

The Most Famous Gunfight

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The most famous gunfight occurred in Tombstone, Arizona where the Earps and the cowboys were fighting for control of the town. The Earps were three brothers who came to Arizona looking for a way to become rich and powerful, they were Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan. They were once lawmen, but wanted to try their hand at some other profession since that profession did not bring them the wealth they all craved. The cowboys were a wild bunch of lawless men who did anything they wanted, and let no one stand up to them.

The Earps did not want to cause trouble with anyone; they only wanted to peacefully start their own businesses. Wyatt and Virgil were power hungry men who would not let some cowboys stand in their way of accomplishing what they wanted. The cowboys controlled the town and everything that went on in it, so they were not about to let some new guys disrupt their control. The cowboys wanted to send the message from the start who was in charge of the town; so they showed the Earps just how powerful they were by ransacking the town and no one did anything to stop them. Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan noticed that the law did nothing to control the cowboys, and that the cowboys owned the lawmen. Wyatt was the leader of the Earp brothers, but did not want to get back into law, so the Earps tried unsuccessfully to start their business without interfering with the cowboys. But the cowboys were not going to let the Earps do what they wanted without paying the cowboys off. The Earps refused to give in to the cowboys and the bitter clash would begin.

Virgil took things into his own hands and became the deputy Marshal of Tombstone, and Morgan served under Virgil as a deputy. Wyatt refused to get back into law and opened his own gambling house. The cowboys knew that they

no longer had complete control and would have to fight to get it back.

Virgil and Morgan would begin their crusade to rid the town of the lawless cowboys, so the citizens of Tombstone could walk down the street without fear of getting shot. This would also give the Earps the opportunity to make their own wealth. Virgil enacted a law that Wyatt invented earlier in his career of no carrying firearms into city limits. Virgil hoped that if no one had weapons, no one would get hurt. This seemed like the best way to gradually force the cowboys out, but the cowboys were not going to give up the town without a fight. The cowboys would see how far they could push the Earps by disobeying the laws and causing trouble. Virgil could always handle the situation with peaceful measures if possible, but on occasion he would have to "buffalo" the cowboy.¹ This tactic that Wyatt, Virgil, and Morgan used infuriated the cowboys. On October 26, 1881 Ike Clanton, a member of the cowboys, was drunk and yelling that he was going to kill the Earps, so Wyatt "buffaloed" him and took him to jail, where Virgil locked him up for disorderly conduct. Wyatt was not a lawman, but when the cowboys started to attack his brothers he joined in to defend them.

Five other members of the cowboy gang rode into town, not knowing that Ike had been arrested. Virgil had to let Ike go after he paid his fine, and Ike told the Earps that they picked a fight that they could not win. Ike went down to where the other cowboys were and tried to stir them up to go and kill the Earps, but the McLaury brothers and Ike's brother did not want to start the first today without the consent of the cowboy's leader Johnny Ringo and Curly Bill Brosius. The cowboys had carried their guns with them into city limits. This was in

direct violation of the law; so Virgil deputized Wyatt and John "Doc" Holliday to help Morgan and him peacefully disarm the cowboys.

The Earps only wanted to disarm the cowboys, not have a shoot out, but when Virgil told them to throw up their hands and turn over their guns, Frank and Tom McLaury thumbed their six shooter.² With this, the most famous gunfight started. The fight lasted only about thirty seconds, but three men lay dead at the

O.K. Corral. The McLaury brothers and Billy Clanton were shot and killed. Ike had ran off and begged Wyatt not to shoot him. Morgan, Virgil, and Holliday were all shot and injured, but Wyatt came away without a mark on him. This was the most famous gunfight of the west, and with this fight a legend would be born. Wyatt would become a legend for his involvement in the battle. The only one to escape without injury.

Endnotes

¹ "Buffalo" was the term used by the Earps. It was when they would use their butts of their colts to hit the other person in the head to arrest him.

² In the west this was a sign that you are getting ready for a gunfight. They are about to draw their weapons to shoot.