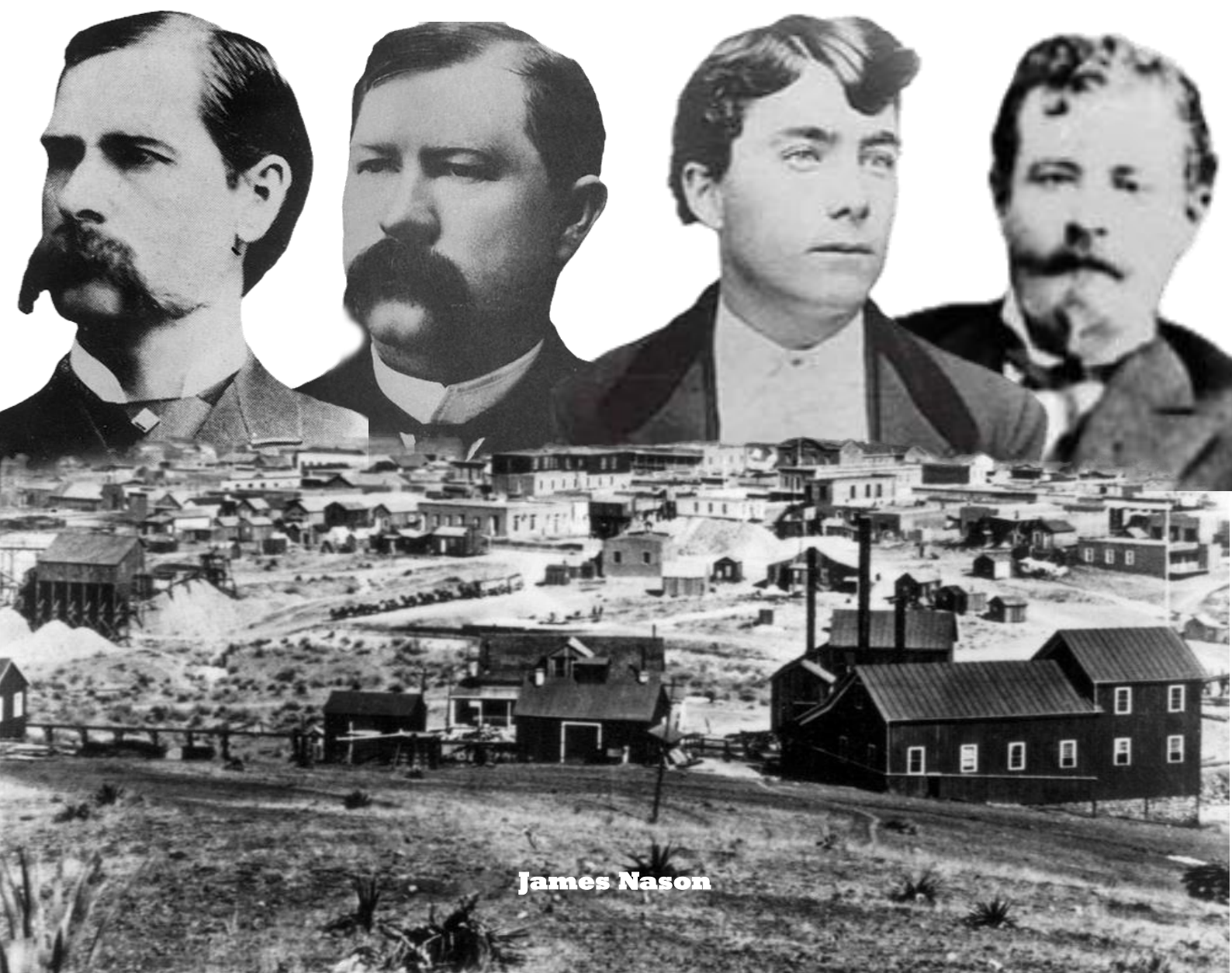


# **GUNFIGHT** **AT THE** **O.K. CORRAL**

**Tombstone, Arizona. 26 October 1881.**



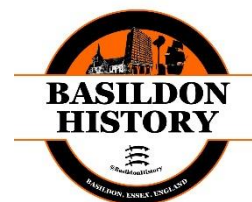
**James Nason**

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## Sources

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## The Powder Keg

The legendary gunfight at the O.K. Corral on 26 October 1881 did not erupt in a vacuum. It was the violent culmination of years of simmering tensions, conflicting interests, and deep-seated animosities in a rapidly developing, often lawless corner of the American Old West. The stage for this iconic showdown was set in Tombstone, Arizona Territory, a town that encapsulated the raw ambition and brutal realities of the late 19th century frontier.

Tombstone, founded in 1877, was born from a silver mining boom. Within a few years, it had transformed from a collection of tents into a thriving, bustling town of several thousand people, boasting saloons, gambling halls, hotels, and a burgeoning business district. This rapid growth attracted a diverse population: miners, entrepreneurs, prospectors, and a significant criminal element. The influx of wealth and people, coupled with a nascent and often ineffective legal system, created a volatile environment where disputes could quickly escalate.



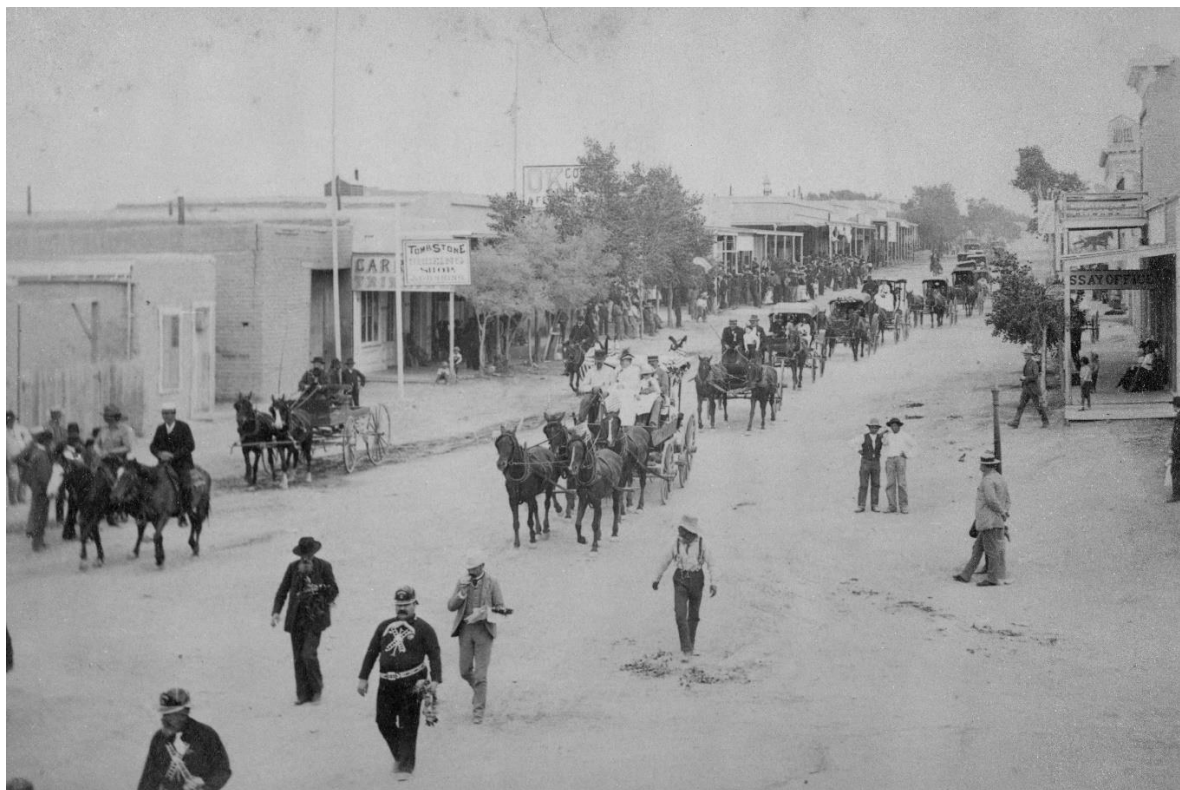
Into this crucible came two dominant factions, representing fundamentally different visions for Tombstone's future. On one side were the Earp brothers: Virgil, Wyatt, and Morgan. Having arrived in Tombstone in late 1879 and early 1880, they quickly established themselves in various law enforcement roles and business ventures. **Virgil Earp** held positions as Deputy US Marshal and Tombstone's town Marshal, while Wyatt Earp served intermittently as a county Deputy Sheriff and maintained interests in gambling and saloons. They saw themselves as proponents of law and order, seeking to impose a more regulated and orderly society, akin to what they believed was necessary for Tombstone to become a respectable city.

Opposing them were the "Cowboys," a loosely organised confederation of rural ranchers, rustlers, and outlaws, primarily led by the Clanton and McLaury families. Figures such as Ike and **Billy Clanton**, and Frank and Tom McLaury, operated from ranching strongholds outside Tombstone, often engaging in cattle rustling, stagecoach robberies, and general lawlessness. They viewed the Earps and their allies as interlopers trying to exert control over a territory they considered their own, encroaching on their traditional way of life and illicit enterprises. As historian Paula Mitchell Marks describes, the Cowboys *"resented the town-dwelling Earps and their efforts to bring law and order to the raw frontier, which meant an end to easy profits*



*from rustling and smuggling."* (Paula Mitchell Marks, *And Die in the West: The Story of the O.K. Corral Gunfight*, 1989).

The tensions escalated through a series of incidents. The Earps suspected the Cowboys in various robberies, including stagecoach hold-ups. The Cowboys, in turn, resented the Earps' authority and their reputation for being formidable lawmen. Political rivalries also played a part, with the Earps generally aligning with the Republican, "town" faction, while the Cowboys gravitated towards the Democratic, "country" faction. Personal feuds, fuelled by alcohol and pride, further poisoned the atmosphere. By the autumn of 1881, Tombstone was a powder keg, ready to explode with the slightest spark, and that spark was about to come.





## The Showdown

The morning of 26 October 1881 in Tombstone dawned with a simmering tension that would soon boil over. The previous night and morning had seen several heated exchanges between the Earp and Clanton/McLaury factions. Ike Clanton, in particular, had been publicly making threats against the Earps, claiming he would confront them in the streets. Virgil Earp, as Town Marshal, had disarmed several of the Cowboys earlier in the day, attempting to enforce the town's ordinance against carrying firearms within city limits. However, Frank McLaury, Tom McLaury, and Billy Clanton were later spotted by citizens carrying weapons on Fremont Street, near the O.K. Corral livery stable.



Ike Clanton, Frank McLaury and Tom McLaury

Concerned by the blatant disregard for the ordinance and the escalating threats, Virgil Earp decided to act. At around 14:30 (2:30 PM), he gathered his brothers, Wyatt and Morgan, and their volatile friend, Doc Holliday. Arming themselves, the four men walked west along Fremont Street, heading towards the narrow 15-foot-wide vacant lot between Fly's Photography Studio and the O.K. Corral, where the armed Cowboys were reportedly gathered. Their intent, according to Virgil, was to disarm them, not to initiate a fight. As Virgil Earp later testified: *"I was going to disarm them."* (Virgil Earp, Testimony at the Preliminary Hearing, 1881, quoted in The Earp Compendiums).

The gunfight technically took place in a narrow vacant lot (Lot 2, Block 17) on Fremont Street, not directly in front of the O.K. Corral's main entrance, which was further down the street. The name "O.K. Corral" became associated with it due to its proximity and the lot's use as a rear entrance to the corral.

The confrontation began shortly after they reached the vacant lot. Facing them were five men: Ike Clanton, Billy Clanton, Frank McLaury, Tom McLaury, and Billy Claiborne. As the Earps and Holliday approached, Virgil commanded: *"Throw up your hands, boys, I mean to disarm you!"* Accounts differ wildly on who fired first, a point of contention that has fuelled historical debate for over a century. What is clear, however, is that within approximately 30 seconds, some 30 shots were fired in the confined space.

The fight was chaotic and brutal. Frank McLaury and Billy Clanton were shot almost immediately. Billy Clanton, still clutching his gun, continued to fire even as he fell. Tom McLaury, though apparently unarmed, was also shot and killed. Doc Holliday, armed with a shotgun, reportedly blasted Tom McLaury at close range before switching to his pistol. Wyatt Earp, considered the central figure in many popular accounts, famously emerged from the fight relatively unscathed, having perhaps only fired a single shot or two at Frank McLaury, hitting him in the abdomen. Morgan Earp and Virgil Earp were both wounded, Morgan critically. Ike Clanton, who had been loudly threatening the Earps, fled at the first shot, escaping harm. Billy Claiborne also ran, unharmed.



Wyatt Earp, Virgil, Earp and Doc Holliday

When the smoke cleared, three men lay dead: Billy Clanton, Frank McLaury, and Tom McLaury. Virgil and Morgan Earp were seriously wounded, and Doc Holliday had sustained a minor graze. Wyatt Earp was the only one of the lawmen to escape physically unharmed. The brief, intense burst of violence, witnessed by a few stunned bystanders, instantly cemented its place in the annals of frontier history, transforming Tombstone from a mere mining town into the site of the Old West's most famous gunfight.

It is thought the whole gunfight didn't last as long as 30 seconds.



Tom McLaury, Frank McLaury and Billy Clanton

## The Aftermath and Vendetta

The smoke had barely cleared from the vacant lot on Fremont Street before the legal and violent repercussions of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral began. Far from ending the conflict, the shootout merely escalated the bitter feud, leading to a bloody vendetta that would force the surviving Earps and Doc Holliday to flee Arizona.



Cochise County Courthouse

Immediately following the gunfight, the legal system of Tombstone swung into action. A Coroner's Inquest was convened, and then a preliminary hearing, presided over by Justice of the Peace Wells Spicer, took place from 30 October to 30 November 1881. Ike Clanton, having fled the gunfight unharmed, pressed murder charges against the Earps and Doc Holliday. For weeks, a parade of witnesses testified, offering conflicting accounts of who fired first and whether the Earps acted within their authority as lawmen.

Wyatt Earp famously stated during his testimony:

*"I had to fight to save my own life."* (Wyatt Earp, Testimony at the Preliminary Hearing, 1881). After extensive testimony, Justice Spicer ultimately ruled in favour of the Earps and Holliday, declaring that they had acted lawfully in the line of duty, citing the "unusual circumstances" and the defendants' roles as peace officers. He concluded that *"The evidence fails to disclose any evidence of malice on the part of the defendants."* (Justice Wells Spicer, Ruling at the Preliminary Hearing, 30 November 1881).

However, legal vindication did not bring peace. The Cowboys and their sympathisers viewed the ruling as a gross injustice, fuelling their desire for revenge. On 28 December 1881, Virgil Earp, the Town Marshal, was ambushed and severely wounded while walking home. His left arm was shattered by shotgun blasts, permanently crippling him. Though he survived, he was no longer able to use a pistol with his dominant hand. Then, on 18 March 1882, Morgan Earp was assassinated. While playing billiards at Hatch's Saloon, he was shot in the back by an assailant firing through a window. Morgan died within minutes, a tragic loss that shattered the Earp family.



These attacks marked a turning point. Wyatt Earp, deeply affected by the shooting of his brothers and convinced that legal channels offered no protection, took the law into his own hands. Abandoning his efforts to operate within the legal framework, he embarked on what became known as the "Earp Vendetta Ride." From 20 March to around 15 April 1882, Wyatt, along with Doc Holliday and a small posse, systematically hunted down and killed several of the men they believed responsible for the attacks on Virgil and Morgan, including **Frank Stilwell** and Florentino Cruz (also known as Indian Charlie). This period saw Wyatt Earp operating outside the law,

transforming him from a controversial lawman into an avenging figure.

The vendetta effectively ended the Earps' time in Arizona. Faced with murder warrants for their actions during the ride, Wyatt, Doc Holliday, and their remaining allies fled the territory, never to return. Their departure, combined with the earlier deaths and dispersal of the Clanton and McLaury factions, eventually brought an uneasy end to the Tombstone feuds. The survivors of this bloody chapter of the Old West scattered, carrying their experiences and the echoes of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral with them into new lives, forever marked by the brief, violent explosion of 26 October 1881.

Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday famously escaped Arizona Territory, eventually heading to Colorado, effectively becoming fugitives from Arizona law for the rest of their lives.



## The Enduring Legend

The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral lasted barely 30 seconds, yet its impact on American culture and the mythology of the Old West has endured for well over a century. From dime novels to Hollywood blockbusters, the events of 26 October 1881 have been endlessly retold, reimagined, and often distorted, blurring the lines between historical fact and popular legend.

The initial mythologising of the gunfight began almost immediately. Contemporary newspaper accounts often sensationalised the event, painting the Earps as heroic lawmen battling ruthless outlaws. This narrative was further cemented in Wyatt Earp's later life, especially after the publication of his controversial, semi-fictionalised biography, *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*, by Stuart N. Lake in 1931. Lake's book, heavily influenced by Earp's own often self-serving recollections, portrayed him as the quintessential upright, fearless lawman, solidifying his image as the central figure of the gunfight and a symbol of righteous justice.

Hollywood, in particular, seized upon this dramatic narrative. Countless films, starting with early silent movies and continuing through classics like John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and John Sturges's ***Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*** (1957), right up to the more recent *Tombstone* (1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (1994), have cemented the story in global consciousness. These films, while entertaining, often took significant liberties with historical accuracy, simplifying complex motivations, sanitising characters, and exaggerating heroism. For instance, the fight itself is frequently depicted as a drawn-out, dramatic shootout in the middle of a street, rather than the brief, close-quarters chaos it likely was in a narrow lot.

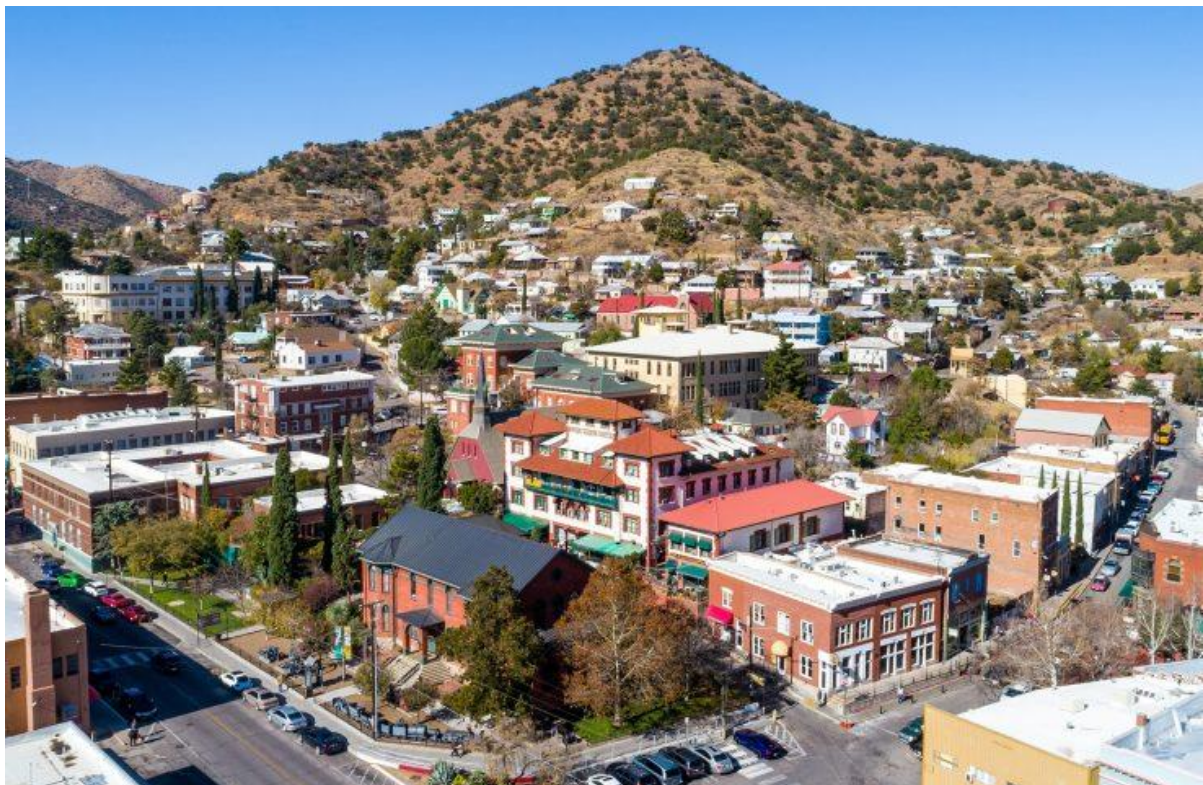


Historians, however, have long debated the true nature of the gunfight and its participants. Modern scholarship often challenges the clear-cut hero-villain dichotomy presented in popular culture. Some historians view the Earps as less altruistic lawmen and more as opportunistic individuals, deeply involved in Tombstone's rough-and-tumble saloon and gambling scene, whose conflict with the Cowboys was as much about competing economic interests and personal grudges as it was about upholding the law. The Cowboys, too, are seen in a more nuanced light, often as a distinct social group (cattlemen vs. townspeople) rather than simply cartoonish villains. As historian Richard Maxwell Brown noted: "*The Earp-Clanton feuds illustrate that violence in the West was often rooted in struggles for economic and political control, rather than simple good-versus-evil clashes.*" (Richard Maxwell Brown, *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society*, 1991).

The surviving key figures also faded into history with varying degrees of fame and infamy. Wyatt Earp lived a long and peripatetic life after Tombstone, engaging in various ventures across the American West, including prospecting, saloon keeping, and acting as a boxing referee, dying of natural causes in Los Angeles in 1929 at the age of 80. He became the last surviving participant of the gunfight. Doc Holliday, suffering from tuberculosis, continued his nomadic lifestyle, his health rapidly deteriorating, eventually dying in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, in November 1887, at just 36 years old. Virgil Earp, though crippled, continued to work as a lawman in California, dying in 1905.

Doc Holliday famously stated on his deathbed, looking at his bare feet, "This is funny," as he had expected to die with his boots on in a gunfight.

Ultimately, the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral endures as a powerful symbol of the American frontier, a microcosm of the conflicts between lawlessness and order, tradition and progress, that defined the West. While the exact truth of those 30 seconds on 26 October 1881 may remain elusive, the legend continues to capture the imagination, reflecting enduring fascination with the era of cowboys, lawmen, and quick-draw justice.



Tombstone today