

Doc Holliday

By Robert Hilliard

Be honest with yourself. When you think about the outlaws and gunfighters of the old west, which one comes to mind first?



Well, for me, it has always been Doc Holliday. Here is a man that came into this world with the best intentions, but ended up contracting a disease that not only hit him early in his life, but shaped the type of person he would be until his dying day.

John Henry "Doc" Holliday was born on August 14, 1851 in Griffin, Georgia, to Henry Burroughs Holliday and Alice Jane Holliday. He grew up a Southern gentleman and at the age of 21 obtained his Dental degree and moved to St. Louis, Missouri to work with a classmate and setup his practice.

Shortly after, Doc was diagnosed with tuberculosis and carried the disease throughout the remainder of his life. Holliday moved around frequently setting up practices in Atlanta, Dallas and points in between. Everywhere he went, his disease would eventually end his practice. Finally, while trying to practice as a dentist in Dallas, Texas, Doc found he had another skill that would aid him in making a living. He became skilled as a gambler. Over the years, Doc found himself engaged in fights and gunfights that would land him in jail for a short period of time.

However, Doc managed to gain a reputation, not only as a skilled gambler and gunfighter, but as a person who lived as if today were his last day on earth. Knowing that tuberculosis would eventually do him in, Doc Holliday lived the rest of his days as if he had no fear. As some historians have put it, Doc seemed to live as if he had a "code" in life. A line, if crossed over would mean a person would catch the wrath of a diseased, but temperamental gunfighter willing to take any chance to prove his point. It was this attitude that helped Doc gain his reputation.

Doc's claim-to-fame would probably start with his meeting with Wyatt Earp in Ft. Worth, Texas in 1877. Earp was a US Deputy Marshall and was given the task of finding and arresting a train robber named Dave Rudabaugh. Doc knew Rudabaugh and helped Earp find and arrest him. So the story goes that Wyatt and Doc became friends and when Earp and his family moved to Tombstone, Arizona to start a new life, Doc and his girlfriend Big Nose Kate, went with them.

Gunfight at OK Corral

In March 1881 Wyatt Earp set out to find a posse of cowboys that had robbed a Tombstone stagecoach and its driver. In an effort to close in on the outlaws, he struck a deal with a rancher named Ike Clanton, who regularly dealt with the cowboys working around Tombstone. In return for his help, Earp promised Clanton he could collect a \$6,000 reward.

But the partnership quickly dissolved. Clanton, paranoid that Earp would leak the details of their bargain, turned against him. By October Clanton was out of his mind, drunk and parading around Tombstone's saloons, bragging that he was going to kill one of the Earp men.

Everything came to a head on October 26, 1881, when Wyatt, Virgil, Morgan and Doc Holliday, met Clanton, his brother Billy, and two others, Frank McLaury and his brother, Tom, on a small lot on the edge of town near an enclosure called the O.K. Corral.



There, the greatest gunfight in the West's history took place. Over the course of just 30 seconds, a barrage of shots was fired, ultimately killing Billy Clanton and both of the McLauri brothers. Virgil and Morgan Earp, as well as Holliday, all were injured.

Vendetta Ride

The battle ratcheted up tensions between the cowboy community and those who were looking for a more settled West to emerge. Ike Clanton went on a rampage, orchestrating the shooting of Virgil Earp, severely wounding his left arm. Morgan Earp was shot to death sometime later.

As a result of Morgan's death, Wyatt Earp set off in search of vengeance. With Doc Holliday and a small posse of others, Earp roamed the frontier on a killing spree that made headlines around the nation, earning the group both praise and condemnation for taking on the West's wild cowboy culture.

Final Years

The friendship with Wyatt Earp continued for Doc for a number of years. In 1887, prematurely gray and badly ailing from tuberculosis, Holliday made his way to the Hotel Glenwood, in Glenwood Spring, Colorado. At the time it was believed that the hot springs of the area might give him some relief. Eventually, Doc's health declined to the point to where he was on his deathbed. As he lay dying, Holliday is reported to have asked the nurse attending him at the Hotel Glenwood for a shot of whiskey. When she told him no, he looked at his bootless feet, amused. The nurses said that his last words were, "This is funny." He had always figured he would be killed someday with his boots on in a gunfight. Doc Holliday died at 10 am on November 8, 1887. He was 36 years of age. Wyatt Earp didn't learn of Holliday's death until two months afterward. Big Nose Kate later said that she attended to him in his final days, but it is also doubtful that she was even present.

The photograph below was published in the October, 2015 issue of True West magazine. The article asked the question, "Is this Doc Holliday?" There have been only two verified photographs of Doc Holliday as an adult. Could this photo found in an elegant home near St. Louis, Missouri be that of an ailing Doc Holliday in his last days?

