

Tombstone by Tombstone

Robert Clay Allison

Did Clay Allison ride through Mobeetie, Texas, while naked? Of course not, he would never be caught in public without his gun belt and revolver. Did he once get angry and pull a dentist's tooth? Yes he did. Did he once fight a duel with Bowie knives inside an empty grave? Unlike most wild stories attributed to old west legends, most of those attributed to Allison were true. He was also unique among shootists in that he was neither a gambler nor a man that ever wore a badge as all other noted gunmen did, and he stood trial for his killings. It might also be noted that during the days of the old west, the terms "gunslinger" and "gunfighter" were never used. The terms "gunman": and "pistooleer" were often used and Clay Allison himself coined the phrase "shootist" and referred to himself as such.

Allison, the fourth of nine children of Jeremiah Scotland and Mariah R. (Brown) Allison, was born on a farm in Wayne County, Tennessee, on September 2, 1841. His father was likely a circuit riding Presbyterian minister as well as a farmer. Very little is known about Allison between his birth and his entry into the Tennessee Light Artillery of the Confederate States Army on October 15, 1861. On January 10, 1862, he was declared mentally unfit for duty with possible suicidal tendencies. This was possibly because of a blow to the head in his younger years. On September 22, 1862, he re-enlisted in Company F, 19th Tennessee Cavalry under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forest. Union Army records show that at the end of the war he was with Company C, 9th Tennessee Cavalry and that he was captured as a prisoner of war on May 4, 1865, and paroled on May 10, 1865.

Returning home after the war he found there was not much home remaining. So, with his brothers John and Monroe and his sister Mary and her husband Lewis Coleman, he headed for the Brazos River area of Texas. As they crossed the Red River a fight erupted between Clay Allison and the ferryman Zachary Colbert. The cause of the fight is unknown, but Colbert ended up dead. Most historians describe this battle as one where the two combatants stripped, had their left hands bound together, and fought to the death with bowie knives inside an empty grave with the victor getting to bury the loser. This might also be the reason for the fight between Allison and Chunk Colbert as described in the John Clum story. Chunk might have been the nephew of Zachary.

In spite of all of Allison's battles, he suffered only one wound and that was self-inflicted. By the late 1860s, he had located in Cimarron, New Mexico. The US Army was stationed nearby, and not having completely abandoned the "Southern Cause," and in particular resenting the presence of black soldiers in the area, he and a few friends decided to play a prank. The Army corralled a sizeable heard of mules just outside the city one night and stampeding the mules seemed to be a way to repay the US Army. During the excitement Allison accidently shot himself in the right instep. (Tintypes show a reverse image making it appear to be his left foot.)

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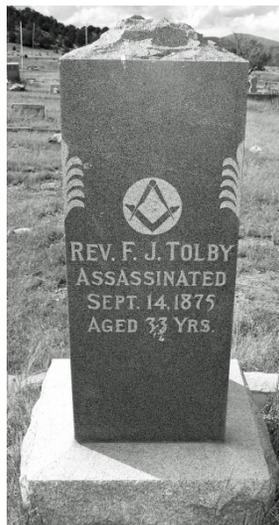


Source: Clay Allison: Portrait of a Shootist by Chuck Parson

Stuart Lake, the writer who so egregiously embellished Wyatt Earp's life, did the same with Allison. He reported that by 1873 Allison had killed scores of lawmen and that the settlements of Texas, Colorado, New Mexico and Kansas feared him as a killer who would shoot a man to see him kick. All total fabrications, but he did become extremely proficient with handguns.

A Methodist minister by the name of F. J. Tolby was a staunch opponent of a corrupt political machine known as the Santa Fe Ring. The ring controlled all political activity in Colfax and Lincoln Counties. Tolby was also a good friend of and greatly admired by Clay Allison. On September 14, 1875, Tolby was murdered as he traveled between Cimarron and Elizabethtown. It was obviously a revenge killing as there was no attempt to make it appear as a robbery and his horse was still near the body when it was discovered. It was soon learned that the regular mail carrier, Florencio Donoghue, had hired Cruz Vega to carry the mail for one day only.

A group of friends, including Allison, was organized to question Vega. After a bit of torture where he was hoisted off the ground by his neck for a while, then being released, Vega "confessed." The torture got out of hand and Cruz was left hanging, but not before he admitted to being present at Tolby's murder and that Manuel Cardinas (sometimes spelled as Cardenas) was the actual murderer. This event occurred on October 30, 1875.



Tolby's Tombstone in the Cimarron Cemetery

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Vega's uncle, Francisco Griego, was considered to be an expert with a handgun and just the past May 30th had been involved in a shootout with three soldiers in the St. James Hotel. One soldier was killed outright, one died of his wounds and the third was wounded but survived. Griego was urged to avenge his nephew's death and at Vega's funeral had declared publicly that he would kill Allison on sight. On November 1st, Griego, his 18 year old son Luis L. and Florencio Donoghue met up at the St. James Hotel. Allison and Griego walked to center of the saloon in the hotel and had some conversation, and then Allison drew his pistol and shot Griego three times. The barroom lights were extinguished and Griego's body was not recovered until the next morning. The local newspaper reported that few regret his loss. (The St James Hotel still exists today and there are still 20 some bullet holes in the ceiling, some of them belonging to Allison.)

On Saturday, November 6th, Manuel Cardinas was arrested and again a confession was "extracted" from him. He named Griego, Donoghue and two members of the Santa Fe Ring, Attorney Melvin M. Mills and Dr. Robert H. Longwill, as the persons who hired himself and Vega. Mills and Donoghue were both arrested on Sunday, but Longwill fled to the safety of Ft. Union and was granted protection. On Wednesday, November 10th, Allison appeared in court for the Griego killing and it was declared as self-defense. Later that afternoon a preliminary hearing was held for Cardinas, Mills, Donoghue and Longwill. Cardinas was held for the murder of Tolby, Donoghue was indicted for accessory to murder and placed on \$20,000 bail. Mills was dismissed for lack of evidence and no decision reached on Longwill because of his absence.

After the hearing ended and Cardinas was on his way to jail, he was shot by a group of men who had overpowered the guards. The guilty party was never discovered, as was normal in old western vigilante affairs, but the prime suspects were Allison and his good friend Davy Crockett, a distant cousin of the hero of the Alamo.

Allison's last gunfight occurred around midnight of December 21, 1876, at Las Animas, Colorado. Allison and his brother John were drinking and dancing in the Olympic Dance Hall. Constable Charles Faber made a feeble attempt to arrest them for wearing their pistols. Then Faber even danced a set with the brothers before he left the hall to get reinforcements. He returned with two unidentified deputies and entered the hall with a double barrel shotgun. He gave no verbal command to surrender or even to raise your hands. Someone shouted, "Look out!" and Faber fired. John Allison was struck and collapsed to the floor. As would be expected of a shootist, Clay drew his pistol and shot Faber. As Faber fell, he discharged the other barrel and John was struck again. Clay rushed to the door of the hall and fired at the fleeing deputies without effect. He then drug Faber's dead body to where John was lying and said, "John, here's the man who shot you, look at the G-d d—d son of a bitch: I killed him." Before John was moved Clay struck the body on the head, saying again, "John, here's the damned son of a bitch that shot you, and I killed him."

John was taken to their room in the Vandiver House where Sheriff John Spiers arrested them. On December 22nd an inquest was held over the body and concluded that the constable was acting in the line of duty and Allison was indicted for murder. Clay was confined to jail and John began to recover after a great deal of buckshot was removed from his chest and legs. Some he carried for the rest of his life. On January 8, 1877, Allison appeared before a judge who declared that manslaughter was the greatest crime he could possibly be tried for and placed him on \$10,000 bail. In March, a grand jury declared that Allison acted in self-defense. John Allison chose to return to his home state of Tennessee.

Clay Allison had more adventures, but this was his last shootout and by the end of the 1870s he had made a conscious decision to change his lifestyle. He returned to Texas and lived in Mobeetie for a while and then settled in Pecos. On February 15, 1881, he married Dora McCullough whom he had met over in Colfax County, New Mexico, a few years before. Dora was also the sister to Kate McCullough, the wife of his brother John. After his marriage, Allison's life was much quieter and much more prosperous. On August 9, 1885 their first daughter was born and named Patti Dora Allison.

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Clay and Dora Allison's wedding picture

Source: Clay Allison: Portrait of a Shootist by Chuck Parsons

Family life may have caused Clay Allison to settle down, but it did not necessarily end his willingness to extract revenge for perceived wrongs. The *Las Vegas, New Mexico Optic* of June 26, 1886, reported that Allison was in Cheyenne, Wyoming, suffering from a toothache. A quack dentist that he visited went to work on a good tooth and broke half of it off. Clay was irate and went to another dentist to get the damage repaired at a cost of \$25.00. He went back to the original dentist, threw him on the floor, climbed on top of him and with a pair of forceps commenced to pull one of his molars. He was in the process of pulling one of the front teeth and a good portion of the upper lip when the dentist's screams drew a crowd and Allison was stopped.

It is strange that a man who had known almost a lifetime of violence would meet death in a most unusual accident. On July 3, 1887, he had loaded his wagon with supplies in Pecos and was headed back to his ranch about 40 miles away. What happened is only speculation, but it appears that somehow, just a few miles from his home, he fell from the wagon and the wagon wheel rolled over him breaking his neck. It was widely reported that he was drunk, but the people that helped him load the wagon reported that he had not been drinking that morning and was perfectly sober as he left town. On the following day he was buried in the Pecos Cemetery where he lay undisturbed until August 28, 1975. At that time his remains, which were in remarkable condition after that long period, were moved to Pecos Park and reinterred next to the Pecos Museum. He is the only known shootist to have his own cemetery.

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"He never killed a man that did not need killing"

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Just over seven months after Clay Allison's death, on February 10, 1888, Dora gave birth to their second daughter, Clay Pearl Allison.

Clay's brother, Monroe Allison, died shortly after Clay in the same year. Brother John lived until January 7, 1898 when he died in Tennessee and his wife, Kate, lived until December 7, 1922. In October of 1890, Dora married a fellow named J. L. Johnson in Pecos, moved to Fort Worth and died there on November 16, 1939. Patti married in 1908 and lived to 1971. Pearl married in 1911 and lived until 1975.

Sources: Clay Allison: Portrait of a Shootist by Chuck Parsons and For Good or Bad: People of the Cimarron Country by Stephen Zimmer