

ECV Jim Savage Mariposa Battalion 1852
Humbug: Jesse Jones
Historian: Dan "Professor Firetruck" Carrion
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Grat Dalton Escapes Jail in Visalia

The jail in the Tulare County town of Visalia was thought to be pretty strong. But a wayward young man from Oklahoma named Grat Dalton proved to be its match. On their mother's side, they were cousins of the Younger Brothers, and the even more notorious James Brothers. But the Dalton brothers weren't criminals at the start of their careers.

Four of the eight Dalton brothers began as Deputy United States Marshalls. At the time, it wasn't always clear where the line between criminal and officer of the law began and ended. Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and several other Old West law officer heroes were called law breakers at one point or another.

In 1887, Grat's older brother, Frank Dalton, was killed in the line of duty while working as a Deputy US Marshall at Fort Smith, Arkansas. Grat took over Frank's job as Deputy Marshall, and Bob and Emmett became Deputy Marshalls with him. After a short time, the boys decided that they could augment their salaries by stealing horses, ultimately fleeing the area. They formed a gang and started robbing stagecoaches and railroads. Their older brother Bill never joined in any robberies, but was nevertheless a spy and concealer of the gang.

Bob and Emmett would also become part of the Osage Nation Police force as deputies. The Osage police paid a monthly salary, unlike the US Marshall's Office. The boys would go back and forth between Oklahoma and California, staying with older brother Bill at his ranch in Paso Robles and with older brother Littleton at his ranch in Clovis.

On February 6, 1891, two masked men robbed the Southern Pacific train at Alia (Earlimart) and escaped after using the train's fireman as a human shield. The fireman was killed by bullets fired from the express car, but the bandits escaped. In later years Littleton would say that Emmet and Bob robbed the Alia train. But the lawmen of the time were suspecting Chris Evans and John. Sontag instead.

Sheriff Kay of Visalia followed the bandit's tracks and eventually caught up with them near a ranch near Paso Robles, the ranch of Bill Dalton. The boys had been hiding nearby in the mountains, waiting for the trail to Oklahoma to calm down a bit, and Bill had been leaving supplies for them. Bob and Emmett were gone, but Bill was arrested. Grat was also arrested and both were sent to jail in Visalia.

Sheriff Kay followed Bob and Emmett to their mother's ranch in Oklahoma but didn't find them, and after several weeks was forced to return to Visalia for Grat's trial. Bill would eventually be released on bond, but at this point he was still in jail with Grat. In fact, Bill had hired a very expensive attorney named John W Beckenridge to defend him and Grat. Unknown to Bill, Beckenridge was also an attorney for the SP Railroad, and they made sure that they nearly bankrupted Bill and his mother with lawyer fees for Beckenridge's defense of the brothers.

SP forced Beckenridge to sabotage the case. He showed up drunk at court proceedings, and even Sheriff Kay told the court that Grat's rights were being overlooked. SP detective Will Smith visited Grat's jail cell every day to try to get a confession out of him. Eventually, Grat was convicted of his crimes.

Four days before he was to be sentenced, Grat Dalton and two other men, Arvil Beck and W B Smith, escaped the otherwise strong Visalia jail. At first it appeared to Sheriff Kay, who was away in San Francisco the night of the escape, as if Grat had simply opened the cell door and walked out. But it was later discovered that they had cut the bars of the cell with a hacksaw

and file, replacing them with cut broom handles that were made black with boot polish. Pieces of a hacksaw and file were found in the men's toilet.

Grat stole a team of horses rode to Goshen, tying them to a hitching post and hiding in a bar. Someone then stole the team a second time, causing the posse in pursuit to go the wrong direction, all the way to Tulare. Grat was then able to escape and head into the mountains east of Reedley, where he would again escape the clutches of the law and eventually make his way back to Oklahoma, and join the gang that had been formed by Bob and Emmett which had been quite successful robbing trains, stages, and banks. Meanwhile, Bill Dalton would leave Paso Robles and join a gang of brothers known as the Doolin Brothers, their combined gang then becoming the Doolin & Dalton gang.

A year after escaping from Visalia jail, Grat Dalton with his brothers Bob and Emmett and Dick Broadwell and Bill Powers (who both had ridden with Doolin and Dalton) rode into the small town of Coffeetown, Kansas. They tied their horses in front of the First National Bank, and Bob and Emmett calmly walked in. The others crossed the street to the Condon National Bank.

A passing freight driver named Charlie Gump (no relation to Forrest) recognized the boys and shouted, "The Daltons are here!" Pandemonium broke loose. Guns were firing in all directions. When it all settled back down, Grat and Bob were dead, as were Powers and Broadwell, Marshall Charlie Connelly, and store keepers George Cubine, Charley Brown, and Lucius Baldwin.

Emmett Dalton had 18 bullets in him, but lived to tell the story. He would be tried and found guilty, serving 14 years for his crimes. After that, he married the aunt of a man he knew in Fresno, and became the historian of the Dalton family.

But wait a minute....back in Visalia, how did Grat manage to get a hacksaw and a file into the jail? It was delivered to him by a

man who was present at every day of Grat's trial. A man who Grat worked with at a warehouse in Pixley some years before. That man was also the man who stole the team from the Goshen bar and drove it to Tulare, allowing Grat to escape. That man was rumored to be none other than Chris Evans of Evans and Sontag fame.