



## Hurled Into Eternity: The Gunfight At The O.K. Corral

*"The real story of the Old West can never be told unless Wyatt Earp will tell what he knows, and Wyatt will not talk."*

-- Bat Masterson, quoted in *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, by Stuart Lake

In thirty seconds and thirty shots, three men died behind the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. It was blood feud and political showdown and law and order, all swirled up together in the powder smoke and sawdust of the Western frontier. It might have been the last battle of the Civil War, or a battle for even more contested ground -- the nature of the American myth, and the right to ride into the sunset, and to return when the land again has need of heroes.

*"Three Men Hurled Into Eternity in the Duration of a Moment.*

*Stormy as were the early days of Tombstone nothing ever occurred equal to the event of yesterday. Since the . . . appointment of V.W. Earp to [town marshal] the town has been noted for its quietness and good order. . . . It seems that this quiet state of affairs was but the calm that precedes the storm that burst in all its fury yesterday, with this difference in results, that the lightning bolt struck . . . with its full and awful force upon those who, heretofore, have made the good name of this county a byword and a reproach, instead of upon some officer in discharge of his duty or a peaceable and unoffending citizen."*

-- Tombstone *Daily Epitaph*, Oct. 27, 1881

Wyatt Earp had made a name for himself as assistant city marshal of Dodge City, the wildest cow-town in Kansas. However, when Dodge settled down, Earp's restless nature drew him further west, to the silver mining boom town of Tombstone, Arizona. His brother Virgil Earp was deputy U.S. marshal for the Arizona Territory, and later became town marshal of Tombstone. Wyatt served on and off as deputy sheriff, but soon found himself embroiled in the local political feud between Tombstone's Republican business community (which supported the Earps' law-and-order ways) and the primarily Democratic ranchers such as the Clanton and McLaury families. The Clantons and McLaury's served as fences for cattle, horses, and mules stolen by a gang of mostly former Confederate rustlers known collectively as the Cowboys; the corrupt sheriff John Behan actively connived not only at their thefts, but at robberies of the Wells Fargo stage lines. When politics thwarted the Earps, they picked up extra cash riding shotgun for Wells Fargo. When three Cowboys killed stage driver Bud Philpott, Behan tried to pin it on the Earps; the Earps, meanwhile, set out to prove Clanton involvement.

Ike Clanton apparently agreed to sell out the three Cowboys to Wyatt Earp, but a drunken Wells Fargo agent leaked the deal, and in a panic, Ike repeatedly tried to instigate a gunfight to kill Wyatt and hush up the stink. Unable to catch Wyatt unaware, Ike wound up forced into a confrontation in the back lot between the O.K. Corral and Fly's Photography Studio. Wyatt, Morgan, and Virgil Earp, along with Wyatt's friend the gambler (and deadly gunfighter) Doc Holliday, confronted Ike and Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLaury, and another Cowboy named Billy "the Kid"

Claiborne around 3:00 in the afternoon on October 26, 1881. As town marshal, Virgil ordered the Cowboys to throw down their weapons (carrying guns being illegal in Tombstone) and put up their hands. Billy Clanton and Wyatt Earp fired simultaneously, and the Gunfight opened. Thirty seconds later, only Wyatt Earp remained unwounded, and Billy Clanton and Tom and Frank McLaury were dead. Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne fled, and were arrested later.

*"Eight rustlers rose up from behind the bank and poured from thirty-five to forty shots into us. Our escape was miraculous. The shots cut our clothes and saddles and killed one horse, but did not hit us. I think we would have been killed if God Almighty wasn't on our side. Wyatt Earp turned loose with a shotgun and killed Curly Bill."*

-- Doc Holliday, interviewed in the *Denver Republican*, May 22, 1882

The above narrative has been questioned, not least by Clanton partisans and revisionist historians, but as Allen Barra points out in *Inventing Wyatt Earp*, this is the version that all non-Cowboy witnesses agreed to -- and that even Ike Clanton reported on the day after the Gunfight. Judge Wells Spicer also agreed with it, dismissing all charges against the Earps in a preliminary hearing. (The version of the Gunfight given in ***GURPS Old West*** is apparently solely based on the Clantons' testimony in that hearing.) However, the Cowboys and their political allies weren't going to give up easily. They redoubled their robberies and rustlings, ambushing Virgil Earp on Fifth Street at midnight on December 28, crippling his arm. "King of the Cowboys" Johnny Ringo and Doc Holliday nearly came to blows -- since the Clantons had been lurking outside Doc's lodgings on the day of the Gunfight, he had cause for nervousness.

On the night of March 18, 1882, parties unknown (but widely suspected to include Cowboy leader Curly Bill Brocius, Behan's deputy Frank Stilwell, and Florentin "Indian Charlie" Cruz) shot Morgan Earp in the back with a rifle as he played pool, killing him. Wyatt Earp immediately headed to Tuscon to put Virgil on the train to California -- but he ran into Frank Stilwell, lurking by the railroad car with a gun. Wyatt shot Stilwell, and crossed the line into vigilantism. Along with Doc Holliday, Warren Earp (who had come to Tombstone after Virgil's shooting), and three other friends, he rode out of Tombstone on March 21 on his "Vendetta Ride." Wyatt's men killed "Indian Charlie" the next day, and survived another withering daylight gunfight unscathed at Iron Springs on March 23, when he gunned down Curly Bill Brocius and another Cowboy, Johnny Barnes. On July 13, 1882, Johnny Ringo was found dead with a single gunshot wound to his temple, his boots off, and his gunbelt on upside-down. His vendetta complete, Wyatt Earp headed west, for San Francisco and a new wife -- John Behan's ex-girlfriend, the actress Josephine Marcus.

*"We had such a séance last night. That evening with Wyatt Earp would have been worth \$1,000 to the newspapers."*

-- diary entry by George Parsons, Aug. 30, 1900

However, the ghosts of Tombstone lived on. Literally, in fact; Tombstone has at least six major hauntings, including the Wells Fargo office (an Earp stronghold) and the Grand Hotel (a Clanton hangout), with 31 ghosts sighted at the Bird Cage Theater alone. The phantoms may have appeared early; Wyatt recalled a "veiled figure" of indeterminate gender calling on Virgil's house on Halloween, 1881. Even the names of the two wounded Earps recall the afterworld -- Virgil as the guide of the dead, and Morgan as a masculine "Morrigan," the Irish death-goddess? Morrigan was also a triple-goddess; Morgan closely resembled not only his brother Wyatt, but fellow Wells Fargo agent Fred Dodge. (This resemblance -- or some more sinister transference -- might be why Frank Stilwell's last word was a panicked "Morg!") Morgan was killed on the death-day of Tammuz, and the dogs on the street howled at the moment of his death. (Wyatt killed Curly Bill on the last day of the Feast of Mars.) Wyatt, meanwhile, went to outrageous lengths to conceal his gravesite in San Francisco's Colma cemetery -- it wasn't found until it was robbed in 1957. The grave of Doc Holliday (and that of his father) have still never been found.

*"Where's Wyatt?  
Down by the creek, walking on water."*

-- Texas Jack Vermillion (Peter Sherayko) and Doc Holliday (Val Kilmer), *Tombstone*

Speaking of Doc Holliday, his father was the head of a Masonic lodge in Valdosta, Georgia; Doc may or may not have also been a Freemason. Wyatt Earp was a Mason, however, although Tombstone's King Solomon Lodge #5 was not chartered until six days after Johnny Ringo's mysterious death (with his legs bare, as in Masonic ritual, and his skull at least symbolically crushed by a gunshot). Was their close, even brotherly, friendship begun with a handshake? The Masonic theme of the three killers repeats itself throughout the saga, from the three murderers of Bud Philpot, to the three assassins who tried to kill Virgil Earp (just minutes before the feast day of St. Thomas a Becket, who was also slain by three unworthy knights), to the three Earp brothers themselves behind the O.K. Corral. Even the town of Tombstone itself recapitulates this theme -- the tombstone is a Masonic symbol, with a Degree of the Monument. The tombstone also recalls the "ashlar" or "squared stone," the Perfected Stone of the Perfected Work. And does the town also memorialize the tombstone carved with "In Arcadia Ego," the resting place of the Grail King?

*"Virgil Earp, Wyatt and Morgan were all up there, Morg Earp told me if I wanted to fight to turn myself loose; they all had their hands; I told them again that I was not armed; Doc Holliday said, 'You s-- of a b---, go and arm yourself; I did then go and arm myself; I went back, saw V. Earp and T. McLowry; Virg Earp was playing poker with his pistol in his lap; we were playing poker, we quit at daylight.'"*

-- testimony of Ike Clanton at the inquest into the Gunfight

It was, after all, a king-shifting time -- the [Emperor Norton](#) had died the year before, perhaps opening up the sacred kingship of America again. President Garfield was assassinated on July 2, 1881 (the true birthday of America), and even the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, Marie Laveau, died that summer. And that year, in a [waste land](#) over a river of silver, death came in threes to Tombstone, Arizona -- where a Southern cavalier with the unhealing wound of tuberculosis ruled a green felt empire of cards. Doc Holliday, they said, had learned card tricks from a housemaid named Sophie (recalling Sophia, the Gnostic spirit of illumination), and consorted with a mysterious Hungarian prostitute named Kate Harony -- also known as Kate Fisher. In the Gunfight, Doc received only a minor wound -- in the side. Was Doc Holliday, Fisher King, guarded by avatars of Gawain, Gaheris, Agravain, and Gareth in the form of Wyatt Earp and his three brothers?

This could explain why mortal enemies Ike Clanton, Virgil Earp, Tom McLaury, Doc Holliday, and John Behan played cards all night the night before the Gunfight: they were desperately gambling for the sacred throne of America on the eve of the Roman "Ludi Victoria" -- the games of victory. Whatever the cards said that night, the final hand played out the next day. If Doc was the Grail King (of Hearts, or Cups), Wyatt was the Ace of Spades -- the death card. Virgil was the Knight (or Jack) of Spades, leaving Morgan as the Ten -- the card which, in the Tarot, is depicted as a man stabbed in the back, just as Morgan would be shot in the back the next spring. (Morgan was also shot in the back at the Gunfight.) Kate Fisher (the Queen of Hearts), who watched from Fly's studio next door, was the Queen in the hole. The Cowboys desperately tried to fill a full house from their two pair of Clantons and McLaury's. Witnesses reported several different Cowboys going in and out of the Corral moments before the Gunfight, but when last call came, they were stuck with Billy "the Kid" Claiborne (no doubt trying to assume the mantle of the "real" Billy the Kid, who had been killed on July 14, 1881) to fill their hand. The Fisher King's royal straight (and Wyatt Earp's solar invulnerability) beat the Cowboys' two pair, and the West was won for Masonic order, four square and on the level. Doc Holliday died in bed at the Glenwood Hotel in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, on November 8, 1887 -- the feast of the Quattuor Coronati, the Four Kings. His cousin Melanie, a nun, burned his letters, saying only that "the world would have known a different man." But the world never did. Because Doc Holliday was dead -- and because Wyatt Earp will not talk.

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