Wild West legends take a beating in Jeff Guinn's "The Last Gunfight"

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Sunday, May 08, 2011
5/8/2011 4:23:01 AM

"This is the West," a newspaper editor tells his colleagues in John Ford's great movie, "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." "When the fact becomes legend, print the legend."

Myths about the Wild West have given us Billy the Kid, Buffalo Bill Cody, Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickock - and Wyatt Earp. For generations, just about every American learned that U.S. Marshall Earp was a force for frontier justice, "brave, courageous and bold," who (with his brothers) shot it out with the cattle-rustling Clanton clan in a town (aptly) named Tombstone.

Sometimes, Jeff Guinn reminds us, the truth is more interesting than a tall-tale. In "The Last Gunfight," he demonstrates that the slap-leather battle (30 shots in 30 seconds), which actually occurred on Fremont Street, in a vacant lot next to a photography studio, was less a triumph of good over evil than an "arrest gone wrong," marinated in alcohol, ambition, anger, stubbornness and stupidity.

Despite the book's subtitle, Guinn doesn't really believe that the gunfight changed the American West. Instead, he weaves a wealth of information ("old, new, incontrovertible or destined for eternal debate") about the incident into a deft, dependable and delightful narrative that helps us understand "the real history" of the frontier.

Like so many 19th century westerners, Guinn's Earp was a drifter, hoping against hope for "real money, social prominence, importance," and moving on, from Wichita to Deadwood to Dodge City, when his dreams went bust.

In Tombstone, Wyatt took a job as Pima County deputy sheriff, positioning himself to run for the top job, which paid the incumbent a hefty percentage of the taxes he collected from railroads, mines and mercantile establishments.

To burnish his reputation among the voters, he promised the Clantons the reward money if they would help him kill the outlaws who had held up a Wells Fargo stage coach.

When the scheme soured, so did their relationship.

After the gunfight, Guinn reveals, Earp was charged with murder. Although he was acquitted, he remained a pariah in Tombstone. When Clanton's cowboy cronies murdered his brother Morgan, Wyatt exacted revenge, and became a fugitive from justice.

Earp lived long enough to take control of his reputation, enlisting collaborators to tell his story. In 1931, two years after he died, "Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal" struck a chord with Depression-era Americans. The book planted the seeds of his reemergence; movies and television made him a celebrity. Wyatt would be pleased by the way things worked out, Guinn concludes, except for the fact that it didn't even net him a buffalo nickel.

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Original Print Headline: 'Gunfight' shines light on Tombstone tale
By Jeff Guinn
Simon & Schuster, $27