

Mary Katherine “Big Nose Kate” Horony Cummings

Kate Fisher, Kate Melvin and Mary Cummings were some of the names for which she was known, but she was probably best known as Kate Elder. John Wayne starred in a movie, *“The Sons of Katie Elder”* which was loosely based on her life. She was born in Pest, Hungary, to a prominent family on November 7, 1850. She was the daughter of a doctor, and his second wife, who was appointed as the personal surgeon of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico. She received an education fitting her family's position. Kate spoke Hungarian, French, Spanish and English. Her life was destined to be filled with tragedy, and she would become just another of the many “soiled doves” on the western frontier. Except for “Doc” Holliday, we would probably never have known of her.

The family left Hungary for Mexico in 1862 to fill the position with Maximilian. By 1865, Maximilian had lost all his support and his rule crumbled. The Horony family fled Mexico and settled in Davenport, Iowa. Kate was fourteen years old and in March of 1865, her mother died and two months later her father died. Now an orphan, she was placed in the home of Otto Smith. That did not work out well and she was soon a stowaway on a steamship headed for St. Louis.



**Sixteen-year-old Kate (seated)
with her sister**

The ship's captain, a man named Fisher, discovered her, allowed her to stay on the boat and enrolled her in a convent school in St. Louis. She assumed the name of Kate Fisher. At some point, she met and married a dentist named Silas Melvin. The couple had a child, but husband and child both died within the year.

Kate was in Wichita, Kansas, by 1874, and working as a prostitute for Nellie Bessie Earp, the wife of Wyatt's brother James. She always said that she never met Wyatt until she reached Texas, however Wyatt was there at the same time and they were believed to have been lovers. Probably, neither wanted Doc to know about the relationship.

Kate had moved on to Dodge City, Kansas, by 1875 and was going by the name Elder. She worked as a dance hall girl for a couple of years and then moved to Ft. Griffin, Texas. There she met Doc Holliday in a saloon where he was dealing cards. Legend has it that during a card game a fellow gambler drew a pistol and before he could fire, Doc whipped his knife out and sliced the fellow's stomach open. Doc was arrested even if it was obviously self-defense and was held in a hotel room because there was no jail. A vigilante committee decided to hang Doc. Kate decided to take it upon herself to save Doc. She set fire to an old shed behind the hotel and the town was soon in danger of going up in flame. While all the men in town were fighting the fire she confronted the officer guarding Doc with a pistol in each hand. With the guard disarmed, the two stole a pair of horses and headed for Dodge City. They registered in a boarding house as Dr. and Mrs. J. H. Holliday. Supposedly, Doc was so appreciative of what Kate had done for him that he was determined to make her happy. He gave up gambling and hung out his dentist shingle. Kate promised to give up the life of prostitution and stop hanging about the saloons.

They both had strong, stubborn personalities and their fights were many. Kate would spend the next several years with Doc, traveling around the western frontier boom towns. Their relationship was often rocky, with Kate still plying her trade as a prostitute from time to time, and of course Doc was back to gambling. They split up many times over the years.

Doc wound up in Las Vegas, New Mexico, where he got into an argument with a former Army scout named Mike Gordon. The argument inevitably led to a gunfight in the street and Gordon was left dead. When a lynch mob threatened again, Doc returned to Dodge City and found that Kate was long gone and Wyatt had departed to Tombstone, Arizona.

Doc didn't know Kate was also headed to Tombstone until they ran into each other in Prescott, Arizona. Doc seems to have won a large sum of money and Kate was only too happy to keep him company. The pair reached Tombstone in the summer of 1880. Kate was not to stay in Tombstone very long. She was soon running a boarding house 175 miles away in Globe. But she visited often and stayed with Doc. Many times when Kate visited Doc they were known to have frequent arguments, most of which were not serious until Kate got drunk. Often, her drunkenness would escalate to abuse, and in early 1881, Doc had finally had enough and threw her out.

In March of 1881 there was a stagecoach hold up not far out of Tombstone and the driver was killed. Seeing an opportunity, the local cowboy faction spread

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the word that Doc was one of the holdup men. While investigating the holdup, the sheriff found Kate drunk and running down Doc for throwing her out. Providing Kate with a liberal application of more lubricant, the sheriff convinced her to sign an affidavit that Doc was one of the bandits and killed the driver. That was the last straw. Doc gave her some money and put her on a stage out of town.

Following the Vendetta ride, where the Earps, Doc and some others murdered several people they suspected of killing Morgan Earp, Doc fled to Colorado where he stayed until he died. Kate followed him to Colorado, and they may have spent some time together. After his death, she returned to Arizona at some time and, in 1888, married a blacksmith named George M. Cummings and became Mary Cummings. She left him in 1889 and moved to the tiny railroad town of Cochise, Arizona, where she worked in the Cochise Hotel. She left the hotel in 1900 and moved in with a man named Howard in the mining town of Dos Cabezas, Arizona.



Kate at 40

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She lived with Howard until his death in 1930, when she inherited his property. In 1931, she wrote to the Governor of Arizona, George W.P. Hunt, requesting admission to the "Arizona Pioneers Home." Being foreign born, she was not eligible for admission, but claiming she had been born in Davenport, Iowa, she was accepted to the home. Kate stayed at the Pioneers Home until her death on November 2, 1940. She was just five days shy of her 90th birthday. She was buried in the Arizona Pioneer Cemetery in Prescott.



Source: Legends of America