

Witnesses' accounts of OK Corral gunfight revealed

Transcript of 1881 coroner's inquest found in storage room

By Anita Singh, Daily Telegraph April 23, 2010

It is the most infamous showdown in the history of the U.S. Wild West history, it inspired a string of Hollywood films and it shaped the mythology of the frontier.

Now the real story of the gunfight at the OK Corral has been unearthed, in the words of the people who witnessed it.

Two court clerks stumbled upon the original transcript of the 1881 coroner's inquest while reorganizing files in a storage room in Bisbee, Ariz.

In vivid detail, it describes the fateful day when tensions between lawman Wyatt Earp and a gang of outlaws ended in bloodshed.

The gun battle in the frontier town of Tombstone left three men dead and ensured Earp's place in Wild West folklore.

The 1957 film, *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, starring Burt Lancaster as Earp and Kirk Douglas as his sidekick, John (Doc) Holliday, presented the two men as heroes. To this day, however, debate rages over who drew their guns first.

On the side of the law were Virgil Earp, the deputy federal marshal, his brothers Morgan and Wyatt and Doc Holliday. On the side of the Cowboys, a loosely organized group of criminals, were Frank and Tom McLaury, Ike and Billy Clanton and Billy Claiborne.

Tensions ran high between the two groups for a variety of reasons, including the misdemeanours of the Cowboys, but also the Earps' uncompromising law enforcement and the business interests of both sides.

In the lead-up to the gunfight, Virgil Earp had arrested two men connected to the Cowboys for a stagecoach robbery.

Threats were made against the Earps, and when a group of Cowboys rode into town fully armed at 3 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 26, both groups were expecting trouble.

One witness, a Mrs. M.J. King, a landlady, said in her statement to the inquest: "I saw quite a group of men. ... I inquired what was the matter, and they said there was going to be a fuss between the Earp boys and [C]owboys."

Confusion over city laws dictating where new arrivals were required to disarm was said to have been the spark that ignited the tinderbox.

According to the testimony of Ike Clanton, the Earps and Doc Holliday were the antagonists.

He claimed: "I stepped out and met Wyatt Earp; he stuck his six shooter at me and said, 'Throw up your hands!'"

"They said, 'you's s---of b-----came here to make a fight' at the same instant Doc Holliday and Morgan Earp shot."

Barely 30 seconds later, Billy Clanton and the McLaury brothers lay dead.

The inquest took place the same day. Wyatt Earp and Holliday were cleared but their reputations never recovered.

The transcript, discovered stuffed inside a modern manila envelope marked "keep," has been turned over to state archivists, who have begun the painstaking process of restoring the faded pages, said to be "as brittle as potato chips."

To Gladys Ann Wells, the Arizona State librarian, the pages are a priceless piece of history.

"They were handled by the people of that moment," she said.

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