

THE POST-SHOOT-OUT YEARS

Wyatt Earp

AFTER HIS INFAMOUS BLOODY GUNFIGHTS, HE MADE PEACE— AND DIED PENNILESS

BY LEO W. BANKS

When Wyatt Earp fled Arizona in April 1882, he left a trail of bodies in his wake. In his infamous vendetta ride, the lawman tossed away his U.S. deputy marshal's badge and gunned down Florentino Cruz, Frank Stilwell and Curly Bill Brocius, the men he believed had murdered his brother Morgan.

Then he rode clear of the Territory, righteous in revenge, glorious in defending his family's honor. But he also had an arrest warrant over his head. Loud voices within Arizona were demanding he stand trial for murder.

Those three killings meant that for all time, Wyatt Earp's name would be written in blood.

He understood that, but couldn't accept it. When he passed into his mid-50s and heard the train of celebrity still roaring at his back, he tried to outrun it. That effort brought him to lower Colorado River country, his part-time home the last 25 years of his life.

Wyatt spent winters there with his wife, Josie, working their mines in California's Whipple Mountains, just west of the Colorado. He often crossed the river, venturing back into Arizona to

scare up a poker game or purchase mining supplies.

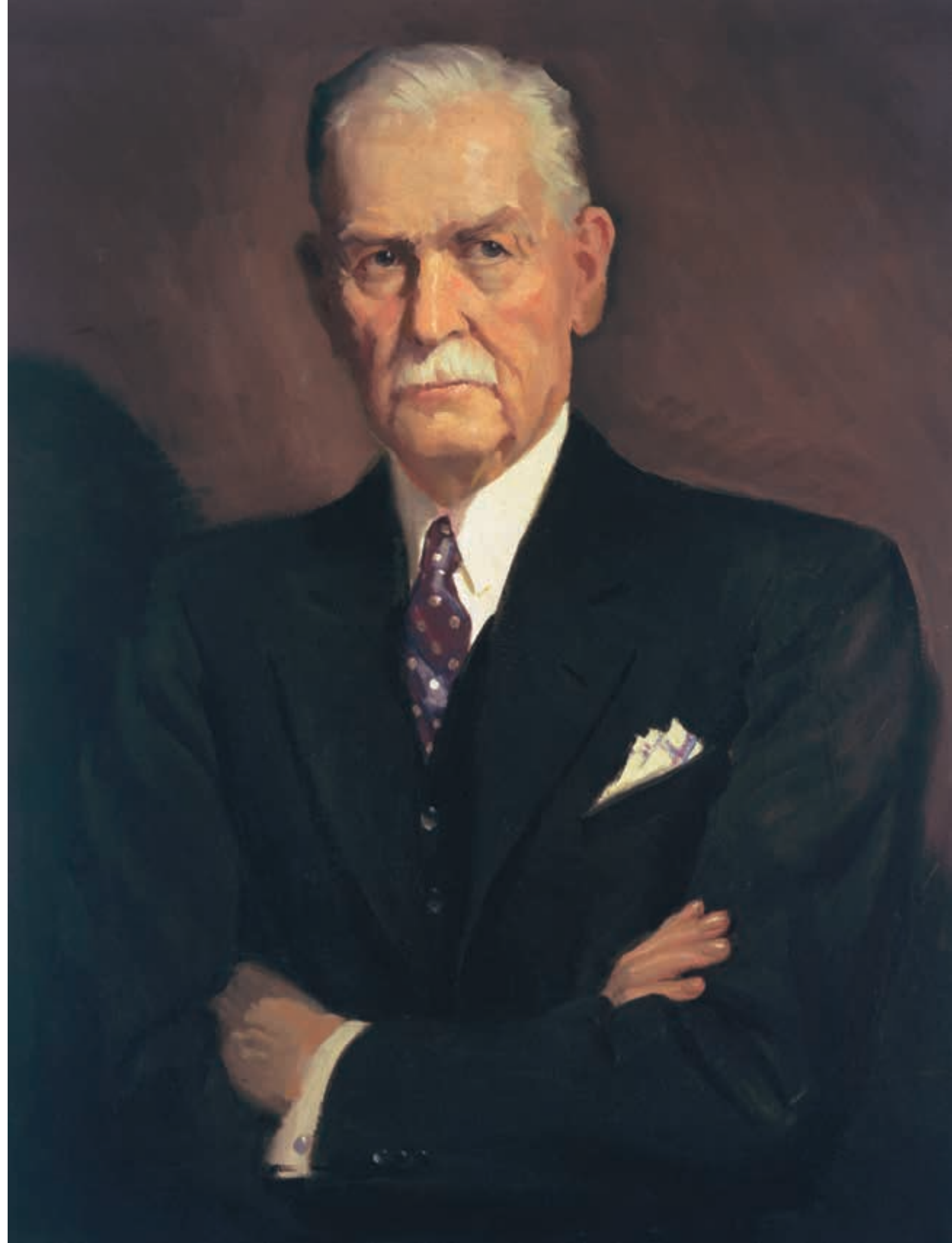
He found comfort in the region's remoteness, far from newspapers eager for another story and a bigger legend.

Contrary to the belief that he never returned to Arizona after his unceremonious departure, Earp spent considerable time around Parker, and in the early 1900s, he lived briefly in Quartzsite, according to historian Lee Silva.

Silva, author of *Wyatt Earp: A Biography of the Legend, Volume 1, The Cowtown Years*, published in 2002, says that Wyatt, a Republican, even ran for constable there in 1904, losing in a heavily Democratic town by a handful of votes, out of 57 cast.

"He came to the desert to avoid people and just live his life," says Silva. "The anti-Earp crowd said he liked to brag about what he'd done, but that's not true. After 1896, when he gave a series of

[RIGHT] This 1928 oil portrait of Wyatt Earp by Frederic Kimball Mizen (1888-1964), a well-known portraitist and top illustrator in his day, captures the steely hardness of the legendary gunfighter's icy blue eyes. COURTESY OF LANCE MANFREDI AND LEE SILVA



interviews to the San Francisco *Examiner* about his exploits, he never wanted to talk about it again.

“My speculation is he had massive guilt feelings about Morgan Earp getting killed. Remember, Wyatt was there when it happened, and I don’t think he ever forgave himself.”

Gunmen assassinated Morgan in a Tombstone saloon on March 18, 1882. A second bullet, presumably meant for Wyatt, slammed into the wall inches above Wyatt’s head.

The murder—and the wounding of Virgil Earp three months earlier—stemmed from the gunfight near the O.K. Corral on October 26, 1881, a showdown between the Earps, who were the law in Tombstone, and the rustler Clantons.

As Morgan lay dying that night, Wyatt promised to hunt down the killers. He did, and with chilling efficiency.

But for all the wailing about bringing Wyatt back for trial, interest in pursuing the case against him faded.

“The cowboy crowd and their descendants always said the Earps were afraid of coming back to Arizona,” says Don Chaput, a Californian and author of seven books of Arizona history, including a biography of Virgil Earp.

“But that’s baloney. Virgil lived around Prescott for several years around 1900, and Warren Earp drove a stage in Willcox and worked

Nevada, they never were able to locate suitable property to buy.

In April of that year, the couple filed the first of their Happy Days mining claims in the Whipple Mountains in California.

Author Silva says his interest in Wyatt Earp began with the stories he heard as a youngster around Quartzsite. But he didn’t begin serious research until 1988, when the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History asked him to annotate Wyatt’s letters. A six-month project stretched into a multiyear effort to produce a four-volume work, the last three still in editing. Finishing at 995 pages, just volume 1 was a daunting task.

Silva collected considerable information about Wyatt’s desert years. His book paints a fascinating picture of an aging man, often with a black hat “pulled right down on his eyebrows,” polite but distant, with a cold stare that could give a rattlesnake second thoughts.

Even then, most folks who dealt with Wyatt commented on that hard blue glint in his eyes. The six-shooter he always wore on his belt or in a shoulder holster must’ve made that glare seem harder still.

In 1908, Merritt Laffoon, a young Mojave Indian, lived on the reservation at Parker when the tribe’s chief, believing the boy needed discipline, told him to “go work for the white man who’s working some mining claims” in the mountains.

Laffoon spent several years doing chores for the old lawman. One

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as a ranch hand there for years.” And Wyatt joined the gold boom near the Harquahala Mountains in 1889.

Chaput found evidence in the Yuma County Courthouse of a legal filing showing Wyatt’s intention to start a town—called Earp—at the site of the mining camp that came to be called Harqua Hala, about 8 miles south of Salome.

Though he didn’t get to name the town, Wyatt may have briefly operated a saloon there. The *Tombstone Prospector*, in February 1889, reported that Wyatt was on his way to Harqua Hala with “an immense load of bar fixtures and liquors, accompanied by two women.”

“He made a few trips there from San Diego,” says Chaput. “But too many people were there ahead of him and he gave it up.”

Silva found published information suggesting that Wyatt might have been called in to help settle the Pleasant Valley War, a ranching feud that roiled Arizona’s Tonto Basin country for a decade after the first shots were fired in 1886.

And around 1912, the Flagstaff paper reported that Wyatt had taken residence in that city, although why remains a mystery.

Certainly he didn’t stay in Flagstaff long. Wyatt’s life after Tombstone consisted of moving from place to place, gambling, horse racing and, when the money was right, taking private lawman’s work.

He also prospected for gold and ran saloons in places like Nome, Alaska, and Tonopah, Nevada.

By 1905, when the Tonopah rush had played out, Wyatt and Josie had given up on their dream of buying some ranch land and settling down. In spite of lengthy wagon trips throughout Arizona and

day, as the two rode together on horseback, Laffoon teased his boss about always wearing guns. “What would you do if somebody tried to kill you now? Do you think your guns would help you?” Wyatt responded by motioning for Laffoon to toss a can into the air so Earp could shoot it.

Laffoon believed Wyatt “wanted to avoid gunplay,” according to Silva’s 1988 interview with Merritt Laffoon’s son, Herman Laffoon. He added that Wyatt chose to live some of his last years away from cities, because “he could be easily ambushed in cities, as were his brothers.”

Silva also interviewed Ray Enz and his sister, Alice. Their grandfather, John Harger, hauled mining supplies out to Wyatt’s shack, and Ray and Alice, then children, often accompanied him and so got to know Wyatt and Josie.

Ray Enz echoed Merritt Laffoon’s story. When Ray asked Wyatt why he carried a pistol in unpopulated desert, Wyatt responded, “That’s the reason I’m alive today.”

Alice recalled that Wyatt liked to sit on the porch of his cottage in Vidal, California, 20 miles west of Parker, but always with his holster slung over his rocking chair within easy reach.

Because Wyatt refused to speak about himself, neither Ray nor Alice Enz, nor Herman Laffoon, could say what he feared.

But one story offers a clue. Ray Enz told Silva that Wyatt and Josie once argued about going to Oakland. Wyatt didn’t want to go, and when Enz asked why, Wyatt, uncharacteristically, explained:

“There’s a man there. . . . The last time we saw each other, we

swore to kill each other. If we meet, I’ll have to kill him, or he’ll kill me. It’s silly. It’s something that happened years and years ago, and there’s no bringing it back to life. So let him stay up there, and I’ll stay down here.”

Silva can’t positively identify the man, but names a suspect—Dave Neagle, a one-time deputy to Wyatt’s Tombstone enemy, Cochise County Sheriff Johnny Behan. Neagle died in Oakland in 1925.

“Trouble is, we know Wyatt and Josie traveled to San Francisco and Oakland often in the 1920s,” says Silva. “The story seems contradictory. I don’t know, maybe Wyatt spent more time in Oakland after 1925.”

But if the Earps lived happily along the Colorado River, money wasn’t the reason. Their mines yielded very little. Wyatt refused to scratch at the dirt himself, hiring local Mexicans and Indians instead and, according to Laffoon, treating them all “with courtesy.”

Laffoon noticed something else: “One thing that set him apart, he never laughed out loud. In all the



[ABOVE] During a 1925 camping trip four years before his death, a pensive Wyatt Earp gazes across the Colorado River to Arizona, where his exploits gained him national notoriety. [RIGHT] In his later years, Earp was hounded by newspaper reporters and writers. He often lamented to close friends, “Why can’t they just leave me alone?” BOTH COURTESY ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, TUCSON



time I knew him, I never heard him laugh.”

Even so, Wyatt provided strong guidance for Merritt Laffoon, frequently advising the young Mojave on living properly and being a good person. Silva says Wyatt’s encouragement helped Laffoon straighten up.

“He married the chief’s daughter and went on to become the Mojave tribe’s shaman,” the author writes. “And all his life, some of his strongest memories were of his friendship with Wyatt Earp.”

When he wasn’t supervising mine work, Wyatt sat in on poker games at the general store in Vidal, and at the Grandview Hotel in Parker. Its owner, Joe Bush, stands out as the only old-timer who said Wyatt didn’t carry a gun in later years. Bush, who also operated a ferry at Parker, became a good friend of Wyatt’s, as did Bush’s wife Nellie, a lawyer who later became Yuma County’s state senator.

Wherever they lived, the Earps earned the companionship of leading citizens and famous people.

The latter included cowboy actor William S. Hart. In 1922, he visited Wyatt at his desert shack, according to Ray Enz.

Hart tried to convince Wyatt to tell the true story of his life, but Wyatt refused to capitalize on his checkered past. “I did what I

had to do, and I’m not proud of it,” Wyatt told Hart. “It had to be done, and I did it.”

According to Enz, Josie piped up, “Well, Wyatt, we need the money. Please give him your story.”

“Absolutely not,” Wyatt retorted unequivocally. “I don’t care if I starve to death!”

Ray Enz, then about 9, remembered the episode because he was mesmerized by Hart, a famous movie idol.

But Wyatt wouldn’t hold to that position long. For years the press had hounded him, publishing one ludicrous story after another: Wyatt beaten up by a midget Mountie in Yukon Territory, Wyatt’s sister marrying Ike Clanton, Wyatt wearing a steel vest in his gunfight with Curly Bill.

In 1923, by then aware that his legend was overtaking him, Wyatt wrote Hart seeking help in correcting false stories about him:

“I am not going to live to the age of Methuselah, and any wrong impression, I want to right before I go away. The screen would do all this, I know, with yourself as the mastermind.”

The need for money had changed Wyatt’s mind.

“It bothered him that he was the last living legend of the Old West, someone everybody treated like a hero, and he was practically destitute financially,” says Silva.

“His letters the last five years of his life are so filled with pathos.

As each of his friends died, he’d say, so and so has passed the great divide, and I can see him sitting there wondering when he’d be next. He comes across like a fading movie star, groveling to get by.”

When he finally connected with Stuart Lake, a biographer skilled enough to tell his story, Wyatt sprinkled his account with white lies, a last sad gamble to make his story as salable as possible.

At its publication in 1931, Lake’s *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal* kicked off a decades-long process that propelled him to international fame. Yet Wyatt, who died penniless in 1929, wasn’t around to see it, or share the profits it generated.

But maybe that’s a good thing. In the last line of Lake’s book, Wyatt says his greatest

consolation in growing old “is the hope that after I’m gone they’ll grant me the peaceful obscurity I haven’t been able to get in life.”

His collaboration with Lake made that “peaceful obscurity” impossible, even in death. The man who went to the desert to escape his legend, in the end, became its slave. ■

EDITOR’S NOTE: For information on Lee Silva’s book *Wyatt Earp: A Biography of the Legend, Volume 1, The Cowtown Years*: (800) 644-6614, www.wyattearpbook.com.

ADDITIONAL READING: *Tombstone Chronicles: Tough Folks, Wild Times* focuses on ordinary people living in extraordinary times amid decadence, cosmopolitan culture and reckless violence. Softcover, with 144 pages and black and white historical photographs. \$7.95, plus shipping and handling. Order at arizonahighways.com or call toll-free (800) 543-5432.

Leo W. Banks of Tucson has been fascinated by the life and times of Wyatt Earp since childhood. He holds actor Hugh O’Brian directly responsible.