

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Ring Recommends Tombstone Shootout Story

If you like reading history, especially Arizona history, I have a book to recommend to you: Jeff Guinn's *The Last Gunfight: The Real Story of the Shootout at the O.K. Corral – And How It Changed the American West* published in May 2011.

Most of us know whatever we know about the famous Gunfight, Wyatt Earp, and Tombstone from the old TV show, *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955-1961), starring Hugh O'Brian, and two first run movies, *Tombstone* (1993), starring Kurt Russell as Wyatt Earp, and *Wyatt Earp* (1994), starring Kevin Costner.

In what the *Wall Street Journal* (June 6, 2011) derogatively calls an "indiscriminate WikiLeaks-style data-dump," Jeff Guinn "aggregates every conceivable scrap of relevant information on the showdown, on the town, on the Old West and American history generally." And I loved every word of it!

We learn for instance that the famous shootout did not actually take place in the O.K. Corral, but down the street in a vacant lot. And the legendary Gunfight was not a clear triumph of good over evil as usually portrayed, but the result of much more complex (and interesting) social, political, and economic forces.

Mr. Guinn gives us a feeling for the complexity of law enforcement in the 1881 Arizona Territory. The roles of federal, territory, county and town officials were sometimes ill-defined or overlapped and were certainly the product of political infighting that would be depressingly familiar today. Salaries were minimal but county sheriffs, whose chief duty was collecting taxes from railroads, working mines, and thriving merchants, got to keep 10 per cent of what they collected.

Guinn traces the career of Wyatt Earp as a farmer, railroad worker, bouncer, saloon-keeper, gambler, and highly-regarded law enforcement officer, including early arrests for brawling, horse-stealing, and being found in a house of ill-fame.

The Wyatt Earp of Tombstone days displays bravery, loyalty to his brothers and friend Doc Holliday, and an absolute driving ambition to succeed and "stand out" in the community. Surprisingly (in view of his exaggerated legend), as Wyatt, his two brothers, and Doc Holliday approached the vacant lot and the Gunfight, Wyatt had never before killed a man.

Wyatt's opponents in the Gunfight are four ranchers and cowboys, often town troublemakers, who in the "reality" of the old west, probably cooperated with local cattle rustlers to make their living. A long-standing feud between the Earps and the cowboys finally leads to the Gunfight, recreated in "stop-motion" detail, in which three of the cowboys are slain.

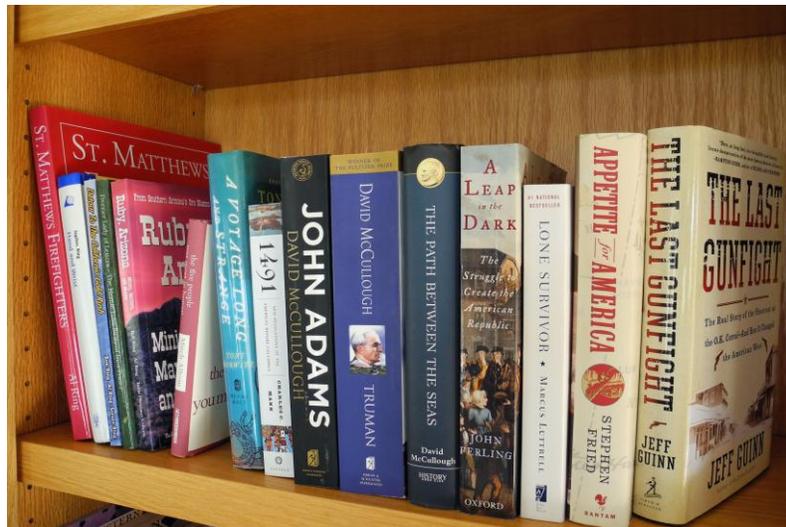
The Last Gunfight depicts the silver-mining boomtown of Tombstone as a frontier mix of luxury and finery, and squalor – with a constant overlay of political turmoil amplified by the town’s two newspapers. Details like the squabbles over town lots and the influence of hard rains and bad weather help make the story more interesting.

The book begins with a summary of US history leading up to the Gunfight events – including post-Civil-War frontier expansion; exploitation of homesteading, ranching, and mining opportunities; and conditions in Arizona. While some reviewers found this pretentious, I found the historical context most valuable.

As a history writer myself, I greatly appreciated the obvious comprehensive research that Mr. Guinn accomplished in creating this book. On several occasions he presents alternative positions on a disputed historical issue, cites the reasoning for each viewpoint, and then offers his informed opinion on the matter.

Finally, I’m a sucker for a good set of “Notes” - that document sources and discuss details of key issues. I especially enjoyed finding reports of interviews with several friends or acquaintances including Lynn Baily, owner of Western Lore Press and author of *Tombstone Arizona: Too Tough to Die*; Bruce Dinges, editor of the *Journal of Arizona History*; Jane Eppinga, author of several Arizona history books; Bob Pugh, owner of *Trails to Yesterday Books*; Christine Rhodes, Cochise County Recorder; and Jim Turner, Arizona historian, lecturer and writer.

Because of the availability of electronic books and my regular use of the local library, I buy very few books these days. But I made an exception for *The Last Gunfight*; it currently resides on my “special-book” shelf.



*I've just added The Last Gunfight to my special-books shelf.
(Courtesy of Bob Ring)*