

This Day in History... October 26, 1881

Shootout at the OK Corral

On October 26, 1881, the Earp brothers took on the Clanton-McLaury Gang at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. The shootout became one of the most famous events in the Old West.

Tombstone had become one of the richest mining towns in the Southwest after silver was discovered nearby in 1877. Two years later, Wyatt Earp, a former Kansas police officer, and his brothers Morgan and Virgil moved to Tombstone to join in the silver boom and work as lawmen. Wyatt found a job as a bank security guard while Virgil became the town marshal.

In July 1880, Virgil, a US marshal, was tasked with tracking a group of cowboys that had stolen six US Army mules. (At that time, in the Tombstone area, the word cowboy referred to outlaws.) Virgil requested to bring his brothers along on the hunt, and they found the stolen mules on the McLaury ranch, home to known cowboys. The McLaurys said they'd give the mules back but never did, and threatened the Earps that if they ever followed them again, they'd kill them.



The Earps originally came to Tombstone following a silver boom.

Over the following year, the Earps had frequent run-ins with the McLaurys and the Clantons, who Earp believed stole his horse. Each time, the cowboys threatened to kill the Earps. Adding fuel to the fire, the cowboys were cohorts of the Cochise County Sheriff, Johnny Behan, who was a rival of Wyatt Earp's – politically and in an affair of the heart.

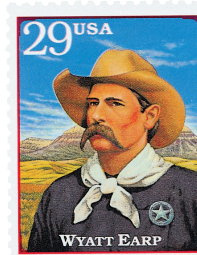
Then, on October 25, 1881, Ike Clanton and Tom McLaury went to Tombstone for supplies. Over the course of 24 hours, they clashed with the Earps and their friend Doc Holliday. About 1:30 p.m. the next day, Billy Clanton, Frank McLaury, and Billy Claiborne rode into town. They found Holliday at the saloon, who was happy to tell them that their brothers had been pistol-whipped by the Earps.

The brothers left in a rage and claimed they'd get their vengeance. They found their brothers and gathered in an empty lot behind the OK Corral. The Earps and Holliday soon found them there and prepared to face off. The Earps and Holliday slowly advanced to stand within six feet of the cowboys. Moments later the deafening roar of gunfire filled the air. The gunfight lasted just 30 seconds, and only about 30 shots were fired. Many debate exactly how the shootout progressed, but generally believe it began with Virgil Earp shooting Billy Clanton in the chest. Next Doc Holliday shot Tom McLaury, and Wyatt shot Frank McLaury in the stomach. Two of the cowboys managed to fire on the lawmen before falling to the ground.

When the smoke cleared, three of the cowboys lay dead or dying, and the fourth was seriously wounded. Of the lawmen only Wyatt Earp emerged unscathed. Ike Clanton and Claiborne ran away. A local cowboy newspaper proclaimed, "The 26th of October, 1881, will always be marked as one of the crimson days in the annals of Tombstone, a day when blood flowed as water, and human life was held as a shuttle cock, a day to be remembered as witnessing the bloodiest and deadliest street fight that has ever occurred in this place, or probably in the Territory."

Meanwhile, Sheriff Behan had witnessed the shootout and charged the Earps and Holliday with murder. The case went to trial, but a month later, the judge ruled that the men were not guilty and that they were "fully justified in committing these homicides."

The shootout became part of the legend of the American West and has been recreated in a number of films and television shows.



Wyatt Earp from the Legends of the West sheet.

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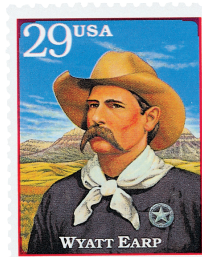
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