

Six Shooters and Saddlebags:  
Violence and folk heroes of the “Wild West” and their relation  
to the Shootout at the O.K. Corral

Ethan Stietz

History 489 Research Seminar

Professor: Dr. Louisa Rice

Cooperating Professor: Dr. Joseph Orser

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## **Abstract**

Few periods throughout American history have been falsely represented with the amount of consistency as that of the land between the Mississippi River and Rocky Mountains between 1865 and 1900, also known as the “Wild West”. There are several aspects that have been falsely portrayed that have become mainstays in the mythology surrounding the “Wild West” especially the amount of violence. The violence claims that have been perpetuated to the public have overshadowed the positive aspects that the “Wild West” provided such as the Cattle industry, the Transcontinental Railroad and the Homestead Act. Those aspects are commonly falsely portrayed due to the presence and portrayal of folk heroes. With the common portrayal of the “Wild West”, it is seldom in which both folk heroes and the violence aspect are as prevalent as in the stories surrounding the Shootout at the O.K. Corral.

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## **Timeline of Events**

Homestead Act Enacted-----May 20, 1862

Completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad-----May 10, 1869

Shootout at the O.K. Corral----- October 26, 1881

First Western Film (The Great Train Robbery) -----December 1, 1903

First radio Western (The Lone Ranger) Begins-----January 30, 1933

First Western Television series (Hopalong Cassidy) aired -----June 1949

## **The Making of Myth and Folk Heroes**

There are points in history that have been able to captivate the minds of people across generations throughout the world. One of the more idealized points in history for Americans is the American West from 1865-1900, stretching from the Mississippi River in the East to the Rocky Mountains in the West, and reaching from the Rio Grande River in the South to Northern Montana in the North the so called “Wild West”, captured the mind of an entire nation. The “Wild West” is not the only classification for the time and place in question. The term “Old West” also pertains to this time and place in some aspects. That however does not work as well as old is an ambiguous term and over time the classification of the “West” in America has moved from the land between the early colonies to the Appalachian Mountains. After Americans began to settle around the Appalachians the west once again moved this time covering the land from the other side of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. After the Louisiana purchase in 1803, the Lewis and Clark expedition explored the West even further, going West as far as they could reaching the Pacific Ocean on November 7, 1805.<sup>1</sup> As a result we are left with the term “Wild West,” which in itself has been created by the misrepresentation of how the West was. By calling it the “Wild West” the interpretation is made available that the land and by association the people were wild and uncivilized.

Western authors such as Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour created heroes to roam this land who captured the minds of the nation with their exploits. By 1958 Westerns comprised roughly eleven percent of all works of fiction published in the United States, and Hollywood released a Western every week testifying to the attractiveness that the western had as a form of

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<sup>1</sup> Jim E. O’Connor, “The Evolving Landscape of the Columbia River Gorge: Lewis and Clark and Cataclysms On the Columbia,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 390-421, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20615448?seq=4> (accessed November 22, 2012).

entertainment in literature and film.<sup>2</sup> By 1959, thirty prime-time Television shows were Westerns, including eight of the top ten most watched shows further testifying to the attractiveness and allure of the Western.<sup>3</sup> The first plotted movie Western appeared in 1903 and hundreds of one-and two-reelers followed in the next decade.<sup>4</sup> While television and film created their own legends and folk heroes, famous cowboys such as James Arness (Marshall Matt Dillon from *Gunsmoke*), Roy Rodgers (*The Roy Rodgers Show*), and Gene Autry (*The Gene Autry Show*), also used some of the popular mythology to add to the legends that had come before.

Historical figures of the “Wild West” quickly became folk heroes and legends. Lawmen such as Pat Garrett, Bat Masterson and, arguably the most famous figure from the “Wild West”, Wyatt Earp, outlaws such as Billy the Kid, and Jesse James, and other legendary figures such as Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok and John Henry “Doc” Holliday, roamed the west. Many of the figures are their own story for the most part; however there are some whose story is linked to another legendary figure for eternity. For example it is difficult to talk about the lawman Pat Garrett without talking about the teenage outlaw Billy the Kid, who he killed, and vice versa; their lawman versus outlaw relationship has forever intertwined them in history, or Wyatt Earp and John Henry “Doc” Holliday who shot their way into American folklore and mythology at the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. The actual historical figures have gone down into legends, although their actual exploits and motives may be forgotten the popular mythology that has been created around them has lived on.

These legendary figures and the events in which they were involved are misrepresented for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons is that the people themselves became engaged in

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<sup>2</sup> Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 613.

<sup>3</sup> Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 613

<sup>4</sup> Jack Weston, *The Real American Cowboy* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1985), 210.

their own myths as in the case of Wyatt Earp. Another reason in the creation of these misrepresentations can be found in the legends surrounding Earp's close friend John Henry "Doc" Holliday, because he did not acknowledge or attempt to dismiss any of the myths surrounding him, which added to his "legend." A third reason for the misrepresentations that have been perpetuated is due to the authors who were supposed to be writing biographies of the major figures and do not tell the truth, a prime example is in Stuart Lake's biography of Wyatt Earp. Why the authors may misrepresent these historical figures who have become folk heroes is unclear; however whatever their motives may be their misrepresentations have become part of the legends surrounding these figures and have added to their legends. A fourth and most common reason is their portrayal in the film industry which reaches the greatest number of people. People generally see Wyatt Earp as a famous lawman who made Dodge City and Tombstone safer places, not the man of questionable morals who had some legal problems of his own including murder charges levied against him for his action in arguably his, and the "Wild West's", most famous event the Shootout at the O.K. Corral.

Our preconceived notion about who some of the legendary figures were, also has an impact on how their myths are shaped. For example, of the last three attempts by the film industry to show the events at the O.K. Corral<sup>5</sup>, only the 1971 film *Doc* attempts to show that Wyatt Earp was trying to make a deal with the Clantons and McLowrys.<sup>6</sup> The 1971 film *Doc* backs up the testimony of Wyatt Earp at his trial after the Shootout at the O.K. Corral where Earp admitted to trying use an arrest to influence the outcome in his favor of the election for

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<sup>5</sup> The films *Doc* (1971), *Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994)

<sup>6</sup> The Clantons and McLowry were ranchers in the Tombstone area. The Clantons were also suspected to be members of an outlaw band known as the "Cowboys", while the McLowrys were accused on several occasions as being horse or cattle rustlers.

County Sheriff.<sup>7</sup> This, according to some accounts, was a major factor in the escalation in tensions between the Earps and the Clantons and McLowrys which ultimately exploded in the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. That story is often omitted when discussing Wyatt Earp; instead we are given a portrayal of a virtuous lawman who shuns alcohol and violence.<sup>8</sup> No doubt parts of the misinterpretations are because of the men in questions themselves, but the intentional ignoring of facts that could have been underlying causes to events also leads to the false representation that has been ingrained as the correct representation by the public. Legendary figures are not the only ones that are subject to misrepresentation due to how they are presented to the public. The “Wild West” itself is misrepresented to the public and those misrepresentations have gone down as facts.

The “Wild West” is portrayed to the public as a land of violence, a land where the historical figures who became folk heroes could be clearly defined between “good” or “bad”, where the lines between “good” and “bad” were black and white. In truth that is not the case but a modern interpretation perpetuated by the film industry allowing for compelling and money making films. In truth the Shootout at the O.K. Corral, violence in the west and folk heroes are not what they seem, and are actually very different than how the public is conditioned to perceive them.

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<sup>7</sup> “Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp,” The O.K. Corral Trial, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/earp/earptestimony.html> (accessed January 30, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> In the film *Wyatt Earp*, he orders coffee whenever he goes into a bar after he had a breakdown over his wife dying and in the film *Tombstone*, he does not wear a gun for the majority of the film and turns down jobs that would have required him to do so.

## The O.K. Corral, Myth vs. Reality

Arguably the most famous event from the “Wild West” was the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. The Shootout took place on October 26, 1881 and may have cemented the legacy of arguably the most famous folk hero of the “Wild West”, Wyatt Earp. The Shootout has been either the focal point or at least referenced in film and television eighteen times between 1939 and 2006. The two most recent films, *Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994) simply reinforce the popular myths about the Shootout, while the 1971 film *Doc* does indeed address the story that a potential cause of the hostility that led to the Shootout was Wyatt Earp’s desire to win the election Sheriff and the potential setup that would have shed him in a better light.

The popular tale of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral is one of the west’s most famous stories, and also one of its most commonly miss-portrayed stories. The popular folk legends say that Wyatt Earp along with his brothers Virgil (who was Deputy United States Marshall) and Morgan were joined by Wyatt’s good friend John Henry “Doc” Holliday and engaged in a gunfight with Ike and Billy Canton and Frank and Tom McLowry, members of an outlaw cowboy gang who were going to try and get rid of the Earps and Holliday. This would in turn give the outlaw gang full control of the town like they did before Virgil Earp accepted the job of town Marshall. The common portrayals say that the cowboy gang members, who were carrying guns, which indeed was against the law in Tombstone at that time, drew first after being told to put their hands up, which according to the popular portrayals was so that they could be disarmed, resulting in the Earp faction acting in self-defense.<sup>9</sup> Often for this portrayal, Wyatt Earp is a virtuous man who is just doing his duty and is talking out members of an outlaw gang.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> See the films *Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994) for the most recent media portrayal of the myth.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Kasdan and Dan Gordon, *Wyatt Earp*, DVD, directed by Lawrence Kasdan (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Productions, 1994).

Earp party is acting within the law and has no nefarious reasons for this action.<sup>11</sup> The Earp party is treated as heroes ridding the town and area of bad outlaws, while no direct harm was going to come to them for their actions and no charges were filed against them questioning their conduct in the whole affair. The number of dead is usually correct for the myths concerning the Shootout with Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLowry not surviving the gunfight, occasionally a film portrayal will have Morgan Earp killed in the fight, instead of being assassinated later which was the case. If not for the legendary figures of Wyatt Earp and “Doc” Holliday being active participants in the Shootout, and men who were not unopposed to adding to their own legends, the Shootout at the O.K. Corral may be just a footnote in the violence in Arizona Territory during the “Wild West”, instead it is one of the most famous events of the “Wild West”.

The reality about what happened on that fateful day tells a different story that what we are commonly told happened however. Tensions between the Earps and McLowrys had been building for over a year, and a recent problem with the Clantons came to a violent end on October 26, 1881. The tensions between the parties reached a boiling point resulting in Wyatt Earp, his brothers Virgil and Morgan along with Wyatt’s good friend John Henry “Doc” Holliday meeting with Ike Clanton, his brother Billy, Frank and Tom McLowry and Billy Claiborne at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona Territory. Virgil Earp, who was the Chief of Police of Tombstone and a Deputy United States Marshall, had called upon his “Special Deputies”, his brothers Wyatt and Morgan Earp, and John Henry “Doc” Holliday for assistance in disarming and arresting the Clantons, and McLowrys.<sup>12</sup> Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne fled the fight as they were unarmed and were not willing participants. Claiborne is not known to have

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin Jarre, *Tombstone* DVD, directed by George P. Cosmatos (Santa Monica and Burbank CA: Cinergi Pictures and Hollywood Pictures, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> “Testimony of Virgil Earp,” The O.K. Corral Trial, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/earp/vearptestimony.html> (accessed February 28, 2012).

had any quarrel with the Earps leading up to the Shootout nor is their evidence that Claiborne was part of the decision in going down to the O.K. Corral in the theories that claim malicious intent in the part by the Earps.

The result of the Shootout led to the death of Billy Clanton and Frank and Tom McLowry, who was likely unarmed (which is the case in the majority of the accounts) at the beginning of the shootout, serious wounds for Morgan and Virgil Earp a bullet graze for John Henry “Doc” Holliday and murder charges for the Earp party. This is a far cry from the virtuous Wyatt Earp who acted with no ill will towards the Clantons and McLowrys as the popular stories have conditioned the general public to believe. Coupling the building tensions with the murder charges levied against the Earp party, and important facts about the Shootout are brought to light that are often ignored when discussing the legend surrounding the shootout. The omission of the tension between the Clantons and McLowrys and the Earps along with the murder charges could be caused by unwillingness to potentially sully the reputation of one of the most legendary figures of the “Wild West”, when he could be portrayed in a good light. If the allegedly good and virtuous lawman that the films commonly portray Wyatt Earp to be is shown in a negative light or at least the shady aspects leading up to the Shootout is brought to the forefront, the whole story of Wyatt Earp would be called into examination and the not so virtuous past of Wyatt Earp is brought into public light. This would tarnish the folk hero’s reputation and lead to accusations by those who fervently see Wyatt Earp as a virtuous man who acted within the law, to arise screaming about slander.

On October 27, 1881 warrants were obtained for the arrest of Wyatt Earp, his brothers Virgil and Morgan and John Henry “Doc” Holliday for their actions in the shootout just one day

earlier, for which they were charged with murder.<sup>13</sup> This trial had monumental historical implications that they may not have known of at the time. If the Earps and Holliday were found guilty, they would have gone down as murders that used their positions as lawmen to kill people that they did not like, and their names may only be known today as the four men who committed murder at the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. If they won the trial they would go down in history as figures that helped to clean up the streets of Tombstone, Arizona acted justly in their actions, and could become some of the more legendary figures of the Old West to be portrayed positively to the public in the future.

The facts of the cases include, Virgil Earp, who was the Deputy United States Marshal at the time, enacted a city ordinance that made it illegal to carry guns in Tombstone<sup>14</sup>, and Cochise County Sheriff John Behan went to see the Clantons, McLowrys and Claiborne before the gunfight to either talk them to them or disarm them.<sup>15</sup> After talking to them or disarming them he told Marshal Virgil Earp that he disarmed them which would have been following the law.<sup>16</sup> This was not an isolated incident however. As the trial was underway, background information into this bad blood between the parties emerged. This background information that is often omitted when discussing the Shootout at the O.K. Corral is information that may portray the shootout and its involved members, including Wyatt Earp, in a potentially negative light. These are facts that may get in the way of popular stories and myths about the west that are often portrayed.

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<sup>13</sup> Odie B. Faulk, *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 152.

<sup>14</sup> "The Law of Tombstone," The O.K. Corral

Trial, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/earp/ordinances.html> (accessed January 30, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Trachtman, *The Gunfighters* (New York, NY: Time Inc., 1974), 27; Odie Faulk, *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Odie Faulk, *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, 151; Douglas D. Martin, *Tombstone's Epitaph*, 5th ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1963), 188

Wyatt Earp testified at the murder trial that the issues had started a year earlier when he was working with the US Army. He was working with his brothers Virgil and Morgan along with 5 soldiers and a Marshall to find six stolen government mules from Camp Rucker, which were tracked to the McLowry Ranch.<sup>17</sup> After confronted about the mules the Earps (Wyatt, Virgil and Morgan), were asked to return to Tombstone while the army worked out the exchange. No exchange was made and Captain Hurst (who was one of the soldiers present at the exchange) cautioned the Earps to watch out for the men as they made threats against their lives after they left.<sup>18</sup> Earp continued laying some of the background to the bad blood testifying that he met Frank and Tom McLowry in Charleston. "They tried to 'pick a fuss out of me' down there, and told me if I ever followed them up again as close as I did before, they would kill me."<sup>19</sup> Wyatt had ambitions to be Sheriff of Cochise County at the next election, and thought it would be a great help to him with the people and businessmen if he could capture the men who killed Bud Philpot in a Stage robbery. There was about \$3,600 offered for their capture. He thought this reward might tempt Ike Clanton and Frank McLaury to give away Leonard, Head, and Crane,[the men who allegedly committed the crime] so he went to Ike Clanton, Frank McLaury, and Joe Hill when they came to town.<sup>20</sup> Earp interviewed them in the back yard of the Oriental Saloon [which he owned a part of]. He told them what he had planned. Earp testified

I wanted the glory of capturing Leonard, Head, and Crane and if I could do it, it would help me make the race for Sheriff at the next election. I told them if they would put me on the track of Leonard, Head, and Crane, and tell me where those men were hid; I would give them all the reward and would never let anyone know where I got the information.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp, The O.K. Corral Trial

<sup>18</sup> Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp, The O.K. Corral Trial

<sup>19</sup> Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp, The O.K. Corral Trial

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp, The O.K. Corral Trial

<sup>21</sup> Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp, The O.K. Corral Trial

Apart from being of a questionable action, integrity wise, this type potentially questionable moral action was a part of the life of Wyatt Earp that is often ignored when talking about the man. After that plan fell through, Wyatt testifies that he along with Virgil and Morgan Earp and John Henry “Doc” Holliday began to hear more threats against them.<sup>22</sup> Upon examination during the trial Ike Clanton denied the conversation and arrangement ever took place, instead implied that it was John Henry “Doc” Holliday who shot and killed Bud Philpot and robbed the stage.<sup>23</sup> Joe Hill, the other surviving member of the conversation did not testify at the trial, so the accuracies of the Earp story in regard to the arrangement of the reward money for the capture of Leonard, Head and Crane can be brought into question causing a disagreement between the Clanton’s and McLowrys and the Earp faction. The Earp version is accepted to be true, or we would have a different view about how the O.K. Corral Shootout happened. This then means that the legacy of Wyatt Earp began to be shaped at the trial partially by his own testimony.

The Shootout at the O.K. Corral is a prime example of how a large important event can be taken in by the folk lore surrounding one or more of its participants and have their legends over shadow what may have transpired. We have been conditioned to believe the story as Hollywood tells it. The story is of a virtuous Wyatt Earp who, along with two of his brothers and his good friend “Doc” Holliday, helped to rid Tombstone, Arizona of outlaws. The fight in which the outlaws drew their guns first and the Earp party acted in self defense. This story does not leave room for the often ignored facts including an ulterior motive behind the violence and who actually instigated the problems. We are instead left with a story in which does not want to sully the reputation of arguably the most well known folk hero of the “Wild West,” and

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<sup>22</sup> Testimony of Wyatt S. Earp, The O.K. Corral Trial

<sup>23</sup> “Testimony of Ike Clanton,” The O.K. Corral

Trial, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/earp/clantontestimony.html> (accessed January 30, 2012)

subsequently serves to add to Wyatt Earp and “Doc” Holliday’s arguably already inflated legends and legacies.

## **Folk Heroes in the “Wild West”**

The creation of folk heroes to expand on the stories of the “Wild West” and thrive in the misrepresented land has only expanded the fallacies and false portrayals about the “Wild West”. Many of the folk heroes that are talked about were indeed historical figures; however like the “Wild West” itself their stories have been altered to make a more compelling narrative about what may have happened. The creation of heroes for this land is not surprising.<sup>24</sup> The creation of heroes, according to sociologist Orrin E. Klapp, can be broken down into four categories: spontaneous popular selection and homage, gradual growth of popular legends, canonization and military decoration, and poetical creations of story tellers, writers and dramatists.<sup>25</sup> These heroes gain special sediment from the public including a certain endearment, faith and veneration which may verge on superstition, a reluctance to admit critical reflection and a tremendous loyalty.<sup>26</sup>

It is very likely that we would not know much about the Shootout at the O.K. Corral if not for the participation of folk heroes Wyatt Earp and John Henry “Doc” Holliday. Their reputations and involvement add a mythological assessment of the events. Few people know that the Earp party was charged with murder for their actions at the O.K. Corral on that day. It is likely that few members of the American public would even know about the Shootout at all if it was not featured in film. Since they do know about it through film, what they may think that they know about it is shaped by the presentations of the events in a way that shapes the folk heroes in a positive manner, or in Klapp’s terms a reluctance to admit critical reflection and a

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<sup>24</sup> There are several articles written about folk heroes and the role that they play in the memory of a society, however the articles by Orrin Klapp provided the best descriptions for the cases of Earp and Holliday that I examined.

<sup>25</sup> Orrin E. Klapp, “The Creation of Popular Heroes,” *American Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 2 (September, 1948): 135, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2771362> (accessed November 2, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Orrin E. Klapp, “Hero Worship in America,” *American Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 1 (February, 1949): 54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2086446> (accessed November 2, 2012).

tremendous loyalty. This altered portrayal of the event may have strengthened the legend of Wyatt Earp creating a stronger loyalty to the stories and further embellishing of the events and his life.

Wyatt Earp is arguable the most famous figure from the “Wild West” and participant in the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. The creation of the folk hero Wyatt Earp could be identified through two of Klapp’s categories of creation: gradual growth of popular legend and the poetical creations of story tellers, writers and dramatists. Earp who lied about parts of his past which in turn added to his legend even when he lived. Earp’s earliest biographer Stuart N. Lake made up parts about Earp’s actions and motives within some of the events he was engaged in which became ingrained as parts of Earp’s reputation continued to add to his legend.<sup>27</sup> The common overlooking of the shady past of Wyatt Earp would fit into Klapp’s characterizations of “Heroes” through the reluctance to admit critical reflection. Also prevalent using the criteria of Orrin Klapp would be the faith and veneration verging in superstition as his exploits is often expanded further than what he accomplished, and his reputation preceding him even during his lifetime.

### *Wyatt Earp*

Arguably the best known figure from the “Wild West”, and key figure in the Shootout at the O.K. Corral was Wyatt Earp. Born Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp in Monmouth, Illinois, on March 19, 1848,<sup>28</sup> he was a “saloonkeeper, cardsharp [sic], policeman, bigamist, church deacon, confidence man, and extrovert”<sup>29</sup> as well as the driving force behind the Earp faction both in the

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<sup>27</sup> “Books,” *Wild West* 13, no. 3 (October 2006): 70-71, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=faca85fb-58c3-4a1f-a0f8-3b4cdfa17b3b%40sessionmgr15&vid=3&hid=15&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=22035533> (accessed November 2, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Odie B. Faulk *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, 137.

<sup>29</sup> Odie B. Faulk *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, 137.

Shootout at the O.K. Corral and the events leading up to it.<sup>30</sup> While Wyatt's brother Virgil was Deputy United States Marshall at the time and an accomplished lawman in his own right, many people have not heard of Virgil other than his relation to Wyatt. Earp was a gunslinger of enormous reputation and had been temperate in the use of the firearm.<sup>31</sup> "His dexterity in using the barrel as a club when subduing roisters bent on shooting up a town had made him enemies along the cow trails."<sup>32</sup> Wyatt Earp had not fired his gun at times when most other town marshals would have; as a result as far as can be determined he had not killed a man up to his arrival at Fort Griffin,<sup>33</sup> Texas in mid-November of 1877. A plainsman, Wyatt had worked as a prospector, teamster, buffalo hunter and odd-job man while still in his teens.<sup>34</sup> Earp has been town marshal of the "uproarious cow town of Ellsworth, Wichita and Dodge City" all before his arrival in Tombstone, Arizona.<sup>35</sup>

There were many noteworthy things about Wyatt Earp, there however were two most noteworthy things about him that stuck out according to John Myers Myers, the first author of "Doc" Holliday's (widely considered to be Earp's best friend) story. According to Myers

One was that he came to have the most virulent set of enemies that ever carried hate to the grave with them and passed on necrophobia to faithful and still-living descendants. The second was that he had more friends, ready to go to bat for him under any and all circumstances, than the law of human averages allows.<sup>36</sup>

This would become ever apparent in the Shootout at the O.K. Corral where "Doc" Holliday willingly joined Wyatt and his brothers Virgil and Morgan, even after Wyatt told him it was their

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<sup>30</sup> Odie B. Faulk *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, 137.

<sup>31</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1955), 73

<sup>32</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 73

<sup>33</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 74

<sup>34</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 74

<sup>35</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 74

<sup>36</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 74

fight and there was no call for him to mix in<sup>37</sup> as well in Earp's "Vendetta Ride", also known as the Cochise County War, after the assassination attempt on his brother Virgil and the successful assassination of his brother Morgan.

*John Henry "Doc" Holliday*

Born John Henry Holliday near Griffin, Georgia in 1852 into a prominent southern family, "Doc" Holliday has gone down as one of the most dangerous gunfighters in history.<sup>38</sup> The record of his birthday was destroyed in Sherman's march through the South. However, the baptismal Docket of the Presbyterian Church of Griffin shows that he was baptized on March 21, 1852 with an "infant" baptism specified.<sup>39</sup> Holliday studied Dentistry in Baltimore<sup>40</sup> and returned to Georgia around the summer 1872.<sup>41</sup> He is said to have headed west in 1873 in search of more arid air to help him with his Tuberculosis as directed by a physician back in Griffin.<sup>42</sup> Having Tuberculosis may have helped enhance the mythology around Holliday, if he knew he was going to die from it, and all records indicate he did know, he may have seen a death in a gun fight as better than dying in a bed from the Tuberculosis, and having nothing to lose because of tuberculosis shortening his life expectancy may have given him a greater willingness to fight as he would have seen himself as having nothing to lose so why not try and see what would happen. This greater willingness to fight and risk his life for those whom he considered to be friends can be found in his joining up with Wyatt and his brothers in the Shootout at the O.K. Corral and joining Wyatt in his Vendetta Ride or the Cochise County War.

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Trachtman, *The Gunfighters*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> "Doc" Holliday by John Myers," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (December 1955): 411, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40577620>

<sup>39</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> "Doc" Holliday *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*

Upon reaching the west it is said that he took up gambling as a means of making a living, which may have helped him to outlive the physicians estimate as the gambling got Holliday into dryer air.<sup>43</sup> Holliday first arrived in Dallas, Texas in June of 1873.<sup>44</sup> Holliday had stints on several towns, stints that may have been longer if not for his success gambling and reputation as a gunfighter. Holliday made the gambling circuits<sup>45</sup> before arriving in Fort Griffin, Texas where in Mid-November 1877 Holliday was introduced to Wyatt Earp.<sup>46</sup> In December of 1877 he arrived in Dodge City with “Big Nose” Kate (her last name has been lost some claim it was Fisher others claim it was Elder<sup>47</sup>).<sup>48</sup> Holliday moved again, willingly this time, and arrived in Tombstone Arizona along with Wyatt, Morgan, and Virgil Earp on December 1, 1879.<sup>49</sup> Holliday stayed in Tombstone for the majority of the time before the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. Holliday died due to his Tuberculosis in Glenwood, Colorado in 1887.

John Henry “Doc” Holliday, who arguably would have been famous even without being known as the closest friend of the legendary Wyatt Earp, was the other legendary figure who has become a folk hero who was present for the Shootout and is often the only other person that can be identified concerning the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. The transition of Holliday to a folk hero could be classified using Klapp’s criteria using gradual growth of popular legend, and poetical creations of story tellers, writers, and dramatists. Holliday was and is known as one of the more dangerous people from the “Wild West”. A dentist with tuberculosis was not a dentist that people would want to go to, people did not even like to go to healthy dentists. As a result Holliday gained a reputation of a gambler and a successful one at that in his day. Living in a

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<sup>43</sup> “Doc” Holliday *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*

<sup>44</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 73.

<sup>47</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 68.

<sup>48</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday*, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Odie B. Faulk, *Tombstone: Myth and Reality*, 139

time period in which violence is told to be ever so frequent, a successful gambler would likely know how to defend oneself if he wanted to live very long and Holliday did. Holliday gained a reputation as one of the most dangerous people in the “Wild West”; this can partially be attributed by his unwillingness to acknowledge any involvement he may have had concerning things that he may or may not have done. Without the involvement of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday it is feasible that the Shootout at the O.K. Corral would either be a forgotten spurt of violence from the “Wild West”, or a footnote in the violence in Arizona Territory.

The presence of folk heroes in events has the potential of clouding what may have actually transpired in certain events. One of the best examples of this is the aforementioned Shootout at the O.K. Corral involving the folk heroes Wyatt Earp and John Henry “Doc” Holliday. As mentioned above the Shootout at the O.K. Corral was not a clear cut as to who was responsible for the start of the Shootout and the grounds for why the Earp party went down to the Corral. The popular portrayal that depicts the folk heroes Earp and Holliday in a positive light are the common stories that are told to the public. They say that they went down to disarm them and were not responsible for animosity between the parties. The truth that is passed over potentially by one of Orrin Klapp’s folk hero identification and treatment points as reluctance to admit critical reflection. This may partially be because they were found guilty of murder, the testimony at their trial shows that the folk heroes should be reflected on critically to attempt to fully understand what actually happened.

One key aspect as to critical reflection is to the character of Wyatt Earp. While some people do admit that he may not have been the nicest person, as testimony during the Shootout trial indicates it is likely he was one of the instigators to the Shootout. A. Bauer, a butcher in

Tombstone, was a witness for the prosecution.<sup>50</sup> In his testimony Bauer talks about an earlier conflict between Tom McLowry and Wyatt Earp. Bauer told in his testimony of Wyatt Earp hitting Tom McLowry on his head and shoulders with his pistol for reasons unknown to Bauer.<sup>51</sup> This event happened on October 26<sup>th</sup> the same day as the shootout. This aggression by Wyatt Earp is counter to the popular portrayal and would induce critical reflection is frequently acknowledged, this according to Klapp's discussion of the treatment of folk heroes may cause Earp to lose some of his folk hero reputation.

A second key aspect to the role that folk heroes play in the retelling to the story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral is that concerning the reputation of John Henry "Doc" Holliday. Numerous sources both during his time and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have concluded that his primary weapon of choice was a Nickel plated .38 caliber pistol. With that information it would seem likely that the gun that Holliday used at the Shootout would have been that nickel plated pistol, or at least another pistol, a point that witnesses for the prosecution at the murder trial after the Shootout at the O.K. Corral tried to point out.<sup>52</sup> As one of Klapp's aspects to the creation of folk heroes says gradual growth of popular legends can lead to the transition of a person to a folk hero. Holliday is talked about as being deadly with a knife or pistol both during his time and since.<sup>53</sup> Although some authors such as James Reasoner claim that Holliday preferred to use a shotgun, which is highly unlikely due to his tuberculosis and the advanced stage it was likely in since contracting the disease, with their basis for this statement in Holliday's use of a Shotgun

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<sup>50</sup> His first name is not given only the initial A

<sup>51</sup> "Testimony of A. Bauer" The O.K. Corral

Trial, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/earp/bauertestimony.html> (accessed March 5, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> All but one of the testimonies of the witness of the shootout for the prosecution claim that Holliday had a pistol the other remembered that he had a shotgun, a point that may have potentially been the biggest hole in the prosecution's testimony.

<sup>53</sup> Several of his contemporaries have been quoted as saying this including Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson.

during the Shootout at the O.K. Corral, both Holliday's contemporaries and the vast majority of Western historians agree that Holliday's likely preferred the pistol over the shotgun.<sup>54</sup>

While the creation of folk heroes could potentially be advantageous in raising the interest of people in a specific period of history, it can also create many problems. When historical figures become folk heroes they and the actual events in which they took part in become available to the embellishment of film. These portrayals, which often are based off of the common folklore surrounding the folk heroes and the event, become ingrained into the general public as close to if not historically accurate. This incorrect understanding further increases the lore surrounding these folk heroes and the period of history itself. While there is little that can be done now concerning the creation of folk heroes from historical figures, what can be done is an exploration beyond the legends surrounding these people and seeing the truth as to what kind of people they actually were. Their legacy is often cemented because of their actions during a specific event. By exploring that event and the roles that the folk heroes played in the event, such as Wyatt Earp and "Doc" Holliday at the O.K. Corral, we can not only develop a greater understanding of the people but also of the event. This will allow for not only a better understanding of the West but also of the folk heroes that so many people have come to see in a particular light.

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<sup>54</sup> James Reasoner, *Draw: The Greatest Gunfights of the American West* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003), 30.

## **Violence in the “Wild West”**

While a lot of what remains of the “Wild West” has become little more than folk stories distorted from the truth long ago for a variety of reasons, what is often remembered are the defining, and often violent, moments of the individuals or the Hollywood portrayal of the people and events. We think of Billy the Kid as the outlaw who killed twenty men before he himself was killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett at the age of 21. When most people think of the western folk hero Wyatt Earp we think of the lawman who helped clean up an allegedly violent Dodge City, Kansas and Tombstone, Arizona and ignoring the questionable activities of his past. John Henry “Doc” Holliday is remembered as a gambler and gunfighter who rode with Wyatt Earp, not the Dentist who had to come west because of his doctors thought that the drier air would help slow the inevitable progress of his tuberculosis. Bat Masterson has been remembered as one of the famous Marshalls of Dodge City who helped to bring justice to an otherwise supposedly violent Dodge City with his given name Bartholomew lost to the past. John Wesley Harden is remembered for murdering 44 people before going to prison, but after this he became an attorney in El Paso, Texas in 1895 which is the part few know about. Popular portrayals show the folk heroes with little to no vices and drinking, gambling and gunfights happen in every town, usually after a tumbleweed passes by.

The myths about violence in the “Wild West” have been reinforced multiple times in the film media. The reinforcement of the violence in the “Wild West” is ever present in the film industry when concerning the “Wild West,” almost to the point in which to say that nothing good ever came from the “Wild West.” The name that we have given it, the “Wild West”, causes the mental picture of a place full of uncivilized people with no respect for the law. The stereotype of the violence is one of the most frequently evident myths, with a clear cut portrayal of who is

“good” and who is “bad.” The myth of the violence can range from a fight between two factions with rifles from horseback, to a fight between cowboys and Indians, or the ever prevalent quick draw gunfight.

Often the violence in Western films is caused by two people who had too much to drink (which results in a short drunken brawl followed by one of them drawing gun and shooting the other), some sort of land issue in which a land baron is bullying the people of a town or trying to drive homesteaders off their land in order to increase their holdings, residual resentment from the Civil War which may be to try and bring the Confederacy back, or unnecessary violence by soldiers during the war causing a surviving victim to want revenge outlaws fighting with the people of a town and/or lawmen, or just bad blood between two factions, the cause of the feud could be one of the above reasons, or many others too numerous to list.<sup>55</sup> The violence starts small with a fist fight, escalating to someone getting shot and starting the small war that will eventually end with a show down between two of the “toughest” and deadliest members of each faction (this member does not necessarily have to be related if it is a feud between families, this person is typically a gunfighter for hire, especially if they are on the side of the aggressors who instigated the violence, who has a reputation for being fast and violent that you learn about during the course of the film).

You can’t talk about all the supposed violence in the west without talking about the iconic quick draw. Almost every western related piece of entertainment seems to have at least one quick draw showdown among other gun fights. For that showdown to happen the participants had to be quick on the draw and that required not only a great deal of skill but also a

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<sup>55</sup> This type of cause and ensuing violence is evident in the films “Open Range”, “Silverado”, “The Shadow Riders”, and “The Outlaw Josey Wales” respectively.

certain type of holster that most likely did not exist at that time. The most common holster of the time, the so called Mexican Loop holster, was so high on the outer side that it was nothing more than a pocket for the pistol to fall into.<sup>56</sup> Over time the top side of the holster was cut down exposing the entire handle and trigger guard allowing for a faster grip and the potential for a faster draw.<sup>57</sup> However, as explored by Lee Silva the fast draw myth is commonly a modern concept and Hollywood holster design

Yes, some individuals probably created their own fast-draw holsters during this time, and perhaps some even tied down their holsters with a rawhide thong around their thighs so that the holster wouldn't ride up the leg on a fast draw. But otherwise, and contrary to movie myth, these Mexican Loop holsters that were usually worn high on the hip into the 20th century were not fast-draw holsters, and the so-called Hollywood fast-draw holsters of the 1950s movie boom simply did not exist in the 1800s.<sup>58</sup>

This is not to say that the quick draw did not exist, there indeed were men who had reputations for being fast with their guns, men like John Henry “Doc” Holliday and John Wesley Hardin, it just was not as prevalent as talked about, discussed and portrayed in western entertainment.

It is easy to see how the quick draw came to be a pivotal part of the western portrayal though. For the film industry, especially early on, it became a point that would have people talking about their film with their friends and family for days afterwards. It became a point to which the film could build up all of the excitement and drama throughout the film and in a second or two it was resolved in a way that would be satisfactory for the audience and would bring the film to a close in an exciting fashion. The problem however, lies in the pistol itself. The pistols of the time were single action pistols, meaning that before a shot could be fired the

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<sup>56</sup> Lee A. Silva, “Packing Iron in the Real Old West Differed from the Way It Was Done in the Movies.,” *Wild West* 24, no. 6 (April 2012): 78, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=d1fa2731-348f-4d13-b3b1-38647c56d704%40sessionmgr115&vid=1&hid=126&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=khh&AN=71329460>

<sup>57</sup> Lee Silva, *Packing Iron in the Real Old West Differed from the Way It Was Done in the Movies*, 78

<sup>58</sup> Lee Silva, *Packing Iron in the Real Old West Differed from the Way It Was Done in the Movies*, 78

hammer had to be cocked back manually. This would make the pistol an unlikely weapon of choice for a full out range war as Westerns often depict because you would likely only be able to get one shot off before being shot at yourself, a rifle or shotgun would make more likely weapons for confrontations that involved more than two people. This is likely the cause for John Henry “Doc” Holliday to have a shotgun at the Shootout at the O.K. Corral, and the argument that Tom McLowry was reaching for a rifle, those guns could get off more than one shot faster than the single action pistols could. By giving Holliday the shotgun it would likely have looked better if a volunteer rather than if the sworn in lawmen were wielding a gun that had the greater chance to cause multiple deaths quicker. Considering the reputation that Holliday had during his own lifetime, it is possible that they believed that if Holliday arrived with one of his pistols in hand the Clantons and McLowrys may have felt more threatened since the pistol was Holliday’s weapon of choice.<sup>59</sup> The quick draw became one of many of the entertainment era symbols of the “Wild West.”

The West had been an irresistible lure since before Daniel Boone’s time, although the definition of the West has changed.<sup>60</sup> When we look at the portrayal of the “Wild West” by the media it is a land of violence. That violence is commonly blown out of proportion. For example Dodge City is talked about as being one of the most deadly towns in the “Wild West”; it is nearly impossible to talk about violence in towns in the “Wild West” without Dodge City being referenced. The facts may tell another story. When people talk about the violence in the West, Dodge City is one of the most common locations mentioned; however, even that is blown out of proportion

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<sup>59</sup> In the film Tombstone, the character of Wyatt Earp says “Give Doc the shotgun they’ll be less apt to get nerry if he’s on the street howitzer”

<sup>60</sup> John Myers Myers, *Doc Holliday* 27.

Many Americans believe that Dodge City was wholly mythological. Others, from undergraduates to syndicate columnists, are still surprised to learn that during its celebrated decade as a cattle town only fifteen adults died violently in Dodge City- an average of just one and one-half per Cowboy season.<sup>61</sup>

This is the side of the West is ignored in our present era entertainment and the resulting influence that it has on the perceptions by the public. Take for example the film Wyatt Earp, when Earp first arrives in Dodge City he fires a shotgun into the air and stands in front of a large group of cowboys screaming and shooting their pistols into the air and threatening Earp who tells them that guns are not allowed in city limits. That scene in itself does not leave room for much interpretation for the atmosphere except for that of a violent Dodge City with an incredibly high body count pre-Earp for Dodge City, not the fifteen violent adult deaths in the ten years it was a cattle town.

Yes there was violence in the “Wild West” and it would be a grievous error to believe that the violence was as bad as portrayed, almost as bad as believing that the “Wild West” was a peaceful place where no one died violently. Billy the Kid killed 21 men before he was killed by Sheriff Pat Garrett at the age of 21, John Wesley Hardin murdered 44 men before he was caught and sent to prison before he became an attorney in 1895, he himself was killed shortly thereafter, shot in the back in a saloon by John Selman.<sup>62</sup> These men have gone down into the folklore of the West because they were different from the rest, they killed many people, to say that there was the abundance of violence that we are conditioned to believe was prevalent in the “Wild West” is as bad as saying that the “Wild West” was a peaceful place. Yes there was violence and yes there were men whose sole reputations were and are predicated upon the fact that they murdered

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<sup>61</sup> Stewart L. Udall et al., “How the West Got Wild: American Media and Frontier Violence a Roundtable,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): page 279

<sup>62</sup> Paul Trachtman, *The Gunfighters*, 179.

people, that type of legacy, however the “Wild West” was not nearly as violent as it is so often portrayed to be.

The alleged amount of violence is the first thing that many people think of when the “Wild West” is brought up. This is unfortunate as it overshadows many contributions that were made in the area at that time. The public can usually pick out at least one positive aspect from the “Wild West”, cowboys and the role that was played in the cattle, and subsequently the beef, industry. While much of that which the public thinks of when the topic is cowboys and cattle drives may be due to the film industry and as a result overly romanticized. The West was influential in the cattle and beef industry. With cowboys replacing Cavalry scouts as fictionalized heroes of the West in the mid 1980s the role of the West in the beef industry became a part of the public’s internalization of the West.<sup>63</sup> The film industry has also created a problem with their portrayal of this internalized positive aspect of the West. If someone were to count the number of cowboys in the next Western film that they watch and note the number of cowboys who are *not* white they could likely keep the count on one hand, unless the film were to take place in Texas, Arizona or New Mexico in which case the number of Mexican *vaqueros* would increase the number.<sup>64</sup> While much of the demographic portrayal of the cowboys can be attributed to racial attitudes and decisions made when making the first westerns, the demographic portrayal has been ingrained as fact to the public and continues to this day.

A second major positive event that is often ignored about the time in question is the completion of the first transcontinental railroad May 10, 1869.<sup>65</sup> This railroad, which not only

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<sup>63</sup> Jack Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 209.

<sup>64</sup> Vaquero is the Spanish term for Cowboy

<sup>65</sup> Mark Clemens, “First Transcontinental Railroad,” *Cobblestone* 31, no. 5 (May/June 2010): 24, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=9ee5a16c-c92e-41b0-b719->

connected the two coasts it also played an important part for the rise of the cattle industry and settlement of the West.<sup>66</sup> The railroad allowed for large “cow towns” to arise in which the aforementioned cattle drives could end before the cattle would be shipped via train to larger cities like Chicago, Illinois where they would be butchered and the meat made available in the urban areas all around the east. The construction of this railroad required labor of many hard working people. Much of the labor that was used was immigrant labor, with new arrivals from China working eastward and Irish immigrants working westward. Their hard work however is often ignored and if they are mentioned it is often for negative reasons. A Chinese immigrant will often be displayed in the West as operating an opium den.<sup>67</sup> While an Irish immigrant will often be a part of the stereotype of Irish people either running a saloon or drunk in one. The first transcontinental railroad dramatically reduced the amount of time that it would take to get across the nation and allowed for an increased rate of settlement of the west, especially aiding the Homestead Act.

The Homestead Act was enacted in 1862, but was aided in its settlement of the West with the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. The Homestead Act allowed for a head of a household, 21 years of age or older, to claim 160 of the roughly 270 million acres that the United States had made available for only the filing fee, usually around 18 dollars.<sup>68</sup> With this land came some requirements including that they lived on the land, build a home and make agricultural improvements for five years, three in some instances, before they were eligible to

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[cad6c5a37d2%40sessionmgr15&vid=1&hid=8&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=khh&AN=50499931](http://cad6c5a37d2%40sessionmgr15&vid=1&hid=8&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=khh&AN=50499931) (accessed November 3, 2012).

<sup>66</sup>Mark Clemens, First Transcontinental Railroad

<sup>67</sup> This is frequent in many Westerns and is clearly displayed in the 1993 film Tombstone, with the opium being an inhibitor causing the death of Marshall Fred White.

<sup>68</sup> B. B., “Repercussions of the Homestead Act,” *Wild West* 24, no. 5 (February 2012):

29, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=4a59bda6-da49-4c42-a550-0a280cdf3856%40sessionmgr15&vid=1&hid=8&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=67763780> (accessed November 9, 2012).

take formal ownership of said land.<sup>69</sup> The Homestead Act is rarely mentioned in stories about the West unless it is a Western in which some of the lands in which homesteads are on become part of a land dispute in which the owner of a large ranch in the area who wants to take the homesteaders' land which is used as a lead for the violence that inevitable ensues, usually with little to no input from a legal authority.<sup>70</sup>

The "Wild West" did indeed have its share of violence. It was never as bad as so many Westerns portray it to the public to have been. Not only are the popular Hollywood portrayals of the violence with the quick draw and pistol shootouts unlikely and unwise at the scale at which the public is conditioned to believe, but the supposed violence has taken away from the positive aspects that the "Wild West" has given us. Seldom are people talking or hearing about the positives of the West. Cowboys and cattle drives are only good to bring in the heroes of the Western and accompany the violence. The transcontinental railroad was built but is not discussed as to the implications that it had. Lastly the Homestead Act is just fodder for the possibility of more violence, and did nothing to give some people a chance to start a new kind of life and live the Jeffersonian ideal of an Agrarian Society.<sup>71</sup> While there was violence in the "Wild West" we have to be careful as to not letting the negative that was the violence cause us to over look the many positives of the West.

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<sup>69</sup> B.B. *Repercussions of the Homestead Act*

<sup>70</sup> This type of a situation is the premise for the 1985 Western *Silverado*

<sup>71</sup> A. Whitney Girswald, "The Agrarian Democracy of Thomas Jefferson," *The American Political Science Review* 40, no. 4 (August 1946): 660, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1950410?seq=4> (accessed November 20, 2012).

## **The Lasting Legacy**

The common portrayal of the “Wild” West leads to that of folk heroes and violence, a land that has been epitomized by the quick draw and a romanticized life lived by cowboys. The truth is that of a west that had its share of violence but was not as bad as it is portrayed to be, a general lacking of the quick draw as portrayed by film and television and engrained into the public’s minds as an iconic part of the west, and a cowboy life style full of hardships, far from the romanticized prospects that is so often is portrayed to have. Legendary figures who, partially due to their own lies about what happened, lies of omission, or lies by biographers often coupled by omissions of aspects key in events cementing their legacy by popular media who tries to bring these legendary figures of the “Wild West” back to life on the movie screen, have had inflated stories.

The Shootout at the O.K. Corral is a prime example of this. We have been conditioned to believe the story as Hollywood tells it. The story is of a virtuous Wyatt Earp who, along with two of his brothers and his good friend “Doc” Holliday, helped to rid Tombstone, Arizona of outlaws. This story does not leave room for the often ignored facts including an ulterior motive behind the violence and who actually instigated the problems. We are instead left with a story in which does not want to sully the reputation of arguably the most well known folk hero of the “Wild West,” and subsequently serves to add to his arguably already inflated legend and legacy.

While the creation of folk heroes out of historical figures has its advantages in raising the interest of people in a specific period of history, it can also create a multitude of problems. When historical figures become folk heroes they and the actual events in which they took part in become available to the embellishment of film and historical accuracy and the truth can

disappear in the interest of making more money. These portrayals, which often are based off of the common folklore surrounding the folk heroes and the event, become ingrained into the general public as close to if not historically accurate leaving the truth to suffer. This incorrect understanding further increases the lore, which is often about their reaction to a violent or dangerous event, surrounding these folk heroes and the period of history itself.

There is no arguing that there was violence in the “Wild West.” Like many things, violence in the “Wild West” was never as bad as so many Hollywood Westerns portray it to the public to have been, nor was it a peaceful place where bad things did not happen. The popular Hollywood portrayals of the violence with the quick draw and pistol shootouts are unlikely and, at the time, unwise at the scale at which the public is conditioned by Westerns to believe, but the supposed violence has overshadowed the positive aspects that the so called “Wild West” has given us. Seldom are people talking or hearing about the positive aspects of the West. The transcontinental railroad was built but is not discussed as to the implications that it had on the cattle industry or aiding in people moving or just traveling westwards. Cowboys and cattle drives are only seen as good to bring in the heroes of the Western and potentially solve the violence. Finally, the Homestead Act is often just seen as fodder for the possibility of more violence, and did nothing to give some people a chance to start a new kind of life and live the Jeffersonian ideal of an Agrarian Society.

While there is little that can be done about the creation of folk heroes from historical figures, what can be done is an exploration beyond the legends surrounding these people and seeing what kind of people they actually were. Their legacy is often cemented because of their actions during a specific event and the exploration of that event and finding out more than what we are commonly told. This will allow for not only a better understanding of the West but also

of the folk heroes that so many children and fans of the west have grown up with and will develop a greater understanding of. While there was violence in the “Wild West” we have to be careful as to not letting the negative that was the violence cause us to over look the many positives of the West.

This makes the job of the western historian that much harder. The number of misconceptions and dedicated believers in the misconceptions are staggering. However, the truth is there to be delivered to the public. The work that western historians already faces an uphill climb in countering all the misconceptions that the media has given the general public, causing a stereotyped west that draws some in strictly by the misinformation that has been perpetuated, and driven away others that may find interest in the overlooked aspects but are put off because of all the violence. The truth about these figures and the events in which they participated have gone the way of the truth about the “Wild West”, still available if one wants to look for them. Instead it has become possible for the public can throw in a movie or turn on a television show and be taken back to an over dramatized time where folk heroes walked and violence ran rampant, a “Wild West.”

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