



EMMETT DALTON in 1892.

**WHEN
THE
DALTONS
RODE**

EMMETT DALTON

**IN COLLABORATION WITH
JACK JUNGMEYER**

**FOREWORD BY
KITH PRESLAND**



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By Emmett Dalton

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FOREWORD

The books and stories about the Dalton gang are numerous. Even before their infamous raid on two banks in Coffeyville, Kansas, wild and exaggerated tales about the Daltons were circulated far and wide. Nearly everyone seemingly had a Dalton tale to tell, and most of the criminal activity, happening from California to Arkansas, from Texas to Kansas, was blamed on the Daltons. Emmett Dalton, the only surviving member of the gang, got rather irritated about these false stories and set about to put the record straight. It was enough to carry the stamp of an outlaw upon him, and he didn't need to be labeled as a cold-blooded killer and a ruthless robber of innocent people as well. According to Emmett, their grudge had only been against the railroad and the express companies. You may be thrilled to hold this book in your hands, eager to read the true story written by the man who was there and experienced it all. But before you do, let me tell you a little about Emmett Dalton.

Emmett was born near Belton, Missouri, on May 3, 1871. He was Adeline Dalton's eleventh child. She gave

birth to fifteen in all. Life was a constant struggle for the large family, as Lewis Dalton, the head of the family, was often absent. He preferred traveling with his racing horses to looking after his wife and offspring. Around 1881, the Daltons moved to Coffeyville, Kansas. After a couple of years, it is said, the bank foreclosed on their property. In any case, Lewis took a lease on some land near Vinita in the Indian Territory, and the family moved there. The long arm of the law barely reached this vast territory, and it was a haven for all kinds of criminals. Emmett's older brother Franklin worked as a deputy U.S. marshal from Fort Smith for the court of the Western District of Arkansas. He was much respected by everyone and a role model for Emmett and brother Bob, two years his senior. Bob went to work as a guard and posse man for Frank. Frank was killed in 1887, while trying to arrest bootleggers near Fort Smith. After Frank's death, another older brother, Grat, came from California and started working as a deputy. Bob soon also became a deputy and Emmett joined him as his guard.

By all the early accounts, Emmett was a polite, quiet-spoken man, who was always ready to help anyone in need. As a young man, he didn't draw attention to himself but stayed in the shadow of his brother Bob, eventually the driving force behind the Dalton gang. Bob, daring and adventurous, was someone who craved admiration and being noticed. Emmett was obviously excited to follow his brother into law enforcement. However,

as things did not work out quite so well on that front, Bob, accompanied by Emmett, turned to crime to “seek justice” and thereafter to satisfy his thirst for attention. As was the case with other deputies, Bob found his wages slow in coming and accepted bribes in order to make ends meet. The first piece of real trouble appeared when Bob and Emmett were arrested for selling alcohol to Indians. They had stopped by a wagon from which two men were selling whiskey to Indians. At a hearing, Emmett was acquitted, but there appeared to have been some evidence of Bob drinking and possibly selling whiskey (the latter seems unlikely). He was released on bail. His reputation as an officer of the law was now questionable. According to one source, the boys started stealing and selling horses to secure funds for Bob’s trial. Whatever the reasons, the boys had now stepped over the line, and there was no turning back. Having nearly been caught in the act of selling a bunch of stolen horses, Bob and Emmett took off to California, with Grat following them a little later. It did not take long for the Dalton brothers to be accused of an attempted train robbery. Their guilt or innocence is still being debated, but it certainly gave them widespread notoriety and set them firmly on the outlaw trail, which would end at Coffeyville, only a little over a year and a half later.

How eagerly Emmett followed Bob into the life of crime is hard to say. I doubt he gave it much thought in the beginning and just enjoyed the thrill of the ride. Since Emmett was more of a thinking man than Bob

and able to perceive the wider picture in any situation, it would not have taken him long to see that his life was going down the wrong track. It was generally accepted by those who knew Emmett that he would never have become an outlaw without the influence of his brothers, Bob and Grat. And as his stubborn sense of loyalty was stronger than his common sense, he was headed straight for hell.

After several train robberies in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories, the now so-called Dalton gang felt the heat of the posses closing in on them. To obtain funds enabling them to flee abroad, Bob came up with a daring plan that would guarantee him and his gang fame and a permanent place in the history of the Old West. They were to rob two banks simultaneously in their hometown of Coffeyville. It has been said that Bob held a grudge against the town. However, the fame did not come in the way Bob had envisioned. Except for Emmett, all the gang members perished. The real heroes were the citizens of Coffeyville, who successfully defended their town against the outlaws. Four of the citizens died in the gun battle. Emmett was also badly wounded and lucky to survive. He insisted he had not fired a shot in Coffeyville, but after some persuasion, possibly due to fear of an unfair trial, he pleaded guilty to murder in the second degree. For this he received a life sentence. After five years, he began his efforts to secure a pardon or parole; he had the unwavering support of his mother, who campaigned on

his behalf, sometimes close to exhaustion. Emmett was a model prisoner at all times and, after nearly fifteen years, was pardoned by Governor Hoch on November 2, 1907. He went on to live in Tulsa, where he worked for Marcus "Scout" Younger (related to the famous Youngers who rode with Jesse and Frank James) at his meat and grocery market and where he started a tailoring business, having learned this trade in prison. Contrary to many biographies, Emmett never was a "special police officer" in Tulsa. In June 1908, he paid a visit to Coffeyville and was kindly received there. A few months later, he married the widowed Mrs. Julia Lewis and settled in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

The years of drudgery in prison would have afforded him plenty of time to dwell upon the shame now attached to the Dalton family name and the tragedy of the lives lost at Coffeyville. His survival no doubt also brought feelings of guilt upon him. The lurid tales of the Daltons as murderous outlaws were an unpleasant addition to his pain and misery. Late in 1908, merely a year since his release from prison, Emmett had already been considering writing a book. Instead, he was enticed into the movie business. A Coffeyville filmmaker and theater owner, John B. Tackett (already famous for taking photographs of the Dalton gang after the raid on Coffeyville), was requested by the Coffeyville Commercial Club to make a film about the town, which could be shown at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition held in Seattle during the summer of

1909. The film included footage about the Dalton bank raid, and Tackett sought out Emmett's advice in order to record the events correctly. Later the pair collaborated in touring and telling the story of the Daltons by way of moving pictures. At each showing, Emmett would give a lecture advising against crime. The shows were a success but also attracted criticism and threats to send Emmett back to prison. The negative reactions didn't faze Emmett, who obviously had found his calling. He spent several years touring and lecturing with films about the Daltons and the Coffeyville raid, pointing out the futility of crime.

Emmett's first book, *Beyond the Law*, was published in 1918. In the preface, he declares that "every statement herein contained, regarding myself and brothers, is absolutely true in every detail." That, for a start, is not true. Even though he had previously admitted that they accepted bribes as officers, this detail is not mentioned. Their "first crime" has changed from horse stealing to holding up a crooked game of Monte in Santa Rosa, New Mexico. No records in Santa Rosa of such an incident have been found. And now Emmett, for the first time, claims that they had been falsely accused of train robbery in California, which directly caused them to become train robbers for real. Although he did not offer this as justification for their actions, it looks like he was seeking some public sympathy for the Daltons to counteract the wilder stories floating around about the gang.

Emmett also claimed he had not been in California at

that time despite reliable evidence to the contrary and his own writing: "From the time in the yard at Bill's ranch in California that we learned we were suspected of the Alila hold up, until the last ghastly minute on the street in Coffeyville, there was hardly an hour that I did not know where my brother Bob was." Lit Dalton, an older brother of Emmett, talked extensively to writer and historian Frank Latta after Emmett's death. While most of what he said can be dismissed as stories of a very bitter old man with an ax to grind, he may have been right when he said that Emmett had thought he had shot and killed train fireman Radcliff at Alila. This would go a long way to explain why Emmett dissociated himself from California and the Alila robbery. Additionally, he was reluctant to admit he took part in any robberies before the Coffeyville raid. In the book, he wrote that he stayed with the horses while "the boys" robbed the trains. However, his apparent hesitance in robbing the two banks in Coffeyville has a ring of truth about it. He has no romantic adventures in this novel, but Euginia Moore is introduced as Bob's sweetheart.

The publication of the book coincided with Emmett and Julia moving to Hollywood, where Emmett became involved in the movie business. His best-known film, *Beyond the Law*, came out in 1919 but did not stir a great deal of interest at first. Emmett again traveled with the film and gave lectures. It was shown around the country for several years. He made and acted in a few other films, which were shown as secondary features in

theaters. In the mid-1920s, Emmett became a building contractor with more success.

When the Daltons Rode was first published in 1931 and is quite different from *Beyond the Law* in its approach, Emmett's motive seemingly being commercial gain more than anything else. The Daltons may well have lost assets in the 1929 crash, as they moved from the spacious Clarissa Avenue home to a much smaller one on Price Street, both located in Hollywood (Los Feliz). In writing the book, Emmett had the assistance of writer and reporter Jack Jungmeyer. The plain language of his previous book is replaced with descriptive scenarios and details, such as the bleak and gloomy mountains foreboding the dark future ahead. By now Emmett knew he could say, and be believed, almost anything and gave people what they wanted rather than a true history. The mantle of an old-time outlaw was no longer shameful, and he had learned to live with it. No longer did he stay with the horses during the train robberies; he was a full-blown outlaw. He did not even resist the Coffeyville raid. And oh, he was dead cool in the First National Bank. There was Abe Knott in the bank with a six-shooter in his belt (he really was in the bank but minus the gun). Emmett wrote, "I had learned from experience never to take my gaze off the other fellow in moments of danger, and never to give back a step. As I looked into his steady eye I felt that one of us might have to die." But according to the *Coffeyville Journal* at the time, Emmett kept those in the bank in a state of nervousness by his swearing and

the reckless manner in which he flourished his rifle. That does not sound so cool!

To add romance to the story, Emmett spins a wonderful yarn about Julia as his faithful sweetheart during those turbulent days of outlawry. The subsequent historians have been keen to latch onto this as fact. In reality, Emmett may well have been acquainted with Julia in those early days, but there was no romance between the two. At the time this relationship was supposed to have blossomed, Julia was married and expecting a child. One book review in 1931 had this to say: “[A]nd while he neglects to mention the heroic efforts of his mother, who tried for years to get her son pardoned, he spends much time in praise of his sweetheart, who waited faithfully for his release—at least in the story. Recorded history is at variance with this part of the narrative, but novelist is entitled to some prerogatives, even in biographical or reminiscent essays.”

Another enduring myth from this book is how Emmett met the future members of the gang while working as a cowboy at the Bar-X-Bar Ranch in the outlaw infested “Triangle Country,” an area between Cimmarron and Arkansas rivers west of Tulsa. There is nothing to support this story. Rather, as Emmett wrote in *Beyond the Law* about the gang coming together: “There were plenty of others like us in that country, and it was not long before the masonry of those in trouble brought us together.” Emmett did for a while work as a cowboy, and I have some evidence this was

on a ranch close to Vinita, Oklahoma, where the Dalton family resided at this time. This is much more likely for a young lad of sixteen or seventeen. Another possible location, mentioned in a newspaper article much later on, could have been near the present town of Glenpool, south of Tulsa. This would have still placed him near his brothers Bob and Franklin, who were dear to him and working in the area.

We should not judge him too harshly for twisting the truth but remember how he had to learn to deal with the price paid for his youthful foolishness and, after his release from prison, the ever-present attention he could not brush aside. Furthermore, we should not forget that memory can play its own tricks too, in the recall of past events. Of the Coffeyville raid, Emmett always said he and Bob got to their horses first and then went to help the rest of the gang before escaping into the alley. In fact, they all reached the alley about the same time, and while Bob tried to fend off the angry citizens, Emmett took no part in the fight, trying instead to make his way to the horses with a sack of money. Maybe his memory preferred his own version of this chaotic event. Putting aside all the storytelling and embellishments, the book does offer interesting insights, such as the loneliness of life as an outlaw and the effects of the constant vigilance. Comments on the mindset of an outlaw are also interesting, as are the anecdotes of some prison incidents. And, by the way, I love the way Emmett had the cheek to say, "If the wilder days and ways of

the frontier are to be historically preserved, it is high time that some vigorous debunking take place while yet old-timers live to tell the tale accurately. Perhaps in the passing I can strip off at least one thin layer of the veneer that covers the truth.”

In the 1930s, Emmett’s health started to deteriorate. He was diagnosed with high blood pressure and diabetes, and he spent his time mainly at home writing stories for Western magazines and some film scenarios. On July 4, 1937, Emmett suffered a stroke and passed away quietly at home on July 13. His ashes were buried in the family plot at Kingfisher, Oklahoma. Right to the end of his life, Emmett turned the story of the Dalton gang over and over in his mind, never quite reaching the point of telling the whole truth to the public at large. And I think it is fair to say there is much more to this tale than Emmett ever revealed. The continued fascination with the Daltons, the relatively inept outlaws with a short career, seems to lie in the multitude of stories spun around them and the mystery of not quite knowing where the line between fact and fiction can be drawn. Emmett inadvertently made his own contributions, but everyone is left with the freedom to speculate about the truth.

Kith Presland
April 2011
Reading, England