

Tombstone by Tombstone

Virgil Walter Earp

At the legendary Gunfight at the O.K. Corral Wyatt Earp called out, "Boys, throw up your hands—I want your guns." No, wait, that wasn't Wyatt, it was the man who was really in charge at the fight, Wyatt's older brother Virgil. Whoever said, "History is written by the winners," was only partially right. It is also written by politicians and Hollywood. If your sole source of the history of the O.K. Corral is television and the movies, you would never know that Wyatt was not in charge at the O.K. Corral. On that day, Virgil Earp was wearing two badges, Tombstone chief of police and deputy U. S. Marshal, and Wyatt was merely an assistant policeman. While it has been said that Wyatt spent more time running from lawmen than being a law man, Virgil was the real thing.

Virgil was born in Hartford, Ohio County, Kentucky, on July 18, 1843. On July 26, 1862, Virgil enlisted in the 83rd Regiment of the Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Union army. His service record shows him serving in several skirmishes in the Civil War and he was mustered out of the Union army in Nashville on June 24, 1865.

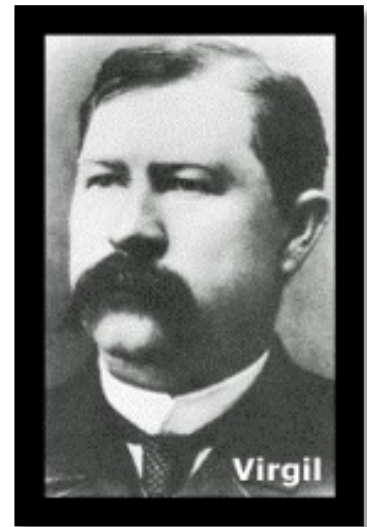
Following the Civil War he wandered around the West, driving stagecoaches in California; grading Union Pacific railroad beds in Wyoming; running a grocery store in Lamar, Missouri, and driving stages in Iowa where he met his third wife Alvira "Allie" Packingham Sullivan. His first wife, Ellen Rysdam, remarried after being told by her father that Virgil had died in combat in 1863. His second wife, Rosella Drago, simply vanished from the records. Allie and Virgil would remain together for the rest of his life. In May of 1877, the couple would head for California with his father, older brother and the younger siblings, Warren and Adelia.

On July 4, the wagon train would reach the city of Prescott, Arizona, where Virgil and his half-brother Newton would decide to remain. In October, Virgil experienced, perhaps, his first gunfight and opportunity as a lawman. While standing on a corner talking with the local sheriff and a U.S. marshal, a Texas lawman came running up waving a Texas warrant for a fellow named Wilson. Wilson and his pal, John Talos, were drunk and shooting at a dog. The sheriff quickly deputized Virgil and the chase was on. The small posse caught up with the two fugitives just on the outskirts of town and a gun battle ensued. Talos soon lay dead with eight bullets in his body and Wilson died a few days later. The lawmen gave credit to Virgil for doing the most damage and he became an instant hero.

Some writers insist that Wyatt was the Earp to arrive in Tombstone as a U.S. deputy marshal. Not so. When Virgil decided to head for the silver boom in Tombstone, U.S. Marshal Crawley P. Dake appointed Virgil as deputy U.S marshal for Tombstone on November 27, 1879.

On June 6, 1881, the Tombstone chief of police, Ben Sippy, was given a two week leave of absence. Sippy failed to return and on June 28, the city council gave the position to Virgil. He performed his job so well that he even arrested Mayor John Clum, a staunch Earp ally, for riding his horse at break neck speed through town.

On October 26, 1881, Virgil issued the aforementioned quote in a vain attempt to prevent gunplay at the O.K. Corral. No one knows for sure who drew or fired first but most reports say that the shooting started when Virgil pulled his revolver and shot Billy Clanton point-blank in the chest. The battle lasted about 30 seconds and about 30 shots. When it was all over three cowboys were dead; brothers Tom and Frank McLaury and Billy Clanton. Virgil, Morgan Earp and Doc Holliday all suffered non-life-threatening wounds. Only Wyatt escaped unharmed. Ike Clanton and Billy Claiborne fled the scene just as the shooting was starting.



Tombstone by Tombstone

On October 29, the city council suspended Virgil because of the gunfight. Two days later, Justice of the Peace Wells Spicer began the controversial hearing to determine whether the Earps and Hollidays should face murder charges. He ruled that they should not be indicted. On the night of December 28, an unidentified person(s) fired a shotgun blast that nearly killed Virgil and crippled his left arm for life. Recovery was slow, but eventually he was up and about, but that was the end of his Tombstone activities.

Brother Morgan was shot and killed through an open window while he was playing pool on March 18, 1882, again by unidentified assailants. The Earps were absolutely sure it was more of the "cowboy" faction. On March 19, Morgan's body was sent back to the parents in Colton, California. For his own safety, Wyatt and Doc Holliday put Virgil on a train for Colton the next day. Wyatt and Holliday found Frank Stilwell, one of the cowboys they believed to be part of the assassination, on the train platform in Tucson and filled him full of the lead. That murder was the beginning of the vendetta ride that would cause all the Earps to flee from Arizona law.

Over the next few years Virgil and Allie did a lot of traveling, especially between Colton and San Francisco where he was once arrested for running an illegal gambling house. In July of 1886, he was elected constable in Colton and his father Nick was justice of the peace. Then in 1887, he was elected Colton's marshal and served two terms and resigned.

Virgil and Wyatt moved with their wives to Cripple Creek, Colorado, in the summer of 1895. They intended to open a saloon for the silver rush, but were too late to compete. Virgil and Allie went back to Prescott where a mine collapsed and Virgil's body was severely crushed. He survived and spent the rest of the decade working a small ranch.

In 1898 he received the shock of his life when a lady named Jane Law sent him a letter from Portland, Oregon, stating she was his daughter from the first wife. Virgil and Allie went to Portland to meet her for the first time. Then the couple bounced back and forth between Colton and Prescott for a few years. A gold strike in southern Nevada drew them to Goldfield. There Virgil took his final oath of office as a deputy sheriff of Esmeralda County.

Virgil died on October 19, 1905, at Goldfield from contagious pneumonia. Allie shipped his body to his daughter Nellie in Portland and he is buried near her in the River View Cemetery. Allie lived to be 98 years old and she is buried with her best friend in later life, Adelia Earp Edwards, Virgil's sister in the Mountain View Cemetery in San Bernardino, California.



Source: Wild West Magazine, December 2009, Article: *In a Brother's Shadow*, by Lee A. Silva.