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When no one is left to tell the story,
would there be no history?

On History:
Fact,
Fiction,
&
Factions

Fact, Fiction &
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of Published Works

**Tombstone Blues:
Is Josephine Earp's Memoir of her Legendary
Husband a Hoax?**

Jefferson Decker¹

On October 26, 1881, Wyatt Earp became a gunfighting legend when he and his companions killed three cattle rustlers behind the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. The magnitude of the event wasn't lost on Josephine Marcus, a Jewish stage performer who had come to Tombstone for a production of *H.M.S. Pinafore*—and who ended up becoming Wyatt's common-law wife. "Without stopping for a bonnet, I rushed outside and toward the sound of the firing before it died down," she later recalled. "It seemed to me in my panic that there must have been a hundred shots. Breathlessly I reached Fremont Street a block away and looked toward downtown.... A man in a wagon, whom I'd never seen before, yelled, 'Hop in, lady—I'll run you up to the excitement.'"

At least that's how Josephine puts it in her memoir, *I Married Wyatt Earp*. Published three decades after her death, the book relates Josephine's rise from boomtown actress in Arizona to prospector's wife in Alaska and California. The book, published by the University of Arizona Press in 1976, was an unexpected commercial success. Now in its twelfth printing, with thirty-five thousand copies sold, it is one of the press's all-time best-sellers. It's also been cited in subsequent Earp books like Paula Mitchell Marks's *And Die in the West* (Morrow, 1989) and in Richard Maxwell Brown's social history of frontier law, *No Duty to Retreat* (Oxford, 1991).

There's just one problem: Josephine never wrote most of the words in the memoir. Or so a number of historians now believe.

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They say that Glenn Boyer, the rancher and former military man who edited the book, took liberties with the manuscripts he claimed were his sources, and then filled gaps in the chronology with his own speculations. Boyer's critics don't mince words: "It's one big fake," says Allen Barra, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist and author of *Inventing Wyatt Earp: His Life and Many Legends* (Carroll & Graf, 1998). And Casey Tefertiller, the author of *Wyatt Earp: The Life Behind the Legend* (Wiley, 1997), concurs: "This may be the most remarkable literary hoax in American history. It has been believed and accepted as the words of Josephine Earp for twenty-three years now."

Why did a scholarly press put its imprimatur on a work that might generously be called historical fiction? Though he has been portrayed in dozens of movies, a television series, and scores of books and magazine articles, Wyatt Earp has never generated much excitement among professors. When the O.K. Corral does emerge in academic literature, it's typically to illustrate the nature of federal law enforcement in frontier towns or the role of violence in Western culture. The question that obsesses most Earp buffs—who fired the first shot in the Tombstone gunfight?—barely registers with professional historians.

In the early 1970s, Boyer gave Arizona a chance to bridge the gap between the amateurs and the scholars: an Earp book with a larger documentary value. While undertaking a book-length analysis of the Earp legend in the late 1960s, Boyer interviewed and eventually befriended several of the Earps' living relatives. They surprised him by sending him a thick manuscript Josephine had put together with the help of two distant relatives, Mabel Earp Cason and Vinolia Earp Ackerman, before her death in 1944.

Unfortunately, the Cason manuscript, as it came to be called, did not pick up Josephine's story until after the Earps left Tombstone, omitting the family's most sensational anecdote. Arizona told him they would not publish without a Tombstone chapter, Boyer says. Accordingly, he produced a second manuscript, which he said Josephine had prepared between 1929 and 1932 with the help of John Clum, a former editor of the *Tombstone Epitaph* newspaper. Then, as Boyer explains in an epilogue to *I Married Wyatt Earp*, he "merg[ed] the two manuscripts, which contained vastly different materials presented in widely different styles." To do so, he relied on interviews with Earp relatives and acquaintances to establish a "conversational standard for the combined first-person narrative."

The result was published by Arizona with the subtitle *Recollections of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp*.

But Boyer's critics say the second manuscript, sometimes referred to as the Clum manuscript, probably wasn't much of a manuscript at all. Rather, it was Boyer's shorthand for a whole collection of sources—notes, newspaper accounts, memorabilia, and the recollections of relatives—that he used to put together the Tombstone chapters. Then, they say, he wrote his own version of the history as if it were coming directly from Josephine, making several errors in the process.

For example, Boyer's Josephine cites an article from the *Tombstone Weekly Nugget* of March 19, 1881—an article that smeared Earp's friend Doc Holliday by implicating him in a botched stagecoach robbery. "Doc's implication in this robbery through the propaganda of...the *Nugget*," she writes, "led straight to the Earps' shootout with the rustlers some six months later." But when a skeptical Tefertiller scrutinized the *Nugget* microfiche, he found that no reference to Holliday existed. Further investigation suggested that Boyer had made a gaffe common to Earp researchers—lifting a fabricated version of the *Nugget* article from Billy Breakenridge's 1928 *Helldorado*.

Complicating matters, a curious scholar cannot simply check the original source for verification. Boyer has said he lost the Clum manuscript years ago—possibly during a divorce. As for the Cason manuscript, it is part of Boyer's large—and private—collection of Earp memorabilia, and he allows researchers virtually no access to those materials. (He does this, he says, to preserve the value of the material for future collectors and to keep other historians from stealing his research.)

How did a book with such shaky sourcing make it through Arizona's review process? Possibly because Arizona's press director at the time wanted it to. According to correspondence unearthed by Tony Ortega, a reporter for the *Phoenix New Times*, an alternative weekly, editors at Arizona were concerned all along about the book's veracity. But Marshall Townsend, then the press director, discouraged editors from challenging authors, and encouraged Boyer to put "more of yourself" into the work.

For his part, Boyer denies his book is a hoax and says he has been misunderstood. "My work is beginning to be recognized by all but a few fanatics and their puppets as a classic example of the newly recognized genre 'creative non-fiction,'" he says. "That sort of

thing may get history back into the door of respectability." To be sure, he's not the first person to employ a nontraditional literary device when writing about frontier lawmen or outlaws: The genre is rife with tall tales and self-conscious mythmaking, and plenty of those efforts show far less attention to real historical detail than *I Married Wyatt Earp*. Then again, such literature doesn't typically win the imprimatur of an academic press.

Arizona's interim press director, Christine Szuter, agrees that the provenance of the book "could be more clearly labeled." But she says that the press will wait until the next edition before slapping on any warning signs. And though she says that Arizona now takes its scholarly review process more seriously than it did in the 1970s, she finds no reason to revisit old judgments or to apologize to scholars who were misled.

That attitude infuriates Casey Tefertiller. "At the same time they're selling it as a history book by Josephine Earp," he says, "they're saying that this is not a history book. It's just beyond belief."

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