An Old West Recollection

Rod Drake*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1973 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
An Old West Recollection

Rod Drake

Abstract

I first met the Earp Brothers in Wichita at the Short Branch Saloon. They were sitting around their private table (which bore a large bronze plaque enscribed EARPS’ PRIVATE TABLE), engaged in their favorite pastime shooting shot glasses off the bar. This habit was much to the chagrin of those drinking from them, which often resulted in a face-full of glass (from which the expression “glass jaw” originated)....
An Old West Recollection

by Rod Drake

I first met the Earp Brothers in Wichita at the Short Branch Saloon. They were sitting around their private table (which bore a large bronze plaque enscribed EARP'S PRIVATE TABLE), engaged in their favorite pastime shooting shot glasses off the bar. This habit was much to the chagrin of those drinking from them, which often resulted in a face-full of glass (from which the expression "glass jaw" originated).

A spirited trio, Wyatt, Morgan, and Virgil, had not exactly restored law and order in the cowtown but at least had it switching sides. Morgan vowed politically to take crime from the street and put it in their hands, to which Wyatt sagely replied, "Bring me a buffalo pizza."

Doc Holliday staggered in, a friend to be avoided, Virgil assured me. He was constantly coughing on Wyatt's punch lines and was always spilling his drink on others during acute spasms. The poison he drank was rot-gut enough to dissolve the cylinder of a revolver, quite embarrassing and fatal in certain circumstances.

Wyatt broke the tension by his old cigarette lighting trick. He had a slight variation—igniting the end held between the teeth. A guaranteed source of amusement, it also increased business for dentist Holliday. In token appreciation, Doc performed his famous Mexican hat dance with spurs routine, despite the protests of the sombrero-clad "bandito."

Later, we crossed paths in Dodge City. Wyatt was appointed U.S. Marshal and, always the dedicated lawman, commented, "Do you have buffalo pizzas here?"

Bat Masterson was there, resplendent in white lace shirt, black leather vest, gold cane, and lavender derby. He was quite incensed over having been named Champion Baton-Twirler West of the Monongahela and had sent a
malaria-infected blanket to the judge's home anonymously.

We toasted Wyatt as the local whiskey drummer shattered his bottle on the drum set’s cymbal. Morgan and Virgil continued with their target practice, taking pot shots until all the commodes in the hotel were broken.

Luke Short, mighty fearless Texan (who later lent the initials to a likewise diminutive cigarette), strode underneath the swinging doors, in town for the Shetland pony show. He confided to me that while he liked Wyatt, he was no crack shot. In angered response, the new marshal promptly fired six slugs into the fissure in the ceiling’s plaster. Luke finished his chin-ups on the bar’s brass rail, then left the saloon muttering under his breath (which was quite low).

Ned Buntline, a prominent newspaperman (although actually he was flesh-and-blood), presented Wyatt with the Buntline Special, a twelve-inch barrelled pistol. This new weapon enabled Wyatt to fire, then draw and aim the gun before the bullet reached the end of the barrel, a distinct advantage over his foes.

Doc entered, boasting of his recent duel in which he gunned down six people. Only one drew on him, he confessed; the cavalry sergeant, cowpoke, drunk Indian, bartender, and 80-year-old temperance lady were the result of a sudden coughing jag and a drawn, loaded pistol. These last six notches had carved the handle of his Colt entirely away, so he wore it upside down in his holster.

Finally, we encountered each other in Tombstone. Here was the site of the legendary Gunfight at the OK Corral, the Earps against the Clantons. The real reason for the shoot-out, Bat later told me, was that both groups were vying for the Tombstone Ideal Family Award. Unfortunately, the Earps still lost the honor to yet another brother team—Frank and Jesse James. Wyatt was later quoted as remarking, “Shucks, there goes a year’s free supply of buffalo pizzas.”
Luke showed up, eagerly looking for an outlaw blacksmith. He subsequently found and shot it out with the Negro robber, Ben "Cactus" Smith.

Morgan and Virgil left to visit a pair of wildly funny young ladies in Denver they were quite enamored of. Liberty Belle was a true ding dong; her sister, Clara, was also a real clown. Luke also said goodbye and took off for Little Rock, Arkansas, and the Penny Ante Championships. Bat bid adieu as he journeyed to meet Wild Bill in Montana for some winter geese and duck hunting, although he was positive it would turn out to be nothing more than a wild goose chase. Doc decided his continual coughing might be helped if he could find a nice, comfortable place to sleep, so he left for Colorado Springs.

Wyatt and I remained behind, often spending long, lazy afternoons in the saloon talking over old times. I remember my last meeting with the great gunfighter distinctly, when after a large meal, he leaned forward candidly and vividly, poetically remarked, "Burp." It seemed to summarize our friendship.