

Creating Wyatt Earp: The Man, The Myth, The Legend

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Daniel Santos

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Daniel Santos

Author's Name

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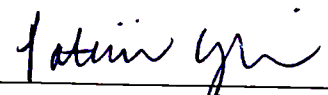
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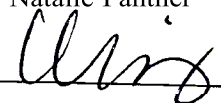
By



Patricia Loughlin Committee Chairperson



Natalie Panther Committee Member



Maria Diaz-Montejo Committee Member

Committee Member

Abstract

Creating Wyatt Earp: The Man, The Myth, The Legend

Wyatt Earp created and manipulated his own legacy by circumventing the history books and taking his story straight to the people. Throughout his life he garnered the proficient physical skills that allowed him to survive and thrive in the many boomtowns of the American West. His broad frontier knowledge and capitalistic mindset provided a plethora of opportunities in a wide array of western occupations such as gambler, lawman, miner, saloon operator and boxing referee, earning Wyatt millions of dollars in his lifetime. Lastly, his recognition of popular culture's fascination with the West granted him the escape from strict academic scrutiny by giving him the chance to dictate his own narrative. This thesis examines Wyatt Earp's life, ups and downs within the larger context of boomtowns and big cities, gunfights and prizefights in the Wild West. My research builds on the historical analysis of Casey Tefertiller, the modern authority on Wyatt Earp, as well as historians Roy Young, Gary L. Roberts, Bob Boze Bell, Andrew Isenberg and Stuart N. Lake, the mythmaker of Wyatt Earp. The Wild West is part of American culture and a better understanding Wyatt Earp's life offers new perspective on the pursuit of the American Dream in the western United States.

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Introduction

Wyatt Earp: The Man, The Myth, The Legend

Growing up in Southern California and Southern Arizona from the mid 1980's into the late 1990's, the Wild West was and is still very alive. Living in both San Bernardino and Colton California, both with Wyatt or Earp family legacies, his name, image, and likeness were part of everyday life. A family visit to Tombstone, a place that would have faded away into the Arizona desert if not for Earp and the myth shaped by Stuart N. Lake. Wyatt Earp and his legend became engrained as an integral part of my upbringing without me realizing it until many years later. The story of Wyatt, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, and Tombstone was exhilarating, the drama, the violence, the love story, and moral objectivity of frontier justice, all come together perfectly symbolize the American West in popular culture. "It is the ancient tale of the hero, his quest, his battle and ultimate victory over evil, and his apotheosis by the community as the reward of his herculean labors."¹ The story is just that, a story, with factual history sprinkled throughout, creating a parallel mythology of the Wild West that further propagates the ideals of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Pioneers, miners, farmers, ranchers, lawmen, outlaws, gamblers, sex workers, entrepreneurs, and every other aspect of modern American society had to be forged on a hostile frontier. The westward expansion of white European settlers outpaced governmental oversight creating the need for new societal norms to be established that were uniquely American. The romanticized Wild West presented in popular culture emphasizes the personal freedoms gained by the absence of government by focusing on the cornerstone of the exceptionalist mindset, and rugged individualism. The American frontier and Wild West's

¹ Rita Parks, *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982. 157.

popularity symbolized a new beginning for the United States of America, a rebirth and a new origin story birthed from the conquest of the North American continent.

Wyatt Berry Strap Earp was born on March 19, 1848, in Monmouth, Illinois. His father Nicholas was a veteran of the Mexican American War and named his son after his commanding officer, Wyatt Berry Strap, in which he held a great deal of respect. Nicholas had plans of relocating to San Bernardino County in southern California, not in search of gold and silver like his son would in the future, but for bountiful farmland. Wyatt detested working on the southern California farm, and soon joined his brother Virgil, a substantial influence on both Wyatt the man and Wyatt the legend, working for the stagecoach lines at the age of sixteen. These early years working the stagecoach lines allowed Wyatt to gain skill sets that were crucial to his survival and success, boxing, and gambling. Around his 20th birthday, he rejoined his father in Lamar Missouri, earning his first badge, appointed local constable when his father Nicholas stepped down in 1869. Tragedy soon followed. Urilla Sutherland, Wyatt's first wife, died of typhoid fever while pregnant with their child. This event shook Earp to the core, and soon he had to flee Lamar after accusations of stealing funds designed to fund local schools. Wyatt never admitted to his biographers what really happened following his departure from Missouri until his arrival in Kansas, which includes stops in modern-day Oklahoma and an eventful stay in Illinois, claiming to participate in the horrendous buffalo hunts designed to inflict horrible damage on the Native Americans way of life so they would be easier subjugated and conformed to reservations as designed in the Homestead Act of 1862. Reservations stripped Native populations from their homelands and policies of assimilation attempted to strip them of their cultures. Ridiculous ideas of European definitions of civilized resulted in some atrocious policies toward non-white peoples in the United States.

His legacy begins in 1874 with his arrival in Wichita Kansas, where he picked up a badge again, though in a part time capacity. From here, his life is well documented and mythicized, as he and his brothers ventured into the southern Arizona boomtown of Tombstone. Forced to pick up the badge again for economic purposes, Wyatt, his brothers Virgil and Morgan, as well as his close friend Doc Holliday, clashed with a group of local rustlers in what became known as the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. The events following the gunfight include Wyatt's younger brother being assassinated and his older brother Virgil being maimed in a failed assassination attempt, Wyatt organizing and deputizing a posse to hunt down and kill those he believed were responsible, and Wyatt and said posse having to flee the Arizona territory due to arrest warrants being issued. Wyatt Earp's journey did not end there. He continued to traverse the western U.S., now with his wife Josephine Marcus who he met in Tombstone. Wyatt Earp was not the classic lawman portrayed in films, television, and fictional autobiographies; he was a man in search of the economic prosperity available in the West. Be that at the card tables, the mines, or wearing a badge, his opportunistic nature allowed him to thrive and survive in one of the U.S.'s most dangerous eras.

The world Wyatt Earp was born into was an ever expanding and changing place. In his lifetime, the Union added twenty states, bringing the total number to forty-eight, completing the continental United States as we know it today. Wyatt was thirteen years old at the start of the American Civil War, with unsubstantiated rumors of his attempts to run away and join his brothers who fought for the Union. With the culmination of the Civil War, the Union once again whole, the idea of a unified nation became paramount for the United States for the first time, and the mechanism used for such a task was Manifest Destiny and westward expansion. This era immediately following the end of the Civil War up to the beginning of the twentieth century,

1865-1900, is historically known as the Wild West. The West was Wild in the sense that in many places' settlement and urbanization outpaced government oversight and regulation including, but not limited to, the presence of adequate law enforcement. The frontier was mythicized since Europeans landed on the American continent, but the Wild West is special. The timing is crucial in its relevance historically and culturally.

Advances in technology allowed information to travel great distances much faster, literacy rates were climbing, cheap books were plentiful and in great demand, and the urban industrialized populace of eastern cities romanticized the freedom the West represented. Millions of settlers were advancing through the frontier, traversing the unforgiving terrain that was home to millions of indigenous peoples who were treated horribly as they were subjugated to reservations as their land was stolen. The Homestead Act of 1862, signed by President Abraham Lincoln, transferred ten percent of total U.S. land into private ownership. 270 million acres of land sold cheaply to migrants so they may establish farms, towns and contribute to national infrastructure. The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad connected the coast, opening the Western markets to Eastern consumers, allowing mining and cattle industries to skyrocket. Though major cities existed in the Wild West, such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, and Sante Fe, the boomtown is the sincere heart and soul of the West. Boomtowns sprang up across the West, typically around successful mining ventures or in conjunction with railroad expansion and are the places our minds go to when thinking of the Wild West. These are the places where shootouts between lawman and outlaws happened, where saloons and brothels served whiskey and delight, the gambling tables where the newly rich became the newly poor, and figures such as Billy the Kid and Wild Bill Hickock were made into larger-than-life figures.

The Wild West era of U.S. history is special because of how it became deeply ingrained in American culture. The fascination with westward expansion captivated 19th century East Coast audiences with unimaginable stories in newspapers and magazines, stage performances and Wild West exhibitions, and the introduction of the motion picture industry. The technological advancements in travel and communication allowed for the increased speed at which information could cross the country, spreading the stories of the untamed West and its inhabitants, creating what we consider modern celebrities out of outlaws and lawmen alike. The fictionalization of real events and people blended the line between mythology and history and spawned the Western genre of entertainment. Popular culture's adoption of the nationalistic messaging of early Western entertainment had a deep and lasting effect on American culture.

Wyatt Earp, a legendary figure in American history, owes his fame and notoriety to popular culture. We are now unable to tell the story of the American West without him and is hard to imagine that Wyatt was not always as famous and admired as he is today. His character has been the subject of dozens of movies and a hit television series that uplifted his name and story to be recognized along with the likes of Billy the Kid, Jesse James and Wild Bill Hickok. Wyatt's life, though incredibly fascinating, was manufactured and developed into the larger-than-life character we know today by Stuart N. Lake's biography, *Frontier Marshal* in 1931, which catapulted Wyatt Earp, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, and Tombstone Arizona into the forefront of popular culture's imagination of Wild West history. Lake's understanding of Manifest Destiny also allowed him to exploit the audience's knowledge of the West to elevate the character of Wyatt Earp. "The frontier breeds men. Good or evil, law-abiding or lawless, the pick of the strain are fighting men."² Firmly signifying to the audience that Wyatt is a symbol of the rugged

² Stuart N. Lake, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931). 3.

individualism the West created and that his reputation as a fighting man was not only good, but noble.

Earp was never a completely honorable lawman as biographer Stuart N. Lake tried to depict; in fact, he spent a good portion of his life making a living in ventures that were socially acceptable but also straddled the line of legality. Earp's wide range of knowledge was not earned in ways of a formal education, which he barely received. Instead, it stems from experiences obtained on his and his family's journey on the frontier. A man of many hats; lifelong gambler, part time police officer, enforcer at a brothel, horse thief, escapee from Arkansas jail, buffalo hunter, saloon operator, mining investor, and his most famous attribute, vigilante. Wyatt Earp exemplified what the American Dream meant in the Wild West, though it always remained just out of his grasp.

In the first chapter, I provide the history of Earp and what I contribute to, how we view one of the most popular Western figures garnering over a century worth of academic and popular commentary. Early historians such as Frank Lockwood of the University of Arizona and Western writers like Walter Noble Burns held neutral or less than favorable opinions on Wyatt, following his splash onto the national stage in the wake of the infamous events in Tombstone Arizona, highlighting his flight from the state to avoid criminal prosecution. Earp lived long enough to attempt to change how he was perceived, finally accepting the request of Stuart N. Lake and forever changing how he would be judged in popular culture. Released two years after Earp's death, academia pounced on Lake's work for the many inaccuracies which Lake would later attribute to Wyatt's inability to narrate much in his final year. Many historians, led by William Raine McLeod and Ed Bartholomew, then jumped into the business of debunking the myths circulating around Wyatt following the popularity of his story in American popular culture. The

1990's brought a rise to "New Western History", presenting new perspectives about westward expansion and American Exceptionalism to the forefront, creating space for a new, more in-depth and honest look into Wyatt's life. Casey Tefertiller, former writer for the San Francisco Examiner, became the new authority on Earp following his biographical work and would be joined by authors such as Roy Young and Gary L. Roberts to edit an anthology of works that is considered a must have for Earp historians.

In Chapter Two, I will give more of a biographical depiction of Wyatt Earp's life from his birth in Illinois to his death in California. Wyatt's life is well documented, especially once he reaches his twenties, when his name begins to pop up in newspapers and police reports. Earp learned throughout his life that he had to be a jack of all trades to survive. He worked many of the jobs one associates with a figure of the Wild West, wearing the white hat of the law enforcement officer, and he wore the black hat of outlaw. Though his days as a sex trafficker, gambler, horse thief, saloon keeper, buffalo hunter, boxing referee and Wild West movie consultant are not part of his popular legacy, they provide a lens into the world of the Wild West and its shift in societal norms, creating a uniquely American culture. The American dream is and always has been happiness through economic prosperity, and there may be no man who represented that more during the Wild West as Wyatt Earp.

In Chapter Three, I examine how the mythology surrounding the Wild West uplifted Wyatt into the position of the ideal Western lawman. Focusing on the final years of Wyatt's life and his overwhelming desire to provide his own narrative on his life and the events surrounding his time in Tombstone. Wyatt and his wife Josephine were diligent in their desire to shape the public perception of Wyatt, with Earp pleading with friends he made in the booming motion picture industry to tell his story. Stuart N. Lake, the final writer who spoke to Wyatt before his

passing, changed everything with his biography released two years after Earp's death, launching Wyatt's popularity and fame onto the Mt. Rushmore of the Wild West.

The last chapter, Chapter Four, focuses on Wyatt Earp as legend. His introduction to the national stage came in Tombstone, receiving mixed reviews from the academic and journalistic communities of the day. His next big hit was the result of the Sharkey/Fitzsimmons fight, a controversial choice resulting in accusations of foul play. Wyatt understood this and knew his legacy could be saved by the court of public opinion, and he was right. Stuart N. Lake's work and the film adaptations of it have catapulted Earp out of the history books and into American popular culture. Between 1920 and the year 2000, the character of Wyatt Earp appeared in at least one movie per decade, three based on Stuart Lake's book, all evolving the character and legend of the historical figure throughout the societal shifts of American culture.

My assertion is that Wyatt Earp as a symbol of law enforcement in the Wild West was curated by himself and Stuart N. Lake to capitalize on popular cultures' narrow understanding of life in the American West. My research analyses the character of Wyatt Earp in comparison to the documented life historically available. His character was able to transcend history books into popular culture and American mythology as a righteous lawman while simultaneously viewed by historians and journalist of the day as a badman. Wyatt Earp, the man, possessed the proficient physical skills, a broad frontier knowledge base, and the incredible drive for economic advancement that allowed him to survive and thrive as he crisscrossed the American West. During his life, he processed many of the titles associated with life in the West, being that of lawman, miner, gambler and even outlaw, displaying the versatility to adapt to each new boomtown he found himself in. Wyatt, the myth, was carefully crafted by Earp and Stuart N. Lake, the final autobiographer to work with Earp in his final months. Lake took Wyatt Earp from

regional fame and infamy and made his story a bestseller by actively promoting and manufacturing the mythology surrounding Wyatt, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Wyatt Earp, the legend, character's legacy is engrained in popular culture and American mythology through decades of film and television adaptations of his character. A seven-decade span between the 1920's and 1990's provided audiences over a dozen renditions of Wyatt Earp and the events of Tombstone, influencing multiple generations of audiences' view of western history.

Earp managed to survive through one of the toughest eras in American history, not always with grace and humility, but often with grit, determination, and an insatiable desire to make money. The desire to create a virtuous law enforcement officer meant ignoring, excusing, and sometimes outright wrongly justifying actions that challenge the national mythology of the Wild West. Earp is quoted by his original biographer John Flood as stating, "Right is right and I shall never compromise with evil men,"³ while he was an officer in Wichita, by at which time he had already fled multiple states, once after escaping jail, displaying Earps vision of himself as the hero of his own story. Wyatt Earp was a man in search of his American Dream and did everything you could imagine someone of that time and place doing to obtain it. He may not be the stereotypical Western hero initially introduced to audiences, but his story represents the struggle of obtaining the economic prosperity promised through westward expansion.

³ John H. Flood, *Edited by Don Taylor, Wyatt Earp, (Tombstone: Old West Research & Publishing L.L.C., 2011).* 25.

Chapter One

Historiography of Wyatt Earp

When I contextualize the world and story of Wyatt Earp, I am amazed that he lived to be 80 years old in an era where life expectancy of a white male was around 40.⁴ This man traversed nearly the entirety of the western United States, making his mark everywhere he stopped. Wyatt was a decorated law enforcement officer in multiple states but was also an outlaw in a few as well. He was a capitalist in search for the American Dream, the belief that every person has the freedom to obtain a better life through economic upward mobility and truly ran the gambit of the Wild West occupations finding his place in the unique environments of each boomtown. Wyatt did it all, he was a cowboy and horse thief, he worked as an enforcer in brothels, participated in the terrible buffalo hunts, fled multiple states and territories to avoid criminal proceedings, participated in gunfights, worked mining stakes he claimed, operated saloons and brothels, and of course famously a frontier marshal. Wyatt was lucky enough to do something very few of his contemporaries could, live to old age. Without Earp's closing chapter in Los Angeles, his name is lost to the history books and American popular culture would forever be changed.

Academically, Wyatt Earp has always been a controversial figure. His early contributions to history books are not encouraging, being labeled an outlaw and overall bad figure, Earp used his skills to change it. He spoke to historians but quickly recognized that his true salvation relied on his ability to get his story to the masses via pop culture's love of early Western films. Wyatt chose to do it his own way, foregoing opportunities with professional writers until the final year of his life, playing it safe and bringing in a friend who could not provide a usable manuscript.

⁴ Jim Kornberg, "An Awful Time for Children," *True West Magazine*, September 12, 2009, truewestmagazine.com.

The need for Wyatt and wife Josephine to control the narrative and dream of selling the story straight to a Hollywood studio almost cost them the most crucial meeting of his legacy.

Wyatt Earp's Final Fight for Legacy

Wyatt Earp first introduction to the national spotlight followed the events in Tombstone and subsequent Vendetta Ride in which he hunted down and murdered individuals he believed were associated with the attempted murder of his brother Virgil and assassination of his brother Morgan in the months following the infamous shootout at the O.K. Corral, in which the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday faced no legal punishment. Prior to Tombstone, Wyatt Earp only received regional and local fame as either a scoundrel or for the few seasons he was a law enforcement officer in Kansas. Following his fleeing of Arizona in 1882, most stories of Earp and Tombstone were negative and were not yet romanticized through American popular culture.

Colonel James H. McClintock published the earliest historical account of Wyatt Earp. A veteran of the Spanish American War, McClintock documented the Earps and the events of Tombstone in his work *Arizona: Prehistoric- Aboriginal- Pioneer- Modern Volume II*, published in 1916, placing them in his section on Southwestern Outlaws. The author references the Earps as a gang after they fled to Colorado to avoid criminal prosecution, "On hearing of the refuge of the Earp gang, Governor Trible on May 16, 1882 issued a requisition on Governor Pitkin of Colorado, asking the return of Wyatt and Warren Earp, Doc Holliday, Sherman McMasters and John Johnson, all charged with the crime of murder," focusing on the Earps and Holliday fleeing Arizona to avoid murder charges following the Vendetta Ride. McClintock viewed the exile of the Earps and Holliday as a positive thing for Tombstone, no longer engulfed in the personal feud of two gangs, "It is probable the people of Tombstone cared little, as the exile of the Earps was the first possible move toward a lasting peace, which then began to be felt." McClintock placed

great emphasis on the outlaw status Wyatt gained following the Vendetta Ride instead of any service not taken in revenge for his brother's murder and attempted murder and viewed the events of Tombstone as a gang war that took over. The historian also acknowledged the niche the Earps filled, "in their palmy days and even later the Earps had many friends, generally enemies of the even rougher element that the brothers opposed." Wyatt Earp's first entry into the history books was not a shining example of frontier justice and law enforcement, instead a scathing review of a lawman using the badge as a tool to commit murder and then flee from the consequences of their actions.⁵

A couple of years later in 1922, notable American West author Fredrick R. Bechdolt released *When the West Was Young*. Bechdolt, who wrote more than a hundred stories of the Old West, provides context for the good guy versus the bad guy scenario later created by fiction writers. By providing context to local politics impact on whom wore the badges and whom would be considered an outlaw, Bechdolt withholds anointing any morality to western lawmen. "It was a time when the old spoils system was recognized in its pristine simplicity. If you trained with the victorious political faction you either wore a star or had some one else who did wear a star backing you." Labeling the Earps and Clanton as two sides of the same coin, with their feud beginning as they blamed each other for a stagecoach robbery, "Johnny Behan, the sheriff, said the Earp brother sent Doc Holliday out with the Clanton brothers to commit the crime. Ike Clanton said he was rustling cattle at the time down in Mexico and accused the Earps of sole responsibility. The Earps in turn stated that the Clanton boys were the bandits." Bechdolt glances over the events of the O.K. Corral and the assassination of Frank Stillwell by Wyatt and his compadres, "Tucson was given something to talk about that evening by the discovery of Frank

⁵ James H. McClintock, *Arizona: Prehistoric, Aboriginal, Pioneer, Modern: The Nation's Youngest Commonwealth Within a Land of Ancient Culture*, Vol. 2, (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1916).

Stillwell's body riddled with bullets beside the track," and concludes with mentioning Wyatt and his groups fleeing to Colorado. The author also fleshes out the rivalry between Johnny Behan and Wyatt Earp, though he does not mention Josephine Marcus, he points to the political beef between the two men. "Sheriff Johnny Behan charged the Earps with participation in robberies and willful cognizance of murders. It was about as far as he did go as a public official. The brothers issued a profane and pointed defiance and went on dealing faro." The depiction of Wyatt does not match the frontier marshal popular culture will champion.⁶

These early depictions can be viewed as negative in the eyes of some, but they provide context to how Wyatt was viewed by his contemporaries in the first couple decades following the events that garnered him national notoriety. Earp, living in Los Angeles since 1906, he adapted himself into the motion picture industry, first strolling onto sets offering his expertise. As he earned the friendships of actors, directors and producers, he got the idea of making his story into a movie. Working as a consultant on early western films, Wyatt was unable to gain interest and was urged to bring in a writer to capture Earp's story. They made the ridiculous decision to hire John Flood in 1925, an engineer and friend, to formulate a manuscript based on Wyatt's recollection of his life. Flood's manuscript was completed in 1926, his lack of training in note taking and narrative writing resulted in 350 pages of unpublishable materials, frustrating the Earps. The amount of control Wyatt and wife Josephine had over the material very well may have led to its mediocre quality, and their reluctance to bring in a professional cost them quality time. Published in 2011 and edited by Don Taylor, city historian of Tombstone, Arizona, the Flood manuscript does exactly what it was intended to do, praise Wyatt Earp and begin frame him as a hero, "Right is right and I shall never compromise with evil men," said Wyatt Earp,

⁶ Fredrick R. Bechdolt, *When the West Was Young*, (New York: The Century Co., 1922).

officer of the law.” The manuscript also provides Wyatt’s insight into the events leading to the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, highlighting Earp using Ike Clanton to hunt down some outlaws to make himself look better before an election. “I thought I’d give you [Ike] a chance to make some money, and it’s all yours if you’ll deliver up Leonard, Head and Crane.” The manuscript never got published and the Earps had to eventually move on and try other authors.⁷

The shift away from academia into popular culture created a shift in tone and relevance for Wyatt Earp, beginning the parallel mythology of the Wild West that has become a foundational piece of our culture and national identity, that I will go further into in later chapters.

The next author to take a shot at the famous lawman was Walter Noble Burns, writer of Western history and early American mythmaker, approached Wyatt and Josephine while researching his book about Tombstone. Earp was initially hesitant and declined to help but eventually provided Burns with a letter that detailed his perspective of what happened in Tombstone. In 1927 we received *Tombstone: An Iliad of the Southwest*, the first popularization of Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Burns’ depiction of Wyatt can be best described as mixed. “Wyatt Earp, who was to achieve sinister eminence as the six-shooter boss of Tombstone, and whose name, for good or bad, was to be bruited more widely, perhaps, than that of any other man in Tombstones history.” Acknowledging the flaws of Earp, he deemed Earp to be reckless and an opportunistic individual who found himself amazingly comfortable on either side of the law. The author may have been the first to romanticize the relationship between Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, “Between Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, as cold, deadly men, perhaps, as the frontier knew, existed a friendship classic in loyalty.” Burns, much like McClintock and Bechdolt, refused to ignore the flaws of a complex individual and provided the

⁷ John H. Flood, Edited by Don Taylor, *Wyatt Earp*, (Tombstone: Old West Research & Publishing L.L.C., 2011).

conclusion his research led him to, Wyatt Earp was out for himself and would do anything to advance his position in life. “Wyatt Earp cleaned up Tombstone. His motives may have been those of an honest champion of good government, or they may have been those of a self-seeking politician establishing a record on which he might stand for election in the shrievalty contest.”⁸

The next work that offers perspective on Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral is the memoir of a former law enforcement officer of Tombstone, Arizona. The following year of 1928, former Tombstone deputy sheriff William M. Breckenridge published *Helldorado: Bringing Law to the Mesquite*. Breckenridge provides a personal account to the feud between the Clantons and Earps, though his account is biased due to his personal relationship with the rivals of the Earps, specifically Johnny Behan and several members of the Cowboy gang that opposed the Earps. Breckenridge did venture to Los Angeles to interview Wyatt, “I spent one whole day with him, and we had a very pleasant visit. It was the first time I had seen him in forty-three years.” but it was merely a formality. Breckenridge also confirmed earlier accounts of how the feud between the Clantons and Earps began, “After Holliday was accused of being one of the stage robbers and of shooting Bud Philpot, the Earp party was very bitter toward cowboys.” The author provides his perspective on the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, insinuating that the Earps and Holliday took advantage of the situation, “It is my belief that the cowboys were not expecting a fight, as only Billy Clanton and Frank McLaury were armed. They had their pistols on, and their rifles were on their saddles.” Though it is viewed as partial, his account provides an important lens on the other side of the coin into the shady dealings and political dealings surrounding the events at the O.K. Corral and following murder spree.⁹

⁸ Walter Noble Burns, *Tombstone: An Iliad of the Southwest*, (Garden City: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927).

⁹ William M. Breckenridge, *Helldorado: Bringing Law to the Mesquite*, (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928).

The man who brought Wyatt Earp to the mainstream, former press aide, author, and professional wrestling promoter, Stuart N. Lake reached out to Wyatt Earp late in 1927 to express his interest in writing the biography of the western figure. Earp was ill when he initially received the request from Lake but procrastinated in his decision to accept the offer from the author. Finally meeting in August 1928, Wyatt hoped that the result of collaborating with Lake would be a book that friends made in the movie industry could adapt into a motion picture. In their limited visits before Wyatt's passing in 1929, Lake was unable to get anything of use out of Wyatt and Josephine, who inserted herself into all these ventures to ensure a positive portrayal of her husband, wanting to protect Wyatt from more bad publicity. The author, much like much of the populace, was thrilled by the Wild West, "the Old West cannot be understood unless Wyatt Earp is also understood." This did not stop Lake from publishing *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal* in 1931 with the approval of Josephine, becoming a bestseller and influencing the popular acceptance of Wyatt as the definition of a western lawman and American hero. "Since Wyatt Earp has so long been a myth to lovers of the Old West, it is no more than fair to state definitely that this biography is in no part a mythical tale." It was a mythical tale and Lake's depiction of Earp went on to be immortalized on the big screen multiple times, including 1941's *My Darling Clementine*¹⁰, the film that etched Wyatt into position in Wild West history and popular culture. "Wyatt Earp's achievements surely must be of interest themselves. His taming of Mannen Clements and fifty cowboy killers in the streets of Wichita; his play against Clay Allison of the Washita in the Plaza at Dodge City; his protection of insignificant Johnny-Behind-the-Deuce against a Tombstone mob; the sanguinary battle of the O.K. Corral, possibly the most celebrated gun-fight in frontier history; or his sawed-off shotgun duel with Curly Bill- tales of these exploits

¹⁰ *My Darling Clementine*, Directed by John Ford, Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007 (original theatrical release 1946).

could not fail, even were they meaningless, to stir a readers blood.” Due to Stuart Lake, the story of the American West could no longer be told without including the story of Wyatt Earp and Tombstone.¹¹

Life After Death- Researchers Unite Against Frontier Marshal

Frontier Marshal changed Wyatt’s reputation in the place he most cared, the court of public opinion. Lake’s work would springboard him into the upper echelon of Western figures and his character had been represented in at least one motion picture per decade between the 1920s and 2000’s. His story gave rise to superstardom in American mythology and popular culture, and Wyatt Earp quickly became a focal part of the American story when discussing the Wild West. Stuart N. Lake’s work was a bestseller and was the inspiration to three major motion pictures, cementing Wyatt Earp’s legacy where he cared most, the court of public opinion.

Back in the academic realm, Stuart N. Lake’s book faced immediate and harsh criticism from contemporary historians and western scholars.

Historian of the Southwest and University of Arizona professor, Franck Lockwood challenged Lake’s view of Wyatt in *Pioneer Days in Arizona: From Spanish Occupation to Statehood*, labeling Earp more of a dishonest man, who used his craftiness to get himself into positions of authority or profitability. “It is very important to keep this in mind in connection with Wyatt Earp and his associates. He and his brothers always managed to wear some badge of law- either as city marshal, or United States deputy marshal, or deputy sheriff, or special officer for the express or railroad company. This gave them the great advantage of always enjoying the legal right to bear arms.” Lockwood’s analysis on the most famous gunfight in western history is a starkly different than what Lake published, “on October 26, 1881, Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan

¹¹ Stuart N. Lake, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931).

Earp, and Doc Holliday shot and killed Billy Clanton and Tom and Frank McLaury on the streets of Tombstone. Though officers of the law, the four killers named above seem to have deliberately brought on the quarrel for the purpose of getting rid of the Clantons and McLaurys.” The historian gained his perspective by interviewing Earp and other survivors, “three years ago in Los Angeles I listened to all the details as related to me in private by Wyatt Earp himself, and about the same time, in company with Mr. William Breakenridge, visited all the places in and around Tombstone where these exciting deeds occurred and had the final scene described to me on the spot where it happened.” Wyatt’s reputation in the academic community is a stark contrast to the antihero of the Wild West created by popular culture.¹²

William MacLeod Raine, prominent western historian, and author of the American West took offense to the romanticizing of Wyatt Earp into some pristine western lawman, especially with the amount of evidence that provides a contradictory narrative. Raine does not hold back in his criticism of Lake or Earp, stating in his 1956-chapter *Wyatt Earp: Man Versus Myth* his belief that Wyatt is blown up beyond what is deserved. “With such a wide field of material to draw from it is deplorable that able writers have not only distorted the facts to make heroes out of ruffians but have carried with them a great bulk of public opinion.” The author inserts his belief that the Earps and Holliday were the instigators of the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, “it is clear that the cowboys were not expecting a fight. If they had wanted to, they could have picked all four of the Earp group off with their rifles while they were still a hundred yards away.” Raine refuses to only accept the Earp account of events due to the multitude of sources willing to provide their testaments on the Earps, “I could quote many more who wrote that they felt the Earps were what the West called “bad men” but I lack space.” The author closes with their

¹² Frank C. Lockwood, *Pioneer Days in Arizona: From the Spanish Occupation to Statehood*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932).

understanding of Wyatt's final desire to set the record straight. "As he reconstructed those days, imagination embellished facts and the Wyatt Earp who emerged was much taller in the saddle than the Wyatt Earp of reality." Raine did not dislike Wyatt Earp, he wants Wyatt to be understood as normal human being, especially since there is so much evidence and information that help provide a deeper understanding of not only Earp, Tombstone, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, but of the entire Wild West and how economic prosperity was a catalyst in frontier society.¹³

The Earp Brothers of Tombstone: The Story of Mrs. Virgil Earp by Frank Waters, prominent writer of Southwestern history, was published in 1960 also took issue with the popular narrative created by Lake's book. Waters did not hold a positive position on Wyatt or the Earps in whole. "With a tin star he might wear the halo of righteousness instead of a hangman's noose." Centered around the recollections of Mrs. Virgil Earp, the author sets out to provide the most authoritative work on the Earp brothers. Portraying Wyatt as a sex trafficker, gambler, capitalist and bully, "Wyatt was an itinerant saloonkeeper, cardsharp, gunman, bigamist, church deacon, policeman, bunco artist, and a supreme confidence man." Waters discredits Lake's assertions of Earps portrayal as a virtuous lawman. Raine notes that Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral have transcended historical facts and relevance. "No, Tombstone no longer belongs to historical time. It belongs now to the timeless American Myth with those who imbued it for their moment with life, the good men and the bad-men and all those men and events who brought them to dust." Waters believed that "up to the last Wyatt still pathetically sought to find someone to publicize his adventurous life," and that in the five months that Stuart N. Lake knew Wyatt before he died, Lake could not have enough information to complete an autobiography. To

¹³ William MacLeod Raine, "Wyatt Earp: Man Versus Myth," (Chapter Two: *Riders West*, An Anthology, New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1956).

date, this depiction of the Earp brothers was considered the most authoritative due to the proximity of the primary source of the material, Aunt Allie Earp.¹⁴

In the 1960s another historian and avid researcher took aim at the legend of Wyatt Earp, hoping to bring it back to reality. Ed Bartholomew's significant contribution to the debunking of Wyatt Earp myths with his two-volume biography of Wyatt Earp. 1963 brought *Wyatt Earp: The Untold Story* followed by *Wyatt Earp: The Man and The Myth* in 1964. Bartholomew did not hold back in his criticism of Earp, calling him a "whoremonger" who was more interested in managing the brothels that were run by his brother, Warren and his wife. The author also questions Earp's bravery leading up to the gunfight at the O.K. Corral by stating that Wyatt "skulked behind Holliday all along the way," and accuses the brothers and Holliday of murder. Bartholomew describes Lake's work as "pure fiction," pointing to Earp being arrested later in his life for running confidence games, or bunco steering, while living in both San Francisco and later Los Angeles. Bartholomew and other researchers could not change the already garnered public imagine of Wyatt Earp, by the time of the release of these books Wyatt had already been the subject of a hit television show that lasted multiple seasons on ABC and a dozen or so movies, expanding his influence on southwestern mythology. Bartholomew's books are credited with the popularization amongst Earp researchers in debunking the myths and legends associated with popular cultures effect on historical reality presented to the public.^{15 16}

Lake was a continuous punching bag into the 1970s when Glenn G. Boyer came onto the Earp scene. Boyer began researching Earp following his retirement from the Air Force and

¹⁴ Frank Waters, *The Earp Brothers of Tombstone: The Story of Mrs. Virgil Earp*, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1960).

¹⁵ Ed Ellsworth Bartholomew, *Wyatt Earp, 1848-1880: The Untold Story*, (Toyahvale: Frontier Book Co., 1963).

¹⁶ Ed Ellsworth Bartholomew, *Wyatt Earp, 1881-1882: The Man and the Myth*, (Toyahvale: Frontier Book Co., 1964).

quickly became friends with Virgil Earp's granddaughter. Boyer received material from the granddaughter that helped him write *I Married Wyatt Earp: The Recollections of Josephine Sarah Marcus*, "eventually these associations led to his obtaining the two Josephine Earp manuscripts upon which this book is based." Published by the University of Arizona Press, meaning it was considered non-fiction and propelled Boyer as an authority on Wyatt Earp. Boyer is the first to bring light to the fact that Josephine was attached to Johnny Behan, Wyatt's nemesis in Tombstone, "we were introduced by my fiancé at that time, Johnny Behan," Josephine wrote. The tension between Behan and Earp in Tombstone was well documented, with Wyatt and Johnny on political opposite sides. According to Josephine's notes Wyatt agreed to remove his name for the position of sheriff, allowing Behan to get the job, with the caveat that Behan would name Wyatt under-sheriff, "Johnny, of course, double crossed him," sparking off their feud. The author also accuses Lake of embellishing the myth of Wyatt Earp, "with his controlling collaborator gone, Lake was now free to liven up the story." An ironic twist of fate, Boyer would also later be accused of falsifying information in his book and placing words in Josephine's mouth and would result in the University of Arizona removing it from their catalog in 2000. Boyer defended his actions by claiming his method as creative non-fiction.¹⁷

Glenn G. Boyer continued to parade himself as the authority on Wyatt Earp into the 1990s with his 1993 publication, *Wyatt Earp's Tombstone Vendetta*, using the account of Theodore Ten Eyck Jr., whose father was a friend of Wyatt Earp, and left behind a manuscript that detailed their friendship. Boyer found himself in the same boat as Stuart N. Lake, relying on family lore and implementing many historical inaccuracies, moving this work out of the biographical section and into fiction. "Closed minds among Wester editors made it impossible to

¹⁷ Glen G. Boyer, *I Married Wyatt Earp: The Recollections of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976).

market new insights, even though supported by Wyatt Earp's surviving relatives." Though this work can be used as a valuable source in the Earp story, his lack of historical rigor, in fact checking the source material is a cardinal sin when it comes to historical writing. "This book illustrates the delightful circumstances of Wyatt's first unburdening to Bill. Rather than talking to satisfy Bill's curiosity, however, Wyatt's remakes were aimed at setting the picture straight before he went to the grave. He hoped Bill would someday pass on what he said, which he did." Boyer was either incredibly lucky or created his own luck, claiming to have received information from family members of those close to Wyatt and the Earp brothers. "I am a grass roots historian, not a paper shuffler, not a pallid bibliophile, chained to smelly public buildings, going blind grappling with secondary sources, though my gleanings from such often-rich material, are considerable and contributed greatly to the authenticity of this book." The authors claim of historical purity is quickly questioned due to his inability to produce the Eyck manuscript, later admitting that "Ten Eyck" was a composite character used to weave together multiple oral histories he allegedly received during his research. Modern Earp scholars do not view Boyer's works in a flattering light, with the author being labeled a fraud for faking some of his source materials. The author's credibility, much like that of Stuart N. Lake after admitting their transgressions, was shot and libraries and publishers distanced themselves from the controversial historian.¹⁸

Wyatt Earp In the 21st Century

Glenn G. Boyer's status as an Earp authority was short lived. His work published through the University of Arizona Press was released back to him, with the University removing his work from their archive due to concerns with the accuracy of the source materials. Followed by harsh

¹⁸ Glen G. Boyer, *Wyatt Earp's Tombstone Vendetta*, (Honolulu: Talei Publishers, Inc., 1993).

critiques levied by new Earp historians Casey Tefertiller and Gary L. Roberts, condemned his work after they were refused access to Boyer's source materials. Boyer defended himself by claiming that he was a literary artist and was doing the world a favor by publishing his work on Wyatt Earp. Once at the top of his field, Boyer is a forgotten contributor to the academic understanding of one of the Wild West's brightest stars.

The late 1990s brought the two most recent adaptations of Wyatt Earp to the big screen and a renewed interest in the Western icon. Historians now had decades of research and new revelations into the character of Wyatt Earp and were no longer interested in strictly myth busting. More interest would now be paid to his story, not just the events in Arizona, creating a more historically accurate description of the life, his character, and the nature of the world in which he lived.

Casey Tefertiller, Independent Writing and Editing Professional and University of California Berkely alum, mentioned before as one of the new leading scholars on Wyatt Earp, earned that reputation with his 1997 autobiography on Wyatt entitled, *Wyatt Earp: Life behind the Legend*. This has been widely considered the most in-depth and accurate depiction of Wyatt's life to date. Tefertiller wanted to remove separate fictionalized accounts popularized in popular culture from the reality in which Earp lived his life. "By the time he reached his seventies in the 1920s, many writers had rediscovered the old stories of Tombstone and were telling lies, accusing him of crimes he never committed and wrongs he believed were morally justifiable." While the author shows admiration and respect for the previous researchers, he takes issue with Lake's decision to market *Frontier Marshal* as Wyatt Earp's own words, "it was cheating, and it was inaccurate. Because of Lake's overuse of the first-person device, Earp would be blamed- or credited- for making up or enhancing much of his own legend when most of the false details

came from Lake and the Kansas old-timers.” Tefertiller lamented prior historians and authors who removed the many shades of grey from the Tombstone story, making a clear black and white, good versus evil narrative to frame Wyatt as either a heroic lawman or a nefarious mankiller. Extensive research provided a factual and balanced narrative for Tefertiller, who did not shy away from the complexity of Wyatt’s non-Tombstone years. “He moved to Tombstone to make money, not to follow some higher calling.” The author provides modern clarity, noting that Wyatt’s legend is more about his bravery in the face of danger rather than the content of his character. “Through the years that he wandered the West, he could never really leave Tombstone behind. He was not a man of esteemed character, or dedication, to a noble cause. He was not a better man than those around him; he was a braver one.” This is by far the most fair and balanced account of Wyatt’s life.¹⁹

The late 1990s brought another examination into the life and mythology surrounding one of the United States most famous Western figures. The following year brought us Allen Barra’s *Inventing Wyatt Earp: His Life and Many Legends* in which the author attempts to gap the bridge between the historical figure and the popular culture icon. Barra, a journalist for the Wall Street Journal and The Daily Beast, typically known for his opinions on sports, offers a critical analysis of Wyatt. “Earp’s image so dominates the western that it’s practically impossible to mention a western made since the mid-1930s that can’t be connected in so way with Earp’s real life story or with another Earp movie.” The author highlights the importance of the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, “or the street fight in Tombstone, as it should properly be called, is so much a part of America folklore that scarcely a public confrontation of any kind can occur without someone evoking it.” Barra also takes issue with Stuart N. Lake, calling his autobiography of Wyatt Earp

¹⁹ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind the Legend*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997).

“one of the great mythmaking American books of the twentieth century; despite numerous debunking’s, Lake’s Wyatt Earp remains, in the minds and hearts of millions, as a solid symbol of America’s frontier.” Challenging some of the myths associated with Earp as well as identifying the character we know in popular culture as a composite of different figures who circled Wyatt’s life including Bat Masterson and his older brother Virgil Earp. “The Wyatt Earp who survives in our cultural memory today is a composite character assembled from the biographies of Bat Masterson, Virgil Earp, Wild Bill Hickock, and others, but the core of the Wyatt Earp legend is Wyatt himself.” The author’s use of the popular culture in examining how the historical figure of Wyatt Earp evolved into the monumental figure he became after his death, highlighting how myth and fact can be so seamlessly interwoven in popular consciousness. “Since World War II, he has been portrayed more times than any other frontier figure, and thanks to cable TV, Wyatt Earp is practically ubiquitous.” Barra points out that Wyatt always is the focal point, even to his enemies, “the greatest irony of Wyatt Earp’s afterlife is that it is his enemies who have kept him famous,” signaling to the books of Breakenridge and Allie Earp, Virgil’s widow. The author summarizes Wyatt as the right man, with the right qualities, perfectly fitted for the time and place in which he found himself. Barra’s analysis of Wyatt Earp’s fame in popular culture and how it clashes with historical evidence has inspired my work.²⁰

For the third straight year in the late 1990s, a book about Tombstone would be published. This work did not receive the academic of popular achievements as the prior works, partially due to not solely evolving around the life and legend of Wyatt Earp. *Tombstone, A.T. A History of Early Mining, Milling, and Mayhem*, by William B. Shillingberg provides an excellent, in-depth history of the town and offers his perspective on the infamous Earp/Clanton feud that engulfed

²⁰ Alan Barra, *Inventing Wyatt Earp: His life and Many Legends*, (New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1998.)

Tombstone. Shillingberg, retired as president of an international probate research corporation, places little to no importance of the Earps in the development of Tombstone and attributes their mythic rise to fame to popular cultures glorification of violence, believing that the miners and businesspeople that have gone nameless in history are the real foundation of Tombstone. “What the Earps actually did fails to compare with the contributions made by local entrepreneurs or that army of nameless men who worked the mines.” The gunfight at the O.K. Corral and Wyatt Earp may be what draw people to the Wild West, specifically Tombstone, but in the authors opinion, they are failures and almost insignificant to the actual development and history of the town. “By contrast, the brothers and their enemies are remembered today only for specific acts of violence.” The authors dismissal and honest review of the Earps time in Tombstone is a perspective intended to showcase the fact that the town would have risen and fallen with or without Wyatt and his brothers, and the fame and popularity of Tombstone in popular culture is derived from “deep rooted psychological urge to glorify such behavior,” to reinforce the notion of the Earps as heroes. Including this work provides clarity on the importance and legacy of Tombstone rather limiting its focus on the few short months a group of brothers occupied its dusty streets, Wyatt Earp and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral may be what is popularly remembered, but as Shillingberg highlights, their imprint on the town was minimal compared to those who grew the town into what it became.²¹

Over a decade would pass before Wyatt Earp and Tombstone were back in the spotlight. This time with the new and interesting take of Andrew C. Isenberg’s *Wyatt Earp: A Vigilante Life*. Isenberg, Hall Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of Kansas, provides a unique view to add to the conversations around Wyatt, specifically focusing on the

²¹ William B. Shillingberg, *Tombstone, A.T. A History of Early Mining, Milling, and Mayhem*, (Norman: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1999).

tendency of Wyatt of being on the wrong side of the law for a sizable portion of his life. “While the Hollywood version is stubbornly, consistently duty-bound, in actuality Wyatt led a life of restlessness, inconstancy, impulsive law-breaking, and shifting identities.” Wyatt’s antihero status in popular culture stems from the Vendetta Ride, going outside of the law to avenge his brothers appealed to audiences, but Isenberg argues that Earp’s character was always nefarious. “When he was not wearing a badge, he was variously a thief, brothel bouncer, professional gambler, and confidence man who specialized in selling gold bricks that were nothing more than rocks painted yellow.” The author highlights segments of Earp’s life where he operated as an enforcer in brothels in Illinois, was arrested and eventually escaped from a jail in Indian Territory for horse theft, fleeing Arizona following murder charges for the infamous Vendetta Ride, and allegations for fixing boxing matches as a referee. All provide a view of Wyatt, not as some Western lawman out to tame the boomtowns of the American West, instead of a man who intended to capitalize on any opportunity presented to him. “By the 1920s, Wyatt had been reinventing himself for over half a century. The man who so often changed his recollections of his own past embedded himself in American collective memory, and that is his enduring legacy.” Isenberg’s analysis of Earp living a vigilante life adds a piece to the complex puzzle that was Wyatt Earp, highlighting the will to do anything within his abilities to prosper in one of the harshest eras in United States history.²²

Lastly, we have a magnificent collection of some of the best published works on Wyatt Earp. Released in 2019, *A Wyatt Earp Anthology: Long May His Story Be Told*, edited by Roy B. Young, editor of the Journal of the Wild West History Association, Gary L. Roberts, emeritus professor of history at Abraham Baldwin College, and Casey Tefertiller. “Fortunately for

²² Andrew C. Isenberg, *Wyatt Earp: A Vigilante Life*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

posterity, Earp's unwaning popularity led to several generations of scholars, avocational historians, and enthusiastic researchers to dig deep into his life and times." This anthology provides various perspectives from over sixty articles that chronicle Wyatt's life from start to finish. The scope allows for detailed dives into his early and later lives, with plenty of focus on Kansas and Tombstone, providing the ability to gain context to who the real Wyatt Earp was. "We trust we've arrived at a well-balanced, fairly comprehensive account of his life, legend, and legacy of the incomparable Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp." The contributors, many of whom are listed above, contribute to one or more of the seven parts of this anthology. "In Part I, historians explore Wyatt's life and legend in the broadest of context. In Part II, others uncover the missing scandals of the Earp family. In Part III, focuses on Wyatt's years as a police officer in the Kansas cowtowns, in Part IV covers the Earp brothers' sojourn in Tombstone. Part V covers the Earp's post Tombstone years, and Part VI is devoted to the development of the Earp legend. Part VII presents accounts that expose modern-day authors who fabricated stories." The Wyatt who emerges from the reanalysis of Wyatt Earp's life is neither "the plaster saint of Lake nor the repulsive villain portrayed by Waters." These historians provide a new, far more interesting Wyatt Earp than ever before, displaying the human elements of Wyatt and how the choices he made in his life effected our national mythology. "We have reached a new level in Earp research. So many are doing such good work, and this volume is a tribute to many dedicated historians who are trying to find the truth of the mysterious legend and the many controversies that surround him." This work has been my inspiration, my 'bible,' and I hope that my research can one day contribute to a better understanding of Wyatt Earp, the American Dream, and our love for the Wild West. ²³

²³ Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts, and Casey Tefertiller, eds, *A Wyatt Earp Anthology: Long May His Story Be Told*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019).

Legacy of the West

The popularization of the Wild West in mass media completely changed the identity and culture of the United States. When we imagine the Wild West, a specific few figures come to mind. What separates Wyatt Earp from the rest is his ability to influence his own history and mythology. His understanding that his legacy depended on his portrayal in popular culture and not what would be written about him in history books was the final talent that Earp demonstrated before his passing at 80 years of age. Though the fruits of his labor were not realized until after his death, the historical figure of Earp is overshadowed by the popular culture icon that is not etched on the Mt. Rushmore of Western figures. The story of his life and specifically his time in Tombstone Arizona are critical to the fable of the Wild West, presented in over a dozen movies and a television series, his character has become an American icon.

By focusing on his ability to adapt to various aspects of life in the Wild West by using the various talents and knowledge he possessed to survive and thrive in his pursuit of the American Dream, I present Wyatt as a Renaissance Man within the context of the American West. Wyatt Earp was a man that sought to place himself in the best position to gain financial prosperity with the talents and character traits that he learned from his father and older brothers. Wyatt used his physical talents as a fighter in many occupations but also used his understanding of saloon operation and gambling to profit as greatly. He was accused of being a crooked police officer, crooked referee and just overall con man on multiple occasions but always managed to get away to the next boomtown in search for his next shot at getting rich. Wyatt was an outlaw, lawman, businessman and conman all rolled into one, there was absolutely no place where Wyatt Earp would not find himself the center of attention, regardless of how his life was viewed by

academia. Historians of his time did not have a fond view of him, but that did not change his ability to market himself and fight to shape his own legacy.

Earp's ability to take his skills and apply them to the best possible means for economic prosperity and advancement allowed him to live to old age despite placing himself in many dangerous occupations. Wyatt Earp did all the things conjured up when imagining the Wild West, he was an outlaw and lawman, horse thief and gambler, saloon operator and sex trafficker, and was part of what became the most famous 30 seconds of the American West, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Wyatt Earp was not an academic, possessing little formal education at all, but the Wild West was not a time and place that needed those skills to survive and thrive. Wyatt Earp left his mark everywhere he went, for good or bad. Earp has been academically scrutinized for over a century while simultaneously becoming an icon of the Wild West through his adaptation to popular culture. Wyatt Earp is a quintessential western figure not only because of the variety of ways he sought to economically prosper, or the infamous gunfight he participated in, but also his determination to tell his truth until he died.

Chapter Two:

The Man

When the dust settled on October 26th, 1881, only one man was unscathed, Wyatt Earp. The shootout at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona, made Earp, his brothers, and his best friend Doc Holliday legends as they battled the nefarious Cowboy gang that threatened the law and order in the West. This event and the bloody aftermath are the center piece of the life and legend of Wyatt Earp and is also one of the most scrutinized events in western history.

The Fight That Made Him Famous

Wyatt Earp led a normal life for a man born in the middle of the 19th century until he participated in an era defining event on a random Wednesday in October, in the boomtown of Tombstone, Arizona. The gunfight at the O.K. Corral and the aftermath, including the infamous Vendetta Ride is etched into American history and mythology due to their popular adaptations beginning in the 1930s. “Most stories about Wyatt Earp have their genesis in truth. However, today more people in the general population are aware of the legends and myths about Wyatt Earp than are aware of the truth.”²⁴ The crafting of Earp into a heroic frontier lawman stretches the facts about his life, his personality, and his desire to uphold the law. When the smoke cleared on the most famous thirty seconds in the history of the American West, no one present at the time realized how important of an event it was or that the people involved would be immortalized in American mythology. The gunfight was not a spontaneous event, like most gunfights or shootouts, it was months and years in the making. Wyatt, his brothers Virgil and Morgan and close friend Doc Holliday are on the side of good, with the Clanton’s, McLaury’s and rest of the organized Cowboy gang as bad men.

²⁴ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp, Outlaw of the Cherokee Nation,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 100.

The more complex version consists of a deal between Wyatt Earp, already active in law enforcement and member of the Cowboys, Ike Clanton, coming to a deal in the apprehension of suspected thieves. Ike's drunken insecurities escalated nothing into a whole lot of something. Fearful of his comrades learning of his assistance to Wyatt in his bid to gain a positive public image before an upcoming election, Clanton rocketed up tensions with his accusations and threats against Wyatt and the other Earp brothers, setting the wheels in motion for the infamous clash. Wyatt made the covert deal with Ike Clanton, not realizing the wheels he set in motion. Casey Tefertiller and Jeff Morey point out that "according to Wyatt, he tried to make a deal with Frank McLaury and Ike Clanton, the most visible of the Clanton brothers and known friend of the rustling crowd, to tell him the whereabouts of the three stage robbers.²⁵" Ike helped Wyatt in secret, turning over the robbers so Wyatt could use the arrest as a way gain popularity amongst the voting public, and Ike received monetary compensation. According to Earp, he told Clanton "I thought I'd give you a chance to make some money, and it's all yours if you'll deliver up Leonard, Head and Crane".²⁶ The secret was too much to bare for Ike Clanton, paranoia kicked in and Ike began accusing Wyatt of telling Doc Holliday of the secret plan, confronting Doc, and threatening to fight him.

The road to the most famous gunfight in history is also linked directly to John Behan, sheriff of Cochise County Arizona, whose job Wyatt coveted. Behan and Earp had a large conflict due to a shared love interest in Josephine Marcus, Wyatt's future wife, who initially was in a relationship with Behan. This rivalry laid the foundation for the events that would lead to 30

²⁵ Casey Tefertiller and Jeff Morey, "O.K. Corral: A Gunfight Shrouded in Myster," in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 364.

²⁶ John H. Flood, *Wyatt Earp*, (Tombstone: Old West Research & Publishing L.L.C., 2011), Edited by Don Taylor. 131.

seconds of mayhem and the beginning of the Earp legend. Behan was also known to be friendly with the Cowboys, the organized group of outlaws that included the Clantons, McLaurys, Curly Bill Broccious, and Johnny Ringo. Behan, not a participant in the famous gunfight, played a small role as the Earps and Holliday walked toward destiny, by noticing the shotgun under Doc's coat and claiming to tell the group, "that he would not allow any trouble,"²⁷ and then attempted to arrest Wyatt after the smoke cleared, who immediately rebuffed him.

Wyatt and Ike would cross paths again soon. Clanton, drunk and disorderly, went from saloon to saloon spreading the news of his desire to challenge the Earps, leading to his arrest by Virgil and Morgan later that morning. Ike did not appreciate the way in which Virgil treated him and kept his threatening tone, promising Wyatt, and the others that trouble was in their near future. That future came quicker than anyone might have been expecting later that same afternoon. Ike Clanton, his brother Billy, Frank and Tom McLaury, and Billy Claiborne would convene at the O.K. Corral, where they were still levying threats and challenging the authority of the Earps. Wyatt, Virgil, Morgan, and Doc would accept the confrontation and headed toward the corral, passing Behan who claimed to have disarmed the men, the Earps and Holliday pressed on and confronted the Cowboys.

The most famous 30 seconds of the Wild West happened next. "Debates about the dispute and who was to blame began almost immediately after the battle occurred. Tombstone's two newspapers, the *Epitaph* and the *Nugget*, were the first to offer biased and contradictory accounts of the gunfight and the motivations of each side."²⁸ The *Arizona Weekly Citizen*, a newspaper out of Tucson summed up the incident the next day. "Marshal Virgil Earp, Morgan

²⁷ Hubert I. Cohen, "Wyatt Earp at the O. K. Corral: Six Versions," *The Journal of American Culture* 26 vol. 2: 204-223, 2003, 207.

²⁸ Kara L. McCormack, "Historians' Gunfight," in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 58.

and Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday Meet the Cowboys- Three Men Killed and Two Wounded, One Seriously- Origin of the Trouble and its Tragical Termination.”²⁹ Conflicting reports on who shot first, but the results are not contested, 3 dead cowboys (Billy Clanton, Frank and Tom McLaury) and the Earps and Holliday suffering little to no harm. The aftermath of the most famous gunfight in the Wild West resulted in murder charges for the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday, which they would get exonerated, but that was not the type of justice their rivals were looking for. “Wyatt Earp would be remembered far differently today if he had been hanged as a murderer, rather than glorified as the definitive frontier marshal.”³⁰

Over the next couple of months, Cowboys attempted to ambush and kill Virgil Earp, maiming him for the rest of his life, “Virgil Earp has been dangerously wounded at the hands of assassins, his brother Wyatt Earp has been appointed deputy United States marshal in his stead,”³¹ but they succeed in the assassination of Morgan Earp, who was shot from behind through a window while he was playing pool. All the suspects in both shooting being able to provide alibies to avoid prosecution. “Virgil Earp has been dangerously wounded at the hands of assassins, his brother Wyatt Earp as deputy United States marshal in his stead.”³² Unable to legally arrest those believed to be responsible, Wyatt made the decision to take justice into his own hands by hunting down those he believed to be involved, with the press infamously dubbing it the Vendetta Ride. The first victim of the Earp’s revenge tour was Frank Stillwell in Tucson, Arizona on March 20, 1882. “The Coroner’s jury, who were impaneled in the case of the assassination of Frank Stillwell, returned a verdict that he came to his death by shots fired by

²⁹ “A Desperate Street Fight,” *Arizona Weekly Citizen*. (Tucson, AZ), Oct. 30, 1881, 3.

³⁰ Steven Lubet, “Conflict of Interest at the O.K. Corral,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 438.

³¹ *The Tombstone epitaph*. (Tombstone, AZ), May. 1 1882, 2.

³² *The Tombstone epitaph*, (Tombstone, AZ), May. 1 1882, 2.

Wyatt and Warren Earp, Doc Holliday, Texas Jack, alias Johnson and McMasters.”³³ Wyatt got to Florentino Cruz, alias Indian Charlie, leaving him lying face down with four bullet holes. “A desperate Behan deputized Curly Bill [Brocius] to go find Wyatt and his posse.”³⁴

Curly Bill and his posse attempted to ambush Wyatt and his group, but as they rode toward the Earp posse, Wyatt leaped from his horse and drew his shotgun, taking out Curly Bill while he miraculously escaped unscathed. The final Cowboy killed, Johnny Ringo, is often associated with the Vendetta Ride because Earp allegedly claimed killed him, with no evidence that Wyatt or his posse had anything to do with the death of Ringo, who was found with a single gunshot to the temple on July 14, 1882. Wyatt’s involvement is no longer a widely held belief. Vigilante justice was nothing new to the United States especially the Wild West, but rarely was it taken up under the guise of law and order. Wyatt, Doc Holliday, Bat Masterson, and other allies traversed Arizona to track down and kill those involved in the murder and maiming of his brothers, killing three cowboys in total.

The Vendetta Ride is an interesting event in Wyatt’s life and American popular culture. Under the façade of law and order, he hunts down, and murders four men believed to be involved with the murder of his brother Morgan and attempted murder of his brother Virgil. No plans to bring them into custody alive so they could face a judge and the legal system, Wyatt and his deputies make it truly clear that they are out for vengeance. Judged harshly by journalist and historians of his day, often characterized as a badman, but in the mythology of the West, “Wyatt Earp cleaned up Tombstone. His motives may have been those of an honest champion of good

³³ *Daily Los Angeles Herald*. (Los Angeles, CA), Mar. 23, 1882, 2.

³⁴ Tom Clavin, *Tombstone: The Earp Brothers, Doc Holliday, and the Vendetta Ride from Hell*, First edition, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020), 333.

government, or they may have been those of a self-seeking politician establishing a record on which he might stand for election in the shrievalty contest.”³⁵

What sets Wyatt apart from most of his Western contemporaries is that he actively promoted and manufactured the mythology surrounding himself, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral as a final gamble on himself during his final years. His character has become engrained in popular culture through the decades of television and film adaptations of his story, solidifying his legend into American history and national lore. But Tombstone was not the beginning of the Earp story, instead it is merely a glimpse into the life and legend of a man who traversed harsh terrain, operated on the margins of society, and was at best, a part time lawman.

Tracing Earp’s life from the beginning we can see a pattern of behavior and decision making that completely contradicts early popular representation of Wyatt Earp, his role in the gunfight at the O.K. Corral and aftermath of, calling into question the intent of Wyatt, Stuart N. Lake and the many writers and directors that have crafted the image of Wyatt Earp we see today.

A Life on the Move

Wyatt Berry Strapp Earp, named after his father’s old captain in the Mexican American War, was born on March 19th, 1848, to Nicholas and his second wife Virgina, in Monmouth Illinois. About a year after Wyatt was born, the family would join a wagon train heading for San Bernardino, California but would disembark and purchase acreage in Pella, Iowa due to Wyatt’s sister Martha getting sick and eventually dying in 1856. By the autumn of 1861, Wyatt’s older brothers Virgil and James would join the Union Army during the American Civil War, leaving Wyatt and his two younger brothers Morgan and Warren to run the family farm. Rumors persist

³⁵ Walter Noble Burns, *Tombstone An Iliad of the Southwest*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1929), 60.

that Wyatt tried to enlist himself in the Union Army at 13 and follow in his older brothers' footsteps, but no official documentation remains to support the claim.

California remained on Nicholas' mind, and he would eventually get his wish to move his family in 1864 after organizing another wagon train to San Bernardino. "Wyatt learned to hate plowing, hoeing, and just about everything else connected with farming,"³⁶ in his time working the family farm and knew that life was not for him. Being rejoined by his older brothers, Wyatt began his working career assisting his older brother Virgil working stagecoaches at the age of sixteen, traversing over seven hundred miles on wagon roads through Nevada and Utah territory. At 18 years of age, Wyatt gained the gambling and boxing skills that helped him throughout his life while working for the Union Pacific railroad in the Wyoming Territory. Gambling was as respected of a profession in the Wild West as lawman, a valuable skill that Wyatt utilized as he travelled between boomtowns. The love of boxing Earp developed in Wyoming also led to his future reputation of using his weapon as a blunt object and preferring to use his hands in physical altercations as well as his reputation as a boxing referee that would come back later in life.

Wyatt, once his contract expired with the freighter, joined his father once again as the family moved east, eventually settling in Lamar, Missouri, briefly returning to the farming chores he adamantly disliked.

Lamar, Missouri

What connects us to figures of the historical or mythical past are not the supernatural or extraordinary accomplishments, it is the human factors that ground those figures or characters into our collective consciousness. Wyatt Earp may not have ever been a classical outlaw, but he was not always on the side of law and order as well. Earp knew that adaptation to whatever

³⁶ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 3.

circumstances were presented as a crucial trait for life in the American West. Wyatt joined his family as they moved East, to Lamar Missouri in 1868 where their father Nicholas Earp would accept the position of local constable. The following year, 1869, Nicholas was promoted to Justice of the Peace, allowing Wyatt to step in and become local constable. “Interestingly, Wyatt did not dictate events of his Lamar years to John Flood, his personal secretary, or discuss them (as far as is known) with Stuart N. Lake, his first biographer.”³⁷

The significance of his first badge deserves to be overshadowed by the tragedy of his first love. Urilla Sutherland, the daughter of hotel operators in Lamar, caught the eye of Wyatt, and within a couple of months of courtship, they would marry on January 10, 1870. Life was good for young Wyatt Earp. A promising career, close to all his family, and married with child expected. Tragedy, and what I believe to be the life defining moment for Wyatt, struck with the death of his young wife and unborn child to typhoid fever. This event caused a downward spiral that led Wyatt into some very precarious situations. A short book entitled “How I Routed a Gang of Arizona Outlaws, by Wyatt Earp, states that “Urilla died a few months later and Wyatt left Lamar. For the next few years he worked at various frontier occupations such as wagon freighting and buffalo hunting.”³⁸ Wyatt’s final days in Lamar, and the end of his first stint as a peace officer, he was sued for allegedly not turning over fees collected as part of his duty that were meant to fund local schools. “As a young widower became negligent in his duties, finding himself under attachment from Barton County in January 1871 for a failure to account for funds

³⁷ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp, Outlaw of the Cherokee Nation,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, 99-114. (Denton: University of North Texas Press.,2019), 100.

³⁸ “How I Routed a Gang of Arizona Outlaws” by Wyatt Earp, box 978, folder 13, Glenn D. Shirley Western Americana Collection, RC2006-068, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 2.

he had received as constable.”³⁹ Not something covered during Wyatt’s later conversations with biographers and authors, Wyatt would flee Missouri and life choices became quite an issue as he reeled from the life shattering loss of his wife and child. “Wyatt Earp, now 22, left Lamar, either grief-stricken over the loss of his wife or escaping possible prosecution for fraud, and would end up in Indian Territory, now eastern Oklahoma.”⁴⁰

Indian Territory

Wyatt Earp’s stint in modern day Oklahoma and Arkansas was brief, but exciting. Suffering imaginable loss, Wyatt made some interesting choices on his journey to rediscover himself. The happy life he imagined in Lamar was gone, his wife and unborn child are dead, and he is facing criminal charges, causing him to leave Missouri behind and venture out on his own. Within two weeks of escaping Lamar, Wyatt found himself in Indian Territory where he was arrested and charged with horse theft, which was a substantial crime in the American West. “Wyatt, Kennedy and Shown, during a period of drinking on or about March 28, 1871, decided to commit larceny near Ft. Gibson in the Cherokee Nation.”⁴¹ Wyatt and co-defendants Ed Kennedy and John Shown stole two horses from William Keys, valuing a total of \$200. This first arrest of Wyatt Earp resulted in him spending over a week in jail. Unable to post bail, having no intention of serving more time in jail, he decided not to stick around to hear the judge’s ruling. Wyatt did the only logical thing he could think of, sold all his stuff and escaped jail, fleeing yet another state. “If Wyatt had been convicted of horse theft, he likely would have been sentenced to five years in the federal penitentiary in Little Rock.”⁴² Interesting enough, the only co-

³⁹ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp, Outlaw of the Cherokee Nation,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, 99-114. (Denton: University of North Texas Press.,2019), 101.

⁴⁰ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 5.

⁴¹ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp, Outlaw of the Cherokee Nation,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, 99-114. (Denton: University of North Texas Press.,2019), 102.

⁴² Andrew C. Isenberg, *Wyatt Earp A Vigilante Life*, (New York: Hill and Wang Publishing, 2013), 84.

defendant, Ed Kennedy, stood trial and was found Not Guilty by a Grand Jury. Wyatt Earp's short-lived stint in Indian territory, modern day eastern Oklahoma, lasted only a few weeks, was eventful, and highlights the willingness to participate in less than legal activities beginning at an early age.

Wyatt Earp in the Sex Industry

Fleeing his second state within a matter of months, Wyatt found his way to Peoria Illinois, joined once again by his brothers James and Morgan. James, a lesser-known older brother in the Earp clan, operated in the world of saloons and brothels and was in the background in Wyatt's future endeavors in Kansas and Arizona. Sex work in the Wild West was common and often regulated, deemed an essential aspect of boomtowns of the frontier and its legality was fluid and depended on time and place. "The rise of prostitution in mid-nineteenth-century America owed itself to more than war and the demographics created by extractive industries; it also reflected a general shifting of standards of nineteenth-century sexual behavior."⁴³ In 1870s Peoria, the laws were loose and gave those who operated in prostitution and gambling a place to thrive, allowing for the Wyatt and Morgan to take up enforcement jobs at the brothel. Wyatt, a huge fan of boxing, always preferred handling physical altercations with his hands rather than a gun, a trait that would stick with him through most of his life. "The fundamental reason that Lake did not present Wyatt as a frontier Prince Hal who progressed from lawbreaking youth to lawgiving adulthood was that Wyatt did not encourage such an interpretation and, unlike Shakespeare's character, he never repented of his misspent youth."⁴⁴

Wyatt and his younger brother Morgan were arrested by local police together on multiple occasions in connection with their activity in brothels. "The amount of the fines levied against

⁴³ Andrew C. Isenberg, *Wyatt Earp A Vigilante Life*, (New York: Hill and Wang Publishing, 2013), 88.

⁴⁴ Andrew C. Isenberg, 2.

Wyatt and Morgan suggest that the arresting officers considered them to be sex traffickers and charged them as such.⁴⁵ Wyatt Earp may not have been a sex trafficker in the vein of the stereotypical 1970's Starky and Hutch street pimp Huggy Bear Brown, but his job did require him to enforce the house rules and protect the employees of the establishment. Taking up residency at the local brothel of Madam Jane Haspel, Wyatt and Morgan would spend the next two years working in vice before Wyatt headed south to Kansas in 1874. This brief time in the grand scheme of Wyatts life highlights his adaptability, physical attributes, and the capitalistic mindset of "seeking to profit from human weakness and need."⁴⁶

The circumstances that dictated the Earps leaving Peoria are not exact, possibly just tired of getting arrested and paying fines, Wyatt, a woman named Sally who identified as Sally Earp and Wyatt's wife, whom may just have been a prostitute that took the last name of her enforcer for protection, joined his brother Jame and his wife Bessie in heading south to Wichita, Kansas.

Kansas -Where Wyatt Earp Becomes Wyatt Earp

Wyatt's career in law enforcement may have technically begun as a town constable in Lamar Missouri, but Wyatt became a lawman when he became a part time officer in the Kansas cattle towns of Wichita and Dodge City. Though the reason for his arrival in Kansas was to join his brother James, who was running a bar and brothel, Wyatt gained a part time law enforcement position that signaled a turning point in Wyatt becoming the virtuous law enforcement officer, or so the story goes. The facts point to Wyatt as an opportunist, a man who was looking for the best possible avenue for economic advancement and decided to place himself in position to make himself a viable candidate for a law enforcement position.

⁴⁵ Roger Jay, "The Peoria Bummer: Wyatt Earp's Lost Year," in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 117.

⁴⁶ Roger Jay, "The Peoria Bummer: Wyatt Earp's Lost Year," in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 122.

Wichita was overrun by cowboys from Texas as they arrived with their herds and the town needed seasonal help with law enforcement. Wyatt, doing his best to stay out of jail, joined a posse and helped track down a thief, placing himself in the good graces of law enforcement and the local community at large for the first time. Earp accepted the position as deputy and earned praise for his service and garnering a positive reputation as a law enforcement officer. “He was neither dishonest nor murderous when he patrolled the streets of Wichita, and he was alert enough to be aware of criminals who might be passing through the area. He was both competent and effective.”⁴⁷ A local newspaper, *The Wichita City Eagle*, praised Earp for his efforts in the summer of 1878, “Wyatt Earp is doing his duty as Assistant Marshal in a very creditable manner. Adding new laurels to his splendid record every day.”⁴⁸ Like much of his life though, his time in Wichita would come to an eventful end when he confronted and physically assaulted a political rival, resulting in Wyatt being levied a fine of “\$32 for the assault, the highest single fine anyone had been assessed in police court up to that time,”⁴⁹ effectively ending his stay in Wichita.

Did Wyatt leave Wichita because he lost his job as a law enforcement officer, or was he following his brother James, once again, or maybe both? Wichita’s economic prospects were on the down turn and “Dodge became a destination of choice for the underworld, defined not in the modern sense of gangsterdom, though gangsters of various stripes did account for a portion of the invading host.”⁵⁰ Using the reputation garnered from his work in Wichita, Wyatt accepted the title of assistant City Marshall before arriving. Dodge City was a big stop in Earp’s story, here he would meet long life friends Bat Masterson, a fellow famous Western lawman, and John “Doc”

⁴⁷ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 13.

⁴⁸ *The Wichita City Eagle*. (Wichita, KS), Jun. 27, 1878, 3.

⁴⁹ Roger Jay, “Wyatt Earp, Wichita Policeman, Part Two,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 159.

⁵⁰ Roger Jay, “The Dodge City Underworld,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 189.

Holliday, lifelong friend and a man who Wyatt would credit with saving his life. “And poor Bat Masterson, and the world, wondered long, long years at the loyalty of Wyatt Earp for the stranger who proved his friend”⁵¹ The bond Wyatt forged with his friends was special, creating lifelong connections on which he could always rely. Both Masterson and Holliday would have roles in future events that made the Earp name famous.

The most fabled friendship in Wild West history, Earp and Holliday, began unceremoniously, with a chance meeting while Wyatt was searching for a fugitive in Texas. “They met in Fort Griffin, Texas, in the winter of 1877-78. There was nothing particularly memorable about it.”⁵² Wyatt and Doc were both gamblers, Earp looked more the role of Western figure, but Holliday quickly garnered a reputation as someone who did not back down from trouble, two individuals who may not have been more different. Doc’s arrival in Dodge City before the cattle season of 1878 was designed to take advantage of the influx of cowboys at the card tables who were high off their cattle sales and full of cash. No significant run ins between Wyatt and Doc would happen until, in the fall of 1878, a few months after Doc’s arrival, “Earp found himself facing a group of rowdy drovers alone. His pistol was holstered, and his life in real danger.”⁵³ Holliday, playing cards at a saloon, heard the excitement and looked outside to notice Earp outmanned and outgunned. Obtaining another pistol from the dealer of the card game, Doc stepped outside with two pistols drawn, distracting the rowdy cowboys long enough for Wyatt to be able to draw his gun and regain control of the situation. Wyatt never forgot this moment and from that day forward, the names Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday would be

⁵¹ John H. Flood, Wyatt Earp, (Tombstone: Old West Research & Publishing L.L.C., 2011), Edited by Don Taylor. 36.

⁵² Gary L. Roberts, “Brothers of the Gun: Wyatt and Doc,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 227.

⁵³ Gary L. Roberts, “Brothers of the Gun: Wyatt and Doc,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 228.

synonymous with one another. No other true incident of note would happen in the streets of Dodge City while Wyatt was there, but that does not mean he did not make the news. “Miss Frankie Bell, who wears the belt for superiority in point of muscular ability, heaped epithets upon the unoffending head of Mr. Earp to such an extent as to provoke a slap from the ex-officer, besides creating a disturbance of the quiet and dignity of the city, for which she received a night’s lodging in the dog house and a reception at the police court next morning, the expense of which was about \$20.00. Wyatt Earp was assessed the lowest limit of the law, one dollar.”⁵⁴

Leaving in the winter of 1879 and following his brothers James and Virgil to Arizona, Wyatt quit his law enforcement gig in hopes of striking it rich in Tombstone’s silver mining boom. Ditching his badge for the opportunity to strike it rich in another venture, Wyatt had no intention of returning to law enforcement, hoping to gamble and stake claims in the silver mining industry. The Earps were heading to Tombstone, where the name of Wyatt Earp became nationally known for the first time and the most famous 30 seconds in Wild West and American history would occur.

Infamy in Tombstone

The most famous boomtown of the Wild West, Tombstone Arizona is the catalyst for the mythology surrounding Wyatt Earp. Without the events that transpired here, the town and Wyatt Earp would not hold the significance they do in the history of the western United States. Silver, gambling, and lastly law enforcement was on the mind of the Earp brothers as they entered the scene. “Wyatt Earp was thirty years old when he arrived in the city of silver and six-shooters”.⁵⁵ Arriving with his four brothers, Warren, James, Virgil, and Morgan, Wyatt initially had little to

⁵⁴ *Dodge City Times*, (Dodge City, KS), Jul. 21, 1877, 4.

⁵⁵ Walter Noble Burns, *Tombstone An Iliad of the Southwest*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1929), 46.

no interest in picking up a badge again, instead his eyes were on silver mines, stagecoaches, and gambling, specifically dealing Faro a popular card game at the time. “Wyatt Earp didn’t go to Tombstone in the Arizona Territory looking for trouble, but he found it in spades.”⁵⁶ Wyatt himself stated that, “I am going to Tombstone but I don’t want to be a deputy sheriff.”⁵⁷ His desire to not pick up a badge again quickly diminished, the hopes of capitalistic ventures were not as plentiful, he was forced to accept the position of deputy sheriff for Pima County. According to Wyatt’s life-long friend Bat Masterson, “at Tucson he had accepted a commission as deputy sheriff for Pima County. He was active in this capacity, which included collecting taxes, a lucrative job for the sheriff and Deputy Earp.”⁵⁸ Virgil Earp then soon became the town marshal for Tombstone, thrusting the Earps, along with one of Wyatt’s platonic life partners, Doc Holliday, into conflict with the local organized crime syndicate dubbed the Cowboys, culminating in the most famous shootout of the Wild West, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Virgil, the closest resemblance of a career law enforcement officer of the family, was the only brother to continuously hold and maintain positions as a peace officer, inspiring some of the credit Wyatt would later receive from authors and historians.

Wyatt’s initial reluctance to pursue or continue his law enforcement career in Tombstone shows his lack of commitment to upholding law and order and confirms that his time carrying a badge and gun was more about the economic upside. Earp comfort operating on the margins also reflects in the events leading to the gunfight that made him and the town famous. Colluding with

⁵⁶ “Wyatt Earp Tells of the Gunfight Near the O.K. Corral” by John Richard Stephens, box 978, folder 15, Glenn D. Shirley Western Americana Collection, RC2006-068, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁵⁷ John H. Flood, Wyatt Earp, (Tombstone: Old West Research & Publishing L.L.C., 2011), Edited by Don Taylor. 65.

⁵⁸ Tilgham, Zoe A., Spotlight, Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp as U.S. Deputy Marshals, box 250, folder 6, Glenn D. Shirley Western Americana Collection, RC2006-068, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Ike Clanton to set up his own associates for arrest by Earp so that he may gain a political advantage over John Behan, a man whose job and fiancé Wyatt pursued, set the wheels in motion. Ike, drunk and paranoid, fueled the fire that was burning even before his secret deal with Wyatt. With death threats flying and confrontation certain, Wyatt, his brothers Morgan and Virgil, and Doc Holliday walked down toward the empty lot near the O.K. Corral ready for a fight. Thirty seconds, three dead men, began a war between two factions. What followed was a failed assassination attempt on Virgil Earp, a successful assassination of Morgan Earp, and then Wyatt Earp's Vendetta Ride. No attempt to arrest, Earp and his comrades set out on a killing spree in the name of justice, but he just used the badge to kill the men he believed killed one brother and maimed another.

Wyatt fled Arizona, he did not leave under his own free will, he was a wanted man for murder. The man whose entire legacy has been based on the initial story of him being some morally upright lawman who cleaned up Tombstone, and Dodge City before that, could have very easily been tried and hanged for his crimes.

Lost in the Wilderness

After leaving Arizona as wanted men, Earp and his group eventually made their way to Colorado. The Vendetta Ride left behind dead bodies, a fugitive marshal, and a political nightmare as the newspapers picked sides with the Republican led papers vilifying Wyatt and questioning his actions. "While vengeance certainly served as a motivation for Wyatt Earp, he believed that he had little choice but to kill, not to capture, the men who maimed one of his brothers and murdered another because the courts could not effectively deal with the outlaws."⁵⁹ Late April 1882, the Earps arrived in Gunnison, Colorado, where they hoped to hear word of a

⁵⁹ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. New York, 1997), 249.

pardon, that never came, so they may return to Tombstone. During this brief stint, Doc Holliday, rumored to have a minor falling out with Wyatt due to a remark toward Josephine's Jewish heritage, was arrested in Denver. News made it back to Arizona, where a halfhearted attempt to extradite the wanted men fell short, leaving the Earps and Holliday as basically free men.

Wyatt and Josephine did not stay in Colorado long. Earp dealt Faro at Bat Masterson's saloon for a couple of weeks and was associated with a gold brick scheme in which they allegedly attempted to swindle a German tourist. The Earps left Colorado for greener pastures, northern California and the San Francisco Bay area. By this time, Josephine began going by the last name of Earp, Wyatt ran a horse stable and gained quite a reputation as a gambler. Again, this stop was not a long one, within a year of moving to California, the Earps would be on the move again, back to Colorado to capitalize on a silver and gold mining boom in Silverton. First of what will be a lengthy list of boomtowns the Earps would find themselves in, Silverton was just a pitstop on the Earps western journey.

A return to Dodge City, this time on a peace keeping mission to help a former friend and saloon owner, Luke Short. What was known as the Dodge City War went off without a shot in part due to Wyatt's advocacy for Short, resulting in the Governor pressuring the mayor to reopen the saloons and gambling halls. "As Earp told the story, his train arrived in Dodge at 10 a.m., and he marched up Front Street followed by an armed posse of Johny Milsap, Shotgun Collins, Texas Jack Vermillion, and Johny Green, called "Crooked-Mouth" because a bullet passed through his cheek."⁶⁰ The conflict between the two parties went off without a shot being fired, with the presence of Earp being a contributing factor as a mediator between the two sides.

⁶⁰ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 272.

After successfully helping peacefully end the conflict, the Earps were on the move once again. Eagle City, Idaho was the next landing spot, another mining boomtown. Here we have another case of Wyatt using law enforcement employment to increase his likelihood of financial success. Earp held the title of deputy sheriff of Kootenai County, leading to many jurisdictional issues involving property rights and mining claims. This short stint in law enforcement also came with corruption allegations as once again Wyatt was alleged to have been the mastermind behind a fraud scheme involving mining claims. By fall of 1884, Wyatt and Sadie were once again on the move, Idaho was no longer booming, and the two headed back to Colorado in 1885. “One day, in the lobby of the Tabor Hotel where they were staying, Earp was startled by the wobbly approach of a frail but familiar man. It was his old friend Dr. John Holliday.”⁶¹ A final goodbye between men who are eternally linked through the mythology associated with the Wild West, Doc would die alone in the Glenwood Springs Hotel in Glenwood Springs, Colorado two years later.

In 1886, the nomadic Earps arrived back in Southern California, San Diego to be precise. San Diego was particularly good to the Earps, with Wyatt and Sadie capitalizing on the thriving real estate market, they were able to purchase multiple saloons and gambling halls. The market fell flat the following year, but the Earps stayed, and Wyatt was able to pursue his interest in horse racing. “In San Diego, he started with trotting horses, the ones that pull carts called sulkies,”⁶² before convincing his partner Eli Gifford into purchasing a racehorse named Jim Leach. Jim Leach provided Wyatt with wins and notoriety, fueling his passion for horseracing that carried into his later years. This is peak Wyatt. No interest in law enforcement, operating on

⁶¹ Roger S. Peterson, “Wyatt Earp- The Boomtown Sport,” in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 515.

⁶² Roger S. Peterson, 515.

the margins of society by operating saloons, gambling halls, and being either involved or near brothels. San Diego was just another stop on the fantastic voyage of Wyatt and Sadie, either due to the bursting bubble of the real estate market or the terrible gambling habits of Josephine, they returned to San Francisco in 1891. While he had no issue with gambling, claiming it as a profession for many years, he grew tiresome of Sadie's freehandedness and her constant need to borrow money from family friends, typically placing Wyatt in the position of having to retrieve jewelry that she used as collateral.

The Crooked Ref and The Last Boomtowns

Wyatt Earp no longer relied on his reputation as a former officer and instead was known more as a sportsman and gambler. Not long after returning to San Francisco, Wyatt lost the ability to own and racehorses due to the economic losses he occurred on his San Diego properties, so he returned to manage a Santa Rosa stable where he raced on the behalf of the owner. The Earps were excessive gamblers, and Wyatt could not help but keep himself from making a scene in every stop on his search for the American Dream. That opportunity came as Wyatt was a last-minute addition to what was billed as a boxing match for the heavyweight championship of the world.

The Fitzsimmons- Sharkey fight was a major national event and now Wyatt Earp was the special guest referee. The events of Tombstone brought little national attention, and Wyatt was regionally recognized, and this prizefight was truly the national debut for the character of Wyatt Earp. The marquee boxing matchup of the year, the champion Fitzsimmons was favored and there was major money being bet on the fight. Wyatt had thirty fights under his belt as a referee, but not of this magnitude. Lots of questions arise from Earps' involvement in the first place, with rumors of corruption and a fix being in play. Wyatt was not known as a man of character, having

built up quite the reputation that gave many probable cause to believe that his insertion into this match as reason to believe something fishy could happen.

Something fishy happened. Wyatt first caused a stir by wearing his gun to the ring, causing a lengthy delay while local law enforcement had to confiscate the weapon. As the fight progressed, Fitzsimmons dominated the underdog Sharkey. Clearly the better fighter, Fitzsimmons, hit Sharkey with his trademark punch to the chest and followed up with a shot to the body, causing Sharkey to hit the mat, claiming he had been hit below the belt. Wyatt stepped in and called for the foul on Fitzsimmons and awarded the fight to Sharkey. The crowd was enraged and rained down boos and obscenities toward Wyatt while Sharkey was being carried away from the ring. The next day, the local papers had a field day assessing what they believed happened the night before.⁶³ “The alleged gunfighter, Wyatt Earp, who is best known as the bodyguard of Long Green Lawrence, of the Examiner, robbed Bob Fitzsimmons of a well-earned victory over Tom Sharkey in the most barefaced manner last night.” The fix was in. Wyatt played his role and his introduction to the national media market portrayed him as a crooked official at a time when people knew truly little of him. Fitzsimmons contested the decision in court, unveiling a conspiracy amongst the promoters to control the outcome of the fight. Regardless of the evidence, the judges ruled that prizefighting was illegal in San Francisco so there was no decision for the court to make.

With no consequences coming from the fixed boxing match controversy, Wyatt set his sights on the north. Gold in the Klondike meant one last boomtown for the Earps, initially attempting to reach Alaska in 1897, “Wyatt Earp, whose career as a fighting man in the palmy and riotous days of Tombstone, Ariz., gained him a national reputation, the luster of which has

⁶³ “Fitzsimmons Was Robbed. Knocked Out Tom Sharkey but Lost on an Alleged Foul. Referee Earp Gave a Raw Decision,” *The San Francisco Call*. (San Francisco, CA), Dec. 3, 1896, 1.

been dimmed only by his later achievement in the Sharkey-Fitzsimmons fight, is going to Dawson City, where it is supposed by the famous gambler-fighter and friends who are backing him that there will be millions to be made this winter if the cards are properly handled.”⁶⁴ A major freeze caused delays that resulted in them not arriving in Nome until 1899. Nome at the time of the Earps’ arrival was quaint. Two blocks wide and five miles long, the couple struggled to find reasonable accommodation, taking up lodging in a shack a few minutes away from the action. Wyatt did well in Nome, partnering with Charles E. Hoxie, opening the premier saloon in town. Dexter Saloon was the top-of-the-line saloon and first two-story wooden building in Nome. “Earp has in Nome a combination saloon, clubroom, and hotel. He is making money perhaps faster than he ever made it before.”⁶⁵ The Dexter also participated in the sex trade with its upstairs ‘clubrooms’ brothel and prizefighting in which Wyatt himself would referee. Earp’s successful saloon venture did not stop him from getting into minor trouble while in Nome, being arrested multiple times for offenses that did not result in any sort of trouble for Wyatt.

What we know about Wyatt is that there was never enough success. Hoping to expand his saloon and gambling ventures in Seattle, where he faced stiff opposition from locals who wanted to keep him out of their business. Though he tried to open and operate a saloon, the state of Washington stepped in and intervened, pushing out of Seattle and back to Alaska where they would spend the next year and a half. Back in Nome, Josephine and Wyatt capitalized on their successful saloon as the population of the town boomed. Mining was no longer the major business of the city, saloon and gambling operations were where the big money was generated, fitting right into Wyatt’s capitalistic wheelhouse. Wyatt made his final fortune Nome. In 1901, Josephine once again got pregnant and the Earps sold their stake in the Dexter and moved back

⁶⁴ “Wyatt Earp Going to Alaska,” *The Silver State*. (Unionville, NV), Aug. 7, 1897, 3.

⁶⁵ *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, (Seattle, WA), Nov. 13, 1899, 6.

to California with what would be millions of dollars in modern money. “Wyatt and Josie returned from Alaska to California in 1901 to wander the ester deserts on seasonal prospecting expeditions.”⁶⁶ Minus a few months in a boomed-out boomtown in Nevada, California was the last stop for Wyatt Earp.

Say Goodbye to Hollywood

The nomadic Earps stumbled around the southwestern desert for a couple of years before formally landing in the Los Angeles area of southern California. Wyatt learned of gold and copper mining opportunities near the town of Vidal in the Whipple Mountains, staking dozens of claims in the area in 1905. “Walter Abrams, Wyatt Earp and others have gone into Whippie mountains, below Needles, on a mining and prospecting expedition.”⁶⁷ Purchasing the only home they ever owned, Josephine and Wyatt spent the winters working their claims in Vidal and spent the summers in rented spaces in Los Angeles, where Wyatt would introduce himself to the world of motion pictures. His early days back in Los Angeles saw him working for the police department, where he was paid to do illegal things in the name of justice. On the other end of the spectrum, it would not be exceedingly long until Wyatt also saw himself on the wrong side of the law, getting arrested for vagrancy in an attempted crooked faro game. “Wyatt Earp, a well-known old time sporting man and famous gun man of Arizona was arrested here last night on having attempted to fleece J.Y. Peterson, a reality broker, by means of a fake faro bank gambling plot, will be prosecuted for vagrancy.”⁶⁸ As we have learned about Wyatt Earp, he was ever the

⁶⁶ “The Earps Last Frontier- Wyatt and Virgil Earp in the Nevada Mining Camps 1902-1905” by Jeffrey M. Kintop and Guy Louis Rocha, box 978, folder 14, Glenn D. Shirley Western Americana Collection, RC2006-068, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁶⁷ *Mohave County Miner*. (Mineral Park, AZ), Jun. 17, 1905, 3.

⁶⁸ “Wyatt Earp, Vagrant,” *The Arizona Sentinel*, (Yuma, AZ), Jul. 27, 1911, 2.

opportunist, and began visiting film sets, befriending important directors and film stars, and consulting on possibly dozens of pictures, all in the hopes of getting his story told.

American popular culture's love of the Wild West was where Wyatt knew his best shot at a favorable legacy laid. Wyatt very well may have been simply looking for a job, or had an affinity of the motion picture world, but it's also as logical that he viewed it as a long game where he could sell the rights to his life story and bypass the history books and thrust his name into Western lore. It's unknown exactly how many silent westerns or films in general that Wyatt consulted on due to the crediting laws of the era, but we do know that he rubbed shoulders with some motion picture big wigs. Visiting sets of popular directors Allen Dwan and John Ford, Wyatt made himself recognizable, making sure to always leave an impression. His charm is an underappreciated aspect of his survival skills, possessing the ability to fit in regardless of any apparent misconceptions to the contrary.

Wyatt Earp is now a film consultant and making friends with huge figures in the movie industry. The man who battled Texas cowboys in Kansas and survived the gunfight at the O.K. Coral, is now getting firsthand knowledge of how the popular narrations of these stories did not need to come from journalist or historians, they can be forged by writers and directors and fed directly into minds of the audience. Earp also famously befriended the two biggest western stars of the era, Tom Mix and William S. Hart, Wyatt pleaded with Hart to tell his story so the public could vindicate the negative perception of him. Earp's understanding of the popularity of Westerns in popular culture gave him one last chance to bet on himself.

Aware of his reputation as laid out by others, Wyatt lacked something crucial to provide a movie producer, he needed his story on paper. The first attempt to document the life of Wyatt Earp was undertaken by John Flood, former mining engineer and friend. Flood had no

formal training, and his writing style caused a major issue in the ability for the manuscript to get published. Josephine also influenced the manuscript. Her desire for a positive portrayal of Wyatt's life and may have requested to have stories embellished or to help the narrative. After completion, Flood's was unpublishable and was passed on by every publisher it was presented to. William S. Hart wrote a letter to a publisher with hopes of influencing their decision to no avail. Brief dialogue with author Walter Noble Burns followed, with little coming of their talks.

Two years before Earp died, he began speaking with Stuart N. Lake, author and former journalist. "Wyatt Earp was persuaded to devote the closing months of his long life to the narration of his full story, to a firsthand and factual account of his career."⁶⁹ The Wyatt Earp, as known in popular culture, was created in this moment. Someone with the ability to document, and as we learn, greatly embellish the life of the character recognized today as an American icon and prominent figure of Wild West history. Lake's biography released two years after Earp's death in 1931, entitled *Frontier Marshal*, it popularized Wyatt, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Though the character of Wyatt played a very minor role in the Wild Bill Hickock movie while Earp was alive, the popularity of Lake's book propelled the character to the lead role of dozens of future film and television adaptations.

The death of Wyatt Earp on January 13, 1929, was surprisingly uneventful for the life that he led. "Wyatt Earp, slim, erect, forceful, last of the frontier gunmen whose guns blazed on the side of law and order, died peacefully in his Hollywood home in the arms of his wife early today."⁷⁰ Complications with a urinary tract infection was his ultimate downfall and not some gunfight might seem anticlimactic for a man of like Earp, which is probably right. Local papers

⁶⁹Stuart N. Lake *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), ix.

⁷⁰ George Shaffer, "FAMOUS FRONTIER GUNMAN IS DEAD AT HOLLYWOOD." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963) Jan. 14, 1929, 3.

announced his death, “Another of the picturesque old-times who feared nothing under the sun, passes with the death of Wyatt Earp, who died peacefully at his home in Los Angeles Sunday, surrounded by all the conveniences and comforts of modern civilization.”⁷¹ Wyatt outlived his friends, his enemies and the Wild West itself, died without ever knowing if his final bet cashed in. Wyatt Earp processed the capitalistic mindset, physical prowess, and ability to adapt to the needs of any given time or place, giving himself the best prospect of financial prosperity.

Wyatt In Perspective

Wyatt Earp, searched everywhere for his piece of the American Dream, using the skills, tools and knowledge base necessary to be successful in this exact time and place. The Wyatt that has come to symbolize law and order in the American West, regardless of how ill-fitting, is curated and only provides a glimpse into the complex life of Wyatt Earp. According to Casey Tefertiller, the modern authority on Earp, “the real Wyatt led a life that was authentically Western.”⁷² An authentic life, not just the one portrayed in movies and television series, offers a glimpse at the real Wild West, and the reality of what men were willing to do to get ahead or survive, the moral ambiguity associated with life on the frontier, and multitude of ways to make money in the boomtowns the dotted the western United States. Wyatt Earp was ‘A Jack of All Trades’ or ‘Renaissance Man’ if we can focus specifically on skills, characteristics and talents necessary to be successful and survive in one of the most dangerous eras of United States history, while reducing privileged advantages such as education and social status, due to their diminished relevance. Anyone could make it rich in the West. Where Wyatt lacked formal education, much like many of his contemporaries in Western lore, he made up for it in life experiences in fields that symbolize what a figure of Western lore should be. Wyatt’s ability to adapt to the ever-

⁷¹ “Wyatt Earp Passes,” *Imperial Valley Press*, (El Centro, CA), Jan. 15, 1929, 4.

⁷² Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 2.

changing social necessities of the town or situation he found himself in granted him to do something most of his generation did not do, live into old age. “He had been roughly moulded by the frontier and he had the frontier’s simplicity and strength, its sophistication and resourcefulness, its unillusioned self-sufficiency.”⁷³ Earp did not have a golden sense of justice and was not some virtuous frontier lawman, he routinely strayed the path and found himself on the opposite side of the law on many occasions throughout his entire life, ironically a positive in how I am defining his title. Arrested multiples times, as well as alleged involvement in several other schemes, Wyatt dabbled in every profession, or status, popular culture identifies when thinking of the Wild West. From saloon and brothel operations to mining and gambling, participating in law enforcement and fleeing states as a wanted man, Wyatt Earp may have understood better than most what pursuing the American Dream meant during the era that has gone on to define American culture, the Wild West.

The Wyatt of modern popular culture is more complex, though still not popularly or academically considered a bad guy or outlaw, with his actions that ventured outside of the selective morality he displayed while wearing a badge, usually being underemphasized when it comes to discussing Wyatt’s character. Understanding that the American Dream of the Wild West was built on a foundation on upward financial mobility through self-reliance and determination, he did not mind venturing outside what may be legal to make money and survive the harsh existence of life on the frontier. As we will see, Wyatt lived a very eventful and adventurous life, a trait passed on to all his children by Nicholas Earp, the patriarch of the Earp clan and veteran on the Mexican American War.

⁷³ Walter Noble Burns, *Tombstone An Iliad of the Southwest*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1929), 46.

Wyatt Earp is a prop in popular culture, a symbol of American exceptionalism and moral virtue as this courageous law enforcement officer set out to tame the Wild West. Wyatt was simply a survivor who fought for his piece of the American Dream, be that wearing a badge or not. His survival depended on circumstance and his ability to profit from the situation, and often that placed him in the grey areas of the law and social norms. The honest, tough normalization of figures that have transcended history into popular culture helps bring a better understanding of their lives and the world in which their reality is based.

Wyatt Earp's cremated remains were laid to rest in the Marcus family plot where he was joined by his final life partner Josephine Marcus in 1944.

Chapter Three-

The Myth

Wyatt Earp is a quintessential Western figure though his life and legacy are typically limited to a singular aspect of his life, his days as a lawman, more specifically in Tombstone, Arizona. A blessing and a curse, Wyatt Earp lived to old age, leaving no chance to be romanticized in death like many of his contemporary Western figures before him. He spent final years living part time in Los Angeles, where he decided his final gamble was to tell his story, from his perspective, in hopes of changing the negative views that were written about him during his lifetime. Stuart N. Lake, Earp mythmaker, wrote, “The Old West cannot be understood unless Wyatt Earp is also understood.”⁷⁴ Though Lake’s work is problematic in Earp historical circles, Wyatt Earp represents the qualities, attributes, and personality characteristics of the Wild West, and understanding Earp’s life gives us thoughtful insight to the realities of the American West. Lake was not a historian, he understood the same thing Wyatt did, the Western genre was still profitable and Earp’s story, specifically his time in Tombstone and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, was one the public could rally around. Historians and journalists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had mixed feelings about Wyatt, his life, his career, the events of October 26, 1881, and subsequent vendetta. Earp, unable to sway the scholarly debate, recognized the value of Western movies’ impact on popular culture. Proximity to the Hollywood film industry during his final days living in Los Angeles, California, Earp wandered on to sets and productions, offering his expertise. Unable to ever know how many movies Wyatt consulted on, he knew his final shot at affecting his legacy laid on the big screen.

⁷⁴ Stuart N. Lake, *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), viii.

The mythology of the Wild West that has permeated American popular culture parallels the historical narrative closely. So close that they are interchangeable. The same goes for Wyatt Earp's exploits in the Arizona desert. Tombstone and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral have become embedded into American culture, not because of the historical significance, instead as a symbol of frontier justice in the Wild West. The symbolism of the Wild West in popular culture was not something lost on Earp, who desperately worked toward promoting his version of events to anyone who listened, especially to those he met in the motion picture industry. Wyatt placed his final bet on us, the audience.

Wyatt Earp Escapes the History Book

Wyatt Earp is a problematic historical figure. Merely a part time law enforcement officer, spent decades as a wanted man for murder in Arizona and he often claimed his profession to be either gambler or capitalist. His last noteworthy accomplishment was being accused of being a crooked referee in a championship boxing match. Wyatt became weary of his reputation and began to actively attempt to speak up and provide an account of the events of his life. Living in Los Angeles, Earp witnessed the rise of the Hollywood film industry as "live spectacle soon became filmed spectacle. American history and the American cinema were inevitably fused, especially when it came to depictions of the post- Civil War Old West. By 1909, the genre had come to dominate the American film market, and Western films were being produced in great numbers to satisfy public demand."⁷⁵ A fan of motion pictures, Earp observed the trend and came up with the idea of getting his name on the big screen and allowing the public to dictate his legacy. Gower Gulch, the popular corner of Sunset Boulevard and Gower Street in which Western extras gathered to obtain daily work, was the starting place for Earp, meeting several

⁷⁵ Mary Lea Bandy, and Kevin Stoebr, *Ride, Boldly Ride the Evolution of the American Western*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 19-20.

important people to tell his stories. “Directors Alan Dwan, John Ford and Raoul Walsh all sought him out.”⁷⁶ By the 1920’s, Wyatt Earp was consulting on movie productions, making friends with the top Western stars, Tom Mix and William S. Hart, and was actively seeking help in dictating his life to paper. “Wyatt Earp had a great story, but nobody in Tinseltown seemed to want it, or see the potential, not even his actor buddies William S. Hart and Tom Mix.”⁷⁷ Working with Hart on the 1923 film *Wild Bill Hickock*, dedicated to Earp friend and idol of Hart, Bat Masterson, Wyatt served as a technical advisor in the first on screen appearance of the character Wyatt Earp. The only appearance of his character Wyatt ever saw went uncredited and failed to gain momentum for any more projects focused on his character or story.

In either 1918 or 1919, Wyatt Earp met with Forrestine Cooper Hooker in hopes of writing his biography. What would become the “Hooker Manuscript,” went unpublished until Tombstone City Historian, Don Taylor, edited a copy of the manuscript titled, *An Arizona Vendetta: The Truth About Wyatt Earp and Some Others*, publishing these conversations in 2010. Forrestine, daughter to old Earp friend Henry Hooker, who helped Wyatt and his group during the infamous Vendetta Ride, met Wyatt in Los Angeles while she was writing young adult themed novels based on her childhood and life in the Arizona frontier. The Hooker account does not add anything new to the Wyatt Earp story, besides being his first attempt at dictating his life story to a professional writer. By 1923, Earp grew frustrated with the coverage he received in Tombstone related articles and stories, “on July 7, 1923, Earp wrote a letter to his friend, William

⁷⁶ Paul Andrew Hutton, “Wyatt Earp’s First Film: William S. Hart’s Wild Bill Hickock,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 648-655, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 649.

⁷⁷ Bob Boze Bell, “Wyatt Earp in Hollywood: The Untold Story of How Wyatt Earp Got Ripped off by Outlaws in the Last Outlaw Town,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 641-647, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 643.

S. Hart,”⁷⁸ complaining about the wrong impressions and writers not being correctly informed about him, and specifically the events of Tombstone. Hart knew that if Wyatt had any chance of getting his story made into a movie, he would need it on paper first.

The failed Hooker biography behind him, Wyatt hired John Flood in the fall of 1923. Flood, an Earp friend, had no business being the personal stenographer for Wyatt Earp. “John Flood Jr. meant well, but he was an engineer, not a writer. Somehow, Sadie and Wyatt Earp got it in their heads that Flood could tell Wyatt’s story, and they could all get rich.”⁷⁹ This venture failed, miserably. No publisher touched it and none of the other authors who met or researched Wyatt used it in any capacity. It was finally published in 2011 in Tombstone through Old West Research & Publishing L.L.C., also edited by Tombstone City Don Taylor. Flood had no formal training in writing and was hired in large part due to Josephine’s assertion that Wyatt be cast in the best possible light, wanting no more bad press to come their way. 1923 is the same year that the character of Wyatt Earp made his big screen debut, “others will be Wyatt Earp, a famous marshal of old Dodge City,”⁸⁰ in *Wild Bill Hickock*, starring his friend William S. Hart. I assume that seeing someone play the character of Wyatt Earp invigorated Earp to keep developing his account into a publishable document.

Frank C. Lockwood, the Dean of the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences at the University of Arizona, was next to contact Earp in 1925. Compiling information for upcoming books on the history of Arizona, Lockwood reached out to Wyatt in hopes of gaining an

⁷⁸ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp Talks “Pretty”: A Look at Wyatt Earp’s Interaction with Interviewers, Writers, and Historians.” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 612-630. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 618.

⁷⁹ Bob Boze Bell, “Wyatt Earp in Hollywood: The Untold Story of How Wyatt Earp Got Ripped off by Outlaws in the Last Outlaw Town,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 641-647, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 645.

⁸⁰ “Bill Hart’s Own Story,” *Evening Star*. (Washington, DC), Jul. 29, 1923, 3.

interview or a written account of Earp's time in Tombstone. Wyatt initially rebuffed the historian's advances, finally agreeing to meet with Lockwood in November of 1926. "On Sunday, November 28th, along with his brother, Dr. Richard C. Lockwood, with whom he was staying in Pasadena, the two men visited Wyatt Earp at his Los Angeles residence where Frank Lockwood's lengthy interview with Earp was conducted."⁸¹ Lockwood left with a bad impression of Wyatt, Earp's retelling of the events of Tombstone disturbing. Lockwood could not comfortably place Wyatt on the side of either the forces of light or the forces of darkness- the only two categories as far as he was concerned."⁸² Wyatt Earp participated in gambling and saloon culture while wearing a badge in Tombstone, by the 1920's this duality of the Western lifestyle was no longer accepted or admired.

Another author was also taking a crack at the tough nut that was Wyatt Earp. Walter Noble Burns decided he was going to take on the tale of Tombstone and wanted to get Earp's perspective. Burns wrote multiple letters to Earp and even paid a visit to his Los Angeles home in the summer of 1926. "Burns had already earned a degree of fame with the publication of his *The Saga of Billy the Kid*. He was a top-level Chicago journalist who had spent much of his time covering the early years of the gangster era."⁸³ Wyatt was not as receptive to Burns as he was Lockwood, Hooker, or his personal biographer John Flood, seeming to be tired of the effort required to defend his reputation. By early summer of the following year, Wyatt made up his mind that he would answer some questions from Burns about Tombstone if Burns focused on Doc Holliday and not himself, deciding against giving him his whole life story, giving up on the

⁸¹ Roy B. Young, "Wyatt Earp Talks "Pretty": A Look at Wyatt Earp's Interaction with Interviewers, Writers, and Historians." In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 612-630. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 616.

⁸² Andrew C. Isenberg, *Wyatt Earp A Vigilante Life*, (New York: Hill and Wang Publishing, 2013), 212.

⁸³ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 323.

fight and wanting to be left alone. Upon visiting Tombstone, talking to survivors, witnesses, and combing through the town records, the story was there to be told with or without help from Wyatt. Earp evolved into the central character in Burns *Tombstone* through no fault of his own, showing the believers in Wyatt that with an accomplished and competent author, the character of Wyatt Earp could be a big hit. “Burns elevated the story of Tombstone to epic levels and, despite its romanticism, provided a compelling portrait of Wyatt Earp as the “the lion of Tombstone.”⁸⁴ The Earps were not happy, they missed out on capitalizing on the profitability of the story once again by not pursuing a better relationship with Burns, instead they insisted that Burns violated their trust by not sticking to the initial agreement that placed the attention on Doc Holliday. Violated trust of not, Burns provided readers with the beginnings of the mythology of Wyatt Earp, “the Earp-Clanton feud has passed into the melting pot of tradition in which so much frontier history has been changed into myth.”⁸⁵

William Breckenridge, former Tombstone deputy under Wyatt’s nemesis John Behan, presented his version of the events in the 1928 book, *Helldorado: Bringing the Law to the Mesquite*. On the opposite side of the Earp faction, Breckenridge provides an opposing perspective of the events surrounding the Earp brothers’ time in Tombstone and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. “The interesting period in Tombstone was during the fall of 1879, and the early eighties. In those few years Tombstone was born a mining town, lived a mining town, and died a mining town.”⁸⁶ This timetable coincides with the arrival of the Earps in the winter of 1879 until

⁸⁴ Gary L. Roberts, “The Real Tombstone Traveisty: The Earp Controversy from Bechdolt to Boyer,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 660-674, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 662.

⁸⁵ Walter Noble Burns, *Tombstone: An Iliad of the Southwest*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1929), 44.

⁸⁶ William Breckenridge, *Helldorado, Bringing the Law to the Mesquite*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 99.

their departure a few years later after the bloody war between the Earp faction and the loose affiliation of criminals of Southern Arizona. Breckenridge is incredibly open about his relationship with those aligned against Wyatt and his friends, due to what he believes is political tension between Earp and Behan due to their desire for the same law enforcement position. “The Tombstone city officers elected January 5, 1881, were John P. Clum, mayor, and Ben Sippy, city marshal. Sippy defeated Virgil Earp by forty votes. Some four- or five months later Sippy resigned from the office and Virgil Earp was appointed by the city council to fill his place. He at once had his brother Wyatt appointed as a deputy city marshal, another brother, Morgan appointed as a city policeman, and Doc Holliday as a special officer, thus making them all peace officers sworn to obey the laws and enforce them.”⁸⁷ The author speaks openly about his friendships with the Clantons, McLaurys, John Ringo and Curly Bill, all of whom were involved in either the gunfight at the O.K. Corral or the infamous Vendetta Ride. The author believes that the lead up to the gunfight at the O.K. Corral was also instigated by the Earp faction, stating, “it is my belief that the cowboys were not expecting a fight, as only Billy Clanton and Frank McLaury were armed. They had their pistols on, and their rifles were on their saddles.”⁸⁸ Indicating that the Earps and Holliday were at fault, the author repeatedly asserts his position by referencing the deaths of Billy Clanton and the McLaury brothers at the O.K. Corral as being murdered or killed. “From the time the McLaurys and Billy Clanton were killed there was continuous war between the two factions.”⁸⁹ Breckenridge, biased as he may be, provides an alternate perspective to Wyatt, the Earp brothers, Doc Holliday, and the whole dynamic within Tombstone and the most famous gunfight in Western history.

⁸⁷ William Breckenridge, *Helldorado, Bringing the Law to the Mesquite*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 120.

⁸⁸ William Breckenridge, 152.

⁸⁹ William Breckenridge, 155.

Wyatt Earp is on the brink of obscurity, a footnote in Arizona and Western history, as he enters the final years of his life. Not receiving the type of respect or recognition he and Sadie believed he deserved, Wyatt still did not have their story on paper, needing a coherent narrative that could be adapted into a motion picture, their plan was not working as they had hoped. On Christmas Day in 1927, former political correspondent and professional wrestling promoter Stuart N. Lake wrote Wyatt in hopes of collaborating on a biography. Earp was initially hesitant to speak to Lake, due to an illness as he suggested, or even reluctance due to prior bad experiences. Their initial meeting came mere months before the passing of Wyatt Earp in his Los Angeles home, almost living long enough to see his final gamble pay off.

Stuart N. Lake Enters the Chat

In an odd twist of fate, Bat Masterson, longtime friend of Wyatt Earp, moved east in 1902. Venturing to New York City to reinvent himself into a sports columnist at the New York Morning Telegraph, quite the change of pace for a famed Western lawman, Masterson met the acquaintance of Stuart N. Lake, reporter at the New York Herald, bestowing Old West lore during their interactions. Undoubtably Masterson spoke about one of his best friends, Wyatt Earp, pointing Lake in the direction of Wyatt more than a decade before the writer eventually sat down with the frontier marshal, he would turn into a legend. Lake served as a press aide to the Bull Moose Party's 1912 Presidential run under candidate Theodore Roosevelt, famed fan of Western lore and believer in the Frontier Theory described by University of Wisconsin- Madison historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner's famous theory places the 'Frontier' or 'West,' and the European immigrants struggle against the 'wilderness,' as the mechanism that birthed true Americans. Academic acceptance of the Manifest Destiny ideology allowed for writers and politicians to focus on white European influences in the American West, limiting or erasing the

impacts of other cultures on the American identity. Though Roosevelt's interpretation of the frontiers impact on the creation of a new "American" varied slightly than that proposed in Turner's Frontier Thesis, Roosevelt acknowledged the core idea of the frontier as crucial to the development of American culture and identity. Lake joined the United States military during the first World War, being seriously wounded by shrapnel while deployed in France. When he returned home, he decided to move west to California and begin his career as a writer, settling in San Diego to work for magazines.

While Lake was settling in San Diego, "Earp and Josephine lived in genteel poverty in rented homes and apartments around Los Angeles."⁹⁰ What took so long for Lake to reach out to Wyatt is unknown, especially with the proximity of the two, finally reaching out to Earp at the end of 1927. Wyatt and Sadie were initially reluctant to meet with another author, soured by previous experiences, and did not agree to meet with Lake until August 1928. The Earps understood that the story of Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral were sliding out of their possession, placing their last ounce of trust in Lake to capture the truth, at least as Wyatt remembered it to be. Some say, "Stuart Nathaniel Lake spent more time interviewing Wyatt Earp than any other writer,"⁹¹ while others believe that Lake was fortunate that Wyatt died soon after meeting due to Earps inability to provide great answers, "he tended to have three answers: "Yep," "Nope" and "Don't Recall."⁹²

⁹⁰ Allen Barra, "Wyatt on the Set," In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 651-655, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 654.

⁹¹ Roy B. Young, "Wyatt Earp Talks "Pretty": A Look at Wyatt Earp's Interaction with Interviewers, Writers, and Historians," In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 612-630, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 624.

⁹² Bob Boze Bell, "Wyatt Earp in Hollywood: The Untold Story of How Wyatt Earp Got Ripped off by Outlaws in the Last Outlaw Town," In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 641-647, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 646.

Stuart Lake and the Earps met multiple times before Wyatt passed away in January 1929, just five months after their initial meeting. The death of Wyatt Earp did not halt the production of the autobiography, believing he had enough personally from Wyatt and the two unpublished manuscripts to continue moving forward, Lake worked closely with Sadie to honor their wishes on how Earp was to be portrayed. Sadie, more so than Wyatt, really focused on depicting the life of Earp as heroic, hoping to change the recent narrative presented by Breckenridge. “Wyatt Earp’s achievements surely must be of interest themselves. His taming of Mannen Clements and fifty cowboy killers in the streets of Wichita; his play against Clay Allison of the Washita in the Plaza at Dodge City; his protection of insignificant Johnny-Behind-the- Deuce against a Tombstone mob; the sanguinary battle of the O.K. Corral, possibly the most celebrated gun-fight in frontier history; or his sawed-off shotgun duel with Curly Bill- tales of these exploits could not fail, even were they meaningless, to stir a readers blood.”⁹³ Sadie, forever protective of her husband, ultimately disapproved of Lake’s work, believing it to be unflattering to Wyatt, and objected to the inclusion of her past romance with John Behan in Tombstone. Wyatt’s understanding of popular cultures obsession with Western lore and motion pictures gave him the audacity to believe that he could change how his story would be told, and then he did it. Without his gumption and undying belief in himself, Wyatt, his brothers, Doc Holliday, Tombstone, and a laundry list of others, the story of the Wild West would be told very differently.

Two and a half years later, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, changed the landscape of Western lore, adding Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral into the tapestry that represents the story of the United States.

⁹³ Stuart N. Lake, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), vii.

‘The’ Frontier Marshal

Published in 1931, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal* became a best seller and launched Earp into a category he never occupied before, Western legend. Exactly what Wyatt had hoped for when he placed his final bet, sadly he never witnessed the success of the book and the character of Wyatt Earp. “The book sold out of its two initial print runs (more than 7,000 copies).”⁹⁴ While the autobiography is riddled with flaws, it accomplished its goal, capturing the hearts and minds of the American public, becoming a best seller, and quickly being optioned into a motion picture. Lake’s work is the foundation of the Wyatt Earp legacy, establishing him as the ideal, classic law enforcement officer that has an incorruptible moral compass, and the ultimate symbol of frontier justice. Another falsehood attributed to Lake was placing the “Bluntline Special” the infamous gun of Wyatt Earp, “legend describes Earp’s gun as sporting a 12-inch barrel and shoulder stock attachment,”⁹⁵ in his hand in 1876, though no historical record shows Earp ever owning such gun. The assertion that Wyatt dictated these stories to Lake gave authority to the novelization and was backed by many of Wyatt’s friends and of course his wife Sadie. Later, Lake would admit to accusations of creative license, but the train had left the station. In a review from the *Brewery Gulch*, the author, Anton Mazzanovich, notices something strange about the story presented, “now Wyatt tells his story entirely different from all the rest that we have read. Some day perhaps some one will come out with the truth.”⁹⁶ Popular culture loved the story presented by Lake and wanted more Wyatt Earp. The inspiration for motion pictures, a television series, and more importantly, the curiosity of researchers and future historians, Stuart Lake’s introduction of

⁹⁴ Michael F. Blake, *Hollywood and the O.K. Corral: Portrayals of the Gunfight and Wyatt Earp*, (London, McFarland and Company, Inc., 2007), 26.

⁹⁵ “Wyatt Earp & the “Bluntline Special” Myth” by William B. Shillingberg, box 978, folder 20, Glenn D. Shirley Western Americana Collection, RC2006-068. NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 3.

⁹⁶ “A Review of Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal,” *Brewery Gulch Gazette*. (Bisbee, AZ), Nov. 13, 1931, 4.

the story of Wyatt Earp to the American public changed the landscape of Western history and American popular culture.

The historical narration of Wyatt Earp's life that enters the public consciousness is a stark contrast to the historical record. As his life entered the public sphere, he longer was Wyatt Earp the historical figure, he became Wyatt Earp the fictional character championed in American popular culture. Lake's depiction of Wyatt catapulted a regionally known figure into the national spotlight. "Too good to be true perhaps, but that has not daunted two generations of popular historians, novelist, and filmmakers who have crafted the saga of Wyatt Earp and the O. K Corral into a remarkable American epic."⁹⁷ In 1932, Lake sold the film rights to Fox Films, splitting the earning with Sadie, regardless of the commotion she caused in the release of his book and future film adaptations of *Frontier Mashal*. The criticism Lake came to face over the falsehoods, embellishments, and lack of critical research in presenting an autobiographical was inconsequential to the momentum Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral gained by the popular adaptation of Lake's book. "Hundreds of books have been published, some 40 movies have been made- so far- aired about the legendary frontier lawman,"⁹⁸ placing Wyatt in the same category as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Wild Bill Hickock when it comes to motion picture adaptations of their lives or events within their lives. Regardless of historical inaccuracies, additions, and journalistic license Lake was accused of using in inventing the story of Earp, and later confirmed, his book branded the legacy of Wyatt Earp into Western history.

⁹⁷ Paul Hutton, "Showdown at the Hollywood Corral: Wyatt Earp and the Movies," in *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 26.

⁹⁸ Bob Boze Bell, "Wyatt Earp in Hollywood: The Untold Story of How Wyatt Earp Got Ripped off by Outlaws in the Last Outlaw Town," In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller. 641-647, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 647.

“Lake added vivid detail to the Tombstone story and presented a powerful case in support of Wyatt Earp. He transformed Burns’ “lion of Tombstone” into an American hero.”⁹⁹

Wyatt Earp became a household name, a true celebrity, and much like his contemporaries, it happened after his death. While he was known to a certain extent nationally, due to the events in Arizona, he constantly struggled to capitalize on any fame that he had, usually because he could not keep himself out of some sort of trouble. The clean-cut frontier law man created by Lake and Sadie Earp was designed to fill a niche that had been carved out in American popular culture when it came to the depiction of the Wild West and westward expansion. Life as a journalist allowed Lake to have a unique perspective in his presentation of Earp.

Earp and The Frontier Myth

In context, Wyatt Earp was not a well-read man and was he more than likely was not aware an academic theory that provides credence to the ideas of Manifest Destiny. He may not have even understood the idea of Manifest Destiny. Someone who did understand the national popularization of the frontier myth as articulated by Fredrick Jackson Turner, historian from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was Stuart N. Lake. Lake, a graduate of Cornell University in New York and former political aide to the Bull Moose Party, would have been fully aware of Fredrick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Theory and applied its principles when creating the mythology that came to surround Wyatt Earp. Turner delivered his paper to the American Historical Association at the 1893 World’s Fair that was held in Chicago, Illinois. The paper titled “The Significance of The Frontier in American History”, lays out the academic justification for Manifest Destiny ideology, “up to our own day American history has been in a

⁹⁹ Gary L. Roberts, “The Real Tombstone Travesty: The Earp Controversy from Bechdolt to Boyer,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 660-674, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 661.

large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West.”¹⁰⁰ The West, or frontier, transformed Europeans into true Americans, “the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought.”¹⁰¹ Completely ignoring the influences of Native inhabitants and the true globalized world the West personified, Turner missed the forest for the trees in what makes the West significant in creating the American identity and American culture. Lake, a native New Yorker, knew Wyatt Earp fit directly into that rugged individual mold celebrated by Turner and those who idealized the West or frontier as a mythological place of the wild adventures of outlaws, lawmen, and Native Americans.

Manifest Destiny ideology also penetrated legislative action in the Homestead Act of 1862. While technically not during the Wild West era, it opened hundreds of millions of acres to white settlers while displacing the Native American populations. This contributed to the influx of hundreds of thousands of white settlers and freed black persons following the Civil War. Arrogant and ruthless decision makers within the United States government broke every treaty signed with the Indigenous nations across the entirety of what became the U.S., sequestering those who inhabited North American for thousands of years before European conquest to reservations, causing enormous harm to native populations. American colonizers, including Wyatt Earp, took part in systematic buffalo hunts sponsored by the U.S. Army, to eliminate the source of food, clothing, and shelter for the nations of the Great Plains in hopes of forcing them onto reservations, resulting in fewer than one thousand Bison remaining by 1900. While Earp has no other direct connections to federal policy when it comes to Native Americans, it is unknown

¹⁰⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894), 1.

¹⁰¹ Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, 2.

his feelings politically on the matter. The deeply held belief that those who did not follow the European ways of life were uncivilized, allowed for the U.S. government to have popular support in its inhumane actions, including the forced destruction of individual Native American traditions. The reservation system robbed Native peoples of their land and assimilation aimed to steal their culture. Forced assimilation and the Dawes Act of 1887, aimed to turn Native Americans into self-sufficient small farmers by turning the tribal reservation lands into personal allotments, breaking them away from any traditional way of life. Sold as a way of incorporating the formerly sovereign nations into the American tapestry, the policies enacted by the government were designed to punish Native populations for being in the way of white settlement in the West. By the census of 1890, white settlement completely closed the frontier, leaving no substantial portions of land in the American West for settlement. Manifest Destiny fulfilled, American Exceptionalism shining bright, and the wilderness tamed.

The history of westward expansion is messy, complicated, full of contradictions and hard truths of what has been done to stretch the United States from Atlantic to Pacific. Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism were popular justifications for the treatment, displacement, and historical erasure of millions of Native Americans as Europeans settlers advanced across the North American landscape. The popularity of frontier mythology that is inspired by historical people, places or events, created a parallel mythology to the historical narrative to project a specific idea or understanding about European advancement in the West. Shifting away from academic principles and into the world of entertainment provides great liberty for those to convey messaging to large audiences, helping shape their opinions. Wyatt Earp falls perfectly into the mold. Born in the Northern United States, though his family has Southern ties, moved West as part of a wagon train conducted by his father Nicholas, and lived a

life that is the perfect symbolic representation of what the American West was romanticized to be.

Back to Life, Back to Reality

Stuart Lake and Wyatt Earp both sought to take advantage of the fantastical representation of the Wild West in American popular culture even though by the time of their initial meeting the era known as the Wild West had been over for more than two decades. Where Earp may have been doing his best to present his authentic version of events, Lake set out to create a story based on the national perception of what life was like on the Western frontier. It was not long after the publication of the book that historians would do their best to correct the record, but the damage was done. Wyatt Earp was no longer a figure based in reality, promoted to mythological status in the story of the Western United States, he became a character that has been immortalized in Western history and Western lore due to his own perseverance and the crafty pen of a talented author. Lake carried the success of the book into a lucrative deal to option the rights of the story into motion pictures, two separate films titled *Frontier Marshal* (1934, 1939) and *My Darling Clementine* (1946), directed by famed Western director John Ford, who had met and befriended Wyatt before he passed. Lake's novelization of Wyatt Earp also inspired a television series titled *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, which aired for six seasons.

Stuart N. Lake may, or may not, have cared about the criticism he received from historians, eventually admitting to taking journalistic license with the Earp story. That did not stop historians from publishing their own research on Wyatt Earp, typically focusing on tearing down the falsehoods pushed by the myth created by Lake. "Other Western characters have been lied about, fictionalized, and mythologized, but nowhere else is the practice so pervasive or so

corrosive to truth as it is in the Earp story.”¹⁰² In reality, Wyatt was an incredibly fascinating person, a complex individual who cared deeply for his friends and family, and while he dabbled in law enforcement, he was not a symbol of moral virtue and participated in multiple ventures that operated on the opposite side of the law. Throughout his entire life, Wyatt symbolized the ideal Western figure; enough education to get by, a rugged, tough individual, capitalistic mindset of the American Dream, and his daringness to put himself in dangerous situations in which he felt he held the legal or moral high ground.

Before *Frontier Marshal*, and since, historians have had varying views on Wyatt Earp, the events of Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Before the release of Lake’s biography on Wyatt, Earp was not known as the great lawman popularly or academically, with the last national headline being his involvement in the Sharkey-Fitzsimmons boxing match controversy as the crooked ref brought in for the fix. The same year the book was released, 1931, historians Eugene Manlove Rhodes and William MacLeod Raine discuss the impact of Lake’s work, which “Raine had communicated to Rhodes his contention that Lake “has magnified Earp into a demi-god who was merely a brave man skilled with his gun- and unusually cool at that in the zero seconds, not ever nervous of hysterical.”¹⁰³ Raine, British born immigrant and graduate of Oberlin College, was outspoken in his belief that writers should not be in the business of making heroes out of outlaws or morally corrupt individuals. “The two most conspicuous examples of Western officers blown up far beyond their real size are “Wild Bill” Hickok and Wyatt Earp. Both of them talked themselves into the hall of fame with the help of credulous

¹⁰² Gary L. Roberts, “The Real Tombstone Travesty: The Earp Controversy from Bechdolt to Boyer,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 660-674, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 661.

¹⁰³ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp Talks “Pretty”: A Look at Wyatt Earp’s Interaction with Interviewers, Writers, and Historians,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 612-630, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 623.

writers.”¹⁰⁴ Raine was correct in the sense that without Wyatt Earp living to old age, he would not have had the ability to tell his story, or at least how Lake interpret his story, and would have been left to the opinions and research conducted by academic historians. Wyatt knew what Raine knew, the popular culture of the American public cared little about historical accuracy and tends to rally behind characters that represented certain beliefs or characteristics with which they could identify.

Raine was not alone in his criticism of Wyatt Earp, the year following the release of Lake’s book, former Wyatt interviewer and University of Arizona professor, Frank C. Lockwood published *Pioneer Days in Arizona*. He believed “that Wyatt Earp was both a cold-blooded killer and a very suave and crafty dissimulator.”¹⁰⁵ Lockwood interviewed dozens of people and combed through all the records available in Tombstone, garnering a negative perception of Wyatt and his actions in Tombstone. In 1945, he also wrote a series of ten articles for the *Tombstone Epitaph*, in which he references Wyatt Earp with distain and negativity. “I do not know of anything of beauty in which he planted or reared, any great idea he ever gave utterance to, any movement in education, morals, or religion to which he ever devoted himself.”¹⁰⁶ Apparently the Earps did not make many friends while in Tombstone, at least not the ones who were being interviewed by historians and authors. Frank Waters, known for his books on the Southwest, was also critical of Stuart N. Lake’s work, describing it as “the most assiduously concocted blood-

¹⁰⁴ William MacLeod Raine, “Wyatt Earp: Man versus Myth,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, 675-686, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019). 675.

¹⁰⁵ William MacLeod Raine, “Wyatt Earp: Man versus Myth,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, 675-686, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 685.

¹⁰⁶ Roy B. Young, “Wyatt Earp Talks “Pretty”: A Look at Wyatt Earp’s Interaction with Interviewers, Writers, and Historians,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller*, 612-630, (Denton: University of North Texas Press. 2019), 624.

and-thunder piece of fiction ever written about the West.”¹⁰⁷ Waters noted his beliefs that Wyatt used the badge as a means to cover his corruption, and should not be considered as exemplary figures when it comes to righteousness or morality.

In the decades that followed, other historians would chime in on Wyatt Earp, especially regarding the myths, but popular culture did not necessarily care about historical accuracy. Historians lost control of the narrative, facts or evidence were not prerequisites when it came to the visions of film directors. The mythical West symbolized freedom and openness that was lost in the modern industrialized world, providing a type of escapism for those in urban environments. The Wild West was marketed popularly as a place of reinvention and self-determination regardless of the limitless dangers, focusing on the romantic notions of rugged individualism, American Exceptionalism, and the pursuit of economic advancement, authors created a fantasy land that mirrored reality. These beliefs seeped into academia as well, looking to provide scholarly evidence to support the popular ideas of Manifest Destiny and justification for the cruelty and dehumanization of Native Americans. It would take decades for Native Americans, African Americans, and other minorities to break away from the stereotypes that infused American culture in the twentieth century.

Winner! Winner!

The final gamble paid off, even though he did not live long enough to collect the winnings. Earp knew how his life would be summarized if he was not able to add his contribution to the conversation. He dedicated the final phase of his life to dictating his story to a series of authors in hopes of some type of manuscript that could be optioned into a movie. It was not until the final months of his life that Wyatt would meet and entrust his life story to the right

¹⁰⁷ William MacLeod Raine, “Wyatt Earp: Man versus Myth,” In *A Wyatt Earp Anthology* edited by Roy B. Young, Gary L. Roberts and Casey Tefertiller, 675-686, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2019), 685.

man, Stuart N. Lake. Lake convinced Wyatt and, more importantly, Sadie, he was the right guy for the job and would take care of Wyatt's image in his work. Instead of just painting Wyatt as a good person and lawman, Lake made Earp 'the' premier frontier lawman the West had ever seen, cleaning up every boomtown he set foot in with his golden moral compass. While exaggerating and or flat out lying, Lake created a character that became the symbol of frontier justice in the Wild West, making Earp, Tombstone and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral interictal pieces of the American story, regardless of their true historical significance. While historians challenged these notions academically, releasing books, journal articles, and other scholarly works that provided an opposing perspective on Wyatt Earp, the events in Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, it really did not do much to change what was already a popular culture phenomenon.

Creating the myth of Wyatt Earp as a symbol of frontier law enforcement was a calculated effort, designed to capitalize off the fascination of American popular with the Wild West. The obsession with the frontier was not new to the era of the Wild West, but the Wild West was able to profit from their stories and become its own genre of entertainment. Before Wyatt Earp, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid, frontiersmen such as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone were historical figures mythicized into American history and lore. The frontier has served as a unifying force in American culture and politics dating back to our founding, but unlike the story and legends surrounding our founding fathers and the American Revolution, the frontier and the stories associated with the Wild West transcended into popular culture. The rise in American literacy rates, the technological advancements in communication that allowed for information to travel faster, and finally the advent of the motion picture cemented the Wild West into the cultural fabric of the United States. The Wild West transformed the United States after the Civil War, no longer was the focus on the division between North and South, though the rivalry and

division played itself out across the West, the focus shifted and the frontier became unifying power for a newly united nation. Even without the romantic vision of Stuart N. Lake, Wyatt Earp lived a life that perfectly exemplifies the mentality of life in the American West, he was educated enough, he was willing and able to do any job that would give him the best chance to succeed in the harsh landscape of the frontier, and though he initially was only romanticized as a good guy, his history on both sides of the law make him an ideal study to understand the complex socioeconomic landscape of the Wild West.

Wyatt Earp was a gambler, horse thief, law enforcement officer, buffalo hunter, rodeo shotgun for stagecoaches, worked his father's farm, outlaw, sex trafficker, and most importantly, a capitalist. Earp is typically thought of as a gunfighter, which makes sense with his involvement in the most famous gunfight in the Wild West, but he typically hated using his gun, unless he was clocking someone over the head with it. Wyatt was a man in search of the American Dream, the idea of upward financial mobility, and was willing and able to try his hand in all the avenues in which were available in the American West. Social norms of the day allowed Earp to participate in professions and other activities that straddled the line in terms of legality and morality but could be extremely lucrative. Operating in saloons, brothels, and gambling, Wyatt and his brothers profited from the same negative elements that future authors would say Earp cleaned up, making what would be millions in modern money. The Wyatt Earp of history never set out to clean up any boomtown, while participating in law enforcement was passed down through his father, his main goal in life was to make money by any necessary means of the day, regardless of its legal status.

Chapter Four:

The Legend

Wyatt Earp Capitalizes: Popular Culture's Love of the West

Wyatt Earp lived an extraordinary existence for a man of his time. He traveled thousands of miles in the American West, sampled all the different lives one could lead, made and lost fortunes, and became a mythological figure in the American story because of his brief time in Arizona. But he was not universally favored or even famous at the time of his death in Los Angeles in 1929. He was known for his escapades in Tombstone, Arizona and as some washed up lawman whose latest headline was being accused of being a crooked referee. Wyatt is the perfect representation of how popular cultures fascination with the Wild West can catapult a figure to stardom, propelling Earp as a top-tier Western figure, and making Tombstone and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral internationally known. Wyatt crosses off the checklist you identify of a Renaissance man of the American West; he worked on his father Nicholas Earp's ranch and farm, rode 'shotgun' for stagecoaches, a sex trafficker or enforcer in multiple brothels, a law enforcement officer, gambler, gunfighter, miner, buffalo hunter and occasionally outlaw. Wyatt Earp knew how to use his skills and straddle the line of social norms of the time in to advance his pursuit of the American Dream. The Wyatt Earp, championed in popular culture, is not the same person that walked the streets of Tombstone or Dodge City. He came to us as the tamer of the Wild West, the 'Frontier Marshal' who cleaned up not one, but two rough boomtowns, providing a moral compass in the land of lawlessness and corruption. Far from the man who sat in his Los Angeles bungalow knowing that any chance he had at a favorable remembrance relied on his ability to sell his story, the way he saw it, not what was being circulated by the historians and western scholars of his day. Earp was a fan of the budding motion picture industry and early

silent era Westerns; it is no coincidence that he found himself on movie sets and film lots to offer his expertise. Wyatt went on to have dozens of uncredited consulting roles, befriending two of the most influential Western actors of the day, Tom Mix and William S. Hart, and rubbing elbows with powerful directors and producers. The last opportunity for Wyatt to capitalize off the amazingly dramatic life he lived fell short; no film studio took the chance on him, and he died never knowing the mythical character his name and image would become.

The closing chapter of Earp's life was the most influential to his reputation. Without his foray into the motion picture industry, specifically consulting on the popular Western genre, the Wyatt Earp we know today would simply be a footnote in the annals of American History. His recognition that popular culture transcended the historical analysis of the characters that graced the silver screen, even possibly consulting on the film that portrayed his character for the first time, Wyatt knew that his best chance of changing how he was perceived laid in the hearts and minds of audiences around the world. No more attempts at speaking to historians, it was time for Earp to take charge, hiring or speaking to multiple authors in hopes of selling his story to Hollywood studios. Failed attempts at producing a manuscript and rebuking other authors who published stories about him and the events in Arizona, Earp finally agreed to meet with Stuart N. Lake. Not meeting Wyatt until months before his passing, Lake worked closely with Earp and wife Josephine on what he claimed to be an autobiographical depiction of Wyatt's life. Though his work would be lambasted by historians and scholars, *Frontier Marshal* gave us the lasting image of Wyatt Earp that has lived on within television, motion pictures and Wild West history for decades to come.

Wyatt Earp, the mythical character, versus Wyatt Earp, the historical figure, creates Wyatt Earp the legend. Historians and scholars desire to "set the record straight" or "debunk the myths"

associated with Earp history breathed life into Western historical research and has sparked a more detailed understanding of life in the Wild West. Audiences' fascination with cowboys, outlaws and all things Western, drove a thriving tourism and entertainment industries, in large part due to the mythological tales spun by talented authors. The legend of Wyatt Earp grew with every movie, television series, and story told.

Lights, Camera, Action

The popularity of dime novel and Wild West Shows was a precursor to the early hits for the early motion picture industry. The mythology presented by the Wild West was not lost on Wyatt Earp or Stuart N. Lake. "In many ways, the life of Wyatt Earp and Stuart Lake's book, along with Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, were the greatest influence on how a generation viewed the frontier."¹⁰⁸ As Los Angeles became the mecca of the film industry, their access to southwestern filming locations provided the accessibility to increase the output of Western films. (Post 1911) "The newer Westerns emphasized battles between cowboys and "Injuns" and, within white society, between heroes and villains. Such battles were typically waged over unclaimed land that was waiting to be conquered, controlled, and cultivated, precisely the type of empty landscape that was the backdrop of these more action-packed Westerns shot in the Southwest, chiefly in California."¹⁰⁹ Early success fictionalizing western figures in popular culture created historical dramas. "In 1901, Butch Cassidy, Kid Curry, Bill Carver, and Deaf Charlie Hanks held up a Union Pacific train in Wyoming; and in an instance of art imitating nature, two years later Gilbert M. Anderson, Frank Hanaway, and George Barnes held up a borrowed Delaware and Lackawanna train in New Jersey for Edwin S. Porter's camera grinding out the sequences in *The*

¹⁰⁸ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 338.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Lea Bandy, and Kevin Stoeher, *Ride, Boldly Ride the Evolution of the American Western*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 25.

Great Train Robbery.¹¹⁰ Western mythology is profitable in the entertainment industry, using figures like Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Buffalo Bill Cody and the newly promoted Wyatt Earp as stars in the melodramatic tales they promoted of life in the West. The Wild West is American culture, “For many Americans the Western movier and to a lesser extent the television Western have played a role similar to that of the epic in other cultures.”¹¹¹ Modern epics, The Western captures the American story, engraining the mythology of the frontier and Wild West into a shared fantasy that required special individuals to survive it.

Wyatt Earp gained national attention, never fame, from his exploits in the Arizona desert. “The gunfight at the O.K. Corral was not as important for its contemporaries as it has become for viewers of Westerns.”¹¹² Interesting to imagine the most famous 30 seconds in Wild West history, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, was just another Wednesday in 1881 Tombstone, Arizona. Wyatt, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral became the perfect western story thanks to Stuart N. Lake, whose captured the charm of the Western, creating a simple plotline adapted to social and political beliefs of the day. The Western symbolizes Turnerian American Exceptionalism ideology in popular culture, not having to rely on historical fact, “Where Lake erred on the facts, Hollywood compounded on the error and delivered a very distorted portrait of the West that would baffle and frustrate the surviving old-timers.”¹¹³ Historical mythology become interwoven into American society, the Western was the darling of the movie companies, and Wyatt was the next champion of the frontier.

¹¹⁰ Rita Parks, *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 81.

¹¹¹ Vincent Marston, “EPICS AND WESTERNS.” *The Classical Outlook* 54 vol. 7, 1977, 76-77.

¹¹² Vincent Marston, 78.

¹¹³ Casey Tefertiller, *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind The Legend*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 338.

Frontier Marshal became a bestseller, and Lake quickly optioned into a motion picture for Fox Films in 1932. Rushed into production, the first adaptation of Lake's story of Wyatt Earp was marred by Josephine Earp. Her reluctance to allow the studio to use the name Wyatt Earp, changed the historical and cultural importance of the movie. Entitled *Frontier Marshal*¹¹⁴ and released in 1934, the film provides a fiction Earp, renamed Michael Wyatt, and the tale of him bringing law and order to Tombstone, Arizona. The film did receive some positive reviews, "Rich in originality and invested with unusual force. "Frontier Marshal," Fox Film's latest romance opened at the Coliseum Theatre on a big double bill last night, and proved to be fast-moving Western epic which delighted the audience in the novel by Stuart N. Lake, the film is true and convincing."¹¹⁵ Though Josephine's pestering resulted in a name change, the film was successful and would result in more adaptations of Lake's book.

Audiences did not have to wait exceptionally long for the real introduction of Wyatt Earp to the silver screen. Five years later, 1939, *Frontier Marshal*¹¹⁶ was again in production, this time the studio ignored the strongly worded letters of Sadie Earp and went forward with their vision, drastically changing Lake's work. Fox Films was able to sign notable actors, Randolph Scott and Cesar Romero as Wyatt and Doc, garnering positive reviews after a speedy production. "*Frontier Marshal*, which was shot in 33 days, not only set a record for speedy completion of movies its size, but it is also a testament to the productivity of the studio system."¹¹⁷ The first film to have the character of Wyatt Earp as its main character garnered positive reviews nationally, though it may have been a B level Western at the time, it captured the audience's attention through its

¹¹⁴ *Frontier Marshal*, directed by Lewis Seller (1934; Los Angeles: Fox Film Corporation), film.

¹¹⁵ "Two Exciting Action Plays At Coliseum," *The Daily Alaska Empire*. (Juneau, AK), Oct. 5, 1934, 7.

¹¹⁶ *Frontier Marshal*, directed by Allan Dwan. (1939; United States: 20th Century Fox), film.

¹¹⁷ Michael F. Blake, *Hollywood and the O.K. Corral: Portrayals of the Gunfight and Wyatt Earp*, (London: McFarland and Company, 2007), 40.

tight, precise storytelling and establishment of Earp as an ideal Western hero. “The screenwriter has established Earp as the man who can handle lawlessness but is a reluctant hero. He refuses the job of marshal, claiming he wants to open a stage line, one of the few accurate facts about Earp in the movie.”¹¹⁸ The eastern city of Washington D. C. audience were excited to see the story of Wyatt Earp and Tombstone. “Twentieth-Fox is making a sort of sequel to Warners’ “Dodge City” by continuing the adventures of Wyatt Earp in “Frontier Marshal.” Earp went down to Tombstone, Ariz., after Dodge City grew too tame for him, and in this picture he and other characters of that time are represented under their own names.”¹¹⁹ Wyatt’s former stomping ground of Arizona provided some contrast to the national praise the film garnered, published in the *Brewery Gulch Gazette*, the contributor who goes by Stan provides the following, “I recall the effect of books like “Tombstone” and “Wyatt Earp- Frontier Mashal” on readers unfamiliar with the Southwestern scene. These make Wyatt Earp a colossus of noble courage, while none of the many oldtimers I know have never spoken a word of praise of Earp and many of them have held him in utter contempt.”¹²⁰ Highlighting that regardless of how popular the mythology of Wyatt Earp was becoming, some still viewed him as a bad man.

The most popular and critically acclaimed movie that was inspired by Lake’s ‘biography’ came in 1946 with *My Darling Clementine*¹²¹. While another movie that depicted the infamous gunfight and the characters associated with it was released a few years prior, this would be the film that truly engrained Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral into the story of the Wild West. “Although cinema historians and critics have praised the film’s artistic value, even calling it one of the finest Westerns ever made, many Earp scholars are less than kind

¹¹⁸ Michael F. Blake, 41.

¹¹⁹ “Western Stuff,” *The Washington Daily News*. (Washington, DC), Jul. 20, 1939, 29.

¹²⁰ “The Silver Scream,” *Brewery Gulch Gazette*. (Bisbee, AZ), Mar. 19, 1936.

¹²¹ *My Darling Clementine*. dir. John Ford, (1946. United States: Twentieth Century- Fox Film Corp.), film.

with their criticisms, some opinions bordering on rabid distaste.”¹²² Directed by legendary director John Ford, someone who knew Wyatt Earp in real life, and starring Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp, this film is the most important stone in the foundation of the Earp legend. The film elevates the Earp legend, not by following historical facts, but by providing an amazing story audiences can lose themselves in. “The story has a historical background being the interpretation of Wyatt Earp, played by Fonda, and his brothers, Tim Holt, Ward Bond, who came to Tombstone and pacify the cattle town while they seek the murderer of another brother.”¹²³ Ford’s power as a director, as well as his brief friendship with Wyatt provided him a special privilege in adapting this story, and enhanced the legend of Wyatt Earp to heights Stuart Lake never could with his novel. Lake expressed his displeasure of how his book was completely ignored by Ford, *My Darling Clementine* brought the Earp tale to A level movie status. “One disappointing aspect of the film is the lack of any real bond between Wyatt and Doc.”¹²⁴ Though they are friendly, there is not the same relationship that would be depicted in later films that show their bond as a crucial aspect of the story. Although Ford played fast and loose with the facts, his vision and Fonda’s character work turned Wyatt Earp into a household name, spreading his myth throughout popular culture.

Lake’s final involvement with the story of Wyatt Earp came the following decade. Wyatt Earp was a hot commodity following the success of *My Darling Clementine*, and studios had plans of a miniseries centered around the life of Wyatt Earp, which Lake would be a consultant on. Leading up to the release of the show, in 1955, Lake would be hired to write a movie about Doc Holliday, his saga leading up to and through the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Offering

¹²² Michael F. Blake, Pg. 61.

¹²³ *Roanoke Rapids Herald*, (Roanoke Rapids, NC), Nov. 28, 1946, 6.

¹²⁴ Michael F. Blake, Pg. 85.

another perspective of the event, this time through the eyes of Wyatt's best friend and ally. Lake wound up being a disastrous hire, delays were followed by shotty work, which were followed by excuses and more delays. Once Lake provided the producers with his outline, they knew they needed to bring in another writer. Full of mistakes and inaccuracies, Lake's final shot at writing a screenplay vanished as the producers paid him the rest of the money they owed him, got him to sign a release, and brought on another writer to complete their vision.

Lake was fortunate to be kept on as a credited consultant on *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*¹²⁵, that ran on ABC for six seasons beginning in 1955. Starring Hugh O'Brian as Wyatt Earp, the show continued pushing the legend of the western lawman. A publicity booklet for O'Brian includes a brief history of Earp entitled *Wyatt Earp A Giant In A Land Of Giants*, noting that "Wyatt Earp is generally recognized to have been the foremost peace officer of his times."¹²⁶ The story also includes a new caveat to Wyatt's lost year, stating that "when he was 21 he returned to Illinois to study law, but found no interest in the subject. He became a buffalo hunter and made considerable money."¹²⁷ Bringing the saga into the homes of most Americans amplified his legend, beating both Billy the Kid and Jesse James to the small screen gained momentum for the mythology of Wyatt, Tombstone and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. The show was instantly compared to another folk hero who received their own series, Davy Crockett, "The name of Wyatt Earp may not roll off the tongue as easily as Davy Crockett (what name does?) but it's my guess that "White Urp" will be famous enough with the coonskin-buckskin small-fry set before man more sunups. The new ABC-TV series follows the Disney formula like

¹²⁵ *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*. 1955-1961. (New York: American Broadcast Company.)

¹²⁶ "Wyatt Earp. A Giant In A Land Of Giants," Hugh O'Brian Publicity Booklet, RC2024-012, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

¹²⁷ "Wyatt Earp. A Giant In A Land Of Giants," Hugh O'Brian Publicity Booklet, RC2024-012, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

a caboose. There's fact, to be hopelessly laced with fiction; a tall, handsome hero; an appealing buddy and inevitably a Crockett-type song, the lyrics of which should be all too familiar by next record-release date."¹²⁸ The success of the show also turned its star into one of a leading Hollywood figure, "s "Wyatt Earp" in the ABC-TV hit show- top in its field in every rating system by which television "box office" is judged- O'Brian during the past few years has skyrocketed to the top as one of the nation's foremost entertainment personalities."¹²⁹ As one of the first Western figures to have their story told in a weekly television series, Earp became solidified as a major Western character.

Stuart N. Lake died at the age of 74 in 1964, his legacy is and will forever be linked to Wyatt Earp, and I think he would have it no other way.

A Symbol of Masculinity

The American West was a male dominated space, with men outnumbering women by vast quantities. Gold rushes, cattle drives, rail construction and other western ventures were completely male ventures. The lack of traditional family structures in the West helped add to the wild or uncivilized nature that has permeated the western United States. The mythology surrounding the hyper masculinity of cowboy culture plays a significant role in the understanding and romanticization of the Wild West.

Wyatt Earp's legend evolves around his presentation as that rugged, stoic lawman as presented by Lake. In a male dominated, homosocial space, "Lake presented Earp as an example of masculine virtues- a characterization Lake established in coded terms that were implicitly yet

¹²⁸ "Wyatt Didn't Shoot B'ars- Just People," by Bernie Harrison, *Evening Star*. (Washington, DC), Sep. 8, 1955, 33.

¹²⁹ "Hugh O'Brian- A Life Story," Hugh O'Brian Publicity Booklet, RC2024-012, NCWHM Special Collections at Dickinson Research Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

powerfully sexualized: Lake armed his protagonist with one of the biggest pistols in the West.”¹³⁰

The special bonds between people of the same sex, male, permeated the West, with most men only interacting with women in brothels or places of commerce. “In a place populated largely by men, most twentieth-century chroniclers went to great lengths to establish that western heroes such as Earp were nonetheless sexually attracted to women. Such a task ought not have been difficult. Like many men in the West in the 1870s and early 1880s, Earp found companionship with prostitutes, notably Sally Haspel, and, later, Mattie Blaylock, who styled themselves as “Sally Earp” and “Mattie Earp” while they lived with him. Yet for Earp biographers, it would not do for a hero to find his women companions in bordellos.”¹³¹

“Lake attributed Earp’s avoidance of sexual encounters with women to the tragic end of his first marriage. When he was twenty-two years old Earp had been briefly married; his “girl-bride” as Lake called her (all the better to emphasize the innocence of the union), died within a year of the wedding. Because of this tragedy, Lake wrote, Earp until his mid-30s, avoided emotional and sexual involvement with women.”¹³² While Lake did his best to present the version of Earp that was most beneficial to the story he wanted to present, historians are not held to a specific narrative and have openly discussed the ranging sexuality of the Wild West, with private homosexual relationships not being very uncommon. The first of male partnership that comes into question for Wyatt during his days in Wichita, Kansas when he shared a single room and bed with his fellow officer Jimmy Cairns. “[David] Leahy’s comment suggest that Earp and

¹³⁰ Andrew Isenberg, “The Code of the West: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Wyatt Earp,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2009). Pg. 142.

¹³¹ Andrew Isenberg, “The Code of the West: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Wyatt Earp,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2009). Pg. 144.

¹³² Andrew Isenberg, “The Code of the West: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Wyatt Earp,” Pg. 142.

Cairns shared a bed; it was not uncommon for roommates to do so. Less commonly, such homosocial relationships were privately sexual.”¹³³

Cairns was not the only man that historians have questioned the deepness of their bond and friendship. Earp’s platonic life partner Doc Holliday has also given rise to questions of their emotional relationship. Wyatt’s physical attractiveness is something that both his male and female contemporaries noticed, with both Cairns and Bat Masterson referencing Earp as uncommonly handsome. “The ambiguity of Earp’s sexuality reflects the tumultuous changes in normative standards of sexuality and gender behavior in the nineteenth-century West.”¹³⁴ While homosocial and homosexuality are two quite different things; it does raise the question of how these men interacted with each other in private. Wyatt Earp eventually entered an emotional relationship with Josephine Marcus in 1881, leaving behind romantic male friendships and spending the rest of his life traversing the West with his final wife.

Updating Wyatt Earp for Modern Audiences

Audiences of the 1960s were maturing and desired the same from their Westerns. No longer was the focus on Turnerian ideological plots and storylines, framing Westerns figures in black and white hats, simply identifying the characters to the audience in good and evil terms. Western fans were interested in a more authentic representation of the Wild West, “indeed, the second half of the sixties saw an increasing move toward the glorification of the loner or outsider here whose values, methods, and allegiances were more and more often in direct opposition to those of the establishment.”¹³⁵ While Wyatt is never portrayed as an outright antihero, his portrayals were becoming more nuanced, shifting away from the knight in shining armor persona

¹³³ Andrew Isenberg, “The Code of the West: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Wyatt Earp,” Pg. 151.

¹³⁴ Andrew Isenberg, “The Code of the West: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Wyatt Earp,” Pg. 157.

¹³⁵ Rita Parks. *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 101.

championed in early films. The films in this section all increase the levels of historical precision in the tale of Wyatt, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. From this point on, films will also depict the full aftermath of the gunfight, including the infamous Vendetta Ride.

In 1967, popular Western television star James Gardner accepted the role of Wyatt Earp for the film, *Hour of the Gun*¹³⁶. The film begins with the famous gunfight, dealing with the aftermath and trial of the Earps and Holliday, before leading into the murder of Morgan and attempted murder of Virgil, and culminating in Wyatt hunting down Ike Clanton in Mexico. Most prior films used the gunfight as the climax for the drama built up over the past hour of storytelling, instead this film focused on the aftermath in which Wyatt is forced to fight violence with violence in effort to avenge his brothers. “*Hour of the Gun* was the most accurate film about the gunfight and the aftermath produced up to that point. It was the first film to deal with the Earps being tried for murder and to show the attacks of Virgil and Morgan happening at different times.”¹³⁷ Audiences were being exposed to new facts and information for the first time that depicted Wyatt and the Earp brothers as being on trial for murder, and then Wyatt taking justice into his own hands, hunting down and murdering those he believed were responsible for the assault on his family. Audiences buy in, they view his actions as reasonable, justifying the actions of a rouge gang of vigilantes out to murder, not bring to justice those responsible. Sacrificing law and order for frontier justice, *Hour of the Gun* is the first movie that shows the darker side of Wyatt Earp.

Next is the movie that brought the legend into my home and into my heart. 1993s *Tombstone*¹³⁸ reclaimed the Westerns position of box office royalty, even just momentarily. The

¹³⁶ *Hour of the Gun*, dir. John Sturges, (1967; United States: Warner Bros.), film.

¹³⁷ Michael F. Blake, *Hollywood and the O.K. Corral: Portrayals of the Gunfight and Wyatt Earp*, (London: McFarland and Company, 2007), 137.

¹³⁸ *Tombstone*. dir. George. P. Cosmatos. (1993; United States: Hollywood Pictures/Cinergi Pictures), film.

importance of this film in the legacy of Wyatt Earp is up there with *My Darling Clementine*, the movie that entrenched the Wyatt Earp myth into popular culture. “The film has also sparked a renewed interest in Wyatt Earp and the history of the gunfight. Since the release of the film, numerous historians have uncovered information about Earp and others involved in Tombstone.”¹³⁹ The most accurate portrayal to date, a star-studded cast that were perfectly chosen for their selected roles, captured my imagination and hooked me into Western lore. *Tombstone* removed the gilded cover more so than any prior Earp story, Wyatt was an authentic representation of the man who strolled the dusty wooden streets of Tombstone, a man out to make a fortune and reluctant law enforcement officer. Another captured element was the deep friendship between Wyatt and Doc, lost in most of the films prior, their platonic relationship is no less important to Wyatt than the romantic relationship he would later share with Josephine Marcus. The Wyatt presented is someone out to strike it rich, someone willing to do whatever was necessary to advance economically and socially, and as someone who was willing to take the law into their own hands to avenge his brothers. It is not glossed over, its front and center, Wyatt, under the guise of the badge he wears, gathers a posse of close friends and murders multiple people who may or may not have been directly involved with the assassination of Morgan and the attempted assassination of Virgil. Earp did not plan to bring any of these men in and given due process and is justified by the audience because they were members of a group opposed to our hero. This Wyatt Earp shows more of the characteristics the true nature of the Wyatt the man, and by removing the inaccuracies it creates a deeper connection with an audience of people doing what they can do to survive and prosper.

¹³⁹ Michael F. Blake, Pg. 200.

The last film I am going to discuss is *Wyatt Earp*¹⁴⁰, released in 1994 and starring Kevin Costner as Wyatt. An attempt at a more detailed, biographical picture, did not have the same impact on audiences as the film released a year prior. The two films will always be linked though they are vastly different. Historically accurate, to a point, this film jumps all the way back to Wyatt's childhood and the rumored story of Wyatt attempting to join the Union Army like his older brothers. The film captures Wyatt's first love, Urilla, but does not highlight the tailspin his life takes after her, and their unborn child's unfortunate death. Instead of showing Wyatt being arrested and breaking out of jail in Indian Territory or as a sex trafficker /enforcer at brothels in Peoria, he pushes the narrative of him participating in hunting bison on the plains before he ends up in Kansas with his brothers. This picture also focuses on the exploits that garnered Wyatt his initial fame as a law enforcement officer in Dodge City, as well as his life after Tombstone with Wyatt and Josephine being shown heading to Alaska on a ship. A classic case of doing too much and not doing anything at all, "*Wyatt Earp* is an epic in search of a story. The story presented provides no one the audience can care about. When the audience lacks an emotional bond to the protagonist, a movie is doomed."¹⁴¹ The films attempt at the grand tale of Wyatt failed, possibly too ambitious of a project to be undertaken by that specific set of individuals, it lacks rhythm leaving audiences disappointed, especially with the popularity of *Tombstone* released only a year prior. "Despite a large budget, huge ambitions, and an impressive cast of actors, the film is defeated by clashing egos, a misshaped script, and different visions that ran amok with no control. Perhaps the film could have used the real Wyatt Earp to bring order to it."¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ *Wyatt Earp*, dir. Lawrence Kasdan. (1994; United States: Warner Bros., 1994), film.

¹⁴¹ Michael F. Blake, 219.

¹⁴² Michael F. Blake, 225.

The films of Wyatt Earp are a testament to Wyatt's final gamble. He bet on himself and his story. Would it have been different if he had been alive when Lake released *Frontier Marshal* in 1931? Sure, but that discourse is no longer of concern, what we have are dozens of movies, television series, and countless cameos of the character of Wyatt Earp over almost one hundred years. Though Westerns are no longer the staple of a booming entertainment industry, fallen by the wayside, their stories are still told, typically with a modern twist. The plots have leaked into increasingly more dramatic programming, with antihero archetypes, made famous in Westerns, leading in the box office and television ratings. While Wyatt Earp the man and the character are distinctly different, audiences are increasingly more accepting of the truth when it comes to the mythical heroes of American History.

Creating A Lasting Legacy

"The West was the American dream space, the landscape of our national desire, the testing ground for the face-off between the urge of free ranging individualism and the need for social order."¹⁴³ Wyatt Earp, a figure created to be the mythical frontier marshal, operated and profited within the margins of social normality and order. His capitalistic mindset led him down many avenues in which people in the West hit the jackpot when it came to quick income, or in most cases, live a comfortable lifestyle. His off-again on-again relationship with law enforcement typically resulted in bad break ups and Wyatt and his family leaving the area, and he failed to acknowledge his escapades in Illinois or Indian Territory when dictating his autobiographies. The story of Wyatt Earp, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral as told by Stuart N Lake, with the help of Wyatt and Sadie Earp, has become engrained into Americana, a tale glossed over in history classes because of popular culture's familiarity.

¹⁴³ Jack Kroll, *Blazing Saddles*, *Newsweek*, Vol. 131, (Los Angeles, Calif., etc: Newsweek LLC, 1998).

Thirty seconds. On a random Wednesday afternoon in October. In a random boomtown in the Arizona desert, a man, a town and an event all became legends. A gunfight between perceived lawmen and outlaws, became a pivot event in American history, etching Tombstone, Wyatt Earp, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral into history books and American popular culture. “Standing in that lot, none of the Earps, Holliday, Clantons or McLaurys knew they were about to be forever immortalized in the pages of American Western lore, as well as cinematic history.”¹⁴⁴ In less than a single minute, a man and town became immortalized. Wyatt Earp’s life and legend changed that October day, though he was not struck by a bullet, the impact of that moment on his life, Western history and Western lore. The gunfight at the O.K. Corral came to be a symbol of West, the perfect example of lawmen and outlaws battling it out in the dusty streets, even though it may have been everything but that. The story of what happened that day has been controlled by Wyatt Earp, projecting his version of events onto the big screen through his social ties to members of the motion picture industry that included Tom Mix, William S. Hart, and director John Ford.

The version of Wyatt Earp that we met via his autobiography or early motion picture adaptations that used Lake’s story was specifically cultured. Lake, and early directors were very much interested in promoting a certain viewpoint of American history, specifically westward expansion and manifest destiny. At the time, audiences clamored for white hat good guys and black hat bad guys, not really looking for nuance in their storytelling, regardless of the historical accuracy, they wanted clear definitions of who was right and wrong. As audiences matured, so did the stories of their heroes, suddenly characters had more depth and nuance compared to films

¹⁴⁴ Michael F. Blake, *Hollywood and the O.K. Corral: Portrayals of the Gunfight and Wyatt Earp*, (London: McFarland and Company, 2007), 228.

created a few decades earlier. Wyatt Earp's story is no different. Though historical accuracy was never at the forefront of the Earp story, as audiences began to crave more authentic representations of historical figures, the story of Wyatt Earp transformed. His story has slowly come to represent more factual reality in which he operated, he was a reluctant lawman, preferred gambling and saloon life, and was more than willing to circumvent the law when deemed convenient.

Wyatt Earp, unbeknownst to Lake, lived a life unparalleled by most of his peers. His ability to adjust to different environments throughout his journey across the West gave him an advantage. His physical gifts allowed him the ability to decide that he would only use his weapon, when necessary, a trait not common in the Wild West, especially for an individual known historically and popularly as a gunfighter. Earp had a knack for gambling, preferring Faro, a popular card game at the time, often operated a table in saloons in the various boomtowns he found himself in and typically identified his occupation as gambler. Wyatt had an extensive criminal record that spanned multiple states and territories and was afraid to return to Arizona late in his life due to being wanted for the murders committed during the Vendetta Ride. Stuart N. Lake either trusted Wyatt and Sadie far too much in his preparation and execution of his autobiography, or he failed to show his due diligence in researching the story Earp was telling him. Either way, the decision was made with intent, Lake did not want to publish an autobiography of a regionally known lawman who was most recently known for being in on a crooked boxing match. He wanted to make Wyatt Earp a star, using his skills as a writer and the bits and pieces he gained from his extensive interviews with Wyatt and Sadie, he crafted a tale that was comparable to the Dime Novels that popularized Western lore. Lake's work, followed by the subsequent motion pictures, created a mythological character named Wyatt Earp that has

lived on for nearly a century, transformed a mining boomtown named Tombstone into a symbolic representation of life on the American frontier, and propped up the gunfight at the O.K. Corral as representative of law enforcement in the Wild West.

We Are Cowboys – Westerns and Wyatt Earp as Cultural Export

When it comes to cultural exports from the United States, the Western is the most important. The Western gave the world an insight into the American persona, a unique experience that we believed distanced ourselves from our European lineage and created the new, exceptional American. The perceived battle between civilization and the untamed frontier, the Western champions a past that was manufactured to present a reality that did not exist. “Certainly one of the most notorious- if not exact the most respected- American cultural effusion is the Western film.”¹⁴⁵ Ironically, the first Western as we know it was filmed in England before the turn of the century. Not a feature length film that would come shortly after, it represents the symbolic nature in which the American Western has had around the globe.

Kidnapping by Indians, filmed in Blackburn, England in 1899, the minute long film depicts white European settlers harassed by Natives of the American West and are saved by cowboys. Future English Westerns were typically comedic in nature. Comedies and Parodies are essential to the British Western, “the central joke is the contrast of manners between tenderfoot newcomers to a frontier community and the rough-hewn locals (including stereotyped Indians of the 'How!' variety).”¹⁴⁶ Brits also used their colonial territories as a stage to promote their own nationalistic propaganda about their expansion into new and unique lands. Various films featured films set in their settler colonies of Canada, Australia, and South Africa. These films focus on the

¹⁴⁵ James K. Folsom, "Western" Themes and Western Films,” *Western American Literature* 2 (3): 195–203, 1967, 195.

¹⁴⁶ Sheldon Hall. "Carry On, Cowboy. Roast Beef Westerns." *Illuminace* 24, no. 3: 103-25, 2012, 107.

white settlers in conflict with the native population and habitat to spread their way of life. “While the other Euro-Westerns have received cute nicknames such as Sauerkraut and Spaghetti Westerns (Germany and Italy), Britain’s contribution deserves “an equivalent culinary term - "roast beef" or "fish and chip" Westerns.”¹⁴⁷ The British contribution to the spread of Wild West mythology is undervalued and underappreciated. “The British Western has received neither the detailed cultural and historical exegeses enjoyed by German, Italian, and American Westerns.”¹⁴⁸

The 1960s and 70s brought us some great Westerns that came from Italian directors, specifically Sergio Leone and his Dollars Trilogy starring Clint Eastwood. Stereotypically dubbed spaghetti Westerns, these films reenergized the Western genre. “While spaghetti westerns are set in the American past, the particular preoccupation with materialism, social antagonism, the role of intellectuals and of knowledge, and the violence of the state place these films in dialogue with concerns that are identified with the European, and specifically Italian, political struggles of the period in which the films are made.”¹⁴⁹ Italian directors used the storytelling devices within Western films, hinting at social and cultural undertones within Italian society at the time. “The popular films of the era, including the western, share a preoccupation with history, adventure, and the masculine derring-do.”¹⁵⁰ Spaghetti Westerns, though typically multinational productions, were famously scarce on dialogue, instead used romanticized violence and symbolic imagery became the main aspect of these pictures, speaking to a new, mature generation of audience that craved the antihero protagonist. While many European countries have dabbled in

¹⁴⁷ Sheldon Hall, 120.

¹⁴⁸ Sheldon Hall, 120.

¹⁴⁹ Marcia Landy, ““Which Way Is America?": Americanism and the Italian Western.” *Boundary 2* 23 (1): 35–59, 1996, 59.

¹⁵⁰ Marcia Landy, 59.

the Western film world, none have reached the fame of their Italian counterparts of the 1960's and 70's.

The only foreign-made Western that starred the character of Wyatt Earp is *Gunman of the Rio Grande*, made in 1964. A joint French, Spanish and Italian venture, the film shows the impact of Wyatt Earp internationally. The only American aspect of the film was the star, Guy Madison, a US born actor that landed his first spaghetti Western role, the direction, production and writing were all European. A simple plot and lots of action as Wyatt Earp cleans up an Arizona border town, continuing the trope of Earp as the 'Frontier Marshal' that comes in and eliminates the bad elements and saves the town. Though it is not a Wyatt Earp tale in the way that it was about his life, Tombstone, or the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, it is a story that continues the mythology and legend of the man who fought to his last breath for his story to be heard. Hollywood films spread the fame and name recognition of a character such as Wyatt Earp

The international impact of the Wild West as a cultural export is monumental. Wyatt Earp is only a part of the whole, but he, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral are important to the spread of American cultural expression. The incredible popularity of tales from the frontier and the emerging Western genre meant that it was an easy decision for some of the first motion pictures to be recreations of real-life escapades of Wild West figures. The advent of Wild West mythology began before the film, becoming insanely popular amongst audiences in the urban United States and in Europe, creating celebrities out of outlaw and lawman alike. Wild West live shows traveled across the globe, providing a unique view of life in the American West that differed to the newspaper and dime novels that circulated. Both live show and printed expression would soon take back seats to the emerging motion picture market, with the first American Western film releasing in 1903 with *The Great Train Robbery*, which got its storyline from the

real-life train robbery by Butch Cassidy in 1901. This domination would last into the 1960's, when a new generation of screen writers would modernize and revitalize the genre, shifting focus toward an anti-establishment story, leaving behind the outside source of struggle, specifically the Native American. The Westerns ability to evolve and adapt to the shifts in the popular culture has allowed it to maintain its influence on the collective identity of what an American is, even as a nation, it's still struggles with its own identity. "Violence in the Western became a ritual reflecting the moral ambiguities in an America trying not to conceive of its relentless spreading westward as imperialism in its own backyard."¹⁵¹ This contradiction has been a constant struggle for the American identity, consistently causing the transformation of the Western genre to tackle the shifting societal views. "Like any enduring form of popular culture, the genre has consistently been able to bend with the times, to reshape its image to conform to the expectations and concerns of each successive audience as the viewers relish the format in their youth, discard it disdainfully in post adolescence, and return to it once again for the sake of simplicity and perhaps a bit of comfort in maturity and old age."¹⁵²

The spread of the American identity into European popular culture via Westerns allowed for the creation of unique and popular versions of the genre. Given names such as roast beef or spaghetti Westerns, England and Italy are just two of many places that have adopted the genre and made it uniquely their own. English Westerns fully understand that American Westerns are anti-British and lean into the comedy of such, using their own slang and humor. Adopting their colonial holdings of Canada, Australia, and South Africa into frontier territories, English Westerns were able to tell similar, moral ambiguous tales of white settlers. Italian Westerns of the

¹⁵¹ Jack Kroll, *Blazing Saddles*, *Newsweek*, Vol. 131, Los Angeles: Newsweek LLC, 1998.

¹⁵² Rita Parks. *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 106.

1960s, though focused on the white settler, were a celebration of masculinity. Spaghetti Westerns were infamously lacking in dialogue, with violence and action being the favored form of expression. Italian film makers were able to tap into the universal symbolism of Wild West mythology, appropriating popular iconography and merging it with their political struggles to create a distinctive version.

Long Live the Legend

The legend of Wyatt Earp has had many contributors, various authors, actors, directors, and historians alike have added to the lore of one of the most famous Western figures. Something that separates Earp from most of his contemporaries, he himself was a large contributor to his own mythology. Wyatt spent his final years influencing the story that would be told of his life with a firm belief that the public should decide his legacy. Surviving into old age initially was a disservice to the legendary Western figure, historians, journalists, and authors alike were not publishing the most flattering stories. Wyatt took refuge in the motion picture world, a place where Western stories were loved, depicting the West as a mythical place where stories like Earp's could reach millions of people around the world. One problem, Wyatt was getting older and struggled to hire a competent writer, insisting on paying a friend instead of bringing in someone with the skill base necessary to accomplish his goal. Many blame the influence of his wife Sadie, who had a considerable influence on the story that would be told of her husband, hoping to protect him from scrutiny and more negative press. It was not until the final year of his life that the proper author captured the story of Wyatt Earp.

Stuart N. Lake's influence on the legend of Wyatt Earp is that of the foundation. The legend is built around his autobiography, *Frontier Marshal*, not the historical record. Lake and the Earp had the same goal, to make the story popular enough to get it optioned into a motion

picture, something that Wyatt Earp believed could rescue his reputation from the historians and journalists who framed him as a badman. The court of public opinion provided refuge. The love of Westerns and stories of the American West were popular in cinemas across the nation, with Earp himself consulting on an unknown number of films. Wyatt's final gamble on the audience hit the jackpot, unfortunately he passed away before he collected a single dollar of his winnings. Audiences have flocked to the story of Wyatt Earp for a century. Beginning with the initial films that followed Lake's mythization of Wyatt as a classic white hat hero, a man set out to tame the bad elements on the lawless frontier. With maturity comes understanding, and as audiences matured, so did the story of Earp and the exploits in Tombstone, with the most recent films being the most authentic representations of the historical figure.

The true legacy of Wyatt Earp should not be limited to his exploits in Tombstone, the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, or his part-time lawman career. The man who traversed thousands of miles in the American West, from Texas to Alaska, was someone who was in constant pursuit of the American Dream of upward economic mobility. Life was something that Wyatt knew he only had one of and wanted to make everything he could out of it. His continuous search for the best possible economic situation for himself took him on an incredible journey across the West and Midwest, making his mark at every stop. Falling into law enforcement due to its economic benefit, Wyatt preferred gambling and a slew of other pursuits compared to wearing a badge, using it as a last resort when he found himself in places where he could not make good money in other ways. Law enforcement was not or ever had been Wyatt's life or passion, there was no morality driven pursuit of justice as Earp came through the boomtowns, he was there to profit on the card tables or in the mines, accepting the badge as a last resort when other avenues were dried up or didn't exist.

Before *Frontier Marshal* made it to bookshelves Earp's reputation as a mythical lawman was nonexistent. The Earp we know popularly is only bits and pieces of the man who traversed the American West in search of economic success. His life is the quintessential American Dream story for that time and place. Life on the frontier was different, formal education meant little, industrialization was sparse, and boomtowns provided the unbridled capitalism where of a man of Wyatt's knowledge and skill set could make substantial amounts of money quickly. He applied various physical skills to advance his economic desires in every stop along his incredible journey across the West. From working the sex industry in Peoria to gunfights in in the Arizona desert, and all the way up to the Alaskan klondike, Wyatt Earp left his mark and made some money.

Conclusion

Jack of All Trades

Wyatt Earp is a symbol of the American West, but not the curated symbol created by Stuart N. Lake and the many writers and directors that followed. As a man, he pursued his version of the American Dream, working his way through the American West attempting various forms of employment, famously carried a badge and gun for a while. Earp was also up for any money-making scheme the Wild West provided, fully investing heavily in gambling and saloon culture throughout his life. His persistence in the pursuit of economic advancement in the West shaped his life and not a badge he wore as a part time lawman. Relying on his physical skills, moral indifference, and economic savvy that provided him with an advantage over many of his peers. Whether he was buffalo hunting on the plains or working the brothels in Peoria, Wyatt took advantage of every opportunity, especially in law enforcement, which came with a lucrative tax collecting position. The Wyatt Earp of history was a capitalist, a gambler, a miner, a confidence man, a saloon operator, and anything else that would put him in position to make the most amount of money wherever he happens to find himself. His mythical status arrived following his brief stint in Tombstone, Arizona in which he and his brothers clashed with a gang of rustlers known as the Cowboys. Wyatt initially did not want to accept a law enforcement position but recognized the economic upside once his visions of operating a stagecoach line fizzled out. Colliding with the criminal element was not Wyatt's goal and was known to collaborate with members of the Cowboys that included Ike Clanton to help capture an outlaw, making Wyatt look better to the public before an upcoming election. The gunfight at the O.K. Corral changed everything, though it was merely a random Wednesday in October at the time, its tale was championed by writers, authors, and historians as a symbol of the Wild West. Stuart N.

Lake, author of Wyatt's autobiography, brought Earp's story to a national audience in his book *Frontier Marshal*, becoming a bestseller and winning Earp's final gamble by being optioned into major motion pictures. Wyatt Earp on the silver screen transformed the myth created by Earp and Lake into a legend. Though Earp was still alive and saw the first appearance of the Wyatt Earp character in a Western movie, his character's first starring role came in the second adaptation of Lake's work also titled *Frontier Marshal*. The court of public opinion pulled Earp out of mediocrity, but Wyatt died never knowing how big of a star his character would become, and how many movies that would be made about him, his life, and especially the escapades in Tombstone, Arizona. Wyatt's confidence allowed him to bet on himself throughout his entire life, his physical skills and economic savvy permitted Earp to survive and thrive, doubling the life expectancy of a man of his era.

A Renaissance Man is a person with many talents or areas of knowledge. When applying this metric to the life in the American West following the end of the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, few individuals fit the bill like Wyatt Earp. Excelling in a wide range of fields, Earp fit perfectly in the time and place he found himself in, surviving long past the typical life expectancy of a He had the ability to adapt to ever-changing situations, placing himself in positions in which he could succeed, he also possessed the social skills that allowed him access to all aspects of society, and of course the physical skills necessary for the Wild part of the West. His relentless quest for the American Dream of economic prosperity led Wyatt to take on every plausible way to make quick money that he could parlay into a larger fortune. There was no aspect of life in the Wild West that Wyatt did not try his hand in. From lawman to outlaw, from saloon operator to brothel enforcer, from mining prospector to crooked referee, Wyatt adapted and got himself to the next chance to capitalize. When you think of Wyatt Earp, a narrow scope

focuses on the events in Tombstone because of its importance in popular culture, but as we expand and pull back, the complexity of the human emerges and allows for a greater understanding of motivations and personality. Subverting away from naïve notions of simplicity and embracing the complexity of the individual human experience, Wyatt Earp presents a unique lens into the history and mythology associated with the American West.

His life is a tale of heartbreak, rebellion, opportunity, and survival. Wyatt Earp's complexity may be narrowed in popular culture, focused on the events of Tombstone and the brief time he spent as a lawman. Academically, Wyatt is a more flushed out person with good portions of his life documented publicly allowing for a chronological account, open to analysis from researchers and historians. The Wyatt Earp of documented history provided is a man who took every opportunity the Wild West offered to achieve his best shot at obtaining economic mobility. Every stop on his journey provided different prospects for Wyatt, displaying his abilities and knowledge of many facets of Western life to make his choice of pursuit. Earp, like most people, made choices that will be debated as good or bad, but given the context of time and place, he challenged for what was offered up as the American Dream. The Frontier Marshal that is idolized in Western history and mythology, stole horses, escaped from jail, worked in brothels, cheated at gambling, and was accused of being a crooked boxing referee.

His life became established in the myth and legend of the Wild West, unable to tell the story of the American West without mentioning Wyatt, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, his legacy impacts both popular culture and the academic world. The popularity of his autobiography led to more than a dozen motion pictures, a television series, and hundreds of popular culture references along the way, making his saga internationally known and recognized as authentically representative of the American life at the time. Historical representation of Earp

has never been as flattering as his characters reputation in popular culture, and Wyatt knew it. Understanding what his historical legacy was during the final years of his life, he collaborated diligently with his wife Sadie and his new friends in the motion picture industry to bring his recollection of events to the court of public opinion. Stuart N. Lake, the final author Earp entrusted his story with, accomplished exactly what Wyatt envisioned when his novelization was published and optioned into multiple motion pictures, creating a new Western figure to accompany the likes of Billy the Kid and Wild Bill Hickock.

Wyatt Earp actively promoted and manufactured the mythology surrounding himself, Tombstone, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral as a final gamble on himself during his final years. His character's engrained legacy in popular culture throughout the decades of television and film adaptations has solidified his legend into American history and national lore. The carefully curated image presented by Lake and others is merely a glimpse into the true nature of Earp and the Wild West era he has come to represent.

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