

Early's Fall
By Jerry Peterson

Chapter 1

AUGUST 15 – MONDAY AFTERNOON
THE JAYHAWK

“Is that someone on a horse?”

James Early twisted around in time to see a paint and rider slow-walk past the Jayhawk Bank's front window. “Yup, what's unusual about that?”

Rance Dalby, the owner the smallest bank in Kansas, nudged at Early's arm with the notary seal he'd been playing with. “Come on, Cactus, when's the last time you saw anyone ride into Randolph on a horse?”

“Before Roosevelt marched us off to war,” Early said – Early, the sheriff of Riley County and a leathery cowboy in his own right.

“That's what I mean. That's ten years ago.”

“Rance, we got ranches up on the high ground, and they got cowboys.”

“But, dammit, they drive pickups today.”

“So now you know, the Old West ain't dead.”

The cowboy who had ridden past reappeared at the door of the one-teller bank, his hat pulled low, his spurs jingling as he came in. Dalby, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled to his elbows, ignored him other than to toss a perfunctory glance his way. He picked up a loan paper and fanned himself. “I tell you, I'm going out to the Blue and put my big bare feet in the water, maybe fish a little after Mavis and I close up. Get myself cool.”

An explosion brought Dalby and Early out of their chairs. Early, suffering from shell shock still four years after the war, dove for the floor. When he came up, there stood the cowboy, a nylon over his face, a vapor of acrid smoke curling up from the barrel of a Forty-Five he held high.

“Excuse me,” the cowboy said, his voice not much above a whisper. “Now that I got your 'tention, I'm here for your money.”

He tossed a duffle bag to Dalby. It slapped down on the banker's desk and slid across, dislodging a stack of financials.

Dalby attempted to work his mouth, but nothing came out. The cowboy waved his pistol at him. “Pick it up. I want everything from your teller's cash drawer, then your vault.”

Early pushed himself to his knees. He brushed the front of his shirt. “Now, son,” he said, “you don't want to be doing this.”

“Why not? I got the gun.”

“Well, you could get yourself a nice long prison term, and I'm told Leavenworth's not the most pleasant place to be.”

The cowboy brought his pistol down. He leveled it at Early, lowered it just a bit and jerked the trigger. The bullet threw up splinters as it tore into the plank floor by the sheriff's

knee.

“You’re serious,” Early said, his eyes like saucers. He twisted around. “Rance, better do what he wants. As for me, I’m gonna just sit down here and wait.”

“Good idea,” the cowboy said.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” Early settled on his rump and crossed his legs in what his father would have called Indian-style. Dalby hustled past. He held open the bag to his teller, Mavis Anderson, her face blanched white. She fumbled with her cash drawer as she dumped its contents in, and a half-dozen coins missed the bag. They fell to the floor, bouncing, rolling, several to ring flat at the bandit’s feet.

“If you don’t mind,” Early said, tapping his shirt pocket, “I’d like a chew.” He slipped two fingers in and drew out a package of gum. Early shook a stick out to the cowboy. “Teaberry. Got a flavor that relaxes you.”

He waved it away as Dalby dashed by and into the vault.

“Throw the mortgages in that sack, too,” the cowboy called after him.

Early, with great deliberation, unwrapped a stick of gum. He folded it and put it into his mouth. “Do I know you?” he asked.

“Doubt it.”

In the instant that the cowboy glanced at Early, the banker slammed the vault door shut, locking himself inside.

The bandit ran to the vault door, cursing. He banged the butt of his pistol on the steel and rattled the handle. When the lock refused to give, the bandit whirled on Early. “You did this,” he said, his voice a spitting snarl.

He swung his gun hard at Early’s head, and the crack of metal on bone sent the sheriff sprawling.

The bandit whipped around to the teller. “Open the gawddamn vault.”

Mavis Anderson, built to hold her own with any man, stepped back from her counter, her jowls trembling. “It’s on a time lock. Won’t open ’til eight in the morning.”

“Shit. Then I hope he croaks in there.” The cowboy turned away. He ran, not for the street door, but for the window in the back wall of the bank. He dove through it, glass and wood shattering.

Mavis Anderson peered after the cowboy before she hurried away from her counter, first to the vault, then to Early. She reached down for the sheriff’s arm. “You all right, Jimmy?”

“Phheww, Lordy, he clipped me good.” Early felt at his head with his free hand while Mavis Anderson hauled at his other arm. “Think I’m gonna hear telephones ringing for days.”

“I thought he’d killed you.”

Early got a foot under himself. “Mave, I got myself movin’ when I saw it coming. Where’s my hat?”

“Over there.”

He made a swipe at it as he came up, and a second swipe before he got hold of the crown. Early slapped his cattleman’s hat on, wincing at the pain of it.

“What we going to do, Jimmy?”

“I guess go after him. Which way did he go?”

Mavis Anderson hurried to the window. She leaned out. “There he is. He’s riding up the

alley, past the old hotel.”

Early forced his legs to work for him, to carry him out the front door to his war-surplus Jeep. He twisted the ignition key, and the Ford V-Eight he'd dropped under the hood roared to life. Early slammed the shifter into first. He tromped on the gas, and his spinning tires threw up a spray of dirt that showered Everett Morgan running up from his grocery store.

Early glanced down a side alley as he rammed the shifter into second – nothing. He turned back and blanched. A pickup came motoring down the middle of the street, toward him. Early jerked his Jeep to the side. He jammed the shifter into third and glanced over as he shot past the next alley.

Another block and the town ran out with the Jeep rocketing up through sixty. That's when Early saw the cowboy, off on the Olsburg Road, the paint churning dirt, galloping east toward the rise that would take him and his rider out of the Big Blue Valley. Early tromped on the brakes, downshifting, spinning the steering wheel. He whipsawed the Jeep onto the Olsburg and again floored it, the war machine whistling across the tracks of the K&N and into the open, eating into the cowboy's lead.

Ahead the road bent.

But the cowboy and his horse didn't.

The rider rammed his spurs into the paint's flanks and the beast took to the air in a leap that carried him and his rider across the borrow ditch and over a woven wire fence. They came down on the far side and disappeared into a field of August-tall corn.

Early slowed. He steered the Jeep around the bend – looking, looking – and floored it one more time, speeding off toward a farm lane. Early grabbed up his microphone.

“Alice, you there?” he bellowed over the whine of the Jeep's engine.

Yes, came back a voice over the Motorola.

“Robbery at the Jayhawk Bank. Guy on horseback. Lost him going east on the Olsburg.”

Robbery at the Jayhawk. Got it.

“Call the Pott sheriff, State Police, and get Hutch up here.”

On it.

Early threw the mic aside as he tromped hard on the brake pedal. He skidded the Jeep into a drive that led on to the Bert Torben farmstead, dust billowing, his whip antenna whacking from side to side. Again Early floored it. He shot through the yard, Em Torben's chickens flying off in a claque of squawking and loose feathers. Early slurried the Jeep around the buildings, slowing when he saw Torben belting up his silo filler. The sheriff slid the Jeep to a stop near the elderly farmer, and dust rolled up over them. Early tried to wave it away, hacking at the taste.

“You got a horse I can have, Bert?”

Torben, gape mouthed, flapped at the billowing dust, too. “Gawd, I haven't had a horse since I bought my Farmall in 'Thirty-Nine. What you need one for?”

The sheriff sprang from his Jeep, gesturing across the way, toward a far pasture and the cowboy and his horse racing away across it. “To catch that sumbitch.”

Early, angry, reached back for the Winchester in its scabbard in front of the windshield. He yanked the rifle out and sighted down the barrel at the retreating figure, adjusting for windage. Early squeezed the trigger.

“Hell, you'll never hit him at this distance, sheriff.”

“I know that, but he doesn’t.” Early levered a new shell into the chamber. He fired, levered again, and fired a third time. Then and only then did he step back. Early brought the rifle up and rested the stock against his hip.

Torben pulled off his straw hat. He wiped a hand back over his nearly hairless dome. “Guess I’m lucky I didn’t have no cows out there, wouldn’t ya say? . . . You know, yer bleedin’ from the ear.”

“Huh?”

Torben touched his own ear. “Bleedin’. Up here. You’re not hearing too good?”

Early put his hand to his ear. When he brought his hand away, his fingertips were wet and red. “Got clipped.”

The sheriff wiped his fingers on his tans, then levered a fresh round into his rifle’s firing chamber. The gun again ready, he slipped it back into its scabbard.

Early took a bandana from his back pocket. He dabbed at his ear as he and Torben stood watching the horse and rider, now no larger than their thumbs, clear a fence at the end of the pasture and disappear into a distant woods.

“Shoot,” Early said, “he can go any direction now.”

“So what’s this all about?”

“Robbery at the Jayhawk.”

“He got the community’s money?”

“No. Your money’s still in the vault. Locked in with Rance. I guess I better get back. Sorry for the disturbance.”

“You know,” Torben said, “if you was to go up the Olsburg, you can cut over through Jessie Smith’s land – he don’t have it fenced. That’d bring you around to the back side of that woods. You might see him.”

“Worth a try. Tell Em I’m sorry about her chickens. I probably scared a week’s worth of eggs out of them.”

Before Torben could answer, Early wheeled his Jeep around. He motored at a leisurely pace past the buildings and through the yard, but once in the farm lane, Early drove like a man possessed, skidding his Jeep onto the Olsburg Road. He raced away only to downshift at the end of Torben’s fence line. There he bucked off through the borrow ditch into a hayfield and tore across the new-mown hay, waving to Jessie Smith’s son, Johnny, barreling down a slope in a doodlebug with a mower attached, laying more of the bluestem prairie hay flat.

Early clung to the steering wheel with one hand while he held tight to his hat with the other, the ride across the hayfield and into a distant pasture like that of a bucking horse in a rodeo ring.

He topped the high ground and stopped, the end of the woods a couple hundred yards below. Early leaned on the steering wheel as he scanned the open fields to the north of the woods. No horse and rider. No horse without a rider. Not even a man on foot.

Early could see a mile across the valley and, to his right, almost four miles, up toward where the waters of the Black Vermillion mixed with the Big Blue and flowed this way. Cattle country up here on the bluffs, some of the richest soil for farming in the valley below. Memories of his grandfather flowed back to Early. The old man loved the bottoms, called it the garden lands of the state. He had one of the finest peach orchards and grew melons the size of bushel baskets

there, down by Bigelow, closer to Manhattan, the county seat town, the college town, home to Silo Tech as the kids over in Lawrence called Kansas State.

Early stepped out to stretch. He rarely went armed, preferring talk to weapons. Yet there were those times. So he had the Winchester in the scabbard and his pistol, a military Forty-Five he'd taken off a dead lieutenant in Algeria's Casserine Pass and had carried through the war. That pistol usually laid in a holster belt beneath his seat. Early could not have said why, but he took out the holstered gun and strapped it on.

That done, he got back in his Jeep. Early let out the clutch and guided the machine on a meandering journey back down into the valley. As he approached the Kansas & Nebraska's tracks, a steamer sounded its whistle. Early glanced toward Randolph and a ten-car freight rumbling up the tracks, bound for Maryville in the next county north. He stopped.

He waited.

He liked trains.

In the Dirty 'Thirties, he'd hoboed some, ridden the rails, under, in and on top of boxcars, had crossed the country a couple times before Pearl Harbor. He was in Georgia when the Japanese sunk half the Navy. Word traveled through the hobo jungles with the speed of a prairie fire. The next day, Early made his way to Minnville. There he enlisted in the Army along with a hundred sixty-three others, eighteen men, like himself, from the camp under the trestle.

Early rode the rails some more, this time in troop trains, home after basic training and to New York to board a troop ship bound for North Africa. Desert country. He'd never had much use for sand, even less once he got there.

Early waved to the engineer as the Baldwin I-One-S "hippo" rolled by. He gazed at the engine and the cars with no particular interest until a movement caught his eye, someone waving a hat from the open doorway of a boxcar.

The cowboy.

The bank bandit.

"Sumbitch!"

Early seethed, waiting for the last cars and the caboose to trundle by. When they did, he bucked his Jeep across the tracks and raced up through the gears, slowing to slide onto State 177. Early let out the string. The Jeep's speedometer needle topped seventy-five on the dirt road as he raced after the freight.

The sheriff paralleled it in three miles. When the fireman and engineer did nothing more than wave in response to his frantic wig-wagging, Early sped on by. Two miles on, where the tracks crossed the road, Early skidded his Jeep to a stop. He grabbed a flare from beneath his seat, lit the flare, and dashed to the tracks. He waved the blazing, spark-showering thing in great arcs, an arm's length over his head.

This time the engineer responded. Early was sure of it, for the train began to play off speed as it neared the crossing. And then he heard it, the screech of steel on steel, the engine's drive wheels locked up.

Early jumped to the side as the hippo slid through the crossing, the engineer bellowing, "What the hell's the matter with you, Cactus?"

"Sorry, Lukey. You got a bandit back in the second boxcar."

"The hell you say."

But Early didn't hear that. He had his Forty-Five out as he galloped back along the train. When Early came to the second boxcar, he stopped. He poked his pistol ahead of him as he eased around the open door. Early leaned in.

"Damn."

Empty, except for bags of sugary-sweet-smelling dried beet pulp stacked in a far corner. He hunkered down. Early scanned beneath the car, and the cars behind and the one ahead. More of nothing, other than a winged grasshopper that took to the air, green against blue. He scrambled up the boxcar's ladder to the roof, but there was nothing on top of the train for the length of it other than a meadow lark that had flown down to the roof of the next boxcar. The bird puffed his speckled chest out and sang for the glories of the day.

Early holstered his pistol. With disappointment showing in his face and his frame, he slid down the ladder to the gravel of the rail bed.

There stood a giant of a man, the engineer smelling of coal dust and lubricating oil, Luke Blackwell. He'd driven the hippo on this run for almost as many years as Early was old.

"Well?" Blackwell asked.

Early pulled off his hat. He slapped it against the leg of his tans. "Back there at the crossing outside of Randolph, this guy who tried to stick up the bank, he was sitting in the door of this railcar. The damn yahoo waves at me."

"Maybe he made his way back to another car."

"It's possible."

"Tell you what," Blackwell said, helping himself to a club wedged behind the ladder of the boxcar, "you go down this side and I'll go down the other. If he's here, we'll catch him."

The engineer hefted himself over the coupling between the boxcar and the car ahead of it.

Early hunkered down again. When he saw the striped legs of the engineer's railroad britches opposite him, he moved out and down the length of the train, peering under and into boxcars. The two hopper cars Early came to, he climbed up their ladders and gandered in to see whether the cowboy might have tried to bury himself in the cargo of grain. The surface would be disturbed. It would show.

Nothing.

Just a lot of nothing.

Blackwell came around the end of the caboose. "He gave you the slip, huh?"

"Looks like it."

The engineer put his meaty arm around Early's shoulders as they walked back toward the head of the train. "I won't tell nobody if you won't tell nobody."

"Why's that?" Early asked.

"We railroad men are supposed to catch the bums who hop our trains."

"This was no bum, Lukey. Damn, he's familiar. . . . Must of jumped off somewhere in the last five miles."

Gravel crunched beneath the men's boots as they ambled on.

"Well," the engineer said, "he'd get beat up some if he did because I was doing a good clip. If he didn't break himself a leg though, he's gone."

"Yeah, probably."

"Cactus, if I was you, I'd call it a day an' go home to that wonderful wife of yours."

“Just might do that after I write up the paperwork.”

“As for me, I got to get this here train up to Maryville an’ bring the Nineteen back to the big little city of Manhattan. I won’t be done ’til after ten o’clock.”

At the cab, Blackwell’s fireman leaned out, Oscar Miller, as burly a man as the engineer. He spat a gob of chewed tobacco to the side. “Didn’t find nobody, huh?”

Blackwell grabbed hold of the ladder. He pulled himself up. “False alarm. What say you and I git?”

“Fine by me.”

The two railroaders disappeared inside the cab of the hippo. Moments later, the engine snorted as Blackwell put the power to the drive wheels. The knuckles of the couplers banged hard against one another along the length of the train as the freight hauler started to move. Then it became quiet, except for the rumbling of the trucks and an occasional squeal when a wheel flange rubbed against a rail.

And the train rolled on, disappearing around a bend as it made its way to the northeast.

Early kicked at the gravel as he shuffled across the tracks to his Jeep. There he stooped to pull his flare from the dirt where he had jammed it to extinguish the flame. He tossed the flare under the seat, figuring he might use it another time.

The sheriff did not hurry back to Randolph. He drove slowly, gandering across the way to the railroad tracks, scanning the gravel and the weeds beyond for a crumbled body in case the cowboy killed himself when he bailed out of the boxcar. Early picked up his microphone.

“Hutch, you on?”

Go ahead, chief, a voice came over the Motorola.

“Where you?”

Coming up on Randolph from the south.

“I’m north, coming in. Meet you at the bank in a couple minutes.”

Roger that.

Early leaned his windshield forward as his Jeep rambled along. He kicked his right foot up over the glass and rode at ease the last three miles. When he rolled up in front of the bank, there stood Hutch Tolliver, Early’s chief deputy, leaning against the back end of his own Jeep, holding the reins of a saddled horse. A paint.

“Found him out in the field beyond the depot,” Hutch said, nodding at the beast.

Early came alongside. He ran his hand over the paint’s haunch, his fingers stopping on the brand burned into the hide. “Sumbitch. I know who the bandit is.”