

Tombstone, Cornish Miners and The Gunfight At The OK Corral

Written by Andy Owen



It's amazing to think that when the Gunfight at the OK Corral was happening in Tombstone, Arizona in 1881, a lot of people with the ringside seats - and the first to congratulate the victors when it was over - were from this neck of the woods.

Camborne and Redruth to be exact.

Only a few miles from Brea Village, where I live, here in beautiful Cornwall.

Hard to believe, I know. But it's true.

Here's the story.

In the late 1850's and early 1860's, the rocky wilderness of the American West became an incredibly rich treasure trove of natural resources.

Gold and Silver strikes were happening.

Big time...

The first ones were in Arizona - and, predictably, people flocked to the state. The mentality was 'get rich quick' - and a lot of people did *exactly* that.

All of those that headed West, were hoping that they would get that lucky break and make more money than they could ever dream of.

In those days, you had a real chance to do that - as the law was simple and clear. The finder could keep whatever he or she found.

The first gold strikes were called placer gold strikes. This gold was so close to the surface you could mine it with your boot, or a knife.

But, that all soon got mined and collected and there was then a need to go deeper.

The romance of the rogue prospector then evolved into the era of the hard-rock miner. And who was called upon to do this specialist and dangerous work?

None other than the 'Cousin Jacks'.

And the reason was simple. At that time, the Cornish miners were regarded as the greatest hard rock miners in the world.

Mining in those days was very hard and very dangerous. You had to be tough to survive. And smart, too.

The Cornish miners were both.

In the early days of underground mining, highly skilled Cornish miners with their unusual language and brogue, were influenced to travel to the USA to do the work.

This close-knit band of miners and their wives were known as "Cousin Jacks" and "Cousin Jennies"

It appears that the names came from their habit of addressing one another as "cousin" - and Jack, of course, was a very common Cornish name.

Others say it was because they were always asking for a job for their Cousin Jack back in Cornwall.

Whatever, during the mid-19th century, the tin and copper industry in Cornwall was in heavy decline and jobs were being lost in serious numbers. The miners and their families were rightly very concerned for the future. It all looked very bleak.

But, during that time, they first started to hear the news of the booming gold, silver and copper mines in the USA. What's more, they heard that there were great opportunities all over the American West for people with their unique expertise.

The decision they faced, was stark. Stay in Cornwall and lose your job and your family's future - or grasp a new opportunity in America.

It was a no-brainer.

Over a quarter of a million Cornish miners went to America between 1860 and 1900. And, they, with their unrivalled skills, were welcomed with open arms.



They quickly introduced many aspects of the highly honed Cornish mining technology into the mining operations over in the USA.

A lot of them initially, headed to Arizona. Tombstone in particular.

The town was founded in 1879 by an interesting character - a prospector called Ed Schieffelin. He was an Indian scout and a prospector - and he was the first to discover silver in the Arizona territory.



Tombstone grew incredibly quickly. In seven years, its population grew from 100 to around 14,000.

The main reason being, the successful mining of silver bullion.

Writer Patrick Hamilton estimated that during the first four years of activity, the mines produced about \$25 million, which is around \$700 million today.

A number of residents of Tombstone became extremely wealthy and spent a lot of money during the boom years. This, in turn, attracted many professionals and merchants, who brought their wives and families to the town.

Tombstone became the fastest growing boomtown in the American Southwest.

Although hundreds of miles from any meaningful town, Tombstone had a bowling alley, four churches, schools, two banks, three newspapers and an ice cream parlour

And that's not all.

There were 110 saloons (yes, 110!), 14 gambling halls, loads of dance halls and even more brothels.

The gentlemen and ladies of Tombstone attended operas presented by visiting acting troupes at the Schieffelin Hall Opera House.

The Cornish miners worked six 10-hour shifts per week and were paid union wages of \$4.00 per day, which was considerably more than the rates back in Cornwall.

They enjoyed their new wealth and independence and spent their hard-earned cash on Allen Street, the major commercial centre, which was open 24 hours a day.

The bars, brothels and theatres did a roaring trade.

The raucous shows at the Bird Cage Theatre and Brothel were particularly popular and became famous all over the country.

In 1882, The New York Times reported "the Bird Cage Theatre is the wildest, wickedest night spot between Basin Street and the Barbary Coast".

It remained open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

There were fights and altercations continually, all fuelled mainly by booze, women and religious hatreds.

This had escalated because of the arrival in Tombstone, of Irish workers, driven from Ireland by the potato famine. They brought along their old methods and their old Catholic/Protestant hatreds.

There were huge battles at first, with Cornishmen and Irishmen wrecking whole mining camps when they got drunk and went at each other.

But, after it while, it started to calm down and they learned to live together. So much so, that they eventually joined in each other's fun on St. George's and St. Patrick's day.

It was another excuse to have a drink.

If ever they needed one...

But, around this time, other issues started to develop and Tombstone became a powder keg. There were numerous tensions. Many of which grew into deadly conflict.

Money, of course, was at the heart of most disputes, but politics was also heavily involved.

The mining capitalists and the townspeople were predominantly Republicans from the Northern States. Many of the ranchers were Confederate sympathizers and Democrats.

Added to this was Tombstone's geographical location.

It was only 30 miles from the Mexican border and was an open market for illegal smuggling - especially stolen cattle from haciendas in and around Sonora.



A handsome profit was to be made by bringing this 'contraband' across the border and selling it in Tombstone.

All of this was organised and run by groups of cowboys.

At that time, the term 'cowboy' generally meant an outlaw. The legitimate cowmen were normally called cattle herders or ranchers.

It quickly got out of hand - and something needed to be done.

The three youngest Earp brothers - Wyatt, Virgil and Morgan - as well as Doc Holliday, arrived in Tombstone on December 1st 1879.

The other Earp brothers - James and Warren - joined them there in late 1880.

Virgil had been hired as Deputy US Marshal for Eastern Pima County - and set up his offices in Tombstone, literally days before his arrival, to concentrate on suppressing the cowboys' illegal activities.



Virgil, Wyatt & Morgan Earp, with Doc Holliday - c1880

In June 1881 he was also appointed as Tombstone's town Marshal (Police Chief) and appointed Wyatt as Assistant Pima County Sheriff.

He also appointed Morgan as an Under-Sheriff.

The Earps weren't overly popular in the town, but they did protect the interests of the town's business owners and residents - and paid particular attention to the cowboys and the problems they were causing.

They had continual conflicts with certain cowboys. In particular, Ike and Billy Clanton, Frank and Tom McLaury - and Billy Claiborne.

It was common knowledge that the McLaury brothers and their cowboy friends worked with the rustlers, buying and selling stolen cattle. They also enjoyed total control of the country outside Tombstone.

The Earps wanted to bring them down, but were continually frustrated.

This was due, in large part, to the sympathetic support of the Cochise County Sheriff Johnny Behan - who favoured the cowboys and ranchers and intensely disliked the Earps.

The Earps' continual complaints about the McLaury's and Clantons' horse thieving and cattle rustling were always dismissed.

The Earps weren't angels, though. Quite the opposite in fact.

They regularly bent the law to suit themselves, especially with regards to gambling and their saloon interests, which earned them further hatred from the cowboys.

And hate was what it was. The cowboys repeatedly threatened the Earps over many months. And, it all came to a head in late October 1881.

October 26th, in fact.

The famous Gunfight at the OK Corral.

Actually, although the historic gunfight is often portrayed as occurring at the OK Corral, it took place a short distance away, in an empty lot on Fremont Street.

It all started to take shape, a little while before...

Five or six weeks earlier, Wyatt Earp had met Ike Clanton outside the Alhambra Hotel. Ike told him that he had spoken to Doc Holliday and it was clear that Holliday was aware of certain parts of previous 'private' conversations between the pair.

He accused Wyatt of divulging details of their conversation to Doc Holliday. Wyatt denied this. A heated row ensued, before they headed to their respective saloons.

Four weeks later, Doc Holliday returned to Tombstone from Tucson, where he had been gambling. Upon his return, Wyatt Earp asked Holliday about Ike's accusation.

Holliday angrily denied it.

On the morning of Tuesday, October 25, 1881, the day before the gunfight, Ike Clanton and Tom McLaury came into Tombstone.

They were in town to sell a large number of cattle, almost certainly rustled from Mexico, but supposedly owned by the McLaurys.

Frank McLaury, Billy Clanton, and Billy Claiborne were planning to join Ike and Tom in Tombstone on Wednesday afternoon.

The Earps were primed and ready for trouble.

Near midnight, Holliday saw Clanton in the Alhambra Saloon and confronted him, accusing him of lying to Wyatt about their previous conversations. They got into a heated argument.

Morgan Earp intervened and took Holliday out onto the street and Ike, who had been drinking steadily, followed them.

Virgil Earp arrived a few minutes later and threatened to arrest both Holliday and Clanton if they didn't stop arguing.

Wyatt Earp walked over to the Oriental Saloon and Ike followed him. They talked again, and Ike threatened to confront Holliday in the morning.

Ike told Earp that the fighting talk had been going on for a long time and that he intended to put an end to it.

Ike told Earp, "I will be ready for you in the morning." Wyatt told Ike to go home "because there was no money in it."

Ike sat down near Wyatt, his revolver in plain sight, and told Earp "You must not think I won't be after you all in the morning."

Clanton continued to drink all night.

Later in the morning, he picked up his rifle and revolver from the West End Corral, where he had deposited them when first arriving in town.

At noon that day, he was still drinking - and once again armed - in violation of the city ordinance against carrying firearms in the city.

At about 1pm, Marshal Virgil and his Deputy Morgan Earp confronted Ike on 4th Street, still armed and Virgil pistol-whipped him from behind and disarmed him.

The Earps took Ike to appear before Justice of the Peace A.O. Wallace for violating the ordinance. Wyatt was heard to tell Clanton, "You cattle thieving son-of-a-bitch, and you know that I know you are a cattle thieving son-of-a-bitch, you've threatened my life enough, and you've got to fight!"

Ike Clanton was heard to reply, "Fight is my racket, and all I want is four feet of ground!"

Not long after this, Wyatt saw Tom McLaury on the street and he saw a gun on the right hip of Tom's pants. After words were exchanged, Wyatt drew his revolver from his coat pocket and pistol-whipped Tom McLaury with it twice, leaving him prostrate and bleeding on the street.

Both Ike and Tom needed attention from a doctor, as they both had nasty head wounds.

Later that evening, Ike's 19-year-old younger brother Billy Clanton and Tom's older brother Frank McLaury arrived in town.

They had heard that Ike and Tom had been in confrontation with the Earps overnight, and they had ridden into town to back up their friends, in case any further trouble broke out.

Both Frank and Billy were each armed with a revolver and a rifle.

They learned immediately of their brothers' beatings by the Earps and went to look for Ike and Tom. They did not hand in their firearms as per the law - so they stayed fully armed.

All four were next seen together at Spangenberg's gun shop, where they bought cartridges, then moved to the O.K. Corral.

For unknown reasons, the cowboys then walked out the back of the O.K. Corral and then headed west, stopping in a narrow, empty lot next to C. S. Fly's boarding house.

Several citizens told Virgil Earp that the McLaurys and the Clantons were all armed and had gathered on Fremont Street.

Virgil decided he had to disarm them. He had been joined by Doc Holliday and they were then joined by Wyatt and Morgan. As usual, the Earps carried their revolvers in their coat pockets or in their waistbands.



Near the corner of Fourth St and Fremont St, they came into full view of the cowboys in the lot.

There was Frank McLaury, Tom McLaury and Billy Clanton standing in a row against the east side of the building. Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne, plus Wes Fuller - a friend of the group - were standing in the vacant space about halfway between the boarding house and the next building west.

When the cowboys saw the officers, they stepped away from the Harwood house.

Virgil Earp was not expecting a fight. He just wanted them to give up their guns, as per the law in Tombstone.

"Throw up your hands, I have come to disarm you!" Virgil said.

Frank McLaury and Billy Clanton drew and cocked their revolvers and Virgil yelled: "Hold on, I don't want that!"

What happened next, was total mayhem.

Someone started shooting. Who it was, has never been proven to this day. Most witnesses generally agreed that the first two shots were almost indistinguishable from each other.

So, it could have been that someone from each group fired at exactly the same time.

The six or seven men with guns, fired 30 shots in around 30 seconds. You can only imagine the noise, the anger, the fear and the pain.

In less than a minute, Tom McLaury, his brother Frank and Billy Clanton were dead.

Doc Holliday was bruised in the hip by a bullet, Virgil Earp was shot through the calf, Morgan Earp was hit across both shoulder blades by a bullet - but Wyatt Earp was unhurt.

Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne were unhurt, as was Wes Fuller who had run from the scene, once the shooting started.

The funerals for Billy Clanton (age 19), Tom McLaury (age 28) and his older brother Frank (age 33) took place soon after and over 300 people joined in the procession to Boot Hill Graveyard.



Incredibly, over two thousand people watched from the sidewalks. Many hundred Cousin Jacks and Jennies amongst them.

Four days after the shootout, Ike Clanton filed murder charges against Doc Holliday and the Earps. Wyatt and Holliday were arrested. They had to post £10,000 bail.

Morgan and Virgil were still recovering at home. Virgil Earp was suspended as town marshal, pending the outcome of the trial.

Justice Spicer convened a preliminary hearing on October 31st to determine if there was enough evidence to go to trial.

On the strength of the prosecution case, delivered over 4 days, Spicer revoked the bail for Holliday and Wyatt Earp and had them jailed on November 7th.

They spent the next 16 days in jail.

After hearing all the evidence, Justice Spicer ruled on November 30th, that Virgil, as the lawman in charge that day, had acted within his office and that there was not enough evidence to indict the men.

He said the evidence indicated that the Earps and Holliday acted within the law and that Holliday and Wyatt had been properly deputised by Virgil Earp.

The Gunfight At The OK Corral was a momentous event from the Wild West archives and it's still talked about and debated to this day.

And, our Cousin Jacks and Jennies were a big part of the audience - with a lot of them seeing the whole thing go down.

The Cornish influence in the State of Arizona - and further afield - was just starting - and has since grown considerably.

Several notable Americans were either born in Cornwall or have family connections to the county.

The most famous, are:

Mark Twain - *Samuel Langhorne Clemens* - was his real name. The Clemens family originally came from Looe, Cornwall.

Franklin D Roosevelt - the 32nd President of the United States (1933–1945), was, a descendant of Thomas Burgess, whose grandmother happened to be a Trethewey.

Randy Travis - the country singer -descended from one Robarde Traweek, who was born in 1668 in Cornwall.

Elizabeth Arden - *Florence Nightingale Graham* - built a cosmetics empire in the United States. Her mother was Cornish, her father Scottish, having met in Cornwall.

Jayne Mansfield - the actress and Playboy Bunny. Her ancestors moved from Cornwall to Pen Argyl to work slate.

And that's only part of it.

The evidence of the Cornish can be seen in today's phone books in Arizona and surrounding states.

Here are just a few of the more common ones:

Carlyon, Chegwin, Goldsworthy, Jago, Kenwyn, Nancarrow, Nance, Opie, Pascoe Penhaligon, Prideaux, Restorick, Rosevear, Spargo, Trebilcock, Tregurtha, Tremaine, Trevithick, Trewin, Trezise and Verran.

In very many restaurants in Arizona, Montana, Minnesota and Michigan especially, you will find Cornish food on the menu.

Most notable, are Cornish Pasties and Figgyhobbin (Figgy 'Obbin) - *(a dessert, similar to a Swiss roll, but with raisins instead of jam and cream and the cake being replaced with puff pastry).*

As far afield as California, the Cornish stand proud. In the sunshine state, you will find many statues and monuments paying tribute to the influence of the Cornish on their development.

In Grass Valley, which is twinned with Bodmin, the tradition of singing Cornish carols lives on - and one local historian of the area says the songs have become "the identity of the town".

Some of the members of today's Cornish Carol Choir, are in fact direct descendants of the original Cornish gold miners.

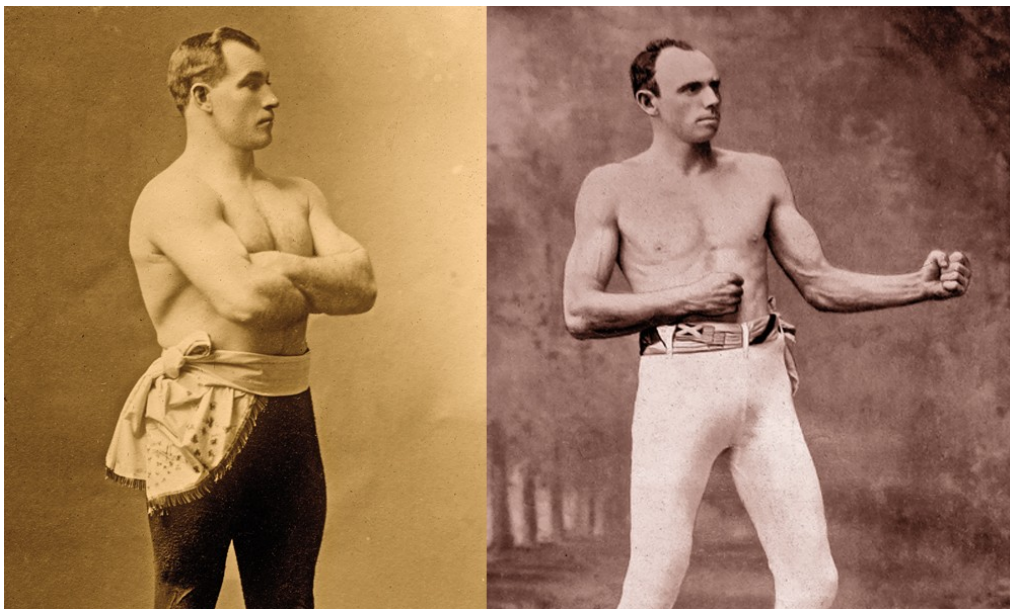
The city celebrates St Piran's Day, and there is carol singing, Cornish wrestling competitions and a flag-raising ceremony.

Yes, the 'Cousin Jacks', certainly put themselves about, didn't they?

And, they still are...

There's an interesting addendum to this story, involving a Cousin Jack and Wyatt Earp.

On 2nd December 1896, Wyatt Earp was in San Francisco and was asked to referee a top boxing match, between Thomas Sharkey and Bob Fitzsimmons.



Thomas Sharkey

Bob Fitzsimmons

Sharkey was an American - and Fitzsimmons was a Cornishman, born in Helston in 1863. Fitzsimmons was a big favourite for the fight and had been gambled on, very heavily.

The fight turned out to be a bit of a humiliation for Earp.

He entered the ring with his famous Colt 45 clearly visible, but was forced to disarm before the fight could proceed. He was later fined \$50 for breaking the law.

Fitzsimmons dominated the fight. Then, in the 8th round, he delivered his famous solar plexus punch and Sharkey went down. He rolled over holding his groin and he and his corner, suggested a low blow.

Earp called a foul and awarded the fight to Sharkey. The crowd went raving mad.

Earp was later accused of fixing the fight.

"It seems so shady," says Steve Gatto, author of eight books of Western history. "A man is winning a fight, then a foul is called, and the fight is handed to the clear loser. My gut feeling is Wyatt had something to do with a fixed fight."

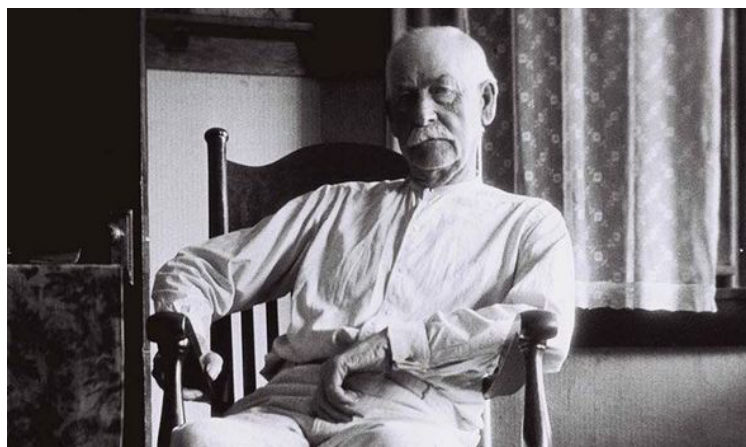
Fitzsimmons and his manager, filed a formal complaint against Sharkey, the National Athletic Club and others, (but strangely, not Earp), claiming the fight was fixed.

A restraining order was granted, that blocked Sharkey from receiving the \$10,000 purse. After hearing testimonies from all those involved, Superior Court Judge Austin A. Sanderson ruled the fight was technically illegal and therefore the court would not recognize the injunction.

Fitzsimmons and Sharkey went on to fight twice more, with Fitzsimmons winning both times. They later became friends and joked about the controversy.

But Earp's reputation was tarnished - and he soon left San Francisco and travelled around, making a great deal of money with his investments and businesses, before eventually settling down with his wife Josephine in Los Angeles.

He died on January 13th, 1929, of a urinary tract infection. He was 80.



Wyatt Earp was a giant of a man in every respect. Immensely flawed, of course. But, what a character - and what a life.