

## **Echoes From the Past**

### **THE DALTON'S ADAIR RAILROAD ROBBERY .....A DIFFERENT PERSPECIVE**

Most Northeastern Oklahomans are familiar with the Adair train robbery conducted by the Dalton Gang in July of 1892, that a sum of money was taken and that there were two casualties, both doctors, one of whom died from his wounds. But a less familiar story concerns the background of the Dalton brothers Grat, Bob, and Emmett and the 1 ½ year existence of the gang which would be decimated at Coffeyville, Kansas the following October.

Like many pioneers the boys' family migrated to Oklahoma. Their father, James Louis Dalton, born in Kentucky in 1824 was a Mexican War veteran serving under the command of General Zachary Taylor. Following the war Louis settled in Westport Landing, Missouri (now Kansas City) and operated a saloon. In 1851 he married sixteen year old Adeline Younger. The Dalton family eventually numbered ten boys and five girls, not atypical for farm families of that era. Leaving Westport, they moved first to a farm near Lawrence, Kansas and later four miles west of Coffeyville. As they matured, various family members left home to find work as farmers or ranchers or to marry. Brother Frank who became a U.S. Marshall for "Hanging" Judge Parker, was killed in the line of duty in 1887 and buried in Coffeyville. Of those who later formed the infamous "Dalton Gang," Grat became a deputy sheriff and later moved to California, Bob became a deputy marshal for the state of Kansas and Emmett, a teenager, found employment first as a cowhand, and later as a lawman. In 1880, Louis and Adeline Dalton moved the remaining members of the family from Coffeyville to Indian Territory leasing farm land south of Vinita near Locust Hill. Later, following Louis' death in 1890 while visiting in Coffeyville, Adeline moved the remaining family members to a farm near Kingfisher.

Various authorities who have studied western gunfighters and gangs estimate that one out of four were former law men who used their skills and turned to crime as a more profitable venture. Both Bob and Emmett were no exception and in 1890 their first venture into the more lucrative business of lawlessness was an unsuccessful attempt at horse theft near Claremore. Nearly getting caught, they fled west and on February 6, 1891, teamed up with brothers Bill and Grat in a failed attempt at a train robbery at Atilia, California. Returning to Oklahoma, their reputation as outlaws firmly established, Bob and Emmett organized a gang that included several other misfits. Their first train robbery was on May 9, 1891 at Wharton Station, a way stop which is now part of Perry, where, according to their account, \$9,000 was stolen. During that summer Bill Doolin, an Arkansas cowboy who was described as "fearless" joined the gang and on September 19, 1891 they robbed an M K & T train at the Lelietta water stop four miles north of Wagner. During their stint as lawmen, the Doolins had learned that the express car on trains contained a "through safe" that was used to ship large amounts of money. Supposedly, the combination to the safe was known only to those at the railroads origin and final destination. In fact, the Doolin's as former lawmen knew that this was sometimes a ruse to prevent robbery, consequently the messenger in charge of the express car could often "be

persuaded with a pistol at his head” to remember the combination. In this instance they apparently were convinced by the messenger that he actually did not know the combination and the gang escaped only with a bag of silver valued by railroad officials at \$2,500.00.

Returning west to the Cherokee Strip the Daltons continued raids on banks in that region as well as another train robbery at Red Rock June 1, 1892. Just prior to the Red Rock robbery and after a 107 day horseback ride from California, brother Grat returned to the Kingfisher farm and joined the gang. The stage was now set for the Adair train robbery.

The three Daltons, Bill Doolin and four other henchmen first planned to rob the train at Pryor, but fearing a trap moved their target to Adair. Bob and Grat had been lawmen in the area and knew Adair quite well so on July 15, 1892 they made their move. Securing the station, the gang waited until the train stopped. After a forty minute gun battle with railroad detectives and the robbery complete, they left headed north to Big Cabin then back west to Kingfisher to plan what would be their last attempt at robbing banks, two at Coffeyville just a few miles from their old homestead. Interestingly, Bob and Grat, both of whom were killed at Coffeyville, joined their father Louis and older brother Frank in the town cemetery. Emmett survived, served prison time and was released in 1907. He died July 13, 1937. The brief saga of the Dalton Gang had ended.

