into a dance on the floor. Bob clicked a hammer back on a .45 caliber pistol and stuck it straight out to touch the nose of the agent who was standing up from his desk. "You keep those hands up and don't say a blessed word," said Bob. "Don't even think about talking. Back up flat to the wall and sink down until you're on your butt. If I look over and see your hands at all moved, I'll lean over this counter and blow a hole the size of a bucket in your crotch."

I stood there being ferocious while Doolin pushed a castered chair aside and slammed desk drawers over onto the desk top, picking up from the paper ruckus quarters and matches and a white box of Smith Brothers cough drops. Powers sat with his ankles crossed on a quiet hickory rocking chair at the front of the depot, a rifle standing in his lap. Newcomb was in the back room clawing boxes open with a garden sickle. Broadwell unlocked the money drawer and handed some limp paper bills through the grill to Bob. Broadwell pushed the drawer shut with his stomach and I saw the agent staring at the legs of Broadwell's jeans, which were stickered with cockleburs and foxtail and had yellow seeds in the cuffs.⁹

This passage testifies as much, of course, to Hansen's wonderful art as it does to Dalton's narrative ability; the original detail, the vibrant and believable language, the conscious acknowledgment of—and backstepping from—melodrama all contribute to an artful and "truthful" reenvisioning of the historical event.

A similar slant is given to Emmett's telling of the fatefully climactic act of the Dalton gang—the raid on Coffeyville. The raid itself is orchestrated as carefully as a stage drama, and its "players" are fashioned into characters (complete with the stage disguises they actually wore) playing out a popular, mythic bit of theater: "I cooked bacon in an iron pan and made another pot of black coffee and observed Eugenia kneeling in front of Bob sticking a brown mustache and fancy goatee to his face, and holding a mirror up. 'I look Shakespearean,' he said."¹⁰ Despite the nod to Shakespeare, Dalton takes a decidedly modernist and experimental tack in describing this event, shifting through the perspectives of his several players at crucial moments in this twelve-minute drama. An especially effective and gritty example is Dalton's telling of his brother Bob's death:

I saw my brother Bob sag back on the rock curbs and stare at his rifle and grope at the rocks to stand up. I saw his face when the pain climbed. Bob saw the sun flash silver off Kloehr's fancy trigger housing but he couldn't convince his arms to raise his own rifle up and his shot at the liveryman only ripped weeds. He staggered forward and slid against the north wall of the jail, a kite's tail of blood on the stone, until he stumbled into the adjoining ramshackle barn and collided with its west wall. Kloehr had a pirate's eye to his rifle sight. Bob fired but the slug only split a rotting board of the stables. Bob fired again and the grass made a spitting noise.

Kloehr saw a twenty-two-year-old desperado with sweat on his face and his shirttail out, sagged against a barn wall. The gunpowder was black on his hands and neck. Kloehr fired a cut bullet into the middle of Bob's dark vest at the sternum. It exploded his chest and hurled him back against a pile of farm implements. Sunlight came through the barn roof and striped him. My brother opened his eyes and lay there and got up on one elbow. He heaved strings and clots of blood onto the straw and he puked again until he was empty and he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He saw men talking to each other on Eighth Street but they weren't coming any closer.¹¹

The truth of this death, and of others in the novel, strikes hard and fast. Reality enjoys a sudden perceptual authenticity when wrapped in the language of the authentic storyteller.

At the same time, though, (and this is one of Hansen's central contentions) the popular imagination transforms that reality into a theatrical experience.

Death becomes a spectator sport, moves through a series of what might be called "captured forms," and thereby undergoes an historical sequence of spectatorial relationships. In *Desperadoes*, for instance, the five gang members in Coffeyville are seen by the citizens of the town both alive and dead, and then are captured in death in the photographs of John Tackett; those photographs are refigured as postcards, death being commodified and broadcast; stereoscopic pictures advance death a step closer to life and to a "virtual reality"; moving pictures (silent nickelodeon films at first, then more sophisticated and "more real" voiced films) represent that reality in ways that actually challenge the truth of the event it claims to depict (Emmett Dalton playing both himself as survivor, and his brother Bob as victim, in *Beyond the Law*). Death, in fact, becomes an object of perception and, for some, entertainment.



Tragedy at Coffeyville

This, as I say, is one of Hansen's lessons in *Desperadoes*. A second lesson, of course, is in the perception of the American West. The West, particularly as it has been shaped by the popular imagination, becomes an extension of the stage: the American West as a theater of change and transition.¹² Emmett Dalton, upon returning late in life to Coffeyville (and thus turned once again into spectatorial object), senses the alteration wrought upon Place by Time: "Seems like everywhere you look it's the twentieth century," Emmett tells his wife, Julia, as they stare out at the Model Ts and grain elevators and tin-roofed warehouses that now mark the Coffeyville landscape. Emmett even admits in an unguarded moment: "I miss the past."¹³ And in a gesture of accommodation,

Hansen brings past and present together at his novel's end, as Emmett Dalton moves through Coffeyville again (a member now of "the Dalton party" and not "the Dalton gang"), reconfiguring that day in October:

I walked to the First National Bank just as I had at twenty and little boys tried to place their shoes on whatever bricks I stepped on. Maybe a thousand people gazed in awe as I stood at the doors of the Condon bank, my hand skating over the riddled wood, and gave my version of the Great Coffeyville Kansas Raid. Then I crossed Walnut Street just as my brother Grat had, recalling aloud the withering gunfire and wagon barricades and the smoke hanging at Isham's. I walked with a crowd shoved around me, adults and children gaping at the picket fence with pea vines on it where my brother Bob was killed. I scraped my heel in the cinders to indicate the place where I lay dying, and then I saw that the crowd had retreated, and there in the alley in black suits with red ribbons on their pockets were six survivors of those men who'd shot at me there forty-five years before. One sat in a wooden wheelchair; two leaned on canes; they shaded their eyes from the sun and grinned at me, and then they slunk up to shake my hand.¹⁴

The past dies stubbornly, as do the stories gathered up in the strands of time and experience and voice. Perhaps America does, indeed, "crave stories" like Emmett Dalton's, like Ron Hansen's—stories that partake of the varieties of texts and textual truths available to the willing and able teller.

NOTES

1. Ron Hansen, *Desperadoes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), unnumbered page.
2. Simply to illustrate the nature of Hansen's use of these several sources, I offer the following two examples. In the first, the initial excerpt comes from *When the Daltons Rode*, the second from *Desperadoes*; both passages describe Bob Dalton's comment to Emmett during the Coffeyville Raid:

"Go slow,' Bob said as he came to my side. 'Take it easy—I can whip the whole damn town!'" (p.249)

"Take it easy, Emmett. Go slow. I can whip the whole dang town.'" (p. 244)

The second example contrasts a passage from Harold Preece's *The Dalton Gang* and a passage from *Desperadoes*. In the scene described the Dalton gang has stopped at Leliaetta, and awaits the arrival of Bob Dalton's lover-accomplice, who is referred to as Florence Quick by Preece and as Eugenia Moort (her alias in *Desperadoes*) by Hansen. It is Bob Dalton who first speaks:

"No cussing, you fellers, when Florence gets here. No barbershop jokes" . . .

It was midday when Florence Quick, resplendent in Spanish chaps and a brand-new sombrero, reined in before the dugout. All seven of the slicked-up desperadoes were waiting outside to meet her. She jumped from a fine stallion, stolen along the way, and

joyously rushed into Bob Dalton's arms for a long embrace. . . . Emmett had prepared a planked deer steak. (134-35)

"I don't want any rough talk or lewd suggestions or taking the Lord's name in vain. Remember how you were taught to act around ladies" . . .

Then Miss Moore arrived and seven beaming men stood with their hats in their hands and white shirts and neckties on and their hair slicked down with rose oil.

Bob picked her up and swirled her around and they kissed for two or three minutes . . . I fried plank steaks of deer meat. (130-31)

Desperadoes is peppered with many such borrowings and echoings from the source materials, as Hansen produces what John Gardner (with whom Hansen studied) called a "collage" effect in his narrative. As can be seen from the above examples, Hansen often wrought significant and purposeful changes in the material from which he borrowed.

3. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, unnumbered page.

4. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 234.

5. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 234.

6. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, 3-4.

7. Harold Preece, *The Dalton Gang: End of an Outlaw Era* (Hastings House, 1963), 305.

8. This 1940 production also claims a small part of film history, as George N. Fenin and William Everson, writing of stunts and stuntmen in Western movies, tell us:

"And one of the trickiest of all horse stunts has never been repeated: in *When the Daltons Rode* . . . stuntmen rode their horses off a moving train and then down a steep incline parallel to the tracks" (299). This same 1940 film reflects a tendency in Hollywood at that time to glamorize popular Western outlaws and "to prove that virtually all of the West's more notorious badmen had been forced into a life of crime by a combination of unfortunate circumstances" (Fenin and Everson, 241). When that formula played itself out—

Hollywood's writers contrived to have Jesse James, Belle Starr, the Daltons, Sam Bass, Quantrill, and sundry others join forces for organized crime waves which belonged more to the gangster era than to the old West. In most of *these* whitewashing was not even attempted in order to provide the requisite amount of brutality and viciousness expected of such a line-up of outlaws; needless to say, any pretense at historical accuracy was likewise abandoned. (Fenin and Everson, 243)

As if these ahistorical contrivances were not enough, in the 1960s Hollywood turned the screw again on the Dalton tradition by producing a string of very minor "B" Westerns:

An attempt was made by these producers to overcome their competition by loading their own pictures with "gimmicks," most specifically, controversial new "versions" of Western history, and the wholesale exploitation of violence and sex, always a safe proposition commercially. A number of crude and tasteless productions, of which *The Daltons' Women* and *Jesse James' Women* were the most vulgar, were rushed to the market; their principal attractions were blatant sexual suggestiveness and all-out saloon brawls between rather bare-bosomed dancing girls. (Fenin and Everson, 307)

Surely, Emmett Dalton could not foresee this last cinematic variation upon his outlaw history as he stood in the peace of that California night!

9. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, 193-194.

10. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, 222.

11. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, 251-252.

12. Emmett Dalton was, himself, conscious of the change in the West and in the nature of the desperado, writing in *When the Daltons Rode* of his time in prison:

During the fourteen years of my official retribution I had peculiar opportunity to note this change in the characteristics of the major law breaker. I met many of the old type serving

time. I was cell mate with them. I understood the breed. They were like old neighbors, often seen, familiar. They wore the earmarks of the 'eighties and 'nineties. As the years dragged on a new kind of freebooter began to drift into prison. More and more of him began to hail from the larger cities. Not so frequently were his legs bowed from much riding. His lingo smacked less of the range. His technique was different. He took his loot from new sources. His armament changed. There was more of the prowler about him.

By the time of my release from prison in 1907 he had become a decidedly new variant. (286)

13. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, 271.

14. Hansen, *Desperadoes*, 272-273.

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