

PIONEER ACTORS, BLAZING A TRAIL TO HOLLYWOOD

Hollywood come calling for “real live bad men” shortly after the industry moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1911. Westerns, referred to as “oaters” in house, were popular and directors believed they needed to use realism in order to appeal to fans. So what could be more captivating than using real gunfighters or bank robbers from the old west? Never mind that the tales of shoot outs with pistols were vastly overblown. In reality, the most successful gunfighters chose rifles or shotguns and aimed for the belly because that was the biggest target. Reputations aside, out of the top thirty three famous names such as Earp, Hickok or Billy the Kid, all were overshadowed by an unknown named Jim Miller who was credited with shooting twelve men. Unfortunately for film makers who wished to pursue the western gunfighter theme, most of their prospects were dead including Miller, hung by angry Ada citizens in 1909. Since finding surviving gunfighters was a difficult task, movie directors sought other surviving “desperados,” of the west, bank robbers.

The most notable outlaw alumnus turned actor from northeastern Oklahoma was Emmett Dalton. Dalton had lived in the area as a youngster after the family moved from Kansas to a home between Afton and Vinita. Later, when brothers Bob, Bill, Grat, and Emmett formed their gang, they completed successful robberies locally at Lilietta and Adair before the debacle at Coffeyville on October 5, 1892. Emmett’s brothers Bob and Grat as well as two other gang members were killed. Emmett was wounded, captured and sent off to prison for life. But fate intervened and he was pardoned in 1909, seventeen years later. Supposedly, his release centered on the fact that Emmett was holding the horses and ran to help when his brothers were in trouble.

Arriving in Coffeyville, Emmett was well received in the community where the robbery was attempted, married an old flame, moved to nearby Bartlesville and was even nominated for the fourth ward seat on the town council. However, Hollywood called and in 1918, the youngest of the Dalton Gang moved to Los Angeles to participate in several silent pictures, of which *Beyond the Law* and *Last of the Dalton Gang* were the most successful. Emmett toured with the films and lectured on the evils of crime. However, this style of presentation was soon outmoded and “real life” criminals like Emmett were replaced. Impatient audiences wanted more glamour and less moralizing. So when “Talkies” were introduced in 1927, articulate and handsome actors begun to replace real live bad men and their reputations. As a result, Emmett lost his job with the movies, but remained in Hollywood and became a building contractor. He died in 1937.

A second, but less successful “real life” criminal with northeastern Oklahoma connections was Roy Daugherty, aka Arkansas Tom Jones. Daugherty’s affiliation with the region was as a member of Bill Doolin’s gang called the “Wild Bunch.” Their most notable robbery occurred on May 20, 1895 at Southwest City where they successfully obtained \$3,700. However, Daugherty was already a wanted man, because two years before he had killed a marshal at Ingalls, Oklahoma. Finally captured and sentenced in 1895, he was paroled from prison in 1910 and moved to Drumright to run a restaurant. Hollywood beckoned in 1912 and Daugherty took part in a few unmemorable silent movies.

He returned to the Midwest, committed a bank robbery at Neosho, and was sent to prison again. Released in 1921, Daugherty robbed a bank at Asbury, Missouri that same year and went into hiding. He was killed during a gunfight at Joplin in 1924.

By the late 1920s “talkies” had replaced silent films and movie moguls had turned exclusively to actors as leading men and by far the most successful with ties to this region was Gene Autry. Autry, born in Texas and raised in Ravia, Oklahoma, found work as a railroad telegraph operator. During 1927, he was substituting at the St. Louis & San Francisco station at Chelsea on the four to midnight shift. Bored, he was playing his guitar and singing when a customer came in. The man, who Autry instantly recognized as Will Rogers, told him that with some hard work he might have a future in radio and, as the saying goes, the rest is history. The singing cowboy was in vogue and during the next three decades Autry cut 300 songs and starred in 93 movies.

Another early movie star with ties a little further west was Tom Mix, a transplant from Pennsylvania. Mix served a stint as city marshal in Washington County at Dewey before eventually launching a six million dollar career as a leading actor through the thirties, but cut short by his untimely death in a 1940 automobile accident.

Since the advent of the movie industry, the state as well as northeastern Oklahoma has produced a multitude of successful actors and musicians...but none with credentials similar to those who first blazed a trail to Hollywood.

