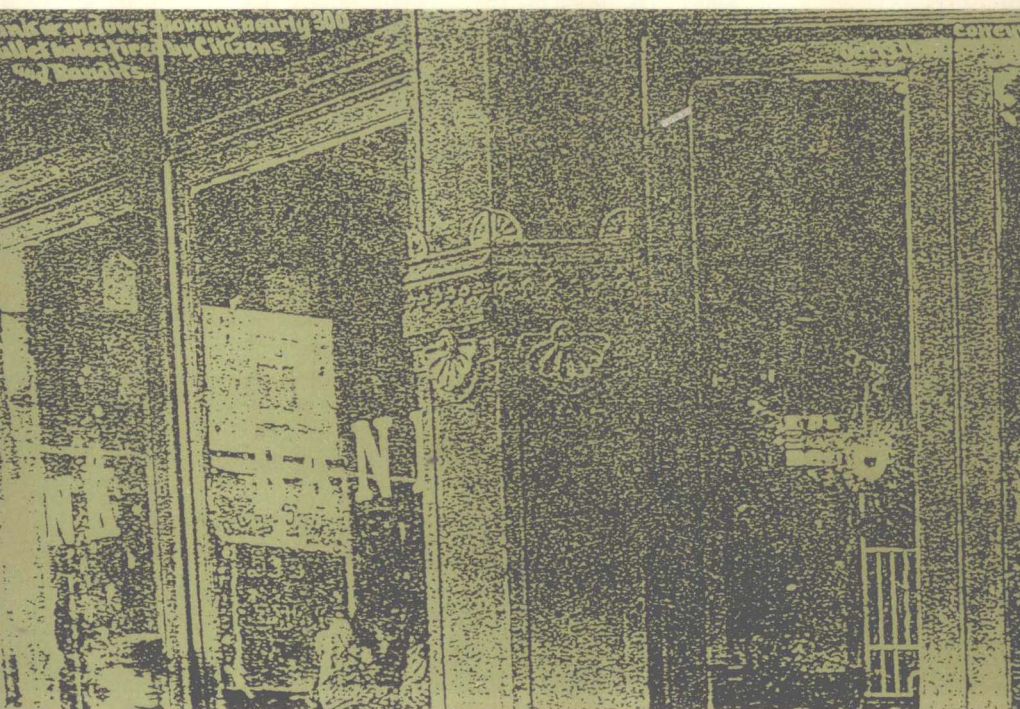


NORTON PAPERBACK FICTION



DESPERADOES



Ron Hansen

DESPERADOES

A novel by
RON HANSEN

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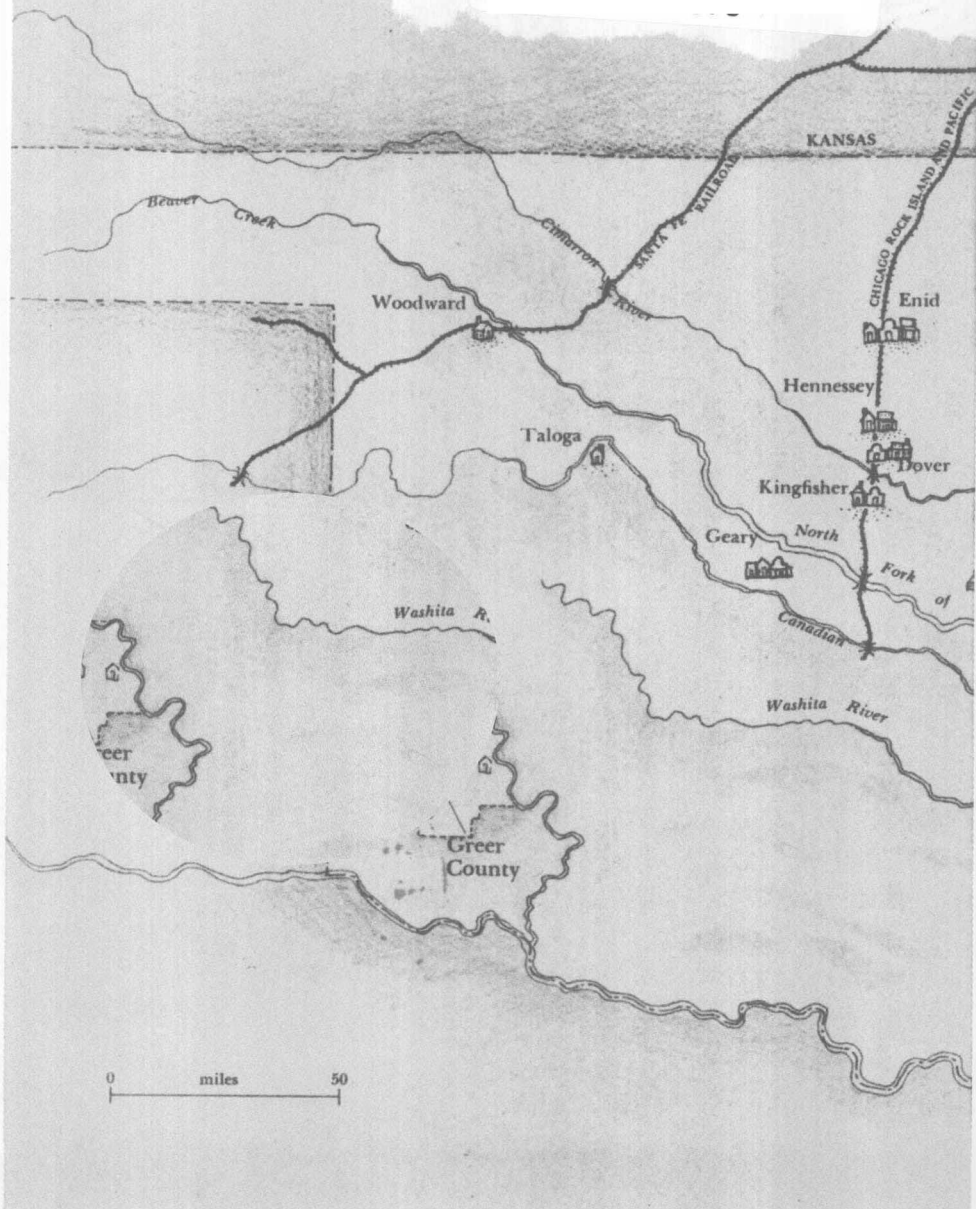
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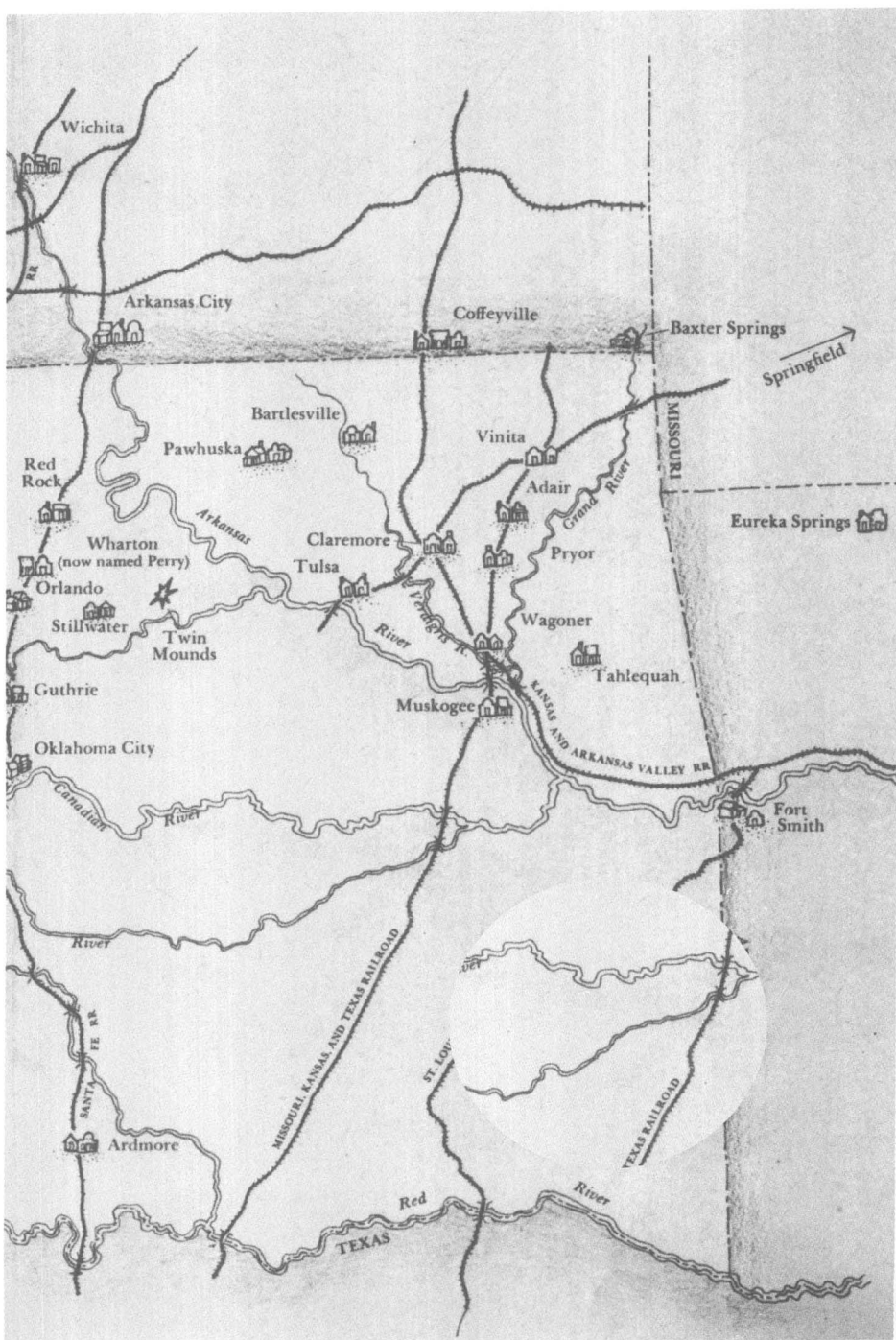
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For my brother, Rob

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 old-timers whose lives and exploits have been so often garbled, fantastically romanticized, or vaguely related . . .

The tale will recount contacts with many of the less exploited desperadoes, as well as some of the more widely celebrated figures of the last frontier.

It will have dreadful and sinister things in it, of course: swift foray, desperate encounter, and the ultimate tests of reckless manhood; hot saddles, cracking guns, and last stands in a fated hour; fantastic courage and inglorious defeat—splendid things and mean, on both sides of the law's deadline. The sowing of black oats, and the terrible harvest.

And to leaven the wild antic of hair-trigger men in hair pants, the story also will have the romantic presence of women, gentle, stoic, and tempestuous, whose lives were entwined with the destiny of outlawed Daltons.

—Emmett Dalton,
When the Daltons Rode

Coffeyville

Baldwin's body

Cubine
and Brown

Bob's position when he
killed Cubine and Brown

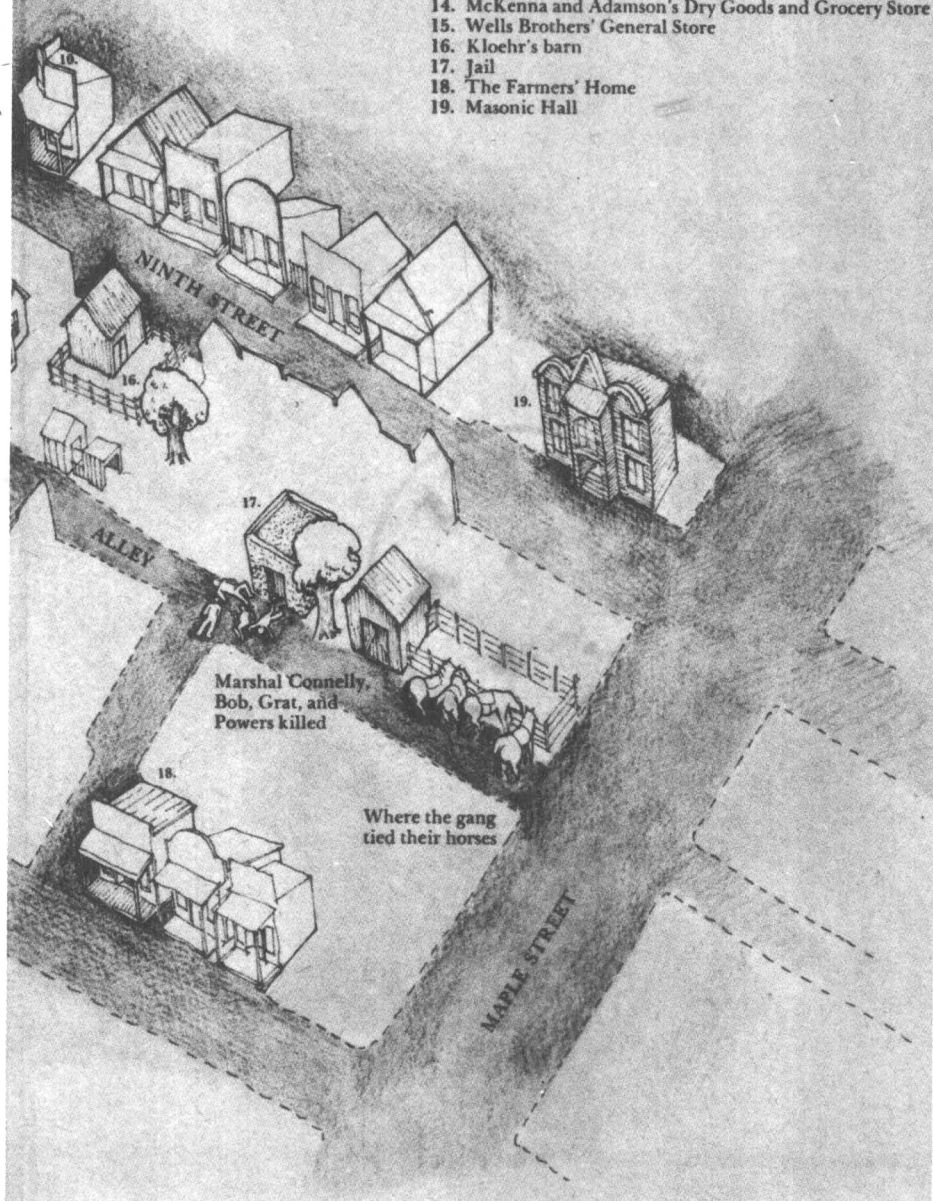
UNION STREET

WALNUT STREET

EIGHTH STREET



1. Condon Bank
2. Isham Brothers and Mansur Hardware Store
3. First National Bank
4. Rammel Brothers Drug Store
5. Abe Knott's Restaurant
6. Brown's Shoe Shop
7. A. P. Boswell's Hardware Store
8. Opera House
9. Eldridge House
10. Carey Building
11. George Boswell's General Store
12. Lang & Lape Furniture Dealers and Undertakers
13. George Slosson & Co. Drugs
14. McKenna and Adamson's Dry Goods and Grocery Store
15. Wells Brothers' General Store
16. Kloehr's barn
17. Jail
18. The Farmers' Home
19. Masonic Hall



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1 When Marshal Frank Dalton was murdered by whiskey runners in 1887, the federal government shipped him to Coffeyville, Kansas, in a mahogany box filled with ice. His face and hair were waxed by undertaker Lape and the body was hauled to Elmwood Cemetery in a quality black carriage with windows that did not warp what was looked at.

When my brothers Bob and Grat Dalton were shot dead in 1892, the bodies were handcuffed and stood in their stocking feet so photographs could be taken and the outlaws lay all night on a Coffeyville jail-house floor with blowflies crawling over their faces. Women came by with pinking shears to snip away bits of their hair and clothes, and the cartridges that were left in their belts sold for a dollar apiece.

And when Bill was gunned down by a marshal's posse in 1894, he was displayed in a coffin covered with window glass until he was badly decomposed. Spectators journeyed by train from Kansas and Texas and Oklahoma, and thousands of people crowded the mortician's parlor so they could file past and solemnly stare at the last of the notorious Daltons.

But 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

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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.

A girl I didn't know was alone in the pool swimming slowly back and forth in satin underwear while in the dining room a combo from Havana played its trumpets and castanets in slick black hair and frilly sleeves. A week ago my wife and I returned from Coffeyville, Kansas, where I was the favorite son, where I was famous, so this was a welcoming party of sorts; but it was a celebration too, because my second book, *When the Daltons Rode*, had just been sold to a film studio here and I was made richer by quite a little. So male movie stars slouched around a billiards table in white flannels and sweaters tied at their necks and a makeup man was perched on our white corduroy couch with my stout and mankind-loving wife, hooting at Julia's comments, saying how precious she was.

If I went inside that grand stucco house with its South American look, women with platinum hair and clinging gowns and perfume strong as onions would beg to see my velvet-wrapped pistol or inquire about the Dalton gang and expect me to enchant them, become the gabby sidekick, confess about how it really was, as if those years of robbery were no more than a yarn about a blue ox or some carnival geek who chewed glass. If I went back inside I could see a houseboy carting drinks and a tray of bread squares smeared with black fish eggs, see a studio vice-president nuzzling the neck of another man's wife or a gaffer in a red cummerbund learning the rhumba with a girl from the typing pool. And I could see myself in an old silent movie that was flickering against the living room wall, see Emmett Dalton in middle age jabbing a six-gun at a bank teller's face as jostling dancers interrupted the screen, my holster strapped over a woman's back, a drawer of coins on someone's tuxedo shoulder.

The past was closer to me then than the sweating glass in

my hand and it seemed not long ago that I was a boy slumped against a sod house in the Indian Territory, watching Bitter Creek Newcomb wade through high yellow grass out to the buffalo wallow where he'd stare at a pane of water there with the white moon wafered in it. I could hear pool water slap softly in the skimmer as some girl in satin underwear glided to the ladder near the diving board, but all I saw was my brother Grat as he slapped the Navaho blanket up and sagged a shoulder against the mud wall, a pottery jug of white alcohol hung from his middle finger. Horses would nicker at the pole fence and he'd look at the empty night and scratch himself. "Ain't had this much fun since the circus."

I walked back toward the house and saw that on the screened breakfast porch newspapermen were taking photographs of Julia hugged like a shy, baffled mother by four of her merry party guests: Andy Devine, Frank Albertson, Broderick Crawford, and Brian Donlevy; Hollywood's latest version of Grat, Bill, Bob, and me. The stars clowned and made pistols of finger and thumb and Julia looked as amused as she could in her pearl necklace and navy blue party dress, a pretty hostess at sixty-four but less like the half-starved grand ladies here than a grocer's wife or a good farm woman who each morning scatters feed to the chickens.

The newspapermen saw me and called me up onto the porch to pose with my wife and then to stand alone next to a movie-house poster framed under glass on the wall. I suppose they fancied that I'd grin for their cameras with a knife in my teeth and a pistol in every hand, that I'd fan a roaring gun at a coffee can to make it whang and hop across the patio, but I was forty-five years away from the boy who wanted to be famous; I didn't want to be news anymore. The only picture they got for their rolls of black film was that of a tall, haggard man with a drink in his hand: Emmett Dalton in a charcoal suit, a rich executive with a needle of pain in his hip and a fourteen-year prison education, a man who golfs with bankers and stumps for good causes and talks to the governor on the phone.

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I walked into the kitchen and put my glass in the sink and lit a cigarette. Julia came out of the dining room with a tray of lettuce and quivering gelatin dessert that she slid onto a shelf of the Frigidaire. She wiped her hands on a towel and asked, "Why are you frowning?"

"I ache."

"I have some aspirin."

"Maybe I'll just suffer for a while."

"Think how much they're enjoying this," she said.

My wife left with a dishrag she'd wrung out and I took the oaken stairs up to my locked study while a musician named Fernando lugged the combo's drums out to a school bus. I used my key and closed the study door behind me and stood in a dark brown room that smelled of old newsprint. I sat at a library table with maybe fifty books about the Dalton gang marked with yellow paper scraps or weighted open with bricks. Framed under glass on the walls were browned reward posters, red-and-blue billboard paste-ups for some of the Dalton movies, and three newspaper front pages dated October 5, 1892. In one mahogany cabinet were magazine articles, mostly false, and in the other I had the more reliable files of Deputy Marshal Christian Madsen, manilla envelopes once wrapped in twine and printed on each a name: Broadwell, Bryant, all four Daltons, Doolin, McElhanie, Eugenia Moore, Newcomb, Pierce, and Powers.

I switched on a study lamp and opened a cardboard box containing the clipping file on me. I unfolded my pocket bifocals and hooked them on an ear at a time, just as my brother Bob had when he said, "I can see clear to Nebraska with these." Then I sat in a stuffed chair for most of an hour, turning the pages over onto the carpet after I'd read what they said.

I heard my wife's high heels in the hallway and turned to see Julia in the room, a cup of hot milk and a saucer in her hands.

"Is it over?" I asked.

"There's still a girl asleep on the floor of the bathroom and a barefoot man at the piano playing 'Swanee' with his left hand. The houseboy's taking care of them."

"Was I missed?"

She smiled. "They make allowances for you. They think you live in a foreign country. A reporter asked about you."

"Did he use the word 'truculent'?"

She ignored that and said, "There's a young man here who's read your book," and in the doorway there appeared a boy in a green zigzag sweater and a white shirt with the collar spread out to his shoulders. I put him at twenty. I said, "What do you want?"

"I'm not sure. I drove all the way from San Bernardino."

I flicked my hand out. "Drive all the way back."

But Julia said, "You could at least visit for a minute, couldn't you, Em?"

The boy stood next to the coat tree with a tablet in his hand. "I read your book," he said. "It's fascinating."

I removed my bifocals and pulled up from the stuffed chair with pain. "Do you want to see my gun? I'll show you my gun and you can go back to San Bernardino and brag in some soda shop."

I limped to a mahogany cabinet where the pistol, a .44-40 Colt, was wrapped in red velvet and stuffed between some manilla files, a protection against common house thieves. I heard Julia say, "He's not really such a grouch; that's just his way of teasing."

I suppose the boy wrote that down.

Then Julia left and the boy and I sat at my library table next to the study lamp. He weighed the pistol in his hand, aimed it at a streetlight, folded the velvet cloth over it. I showed him a black bullet big as the top knuckle of his little finger. "That was dug out of my shoulder in Coffeyville. I was awake and face down on a mattress and rifles were held to my head. I remember it dropped in the doctor's pan like a marble."