Men pass the time playing cards on a train as a porter looks on.
Topeka insurance executive and real estate developer Luther Chapin Bailey was born near Waynetown, Indiana, in 1866. He grew up in Warren County, where he attended “common” schools, Greenhill Seminary, and nearby Purdue University. In January 1889 Bailey moved to Topeka, Kansas, where he taught school and, in 1891, married Ida Alice Roudebush, with whom he had three children. In 1891 Bailey also joined his brothers in the insurance business. Bailey Brothers and Company was managed by Bailey, his older brother George, his younger brother Curtis, and George’s son Jean. In time Bailey took up real estate development and, shortly before the outbreak of World War I, he and his brother Curtis purchased a large tract of land located just east of Topeka’s Gage Park. The “Gage Frontage Addition” was developed as a modern suburban residential area, located only twenty minutes by streetcar from downtown Topeka. In 1900 the Union Casualty and Surety Company chose Bailey Brothers to manage its Southwestern Department, which included Texas, Oklahoma, Indian Territory, Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska. As an agent of Union Casualty and Surety, Bailey was in charge of field operations and recruiting new agents, both of which required considerable railway travel.

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In addition to his reputation as a successful businessman, Bailey was known in Topeka as something of a man of letters. He was a popular after-dinner speaker and he wrote poetry, an unpublished novel, and various historical essays on American and Kansas history. Also a literary critic, he corresponded with Kansas novelist Margaret Hill McCarter and noted poet Edwin Markham. Bailey’s home at 909 Garfield Street was the frequent meeting place of Topeka men interested in discussing history, politics, business, and literature. One of his frequent guests in the 1920s was Arthur Capper. Luther Bailey died in 1947 at the age of eighty-one and he was buried in the family plot in Topeka Cemetery with his head resting on a copy of his favorite book—Charles Lamb’s Essays of Elia.¹

The story that follows, written by Bailey sometime in the 1930s and originally titled “The Last of the Daltons,” tells of an eventful overnight train trip taken by the insurance man. The original occasion for telling the story, Bailey offers as preface, occurred during a meeting of Topeka gentlemen, who were debating matters of life and death around his evening fire. According to the hand-written manuscript, which was never published, the events Bailey witnessed took place shortly before Christmas 1904, though subsequent research by the editor proves this date incorrect. Although Bailey did publish monographs on history, in this instance—and in a move common among writers of historical fiction—he seems to have combined several stories into one to make for a more interesting tale. By doing so, he transformed an account of a train robbery into a Christmas story.

Newspaper reports, one of which offers an interview with Bailey himself, document that the train robbery the insurance man describes actually occurred on the night of February 4, 1895. In none of them is the robbery attributed to the notorious Dalton Gang. Years after the incident, Bailey occasionally recounted the story of the train robbery to members of his family, though he never mentioned the Daltons or rushing home to be with his wife and three children for Christmas. He did, however, stress the unique method he chose to prevent his clients’ money from being stolen. By retelling the robbery as a “Kansas Christmas story,” perpetrated by a set of renouned robbers, however, Bailey adds a wild and dangerous air to his embellished account of an historical event.

No changes have been made to Bailey’s story as it is reprinted here, though editor’s notes and footnotes have been added in those places where newspaper reports confirm or question the original author’s version of events.

—the last of the daltons
by luther chapin bailey

A group of gentlemen, gathered around a big log fire in my study, seized upon the question of what each would do if suddenly confronted by some major casualty or disaster.

I at last found myself at serious odds with my guests, especially when a couple of college professors who had never experienced a major disaster or casualty were very certain that their knowledge of philosophy and psychology would be sufficient for guidance of their conduct under great storm and stress.

Although I was an insurance agent, my contention was that when such casualties assert themselves, all of our well-laid plans and conceptions of what we should do in such emergencies are at once thrust aside, and the great subconscious asserts itself as our monitor of self-preservation.

To illustrate this thought, I told this story, “The Last of the Daltons,” as a personal experience.

Late in December 1904 [editor’s note: in actuality February 4, 1895], I had been traveling on insurance business along the Santa Fe Railroad in central Kansas, having spent the day in Hutchinson, and took the late evening train for Garden City.

It was indeed a strange and queer feeling to be headed away from home with its Christmas trees and good cheer promised to gladden the hearts and souls of a bunch of small children, and was accordingly crowding my every effort to return to Topeka before Christmas. I had an “engagement” with three small children to assist in the reception of Santa Claus. I had to be home Christmas Eve without fail.

It had been snowing all day. The night was such a one as is often invented as the proper background for tragedy—a hostile environment. The snows had almost ceased, large storm clouds were floating over the skies, and a fugitive moon was rushing nimbly forward now in darkness, now in light, as if fleeing on the ghostly feet of haunting fear.²

After a good dinner in Hutchinson, I took the night train for Garden City. After spending a delightful hour with Judge Whiteside in the smoking car, I bade him good night.


2. Or, in the words of the Hutchinson Daily News, “The night was very cold and the moon shone and everything seemed to conduce to the success of the robbery.” “They Took Cash,” Hutchinson Daily News, February 5, 1895.
and retired to the sleeper in the rear. There was only one sleeper on the train that night, and I had the very first berth on the left upon entering the car—the toilet occupying the opposite corner. Immediately, I donned my night clothes and prepared for the short night’s run.

The day had been more than usually careworn, and it was difficult to immediately fall asleep. It seemed only a very short space of time until we again stopped on the siding at the little village of Sylvia, about twenty-five miles west of Hutchinson, where I had occasion to humbly thank the good Lord that I hadn’t gone to sleep while the train was running into the station, where it was taking far more time in a small hamlet like this to change cars and take on water and fuel.

But, oh! Such singing! Groups of young people were singing Christmas carols, merry making, and treating passengers on the trains to entertainment that might have found appreciation in the haunts of the lettered elite.

I felt very much elated, indeed, as it seemed that the front part of the sleeper had drawn the lion’s share of the entertainment. Just outside my window, a real prima donna way out in the wheat fields of Kansas, supported by an impressive chorus, was rendering “O, Holy Night.” Like many others, I too had heard it many times. It is immortal. But the young lady who sang it that night—if an imitator—was a vaulting genius, the likes of Madam Schumann-Heink.

This was one time when a halting train aroused no resentment, for all too soon the clang of bells and whistles announced the “All Aboard,” and we were headed into the stormy night.

If song possesses the power to soothe madness, the brief entertainment had served as a magic somnolent, and I immediately nestled down in my pillows and blankets. I was just launching off in that first embrace of sleep when—without warning of bell or whistle—the engineer suddenly set the air brakes so suddenly that the train almost leaped from the tracks. The cars not only seemed literally to bound and rebound on the rails, but staggered as if a ship in a gale. One felt as if the giant eye beams [I-beams] of the structure were literally burning up.

3. Ibid. Hutchinson attorney Houston Whiteside (1846–or 1848–1941) was not a judge, though newspaper reports confirm he was on the train robbed the night of February 4, 1895. “Hon. H. Whiteside was one of the passengers on the ‘hold up’ train last night,” reported the Hutchinson Daily News the day after the robbery. “He has not been heard from yet and it is not known what loss he sustained.”

4. According to the Stafford Republican, the train arrived in Sylvia at about 11:00 p.m. “Four Train Robbers Hold Up the California Express Near This City Last Monday Night,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895.

5. Ernestine Schumann-Heink (1861–1936) was a famous operatic contralto. Her performances were broadcast over national radio from 1933 until 1935.
Bailey described the Santa Fe train on which he traveled as having a smoking car where he spent an hour talking with a fellow passenger before retiring to the sleeper car. There he “had the very first berth on the left upon entering the car—the toilet,” he presaged, “occupying the opposite corner.” His description of the train’s amenities echoes those offered on this advertisement for a 1905 night train between Chicago and Denver, which passed over the same tracks Bailey traveled ten years earlier. It was Bailey’s idea to darken what the advertisement touts as the “wide-vestibuled and electric-lighted” corridors of his train car that allowed his escape to the ladies’ room.
The first thought that came to me was that there was some obstruction on the track—cars telescoped, a fire, a head-on collision. Having no thought of what to do in such an emergency, I found myself upon my knees with my hands braced against the west wall of the sleeper to save myself when the crash came. What a strange transformation—a few minutes prior being lulled to sleep by beautiful voices singing “O, Holy Night” to now being among those sleepers suddenly roused by the most hideous, blood-curdling, proseaph oath and rifle fire, with stentorantes voices loudly commanding, “Keep in your heads, you blanket-y-blanket-y-blank!”

Above all the commotion could be heard the clang and clatter of the sledge hammer and crow bars on the doors and safes in the express car ahead.

There were about a half dozen train robbers—the notorious Dalton Gang. While some had been detailed to master the engineer and fireman, others were taking care of the conductor and brakeman. This allowed a detail of safe breakers to rob the express car, still leaving two handsome, debonair gunmen to shake down the passengers.

6. The crash Bailey anticipated did not come. According to newspaper accounts the train slowed and then stopped because the robbers, who had boarded at the Sylvia depot, compelled the engineer to run the train out about a half mile and stop it. “Four Train Robbers,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895. The Garden City Herald reported that the train was stopped west of Sylvia at 11:30 p.m. “Santa Fe Held Up,” Garden City Herald, February 9, 1895.

7. The Stafford Republican recorded that “the command here, with an oath, was for all hands to go up and that mighty quick.” “Four Train Robbers,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895; “Santa Fe Held Up,” Garden City Herald, February 9, 1895.

8. According to the Stafford Republican and Garden City Herald, there were actually four robbers. “Four Train Robbers,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895; “Santa Fe Held Up,” Garden City Herald, February 9, 1895. No newspaper accounts attributed the robbery to the Dalton Gang. Wells Fargo Historical Services recorded the names of only two of the thieves—“Ed. Newcombe, alias Slaughter Kid, alias Bitter Creek, and Will Blake, alias Tulsa Jack.” Charles Riggs, Wells Fargo Historical Services, to Mark Scott, email communication, March 10, 2009.

9. The Hutchinson Daily News reported that “a demand was made upon Express Messenger Jesse Ruble to open the express safe. Mr. Ruble swore he never would open the safe and his positive manner so completely baffled the robbers that they at once abandoned the express car without securing any booty and made the engineer and fireman walk before them to the passenger coaches with an open sack in their hands and while one robber commanded ‘hands up,’ the other ‘went through’ the passengers and took pocketbooks, watches, revolvers and such other booty as they could find.” “They Took Cash,” Hutchinson Daily News, February 5, 1895. According to the Stafford Republican, “The spokesman then announced that this was the first time they had ever done this but that they had failed to get anything in the express car and must call upon the passengers for a donation to help them pay running expenses. That they did not want watches, jewelry, papers or pocketbooks, but cash only.” Bailey noted that the two robbers were “handsome,” indicating that they wore no masks. The Stafford Republican reported that the robbers were “unmasked.” “Four Train Robbers,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895. The Hutchinson Daily News stated, “One of the men was about six feet tall, dark hair and mustache [sic] and wore dark clothes. The other was about five feet eight inches and had dark hair and dark mustache.” “They Took Cash,” Hutchinson Daily News, February 5, 1895.

I quickly arose and, peeping around the door, saw two young fellows coming down the aisle of the chair car with their rifles lying in the crook of their arms, gallantly and without effort terrorizing those from whom they took collections.

10. Judge Whiteside arose, sharing some part—perhaps all—of his purse, and then just as gallantly offering them his cigar case.

The collection in the chair car would soon be taken, and then they would come to disturb the sweet repose of the Pullman sleeper. Except for the colored porter, there wasn’t a soul up and out but myself.

I speculated at once what to do. I had in all a couple hundred dollars in cash, having collected a part of it that day in Hutchinson. I immediately began to soliloquize that a holdup of this character would only come once in a lifetime.

I had no shooting irons—thank the Lord that I couldn’t be tempted to make a fool of myself. The porter had just run to my berth asking me if I had a gun. No, I hadn’t. If you shot a gun out of this car, you would draw the concentrated fire of those thieves. They were liable to cut the car to pieces. If you shot a gun out of this car, you would literally be thrown off the back end of the car—where you belonged.

Again, I peeped around the door jamb, and saw that the robbers were about half done with the shakedown in the chair car. Then again, the idea came to me, “Pay out quick and fast! Give them every cent you got!”

I parted my curtains so that they would have no trouble finding me. I was sitting there on the side of my berth with all the money I had piled out, ready to hand it over with a smile.

I waited and waited. They were so slow and tedious.

Again, I peeped around the door. They were steadily advancing toward the sleeper.

11. Whiteside later reported to the Hutchinson Daily News that he had been robbed “of some city warrants.” “City Council,” Hutchinson Daily News, February 19, 1895.
Two hundred dollars! Oh, my, oh, my! That’s an awful lot of money! The folks back home will need it. That’s too much!

I immediately cut my pile in two, hiding and sequestering the money and my watch under the blankets and mattress. Still, they didn’t come.

Give up a hundred dollars? Mercy, that’s too much money! I split it again, thinking that fifty dollars was plenty to give up on a short night’s ride like this.

I thought they were the slowest holdup fellows I ever saw. And then I made up my mind that I just wasn’t going to give them fifty dollars. I hid it all but eight dollars in silver.

Again, I peeked around the door. They were slowly coming.

Throwing on my overcoat, I ran down the aisle and found the porter near the rear end of the car. I peremptorily ordered him to put out that rear light.

“Oh,” he said, “Boss, they shoot me! They shoot me!”

“That’s what you are paid for,” I said. “Put out the light.”

He turned off that light and every one of them up to the west end of the car, where my own berth was.

My first thought was to shroud the car in darkness. Just as the porter was about to turn off the last light, the thought came to me that if we turned out all the lights, that might perhaps enrage the holdup gang. They might wreak revenge on the car for having been despoiled of their choicest pickings among the travelers on the sleeper.

When we reached Garden City the next morning, I was heralded as the hero who saved the sleeping car. When the thieves had finished the shakedown of the chair car, the passengers told us the next morning that they started boldly across the vestibule for the sleeper. The big six-foot man in the lead immediately backed up and said, “Oh, no! Oh, no! It’s a death trap! There are probably a dozen guns in that car the minute we step into that light!”

My contention about the subconscious before the wise men seated before the fireplace speculating on what they would do in such emergencies was dramatized by my decision to shroud the car in darkness—except for a single lamp over the door through which the train robbers would have to enter.

But even before the robbers reached our sleeper that night—after the lights had been turned off—I had made up my mind that I just wasn’t going to give up a cent to that ugly bunch of holdups.

I quickly retrieved all my money from the blankets and the mattress, boldly stepped across the aisle, and entered—the ladies’ toilet. I securely bolted the door and nestled up into the corner on the stool with the solemn conviction that no highwayman, no bloodthirsty robber, would have the impudence to batter down the door of a ladies’ toilet!

While sitting there, I heard the most blood-curdling cry—or was it a wail?—immediately above me. It was the porter who had come to me earlier in the evening asking

Bailey took his own company’s advice and “kept his temper” (and his money!) during the train’s robbery. Not all passengers made out so well. Judge Whiteside and the other passengers in the chair car, Bailey recalled, lost money and personal effects such as cigar cases to the robbers. Newspaper accounts and railroad records at the time estimated the collective losses of money at between $50 and $80, and noted that the robbers refused to collect any cash from the female passengers aboard the train. Advertisement from a publication of the Union Casualty and Surety Company, part of which was managed by Bailey and his brothers, courtesy of the editor.

12. The Stafford Republican reported that “when the first alarm was given the passengers concealed their valuables in many ways. One man stuffed a roll of bills in his glove and threw it up in the bundle rack; another put his money in his boot, etc.” “Four Train Robbers,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895.
for a gun. He had found a gun, climbed up the outside of the train, crawled out onto the roof of the chair car, and had taken a single pot shot at the Daltons.

One of them with his rifle lying in the crook of his arm threw the gun around, fired, and grazed the porter just across the seat of his pants. It was this porter who was now hanging above me at the corner of the sleeper crying, “Oh, my God! Open the door and let me in! I’m shot all to pieces!”

“Good enough for you!” I yelled up at him. “I told you that you were a fool to take chips in a game where the cards were all stacked against you!”

So ended this unusual Kansas Christmas story. The Dalton Gang had terrorized people, but killed no one. No one was injured—except for the porter. And—thanks to the ladies’ restroom—my clients’ funds were safe, which was good news for the Christmas season. In the words of our company slogan, “Bailey Brothers insures everything—but the Hereafter!”

13. Ibid. According to the Stafford Republican, “During the robbery the negro [sic] porter climbed up the rear end of the sleeper onto the tops of the cars and began shooting at the robbers, but a shot from a winchester [sic], which inflicted quite a painful flesh wound in the hip, quenched his defensive spirit.”

14. Nevertheless, the community was outraged by the holdup. The Hutchinson Daily News fumed, “The whole country is thoroughly aroused and the ‘train robbery’ is the sole topic of conversation. It was not so bad for train robberies to occur in the [Indian] Territory, Texas and Missouri, but when the good name of Kansas and Reno county is coupled with one of the coolest and most successful train robberies, our people feel like kicking.” “They Took Cash,” Hutchinson Daily News, February 5, 1895.

15. The Stafford Republican averred that “several shots were fired at different times, but all, it seems, with a view of intimidation, rather than injury.” “Four Train Robbers,” Stafford Republican, February 7, 1895. Note that this account of the train robbery matched the abbreviated version Bailey gave to a reporter of the Garden City Sentinel. See “Another Hold Up,” Garden City Sentinel, February 9, 1895. Details of Bailey seeking sanctuary in the ladies’ restroom, however, were delicately omitted from all news accounts of the train robbery.