

## *Prologue*



### **TOMBSTONE THAT MORNING**

Virgil Earp was determined to sleep in on Wednesday, October 26, 1881. The Tombstone police chief tumbled into bed around 6 A.M. after participating in an all-night poker game at the Occidental Saloon. Among others, he'd played against Johnny Behan, the county sheriff, and local ranchers Ike Clanton and Tom McLaury. Before sitting down to play cards, Clanton had spent much of the night threatening the chief's brother Wyatt and Wyatt's gambler pal, Doc Holliday. At one point he and Holliday had to be separated. Holliday eventually headed home to his room in a boardinghouse, but Clanton kept drinking and getting more worked up.

As chief of police, even off-duty and playing in a card game, Virgil Earp always remained alert to possible trouble. But empty threats were common in Western saloons. Men had a few drinks too many, promised to commit mayhem on somebody else, and forgot all about it the next day when they sobered up. Ike Clanton had a reputation in Tombstone as a loudmouth who fired off hot air, not hot lead. Virgil didn't take him too seriously. When the marathon poker game finally concluded—afterward, nobody seemed to remember who won or lost, so no huge sums could have changed hands—Clanton swore again to Virgil that he was going to get his guns and then settle things with Holliday the next time he saw him. He added that it seemed Virgil was part of a group conspiring against him. The Earps and Doc Holliday, Clanton warned, had better get ready to fight. The police chief replied that

he was going to get some sleep, Ike should do the same, and he better not cause any problems while Virgil was in bed.

Dawn on that Wednesday morning broke bitterly cold in southeastern Arizona Territory, so it was a good time to stay warm under the covers. A storm was on the way; Thursday would bring sleet and snow. Extremes in weather had been common all year in the region. The blazing heat of summer was a given, but April through early July had been the hottest and driest in memory. When rain finally did come in July and intermittently thereafter, it frequently arrived as a deluge. Just weeks earlier, much of sprawling Cochise County—roughly the size of the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined—had been drenched. The desert soil, baked rock-hard by the sun under a coating of sand, didn't absorb moisture well, and roads throughout the county flooded. Now biting winds whipped down from the north, causing the temperature to plummet. It was not a comfortable morning to be outdoors.

Yet as Virgil Earp fell asleep, the main streets of Tombstone still bustled with people. It was always that way, every hour of every day. Tombstone was a mining town, built over a warren of underground tunnels and surrounded by a bristling ring of hoists, smelters, and other structures manned nonstop in a frenzied communal effort to wring as much profit from the earth as possible. The mines operated in shifts, never closing, so neither did many of the town's dazzling array of shops, restaurants, and saloons. Weather, like the time of day, made no difference. Broiling, freezing, day, night, Tombstone pulsed with frantic energy. In some form or another, everyone there was on the make.

For the better part of twenty years, Virgil Earp and his brothers, James, Wyatt, and Morgan, had roamed the American frontier, trying to make the great fortune and secure the leading places in a community that their family had coveted, and failed to achieve, for generations. Tombstone, they hoped, was where their dreams would finally come true. Virgil was police chief and a United States deputy marshal, James had a "sampling room" saloon, Wyatt and Morgan sometimes worked for Wells Fargo, and all four brothers owned shares of mine property in and around town. Wyatt had hopes of being elected county sheriff in another year, a job with the potential to pay him as much as \$40,000 a year—the kind of wealth that might gain the Earps admittance to Tombstone's highest social circles. Finally, they would be *somebody*.

Tombstone was a place where such things could happen. Thirty miles from the Mexican border, seventy miles from Tucson, the town was well known throughout the country, mentioned frequently in the business sections of major newspapers from New York City to San Francisco. Its silver mines were said to be the richest since the legendary Comstock Lode was discovered in Nevada Territory in 1859. Legitimate investors, less savory speculators, prospectors in search of strikes that would make their fortunes, and experienced miners looking for work constantly flooded into town, along with those hopeful of siphoning off some of the rumored riches into their own pockets—lawyers, merchants, gamblers, saloonkeepers, prostitutes. In that way, Tombstone was typical of any mining boomtown.

Yet it was also unique. By design as much as by accident, Tombstone was a cultural contradiction, one where the usual mining camp demimonde delights of fixed card games, brothels, and cheap rotgut coexisted amicably with swank hotels and restaurants, world-class stage entertainment, and pricey blended whiskies of the sort sipped in the finest East Coast metropolitan watering holes. Civic leaders were about to debate the advisability of installing sewer lines, and telephones linked the major mines and the busy Mining Exchange Building, as well as a few of Tombstone's glitziest hotels. The town was an addictive hybrid of elegance and decadence, a place soon to be described in one prominent travel magazine as "a spasm of modernism." Tombstone deserved the description. In many ways the town was the logical culmination of what, in just over a century, the American West had come to represent: Limitless opportunities for any man to achieve any ambition, no matter how lofty or unlikely. On this chilly morning, there was no other place like Tombstone in all of Arizona Territory, or in much of America.

Thanks to stringent ordinances prohibiting guns to be carried within city limits, Tombstone was mostly a safe place, too. It was inevitable, in any community with so many saloons patronized by prideful, hard-drinking men, that alcohol-fueled testosterone overflow periodically resulted in fist-fights or drunken attempts at gunplay. More often, bellowed threats like Ike Clanton's against the Earps and Doc Holliday were never carried out. The efficient town police force sent prospective combatants home to sleep it off, or else locked them up for the night and took them to court to be fined the next morning for disturbing the peace. As the sun rose on October 26, the

vast majority of Tombstone residents had never witnessed, much less participated in, physical violence or gunplay within town limits. Billy Breakenridge, who served several years as a Cochise County deputy sheriff, later claimed that “I never heard of a house [in Tombstone] being robbed, or anyone being held up in the city, and it was perfectly safe for any lady or gentleman to pass along the streets, day or night, without being molested.” The most substantive proof came in August 1881, when Chief Earp informed the city council that things were so quiet, the town police force could be reduced to three men—himself and two officers, though he reserved the right to appoint civilians as “special deputies” if necessary. (When he testified in a trial in Tucson in mid-October, Chief Earp named his brothers Wyatt and Morgan to serve as special deputies while he was away.) In town, Virgil Earp had a well-deserved reputation as an impartial enforcer of the law; during the broiling heat of summer 1881, he even arrested Wyatt for disturbing the peace and fighting. Wyatt had to pay a \$20 fine.

But there was ongoing concern among town leaders about a group they believed not only threatened local tranquillity, but Tombstone’s future prosperity. In the surrounding area, particularly in the smaller settlements of San Simon, Charleston, and Galeyville, a loosely knit band of desperadoes collectively known as “cowboys” engaged in raucous lifestyles that frequently crossed over into lawbreaking. The cowboys rustled openly; because of beef shortages in Cochise County, butchers and consumers didn’t much care where cattle were purloined, so long as the majority of them were stolen from Mexican rather than American herds. In exchange for a cut of the profits, small ranchers in the area such as the Clantons and McLaurys gladly grazed the rustled stock on their property until it was fattened enough for sale. The cowboys were also suspected—it was never proven—of attacking Mexican pack trains bringing goods across the border to trade, and of raiding Mexican settlements in much the same manner as renegade Apaches. International tension resulted. Members of President Chester A. Arthur’s cabinet were consulting with territorial officials about it.

Clashing opinions about the cowboys ramped up an already bitter political feud in Cochise County and Tombstone, the county seat. The town’s rival newspapers were engaged in all-out editorial war. The *Nugget* was unabashedly Democrat in its leanings, favoring minimal government

intervention in territorial and local issues, and claiming that “cowboy depredations” were grossly exaggerated by area leaders who wanted to enrich themselves at the expense of individual freedoms. The Republican *Epitaph* took the opposite view: The cowboys were menaces not only to local safety, but to Tombstone’s reputation. There had been several area stage robberies in the last seven months, surely carried out by cowboys. The *Epitaph* demanded federal intervention, currently forbidden by congressional edict; meanwhile, John Clum, the newspaper’s publisher and mayor of Tombstone, joined other civic leaders to form the Tombstone Citizens Safety Committee, ready when needed to mete out swift vigilante justice. In an August 1881 editorial, Clum wrote, “When the civil authorities are insufficient or unwilling to protect a community, the people are justified in taking the law into their own hands and ridding themselves of the dangerous characters who make murder and robbery their business.” It was a slap at county sheriff Behan, who rarely arrested cowboys and occasionally managed to let them escape jail when he did, and an equally blunt warning to Tombstone police chief Earp: If he ever failed to keep the cowboys under control while they were in town, his bosses would do it for him.

The last thing Virgil Earp wanted was armed, trigger-happy civilians stalking cowboys on Tombstone’s streets. It took the judgment of an experienced lawman like the town police chief to know when to act decisively, and when to let situations fizzle out of their own accord. Ike Clanton’s babbled threats to “fix” Doc Holliday and the police chief and his brothers were good examples. Virgil could have arrested him, but guessed that Ike would cool down. As the sun came up on Tombstone that Wednesday, Clanton was probably snoring in a drunken stupor in a town hotel. When Ike woke up with a hellacious hangover, he’d stumble back to his ranch. It was nothing to lose sleep over, and Virgil didn’t intend to.

But around nine in the morning, policeman A. G. Bronk roused Virgil after just a few hours of slumber to tell him that Ike Clanton was staggering around town, now armed and still drunk, threatening to kill all the Earp brothers and their friend Doc Holliday on sight. The chief told Bronk not to worry about it, then rolled over and went back to sleep.

About six hours after that, three men died, with a fourth soon to be assassinated and a fifth crippled for life. Yet the impact of the bloody events in

and just outside a cramped Tombstone vacant lot extended far beyond the fates of the eight men directly involved. What has come to be called “The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral” became a pivotal moment in American annals because misunderstandings, exaggerations, and outright lies about it provided impetus for future generations to form a skewed, one-dimensional view of frontier history. In fact, it represented an unintentional, if inevitable, clash between evolving social, political, and economic forces, though the Earps and the Clantons and the McLaurys and Doc Holliday had no notion of that when they began pulling triggers. The real story of Tombstone, and of the American West, is far more complex than a cartoonish confrontation between good guys and bad guys. Much of the subsequent misinterpretation can be directly traced back to that critical moment on a freezing October morning in 1881 when sleepy, well-meaning Virgil Earp guessed wrong.