



The Last Gunfight: The Real Story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral--And How It Changed the American West

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On the afternoon of October 26, 1881, in a vacant lot in Tombstone, Arizona, a confrontation between eight armed men erupted in a deadly shootout. The gunfight at the O.K. Corral shaped how future generations came to view the old West. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and the Clantons became the stuff of legends, symbolic of a West populated by good guys in white hats and villains in black ones, and where law enforcement largely consisted of sheriffs and outlaws facing off at high noon on the main streets of dusty, desolate towns where every man packed at least one six-shooter on his hips. It's colorful stuff—but the truth is even better.

As *The Last Gunfight* makes clear, the real story of the O.K. Corral and the West is far different from what we've been led to believe by countless TV Westerns and Hollywood films. Drawing on new material from private collections—including diaries, letters, and Wyatt Earp's own hand-drawn sketch of the shootout's conclusion—as well as documentary research in Tombstone and Arizona archives and dozens of interviews, award-winning author Jeff Guinn gives us a startlingly different and far more fascinating picture of what the West was like, who the Earps and Doc Holliday and their cowboy adversaries really were, what actually happened on that cold day in Tombstone, and why.

The gunfight did not actually occur in the O.K. Corral, and it was in no way a defining battle between frontier forces of good and evil. Combining newfound facts with cinematic storytelling, Guinn depicts an accidental if inevitable clash between competing social, political, and economic forces representing the old West of ruggedly independent ranchers and cowboys and the emerging new West of wealthy mining interests and well-heeled town folk.

With its masterful storytelling, fresh research, and memorable characters—the Earps, cattle rustlers, frontier prostitutes, renegade Apaches, and Tombstone itself, a beguiling hybrid of elegance and decadence—*The Last Gunfight* is both hugely entertaining and illuminating, and the definitive work on the Wild West's greatest shootout.

The Last Gunfight: The Real Story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral--And How It Changed the American West Details

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From Reader Review The Last Gunfight: The Real Story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral--And How It Changed the American West for online ebook

Kent Horner says

This is an extremely well researched book about, not just the gunfight at the O.K. corral, which actually took place in a vacant lot near the O.K. corral but about the history of the Earps, the Clantons, the Arizona territory and the township of Tombstone and why it was named Tombstone. The "blood and thunder" hyperbole that was common in books written about the frontier characters was foundational in the massive amount of "cowboy" movies and tv shows that peaked in the 1950's. Matt Dillon, the main character in Gunsmoke was actually a characterization of Wyatt Earp. The movie Tombstone is one of my all time favorites and to show Ike Clanton begging the "lawmen" not to shoot because he was unarmed is actually what happened. Johnny Ringo really was a notorious cowboy who got in an argument with Doc Holiday but now I know how he really died. I know this is THE most often overused phrase in nonfiction but the facts surrounding the events in Tombstone in and around 1880 are far more interesting than fiction. BTW I don't think they could have picked a better man to portray Wyatt Earp than Kurt Russell and Doc really did use the term, "you're a daisy if you do".

James Rada Jr. says

This book reminded me of the line from the John Wayne movie, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." I was reminded of it because Jeff Guinn did the opposite. Through a lot of research, he worked to trace back the beginnings of the "Gunfight at the OK Corral." In doing so, he actually wound up making the story of the one of the most-famous gunfights in history less interesting, though it was more correct than story of legend.

Guinn writes well, don't get me wrong. The reason I got this book is because I so thoroughly enjoy his book about Bonnie and Clyde "Go Down Together." It's just that in unraveling the knotted threads of the tapestry that is the story of the gunfight, the picture just wasn't as interesting when he wove it back together. How could it be? Over the years, the story has been written primarily to create action, adventure and suspense.

While Guinn did his best to make things as accurate as possible, it seems like he ran into trouble because all of his sources tended to disagree on a lot of points. He had to try and sort out bias and inaccuracies in the media and self-justifying autobiographies and journals. All and all, I think he does a good job at this, but I found myself wondering if someone else could look at the same materials and draw a different picture of what happened in Tombstone.

Pop says

Good book if you are interested in White Hats & Black Hats of the old West. Kinda long in the tooth but fair report on the Wyatt & his brothers. My favorite bio was on Doc Holliday though.

Mark says

If you only want to read one book on Gunfight at the OK Corral - this is the best book on it.

Now for my longer review:

I've been studying the Gunfight at the OK Corral since I was in the 8th grade when I did my first book report on Wyatt Earp. And I've read entire books dedicated on Earp and Doc Holliday - so I had to keep that in mind when reading this book. Basically there's a lot of stuff I already knew but most people probably won't know.

The Gunfight at the OK Corral remains with us because it's such an intriguing event and because of Tombstone's relatively cosmopolitan environment - we have a strong newspaper record of the events. It was the "OJ" trial of its day. Including having one newspaper "pro-Earp" and one newspaper "anti-Earp".

Plus you have politics (Wyatt was promised a sheriff's job by Johnny Behan), a love triangle (the girl Wyatt runs away with Johnny's girlfriend) and colorful characters (Doc Holliday wanted to die in a gunfight - not by TB, Johnny Ringo - probably the best gunfighter in the West was probably educated enough to be college professor). And everyone involved is neither 100% good nor 100% bad.

This book while a bit dry - does provide a good overview of the founding of Tombstone, how the cast of characters ended up there, the gunfight and the aftermath.

Scott says

One of the more disappointing reads I've had in while. I picked this up at the discount table of a local bookstore, and maybe that should have tipped me off. What should have tipped me off even more was reading the first chapter which struck me as a rambling, unfocused, and generally uninteresting hodge podge of generalities, but I figured it would probably get better once the author got into the real subject matter of the book. And it did, in a way - the generalities were gone, but there were a whole new set of problems with his narrative style.

He seems to have a genuine grudge against the Earps and is overly unsympathetic to their enemies, but that's the least of the problems - I have no illusions that the Earps were squeaky clean. But aside from having a definite slant, he's frequently telling us what various characters were thinking when it's obviously impossible to tell, and he has a bad habit of passing off sheer conjecture as established fact.

The Earps appear to be one of those subjects on which there's still a lot of controversy, but I don't think this book adds anything to the story. There are other books on the subject, so unless you're really up on the subject and are up for a fairly outrageous take on it, this isn't the one I'd dig into.

If you don't want to take my word for it, though, just take the Jeff Guinn challenge. Read the first chapter - if it seems good to you, then maybe Jeff is just your cup of tea. But if you think it's lousy, heed my warning - it doesn't get any better.

Karen Ireland-Phillips says

This caught my eye the last time I swung through the library because I really didn't know the story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral. Mary Doria Russell's Doc piqued my interest in the subject. [return]Doc was a fictionalized exploration of a man usually portrayed as a cold-blooded killer. Ms. Russell traced his childhood, young adulthood and the course of his tuberculosis and alcoholism, and questioned whether Doc Holliday wasn't motivated by friendship and self-preservation far more than ill tempered malice. Doc focused on a period preceding the O.K. Corral gunfight by a number of years. [return]Mr. Guinn's slant is much more traditional, and presents the "Shootout" as his centerpiece. His attention is on the Earps, whom he presents as complex, ambitious men. He dismisses Doc Holliday as a gun-toting brute. Ike Clanton, on the other hand, is portrayed as a blowhard – a stupid and cowardly drunk who inadvertently set the massacre in motion yet escaped with his skin whole. The political aspirations, feuds, ambitions and greed of these and other men precipitated the gunfight, Guinn argues.[return]Many of the primary sources were familiar from Ms. Russell's volume. This volume offers a background of the forces that created the "Wild, Wild, West", and of the (mostly men) that populated the deserts and cow-towns – miners, farmers ranchers, drovers, merchants, bankers – and Wells Fargo. Tombstone itself was founded by a prospector who made a big strike after being told that he was prospecting for his own tombstone. [return]In Guinn's view, the main motivator of the actors – male - was raw ambition. Women barely exist except for whores and wives (who are sometimes the same women), and lack all agency. The sole exception is the "difficult" (a familiar caricature) Josephine, who took up with Wyatt Earp in a tempestuous relationship after he left Tombstone. [return]I found the extensive discussion of the legal repercussions of the shootout fascinating (I would) and the post-history engaging. It's a detailed look at how the machinations of publicity seekers can change the perception of an event and the people involved. ("Cow-boy", for example, began as a potent insult implying criminality, not a description of a hardworking ranch hand or good guy.) Guinn traces how Wyatt Earp emerged as a kind of hero post-Tombstone, the "source" for many a cowboy story and movie.

Patrick Belair says

This was one of my thrift shop finds ,and was a very good one.Mr Guinn tells a very deep and in my opinion very detailed look at the infamous fight at the o k corral in Tombstone Arizona.If you are a fan of the old west and all the life size people involved in the not so pleasant times check out this book you will be surprised what you learn. I was.

Matt says

"It's like Deadwood...without people."

-- Me, to my wife, upon entering Tombstone.

When my wife and I drove into Tombstone a few years back, the first thing that struck me was its verisimilitude. It really did a good job mimicking its late-19th century self. That is to say, like any boom town gone bust, it was empty.

(To be fair to the Tombstone Chamber of Commerce, we arrived at the end of the season. Arriving at the end

of the season is a skill of mine. I dislike crowds and lines and traffic).

The streets – asphalt, not dirt – were desolate, and it took little imagination to imagine tumbleweed blowing across our path. There were stores – a collection of western outfitters all selling the same boots and Remington paintings – but few customers. To no one's surprise, there was a restaurant called the OK Café, which was so obvious I didn't even take a picture.** The putative site of the gunfight, the OK Corral itself, was locked up for the day. I wasn't too distressed, because I wouldn't have paid to get inside anyway, seeing as how the actual gunfight took place in a vacant lot on the corner of Fremont and 3rd.

(** I did take a picture)

My wife and I wandered the desolate sidewalks for awhile, poking our heads into various establishments offering Old Timey Photographs for extraordinary prices. We went to the Courthouse Museum where we learned a lot, but mostly that empty old courthouse museums are a bit creepy. Finally, we ended up eating at Big Nose Kate's Saloon, named after Doc Holliday's erstwhile lover and traveling companion. There were no other patrons, so the flat-screen televisions that played *Tombstone* on an endless loop flickered into vacant space.

Our brief visit perfectly encapsulates what I feel about the OK Corral. I wish there was a better way of phrasing “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” but damn you William Shakespeare, you know your business!

The gunfight at the OK Corral was a historical non-event. It was a local quarrel played out on a tiny stage with few actual reverberations other than to those directly affected by it (namely, those who killed and were killed). Yet, for whatever reason, the seconds-long shootout has become part of the mythology of the American West. It is dramatically overrepresented in novels and films.

Maybe it has something to do with the name. I venture a guess that if the gunfight took place at Kjellfrid Dagfinn's Corral, we might all have forgotten about it long ago.

Jeff Guinn's *The Last Gunfight* is a densely-detailed, serious-minded, 300-plus page account of a fleeting scrap of western lore. The subtitle (no doubt the fault of some dastardly copy editor) proclaims the OK Corral as the gunfight that “changed the American West.” To Guinn's credit, at no point does he attempt to prove that ridiculous claim. Nor could he. By 1881, the year the gunfight occurred, there wasn't a whole lot of time left for the American West. Custer was already dead; Wild Bill Hickok was already dead; Crazy Horse was already dead. In nine more years, the 1890 census would close the American Frontier. No, if the gunfight at the OK Corral changed anything, it was Kevin Costner's career. (*Waterworld* actually turned a healthy profit).

That doesn't mean that Guinn still doesn't blow this event out of all proportion. This is the kind of book that unabashedly opens with a chapter called “the West,” and then brazenly attempts to distill its history into less than 20 pages. This is also the kind of book where the build-up to the bloodbath is agonizingly drawn, freighted with repeat references to tumbling dominoes.

With that said, I liked this book a lot.

I expect Guinn to take his subject seriously. He is obviously fascinated by it, down to the smallest bits of minutiae, and he takes apparent joy in sharing every last scrap of his research. Far be it for me to begrudge a man his obsessions (I said, while planning yet another trip to the Little Big Horn battlefield).

The story Guinn tells has all the familiar ingredients. Tombstone, the booming center of a silver rush, with pretensions to be an arid San Francisco. Wyatt Earp, the “famed” lawman from Dodge, fresh arrived with brothers Morgan and Virgil (and their prostitute common law wives). The Cowboys, a gang of rustlers that included quick-draw artist Johnny Ringo, enigmatic Curly Bill Brocius, and preposterous bumbler Ike Clanton. Nipping at the edges of this circus was suave little Johnny Behan, the county sheriff. And at the center was a woman, Josephine Marcus, of whom little is known and much is speculated.

In common telling, the Earps are the white hats and the Cowboys are the black hats; the Earps represented law and order and civilization, while the Cowboys held to the lawless, violent past.

It’s tempting to say that Guinn strips away the myths like the peel from an onion. The word “deconstructs” comes to mind. But that’s not entirely accurate. Guinn is actually concerned with “reconstruction.” The myth is simple. Guinn takes great pains to heap convolutions onto the plot. To be honest, I can barely tell you, right now, what actually led to the gunfight at the OK Corral. It’s really quite complicated.

When we finally get to the fight, two hundred pages into the book, it is delivered with aplomb. Of course, it’s all speculation, since no one really knows what happened with any certainty (the chief survivor, Wyatt himself, grew into an inveterate liar). I don’t think that really matters. This is not the kind of book that had me constantly turning to the endnotes or parsing the sources.

Wyatt, who had never been in a face-to-face gunfight himself but was at least the veteran of actual shooting scrapes in Kansas, cocked and extracted his pistol in one fluid motion. Frank was Wyatt’s immediate target and he beat Frank to the draw. Virgil waved the silver-headed cane and shouted, “Hold! I don’t mean that,” but it no longer mattered what Virgil had meant. Wyatt fired, hitting Frank in the abdomen just to the left of his navel, and as Frank twisted from the impact Billy fired at Wyatt but his shot went wide...

I was quite interested in the aftermath of the gunfight, and especially Wyatt’s “revenge ride” after the assassination of his brother Morgan. Unfortunately, and most likely due to a dearth of credible sources, Guinn doesn’t devote a lot of space to these episodes. Instead, the bulk of the post-OK Corral material is made up of the Inquest into the deaths of Billy Clanton and Tom and Frank McLaury, who died at the hands of the Earps and Doc Holliday. This section is probably the best of the book, combining an interesting primer on Territorial law with a lot of first-person testimony regarding the Earp/Clanton feud.

The fact is, the drama emanating from Tombstone – the gunfight, the revenge killings, the mysterious death of Johnny Ringo – lend themselves far better to dramatists than the historian. There are more rumors than stars, but precious little hard evidence. And that’s fine. I didn’t read this book with a burning desire to know nugget of information, or to carefully weigh every iota of data. This is not history as explanation or instruction. It is history as entertainment.

Robert Jones says

Wanna be a little bit pretentious? STEP 1: Read this book. STEP 2: Watch Tombstone with friends. STEP 3: have fun pointing out all the little errors in the movie! Your friends will love it. I promise.

Unlike Every Day Life in the Wild West, the Last Gunfight actually gives a good idea of what life was back in the wild west. It does so by giving the abbreviated histories of nearly everybody involved in the legendary Tombstone gunfight. So you not only learn what it was like to have been a gunslinger in a frontier boomtown, but you get to learn a little history, too.

It's actually surprising how much more interesting the real story was. Usually the opposite is true - the boring story with a nugget of interesting is gussied up to be as cool as possible for the big ol' Hollywood retelling. It's better for two reasons: one, you learn that the gunfight was not a shootout between the forces of good and evil. There were shades of gray, with heroic villains and villainous heroes on both sides. You still find yourself rooting for the Earps (at least, I did), but you can kind of understand the other side, too. It really boils down to law and order versus freedom and individuality. Both good things, and both bad if embraced fully on their own.

The other thing that makes it interesting is all the shit involved that you wouldn't have seen in the movie. Love triangles! Political intrigue! Courtroom drama! Seriously, they had surprise witnesses and the sudden appearance of a highly qualified attorney related to one of the victims and the sort of thing that makes TV courtroom shows look ridiculously unrealistic.

Jeff Guinn has one of those rare talents, too, to make history interesting. Just the style of writing kept me hooked - I never felt like I had to force myself to read another page of dry fact recitation. The exception to this is the second chapter, about the formation of the Wild West. It's important, yeah, but kind of boring. Trust me, it gets much better.

The ending was kind of weak, too. The entire book was building towards a climax that, once over, destroyed all the sense of tension in the book. Even something as interesting as the Vendetta Ride shouldn't have been such a difficult read, and I get the feeling that Guinn (like the reader) had somewhat lost interest at that point. The very last chapter talked about the gunfight's effect on popular culture, including the books and movies that had been made in its honor. Surprisingly, there is not one reference to the Tombstone movie most people might know and love. I think an entire chapter could have been spent comparing the film to the history. Oh, well.

Still a great read, especially if you're into the genre. Even if not, though, it's still definitely worth your time!

Jim A says

Good read that separates Hollywood from reality as to what happened in Tombstone in 1881, and the aftermath.

Melody says

I tried listening to the audio version of this book. The narrator was very good (his voice was so familiar too!), but it just wasn't keeping my attention. I hate to give it a poor rating because I'm sure it's a good book full of interesting information.

Darwin8u says

"Fight is my racket."

- Ike Clanton to Wyatt Earp

It is hard for me to avoid liking this book. Having grown up in the West, fed on a solid diet of Gunsmoke, John Wayne, guns, etc., the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral was part of the narrative dust of my childhood.

Not to mention that five years after the shooting in Tombstone, AZ my paternal grandmother's maternal grandfather's maternal grandfather was shot and killed by (depending on the story and myth) either cattle rustlers he had cornered, or remnants of Butch Cassidy's gang who wanted to see if they could put a hole through a Mormon (you know, protective Mormon underwear). Anyway, on Christmas day of 1886, my 5th great(?) grandfather was shot and killed, leaving behind four wives (Sarah, Lucy, Catherine, and Elizabeth).

The posse that went after Billy Evans, aka J.W. Dimon, aka Jack Diamond, aka W.N. Timberline was headed by J.R. Woolsey (my 4th great grandfather and the husband of James Hale's first wife Sarah).

I even lived for a while in Glenwood Springs, Colorado just a couple streets over from where Doc Holliday died, not from gunshot wounds, but TB.

Anyway, these stories of gunfights, cowboys, prostitutes, miners, rustlers, and dirty ne'er-do-wells have floated around me for years like mythical mouches volantes, so I love Guinn's attempt to separate the blood from the smoke, the men from the lore. It was a very good book, just not a great book. Perhaps, the myth is already too established. There is no way to put the gunfighting genies of the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday back in the historical bottle. Their stories have woven themselves into the bullshit fabric of Arizona, the West, and America too deeply. The reality is there, and Jeff Guinn has uncovered a lot of it, but there is no real competition with Hollywood and our own desperate fable-making abilities.

Allison says

Very interesting history on Tombstone and the OK Corral, but I felt that this book was a little dry. Very well researched, but not much in the way of endearing the characters to the reader. Still an overall great book.

Kevin Symmons says

As a student of the "Old West" it was a pleasure to read a thoroughly researched work that debunked the myth of the heroic gun battle at the OK corral, which Professor Guinn correctly explains never took place at that location. I found his characterizations illuminating and honest. He gave a fair description of the times and participants on both sides of the infamous feud between the Earps and the Cowboys. I also enjoyed the background material and his explicit descriptions of the silver strike in southern Arizona and the resulting short-lived boomtown.

I would recommend this to all "fans" of western history and folklore. Bravo Jeff Guinn!

Terry Cornell says

Well researched book on Tombstone, the Earps, Clantons, and the infamous gunfight. Guinn dispels many inaccuracies and myths, and does a great job of describing Tombstone of the time. The real town was more of a prosperous mining town, than portrayed in movies and television. Guinn does an excellent job writing about the court trials, vendetta shootings, and life of the surviving participants including how the event and town have become somewhat mythologized in our culture. The author also does a great job of describing the complex circumstances that led to that fateful day. I would really give this book three and a half stars. The only reason I don't give it four stars is that I found some of the writing a little repetitive at times.
