

## John Peters "Johnny" Ringo

Ringo is another one of those old west legends whose history seems to be strewn with discrepancies. One source says he was born in Ringoes, New Jersey. He was born in Green Fork, Wayne County, Indiana, on May 3, 1850. Some authors list his name as Ringgold, but his family was never associated with that name. He was the son of Martin Albert Ringo and Mary Peters Ringo. We wouldn't even address the controversy over whether or not he was a college graduate.

The family had relocated to Missouri by 1857 and departed on a wagon train in May of 1864 to San Jose, California, where Mary's sister lived with her husband, Colonel Coleman Younger. Younger, a prominent figure in the area was an uncle to the outlaw Younger brothers. A terrible tragedy struck while on the wagon train. Early in the morning of July 30, Ringo's father stepped out of the wagon with a shotgun in his hand and it accidentally went off. The load entered his right eye and came out the top of his head.

Despite the tragedy the family pushed on to San Jose where they stayed about a year with the Youngers. Nothing is known of Ringo's activities from 1864 to 1870. In 1870 or 1871, he left California and his destination and activities are unknown until 1874 when he was in Burnett, Texas. On December 25, 1874, he was charged with firing his gun in a public square, his first known criminal indictment.

In May of 1875, a well-known and well-liked American, Tim Williamson, was murdered in the Mason County "Hoo-Doo" War. This was a complicated 'range war' that pitted German immigrants and Unionists against the "cowboys" and Confederate sympathizers. This brought Scott Cooley, a good friend of Ringo, and Ringo himself, into the war.

There is little doubt that Ringo participated in two killings in the war. The story goes that two of Ringo's close friends, Moses Baird and George Gladden, were told by James Cheyney, a Mason gambler and Unionist sympathizer, that they were wanted for some reason in Mason. The two men mounted their horses and rode straight into an ambush by Sheriff John Clark of Mason. Baird was killed and Gladden seriously wounded.

Seventeen days later, on September, 25, 1875, Ringo and a fellow named Bill Williams rode up to the home of Cheyney who invited them in for breakfast. Cheyney was drying his face with a towel when Ringo and Williams shot him in front of his family. A year later Ringo and George Gladden were indicted for Cheyney's murder and Williams was not mentioned.

Peter Bader was one of the Germans responsible for the murder of Williamson. Shortly after Cheyney's murderer, Cooley and Ringo shot and killed Charley Bader, an innocent brother, by mistake.

In 1877, Ringo was placed in the same Travis County jail as the infamous brutal outlaw and murder, John Wesley Hardin. Hardin complained of being in jail with someone as mean and vicious as Ringo. Even though he had just been involved in two murders, Ringo was never the vicious, man-killing, gunslinger that some authors and Hollywood has made him out to be. He did break out of jail and disappeared for a while. Then he showed up in Tombstone in 1879.

In Tombstone he took up with the faction known as the "cowboys" who were the supposed "rustlers" though an indictment against any of them has not been found. This group included the Clantons, the McLaurys, Curly Bill Brocius, Pony Deal and Billy Claiborne. Cochise County Sheriff John Behan was also sympathetic to the cowboys. On the other side was the usual opposing force, the large ranchers who thought every small rancher was stealing their cattle, the Earps and Doc Holliday.

After the OK Corral fight, a drunken Ringo supposedly challenged Holliday and Wyatt Earp to a shoot-out. Officer James Flynn pulled Ringo away and stopped the hostilities.

Ringo drank a lot and was reported to be suicidal at times. In 1882, he returned home and his sisters, devout Methodists, refused him entry. So, he returned to Tombstone.

A short time later, on July 13, 1882, a bullet entered his right temple and exited out the top of his head. He was found the next day near Turkey Creek, leaning against an oak tree and his revolver in his right hand. But even in death he was surrounded by controversy. His horse was gone, his shirt was ripped off and wrapped around his bootless feet and his cartridge belt was on upside down. When his horse was found, his boots were attached to the saddle. Some have even reported he was partially scalped.

The coroner's jury ruled it death by suicide and this really stirred up a controversy. I believe a good case could be made either way, but tend to believe the suicide theory. His close friend, and possible lover, Billy Claiborne believed so strongly that Buckskin Frank Leslie murdered Ringo that Leslie eventually had to kill Billy in self-defense. Many people believed that Wyatt murdered him in revenge for Morgan Earp's murder. Some believed Doc Holiday had done it. Strangely, after years of denial, Leslie allegedly told one of his prison guards that he did kill Ringo. One author, Frank Lockwood says Wyatt told him "in circumstantial detail how he killed John Ringo." Another writer, Glenn Boyer, claims Josie Earp, Wyatt's wife, gave an account of Wyatt killing Ringo.

Ringo was buried beneath the tree where he was killed. The grave is on private property and permission to visit should be requested at the house next to the gate on E. Turkey Creek Road. From Willcox, AZ it is a 46.6 mile, one hour and six minute trip. Follow AZ Highway 186E until it becomes AZ 181W. When 181W makes a 90 degree turn to the right, turn left instead onto Turkey Creek Road for 4.7 miles. The GPS coordinates are N31.86562, W109.41875

Sources: *The Mason County "Hoo-Doo" War: 1874-1902* by David Johnson; Johnny Ringo Biography at <http://www.angelfire.com/co4/earpgang/ringo01.html>; ["www.johnnyringo.com"](http://www.johnnyringo.com)



