

Meet the Legendary Doc Holliday: The Man Who Went From Being a Dentist to a Gambling Gunslinger on the Run From the Law

yas! | By Jon Graves | April 10, 2022

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Even if you don't know much about history, there's no doubt that you've heard of Doc Holliday. He's one of the most famous figures of the Wild West, a dentist and deputy turned later into an outlaw, who took part in the most legendary gunfight at O.K. Corral.

He wasn't alone in his adventures, teaming up with the equally famous Wyatt Earp and his brothers, but somehow Holliday has managed to provide inspiration for numerous books, TV shows, and movies. But just how many of these stories are actually true?

Growing Up with Conflict

Born John Henry Holliday in 1851 in Griffin, Georgia, Doc was thrust into troubled times. His father, Henry Burroughs Holliday had fought in the Mexican-American War shortly before his birth, and later served in the American Civil War.



sciencesource.com

His mother, Alice Holliday, was adamant that her son wouldn't have to face the horrors of the conflicts around him, so when Union troops threatened to capture their town in 1862, the family moved further south to Valdosta, Georgia. Despite these troubled times, Holliday was said to be a peaceful child – never fighting with neighbors or classmates.

A Brilliant Student

Knowing the path that he took later in life, it would be easy to assume that Doc Holliday would have been a troublemaker at school. But the truth was quite different. He had been born with a cleft palate that caused speech impediments and needed corrective surgery and hours of speech lessons to overcome this condition.



oldwestmuseum

Holliday was also an excellent student academically. Attending the Valdosta Institute as a teenager, he learned rhetoric, math, and history, as well as becoming fluent in French, Latin, and Ancient Greek. From here he went on to the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery, earning his Doctorate in Dental Surgery by the time he turned 20.

Tuberculosis Looms

In 1866, the young Doc Holliday suffered a terrible loss when his mother died of tuberculosis. He had been very close to his mother and was greatly impacted by her death. To make matters worse, his father remarried just three months later to a woman named Rachel Martin, who was just eight years older than Doc.



listor.se

This wasn't the only time his family was affected by tuberculosis. He had an adopted brother named Francisco who had died of the condition when Doc was a teenager. The disease would become even more personal when Holliday received his own diagnosis at the age of 21, with doctors giving him just a few months to live.

Dentistry and Gambling

Doc would go on to outlive his initial diagnosis, though he did suffer from regular bouts of coughing. He continued to work as a dentist, setting up a practice with a family friend, Dr. John Seeger, in Dallas, Texas.



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By the 1870s, his dentistry work began to decline, but Holliday had chanced upon another source of income: gambling. In fact, the young man had such a knack for it that it became his main way of earning money. But things took a turn for the worse in May 1874, when he and 12 other people were busted for illegal gambling and banished from Dallas.

Doc Turns to Fighting

As Doc became more involved in the world of gambling after his departure from Dallas, he also began to get into fights. 1875 saw the start of a fighting spree, and in 1877 he was arrested after a bloody altercation with another gambler, Henry Kahn.



wikipedia.org

After their release, Kahn shot and seriously wounded the unarmed Holliday - the Dallas Weekly Herald even reported that Holliday had been killed. After this incident, Doc's cousin George Holliday took him to Fort Griffin, Texas, to help with his recovery. It was here Doc would meet an educated prostitute known as Mary Katherine "Big Nose Kate" Horony, who would become his only known love interest.

Holliday's True Nature

From those who knew him, there are some mixed reports about the kind of person that Holliday really was. Some of his contemporaries described him as a "calm-tempered gentleman", while others said he had a "mean disposition" and an "ungovernable temper."

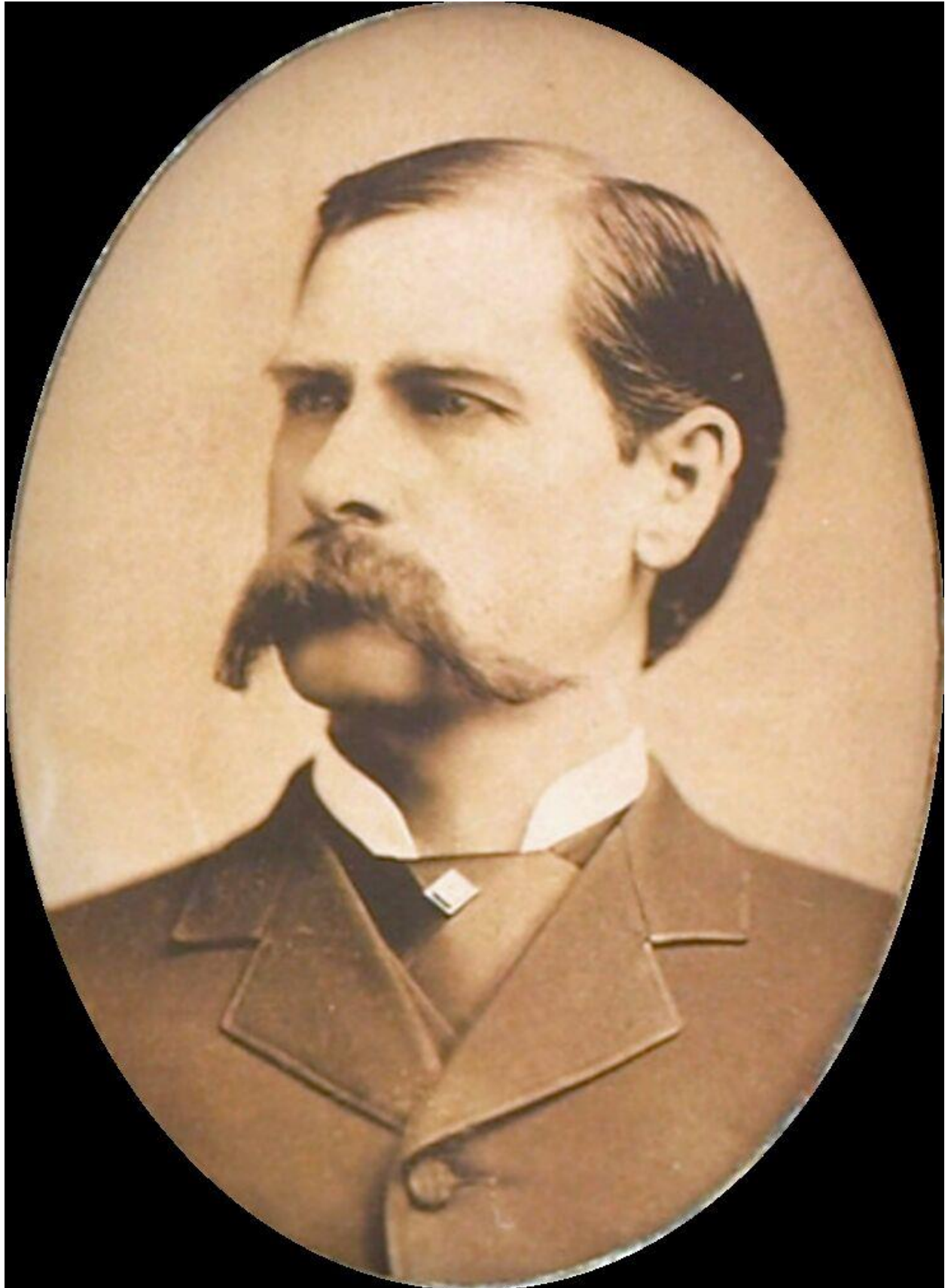


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According to the man himself, he was arrested 17 times, was ambushed five times, and escaped hanging four times. When asked if his conscience ever troubled him, he replied to the journalist, "I coughed that up with my lungs years ago." Though much of his reputation might have been exaggerated, it was enough to put Doc Holliday into the history books.

Meeting Marshall Wyatt Earp

One of the Wild West's most famous outlaws was Wyatt Earp, but there was a time before his life of crime that he was on the other side of the law, as a deputy US Marshall. There are few details about this auspicious meeting, but we do know that Holliday met Earp before he went rogue.

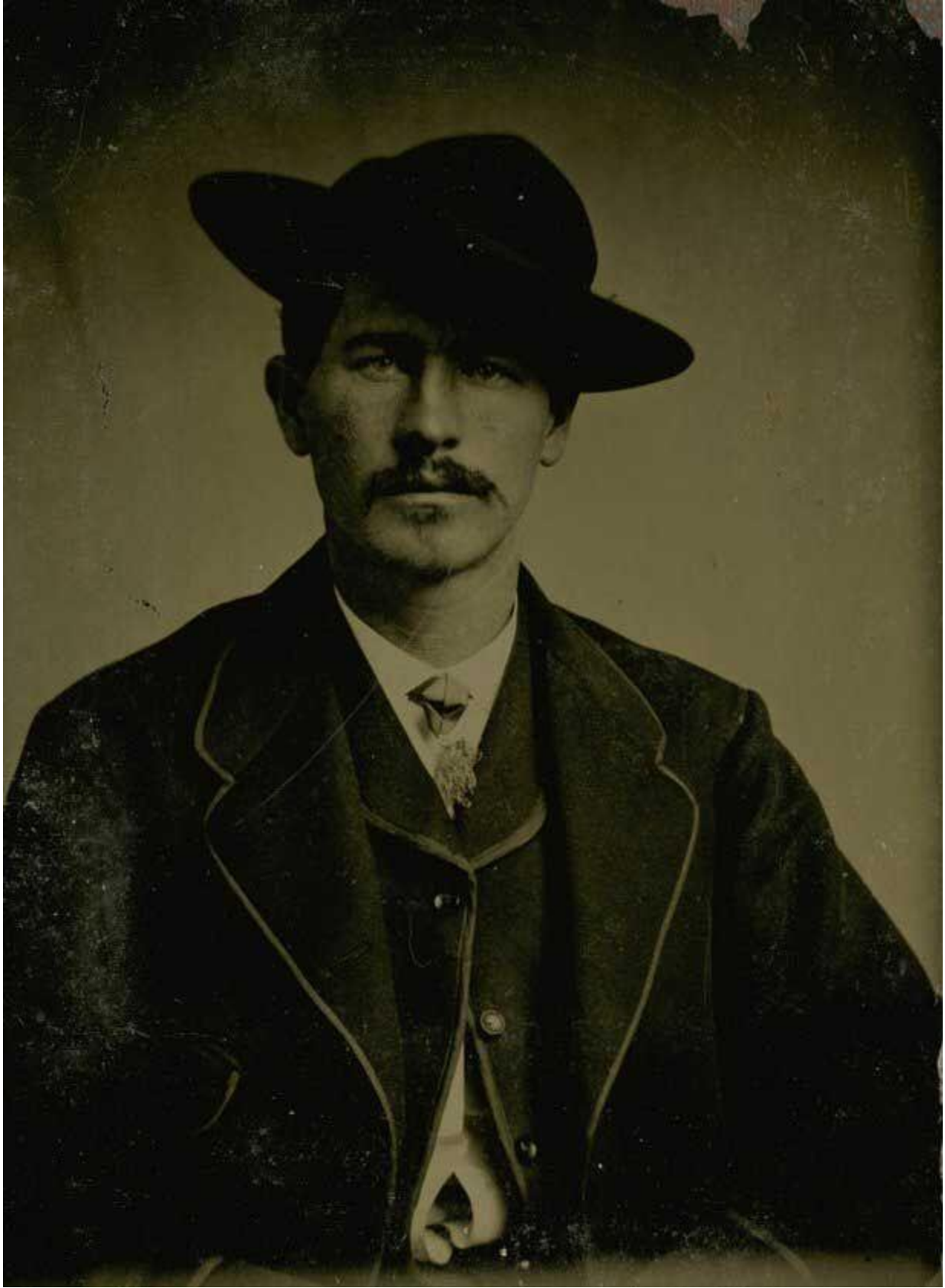


Heritage Auction Gallery

At the time, Wyatt Earp was on the trail of an outlaw known as “Dirty” Dave Rudabaugh. Holliday had been gambling with Rudabaugh and ended up giving Earp some information on the man’s whereabouts – Rudabaugh had apparently fled to Kansas. But this wasn’t the last time the Earp and Holliday would meet.

Saving Earp’s Life

The next run-in between the two men would be in Dodge City. Earp was chasing some cowboys (various reports have the number at either two or five), who ran into the Long Branch Saloon. Holliday happened to be in town looking for work as a dentist, but that day he was gambling in the bar’s backroom.



Public domain

The cowboys started smashing things up and harassing customers before Earp came in trying to stop them. As he entered, the cowboys all pointed their guns at him. Holliday jumped up and pointed a pistol at their leader, forcing them to drop their weapons. Though there are no newspaper reports of the incident, Earp always credited Holliday with saving his life and the two became friends.

Giving up Dentistry

Although he was well-known for his fighting and gambling, to this point Holliday had continued to practice dentistry throughout his moves across the country. As time went on, he also became known for giving his customers substandard treatment, and he eventually gave up dentistry for good in 1878, but not before he had earned the nickname "Doc".



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Doc still suffered from the symptoms of his tuberculosis, and later in 1878 moved to Las Vegas to take advantage of the nearby hot springs, which were said to be helpful for those with lung problems. However, the anti-gambling laws in effect in Las Vegas would lead to him moving back to Dodge City for a time.

The New Territories

In the late 1870s, both Holliday and Earp moved west. Holliday had moved back to Las Vegas with his lover Mary Horony to build saloons, while Earp had resigned from his position as deputy Marshall and planned to head to the new silver boom in Tombstone, Arizona.

Holliday had tried and failed with gold rushes in the past, but ended up joining Earp in Tombstone in 1890.

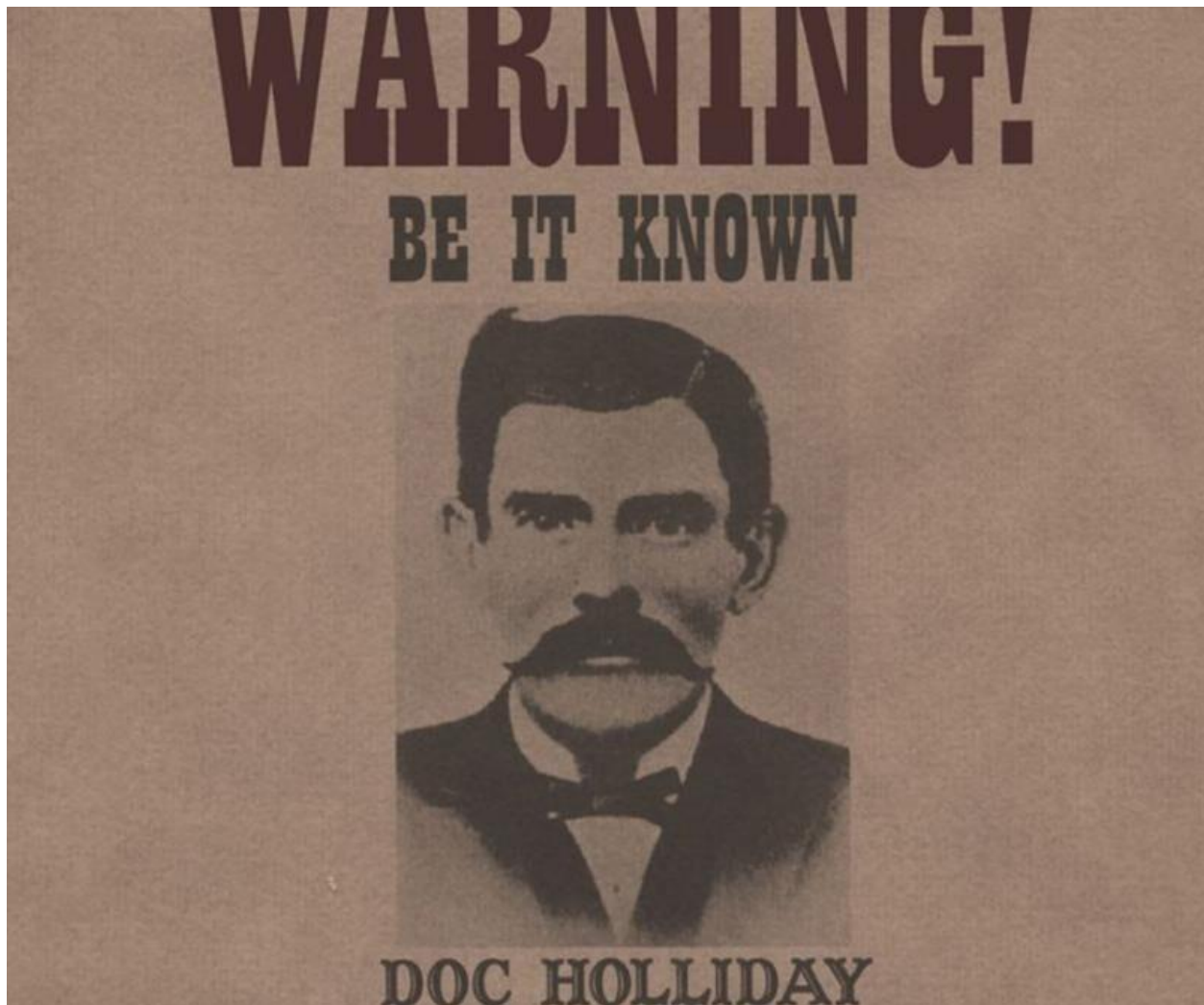


cisko66

The new territories had little in the way of organized crime prevention. With Earp's previous experience as a lawman, he was soon appointed to the same position, deputy US Marshall, for Tombstone.

The Stagecoach Incident of 1881

Holliday and his lover Horony were known for having drunken fights, but things turned particularly nasty in March 1881. Three cowboys had robbed a stagecoach bound for Tombstone and ended up murdering some of the passengers. Rumors started that Doc was the leader of this group, and Horony made a testimony to Sheriff Behan of Tombstone confirming this.



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On this basis, Holliday was arrested and charged with the crime, but Wyatt Earp was able to come to the rescue, finding witnesses who could attest he was in another place at the time. Horony later admitted that she had been drunk and forced to sign a testimony that she hadn't understood.

The Ike Clanton Incident

He might have given up dentistry, but Holliday certainly hadn't given up fighting. On October 25, 1881, he had a run-in with a man named Ike Clanton while drinking at the Alhambra Saloon. Holliday had challenged the man to a duel, but when he discovered Clanton was unarmed, he took to taunting him instead, claiming that he had killed the man's father.



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Clanton couldn't let this go and the next morning he made sure he was armed before seeking out Holliday, waking him and Horony up with threats of violence. Holliday was reported to have reacted by shouting, "If God will let me live to get my clothes on, he will see me."

A Duel Becomes a Battle

We'll never know who would have won if the duel had gone ahead. The Earp brothers arrived and put a stop to Clayton's threats, disarming him and taking him to the jailhouse. But while he was behind bars, his fellow outlaws came to back him up, including his brother, Billy Clanton, as well as Frank and Tom McLaury.



goldismoney2.com

Ike was forced to pay a fine and then he was released. So now Holliday and the Earp brothers not only had to face Clayton but his cowboys as well. There are very few details about what happened next, but there was a sudden burst of gunfire and 30 bullets were fired in under a minute.

The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral

When the street fell silent, the aftermath became clear. Holliday was injured, along with Morgan and Virgil Earp. On the other side, Ike Clanton had fled, while Billy Clanton and both of the McLaury brothers had been killed instantly. Some reports say Doc had shot all three.



onetripatatime.com

This brief but bloody shootout became one of the most famous battles of the Wild West. The fight didn't actually take place at the OK Corral, instead about six doors down from its rear entrance, but the name has stuck.

Revenge for Morgan

This wasn't the end of the trouble in Tombstone. In March of 1882, one of the Earp brothers, Morgan, fell prey to an ambush and was killed. Wyatt Earp swore revenge on the cowboys that had committed the crime and recruited Holliday so that he could help him on his mission.



Frank Stillwell/publicdomain

The man they believed to be responsible was Frank Stillwell, whom they found hiding in some railway cars along with Ike Clanton. It's believed the two men were waiting to ambush Virgil Earp. Stillwell was later found dead beside the railway tracks, his body riddled with bullets.

The Wrong Side of the Law

With the death of Frank Stillwell, the five deputies suddenly became wanted men, as a local sheriff put out a warrant for their arrest. But they weren't about to stop their mission for revenge on the cowboys and moved on to the town of Iron Springs.



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Here they found eight of the men they were after, sneaking up on them and firing without warning. Holliday and the Earp posse managed to kill three of the cowboys, with no casualties on their side. After this attack, they decided to head to leave Arizona to try and avoid arrest.

Leaving the Earp Posse

The men traveled together through New Mexico Territory, but by the time they got to Albuquerque, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday had a

serious falling out. Holliday decided to leave the group behind and headed to Colorado.



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In 1882 he decided to move again, this time to Glenwood Springs, where he hoped the waters would help his tuberculosis. It was the wrong move for Holliday, who was arrested as soon as he arrived in Denver on the charge of the murder of Frank Stillwell.

Earp Reappears

News of the arrest reached Earp, and despite the men's falling out, Earp did his best to help his old friend. He was worried that Holliday wouldn't receive a fair trial in Arizona and attempted to get him moved. Earp called in a favor with another old friend: Colorado Chief of Police Bat Masterton.



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Masterton claimed there was already a warrant out for Holliday in Pueblo, and insisted that he face the charges there. The plan worked and Holliday was released just two weeks later. In June 1882, Earp and Holliday resolved their differences when they met up in Gunnison, Colorado.

The Death of Johnny Ringo

Since early 1882, Holliday had been the enemy of a man named Johnny Ringo, who was also suspected of being a part of the ambush that killed Morgan Earp. Ringo was found dead in a tree in July that year with a revolver in his hand, and the death ruled a suicide by the coroner.



atlasobscura.com

There are some that believe the wounds weren't self-inflicted. A historian claims to have found manuscripts written by Earp's third wife, in which she says Holliday and Earp traveled to Arizona to kill Ringo. But given that there was still a warrant for Doc's arrest in Arizona at the time, it's unlikely that he would have risked entering the state.

The End for Holliday

Holliday's health began to decline rapidly, and he began to rely on alcohol and laudanum to ease his symptoms. By 1887 he made his way to Glenwood Springs, seeking help for his tuberculosis, but it's likely the sulfuric fumes of the waters would have made the condition worse.



hooch.net

He saw out his final days attended by nurses and his ex-lover Mary Horony. It's said that as he lay dying, he looked at his bare feet and laughingly remarked, "This is funny." Holliday had always assumed he'd die with his boots on in a shootout.

Holliday's Legacy

Doc Holliday died in November 1887, but his legend lives on, and the man only became more famous after his death. His obituary in the Denver Republican at the time read, "Few men have been better known to a certain class of sporting people, and few men of his character had more friends or stronger champions."



eater.com

His long-time friend Wyatt Earp also came out with praise after his death, saying, "I found him a loyal friend and good company. He was a dentist whom necessity had made a gambler; a gentleman whom disease had made a vagabond; a philosopher whom life had made a caustic wit; a long, lean blonde fellow nearly dead with consumption and at the same time the most skillful gambler and nerviest, speediest, deadliest man with a six-gun I ever knew." Holliday remains one of the legendary figures of the Wild West, and despite dying at an early age, his life and adventures have gone on to inspire books, television shows, and movies.

Tombstone on the Big Screen

One of the many movies inspired by the life and times of Doc Holliday was *Tombstone*, released in 1993. At this time, the Western film genre was somewhat on the decline, so there wasn't much confidence placed in the project, but the producers somehow managed to assemble an incredible line up of talent.

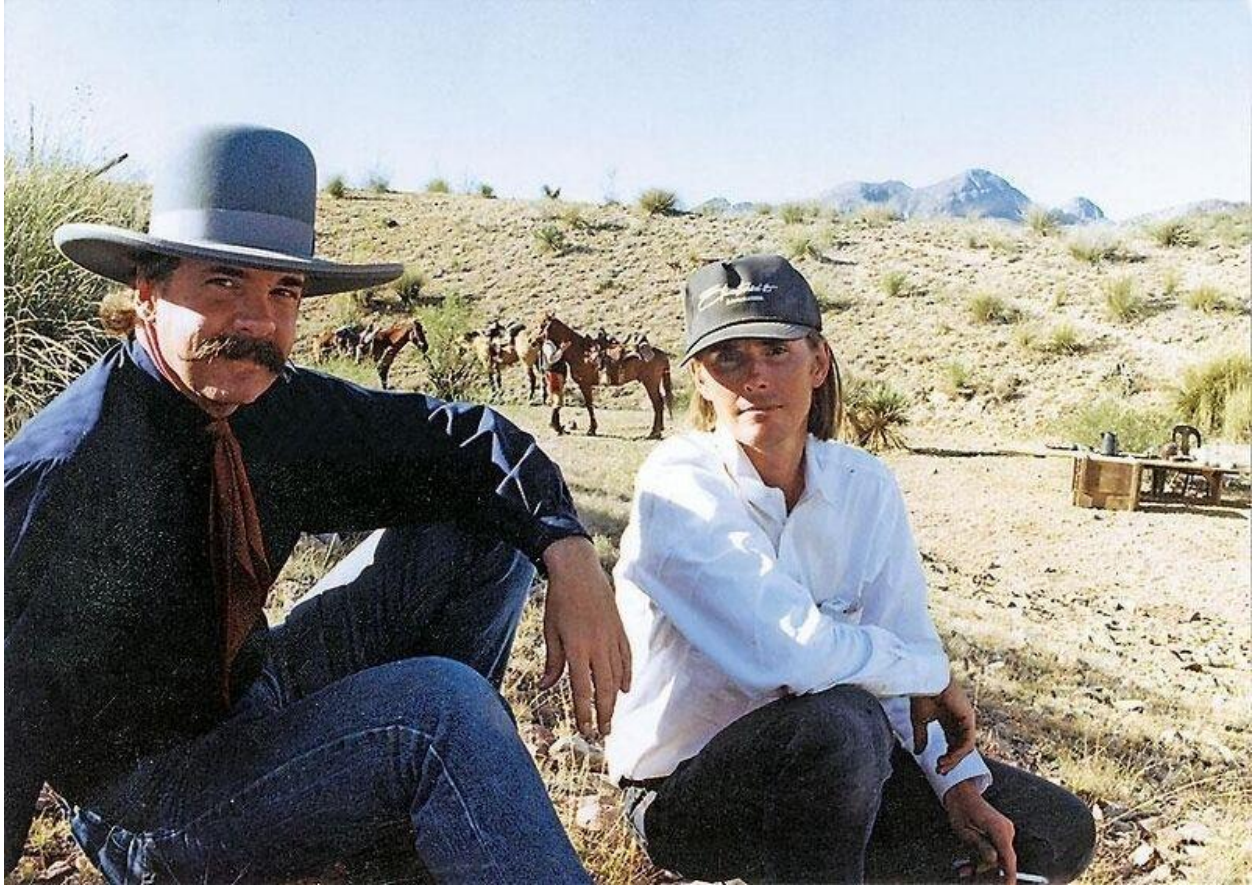


vichomes.tk

In the starring roles were Kurt Russel and Val Kilmer, who were A-list stars at the time. Supporting roles weren't overlooked either, with Sam Elliott, Bill Paxton, and Powers Booth all having parts in the film. *Tombstone* was also narrated by legendary actor Robert Mitchum.

A Change of Directors

The screenplay for *Tombstone* was written by Kevin Jarre, who also wrote screenplays for *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. But what is not so well-known is that Jarre was also meant to direct the movie, and had actually started to work on the production.



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As a first-time director, he was quickly overwhelmed by the task of shooting such a big film. He was taken off the job within a month and director George P Cosmatos stepped in. It must have been a disappointment for Jarre, but Cosmatos brought his own touch that created the film we know today.

Box Office Success

There had been some concerns about how well the film would perform at the box office, but *Tombstone* would go on to prove that the public's love for Westerns was still strong. Released on Christmas Eve, *Tombstone* went on to earn \$56.5 million on a filming budget of \$26 million.



Irohka/depositphotos.com

It wasn't just the general public that approved; *Tombstone* was a hit with critics too. The film has a rating of 74% on Rotten Tomatoes and was named "one of the 5 greatest Westerns ever made" by True West Magazine.

Michael Biehn Asked to Be Shot

Spoiler alert! Although the history of this event isn't clear, the film version of Johnny Ringo's death has Doc Holliday (Val Kilmer) shoot Ringo (Michael Biehn). According to Biehn, the scene came about at his insistence. He revealed in an interview, "I wanted him to shoot me."

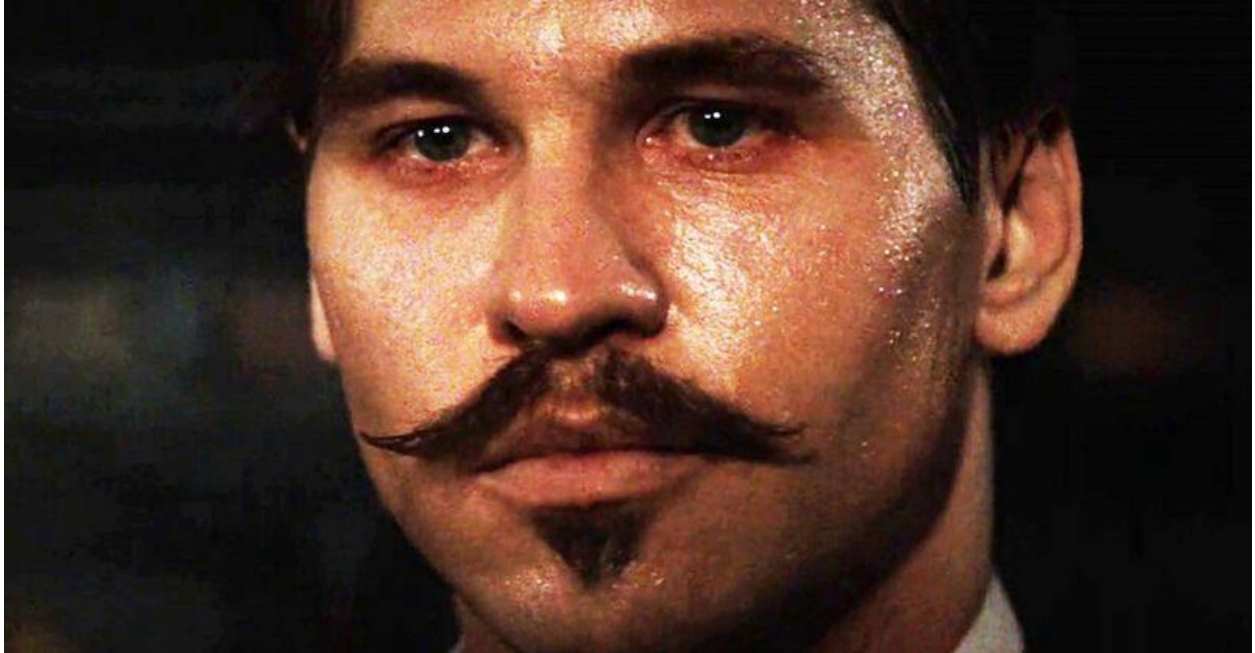


quotesgram.com

Biehn explained, “Well, I always thought Johnny Ringo had a little bit of a ‘[death] by police’ mentality. There’s a part in that movie, which I think is one of my greatest moments on film, and I don’t sit around and look for it, but whenever I see it, I always think, ‘Yeah, that’s what I was trying to do, and that’s what I got.’”

An Incredible Scene

More spoilers! While the scene where Holliday shoots Ringo might have been a contentious one for fans, it did provide a great climax for the film and was also a favorite with those on set. Sam Elliot (who played Virgil Earp) said it was one of the best scenes in the film.



pastfactory.com

Elliot spoke about it in an interview saying, "That thing was just incredible. They're both so good, and you know this moment is coming all the way through the film. You're salivating by the time it does come."

A Famous Fan

Of all the movie's fans, there was one who managed to rival the cast in terms of fame. According to Val Kilmer, "One of my favorites was Bob Dylan who was obsessed with Tombstone." The revelation came when the actor and musician met up one night.



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Kilmer explained, "So he came over to my hotel. I was like, 'Where are you? I'll come over.' And he said, 'No, I'll be right there.' So we sat and eventually he said 'Ain't you gonna say anything about that movie?' I was so star-struck myself. He wasn't star-struck, but he was just really, really into that movie. It was very flattering."

Becoming Johnny Ringo

Actor Michael Biehn really tried to get into the mindset of his character, Johnny Ringo. He claims "He was just a drunk guy, as you can imagine living back then in the old west. You think about all the saloons and the all the warm beers, no air conditioning."



att.net

Bien thought that life in the Wild West wouldn't have offered a man like Ringo the excitement that he needed. And that after living in a "miserable" town like Tombstone, Ringo would have engaged in life or death situations just to give him an adrenaline rush.

His Favorite Character

Michael Biehn really connected with the character of Johnny Ringo more than he had with many of his other roles. He said that Ringo was one of his favorite roles and enjoyed the challenge it provided. He said, "Johnny Ringo's probably, along with Kyle Reese, my two favorite characters."



Gage Skidmore

Does the name Kyle Reese have you scratching your head? It's the lead role played by Michael Biehn in the first two *Terminator* films. You could say that there is something of a similarity between the two characters, so it's no wonder Biehn lists them both as favorites!

It Ain't History

Michael Biehn obviously enjoyed his time on set and the chance to take on his role, but he did have a few words to say on the film's authenticity. He admitted that "*Tombstone* was such a good movie because it had a great script," but also compared it to the "latest pop hit" and said it "ain't history."



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Bien went on to say, “It had great characters. And it had great actors to play them... Everywhere you look, there is a new face that pops up. They are a celebrity, but they fit into this world. I think our film was the bubble gum version.”

Filming Was Fun

Michael Biehn might have had his opinions on the film’s shortcomings, but he was quick to point out that filming *Tombstone* was a lot of fun, despite the hiccups with production. He said, “We had a lot of problems on our movie with Kevin [Jarre] getting fired.”



screenshot

The cast and crew didn't let these issues stop their enjoyment, with Biehn saying, "Our movie, for some reason, was a lot of fun. It kept people laughing. The quotes were something that a lot of people enjoyed. We had the gun twirling. The Latin. The characters were fun."

Authentic Mustaches

Kevin Jarre, who wrote the screenplay and was intended to direct the film, had some strong opinions about the characters' facial hair.

Michael Biehn spoke in an interview, "He was very specific about how he wanted the mustaches. He wanted them to curl up on the end.

Which means, if you grow a mustache, and it grows long enough, you have to use wax on the end of it."



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In an attempt to make things as authentic as possible, all of the actors were asked to grow their own mustaches. And all but one of them did! Only one actor, Jon Tenney, was unable to grow his own as he had just finished another acting job that needed him to be clean-shaven.

Wanting It His Way

As the writer of the film, Kevin Jarre obviously had a very strong idea of how he wanted the film to be. And as he was taken on as director, he thought that he could bring the film to life in the way that he had envisioned it.

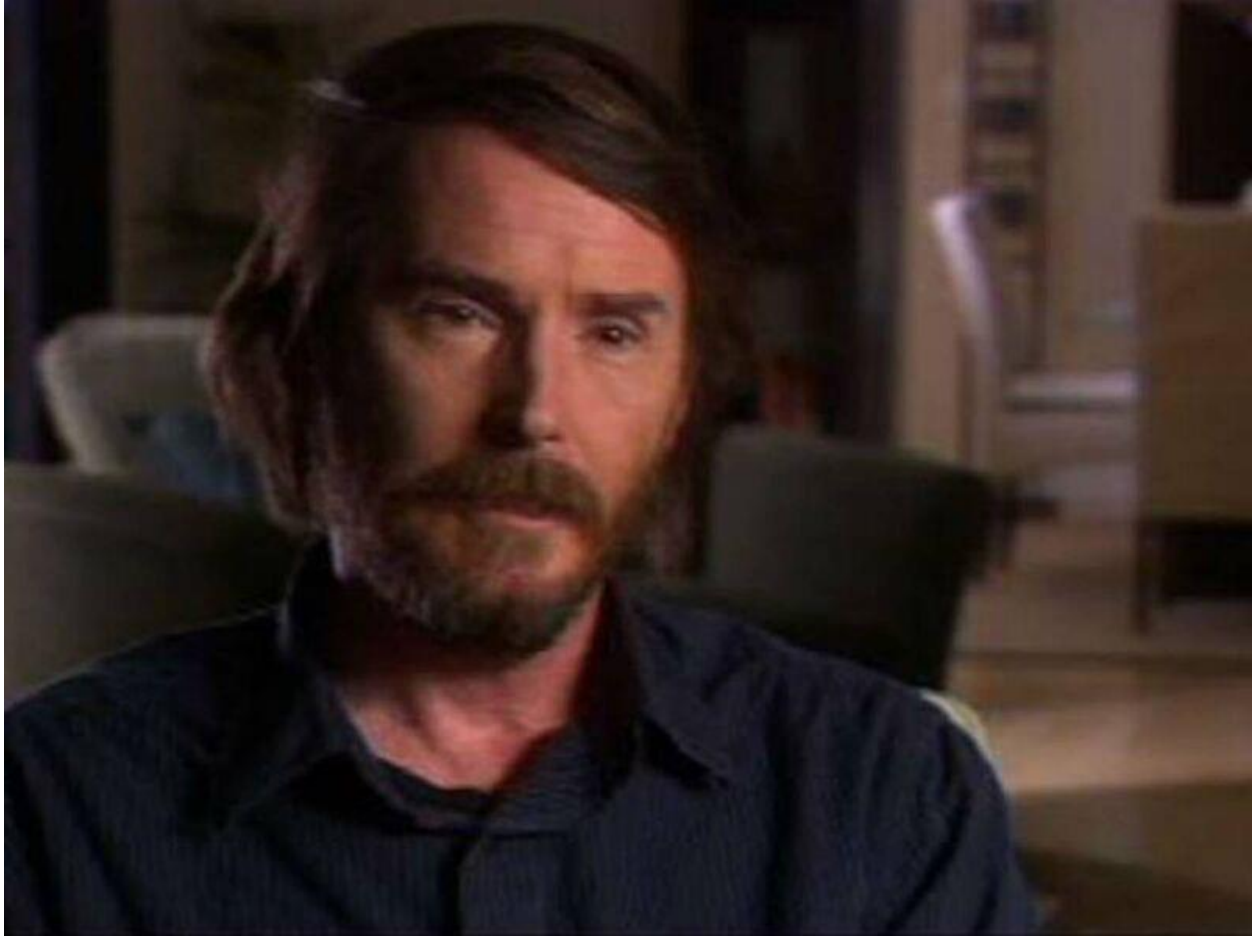


screenshot

But apparently, it was sticking so closely to the vision that helped get him fired. Michael Biehn spoke of the time, "He wanted to cast it the way he wanted to cast it. He wanted the saddles to look the way he wanted them to look. He wanted the spurs to be a certain way. He wanted the mustaches to be a certain way. He wanted the dialogue to be a certain way."

Jarre's Departure

Jarre's departure might have been the right thing for the film in the long run but it was tough for the cast at first. Sam Elliott revealed, "The biggest challenge for everyone in this picture and particularly Kurt [Russell] was that they got rid of Kevin Jarre."



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“All of us actors had a real feeling for Kevin. Kurt was the one who said, ‘We gotta pull this thing off, do this for him.’” Elliott continued, “The sad part of it was this guy was a brilliant writer, and he knew the elements... It was heartbreaking.”

Kevin’s Love of the Past

Another thing that helped Jarre get sent off set was his desire to replicate films from the golden era of Westerns. Michael Biehn revealed. “He wanted everything in this long master shot. That’s the way they used to shoot in the 40s, and that’s the way he wanted to shoot his movie.”

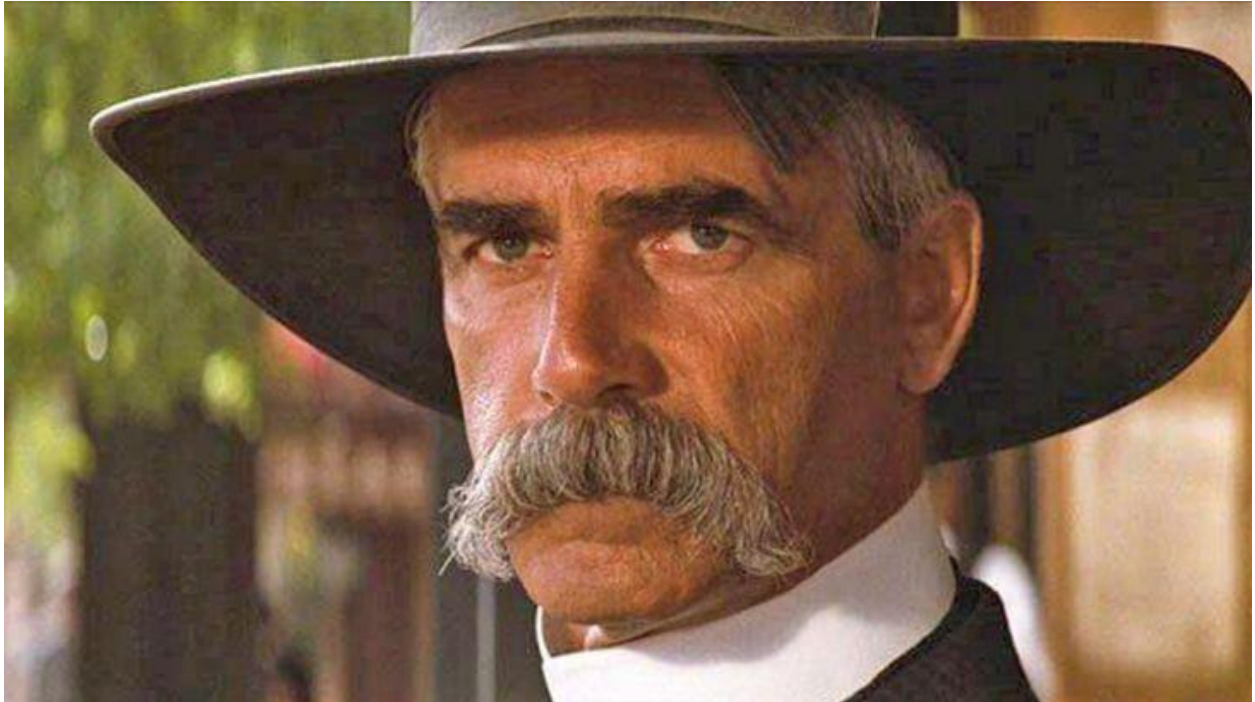


piddleville.com

The production crew, however, had different ideas. They wanted *Tombstone* to be a modern retelling, not a '40s Western. "That's what Kevin wanted. That's what he fought for. And that's what he eventually got fired for."

Casting the Film

Jarre might not have stayed on as director, but his involvement in the early stages of production meant he was able to have a say in how the film was cast. Sam Elliott, who plays Virgil Earp, described Jarre's process:



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“I remember going and having lunch with him at a place on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, which I don’t think is even there anymore,” Elliott said. “And Kevin said he was having all of his meetings there, like he was holding court... I think Kevin’s the one who really controlled this thing creatively before it got off the ground.”

The Script Was Key

The chance to play a famous outlaw might be attractive enough on its own to an actor, but we all know that it’s the script that really makes a film. Luckily Jarre’s screenplay with a hit with many of the actors. Sam Elliott said, “Kevin Jarre wrote a brilliant script. I think across the board, every character was well drawn.”



screenshot

Val Kilmer fell in love with the script when he read the line, “I’m your huckleberry.” He was even intrigued enough to ask Jarre how he had come up with it. Kilmer says, “He didn’t have a specific answer. But I loved it. It just seemed to be the odd, perfect statement for the scene— ‘You’ve met your match.’”

George Cosmatos Comes on Board

It’s only natural that the cast would have formed a bond with Jarre, after all, it was Jarre who had cast them, and his script that had attracted them to the film. So, when he left the film, some of the actors had trouble adapting to the new director, George Cosmatos.



Natalie Parham/unsplash

Sam Elliot described his dealings with Cosmatos, “We had our moment right at the beginning... I always go to the set and stand around when I’m not working just to watch—I’d rather do that than sit around a hotel—and I remember George coming up to me with his dark glasses, looking up at me from the top of his glasses, sticking his nose right in my face. And he said, ‘Am I gonna have trouble with you?’”

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A Rocky Start

This challenge from the director might have intimidated most people, but Sam Elliott refused to back down. He describes, “[I] just looked him right back in the eye and said, ‘I don’t know, am I gonna have trouble with you?’”

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According to Elliott, Cosmatos, "just laughed and said, 'Ah, we're gonna get along fine.' So, we got along good." It might have been a rocky start to the production, but eventually, things fell into place, and the film was ultimately a success.

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***Tombstone* Is About Friendship**

For Val Kilmer at least, the film *Tombstone* is about the strong bond that can grow between friends. In this case, he's talking about Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, "Their bond and strange empathy with each other is really attractive."

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He also describes his fascination with the characters, “[There’s] this lawman [Wyatt Earp], who finally gets a chance to make some money and relax and have fun like every other American, then he gets pulled back into doing the right thing... And his best friend [Doc Holliday] is kinda crazy... It’s quite possible he’s a psychopath. But he’s so funny.”

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