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Apr. 29, 2012

Legal Seminar Honors

**The Earp-Holliday Trial**

For this assignment I researched the O.K Corral Trial of Tombstone, Arizona. It is more commonly known as the Trial of Wyatt Earp. When these famous trials assignments were initially handed out, I expected a majority of them to be more recent; some that we would know like the back of our hand from the mere mention of the party’s names. While I have heard of the O.K. Corral and Wyatt Earp, I didn’t know enough about it to write a full report. The chance to dive into this case was a unique opportunity to see how the laws of today mixed with the gun slinger Wild West style that was so common to the people in those times.

The best way to understand this case is to first understand the cast of characters involved in this situation. On one side we have Virgil, Wyatt and Morgan Earp along with Doc Holiday, and on the other side we have Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLaury. The Earps and their close friend Holiday were respected men of the law. On the other hand, even the most favorable accounts of this case paint Clanton and the McLaury’s as reckless cowboys. Due to their status in the community, Earp and Holiday were allowed to exercise a certain level of power over the citizens in Tombstone. The issues between these two groups started when the McLaury’s were found to have stolen and then re-branded several mules after they brought them to their ranch. What I found interesting about this particular situation is that Frank didn’t deny stealing them but he did have a problem with the Earps involvement in his personal matters. He didn’t view the Earps as law enforcers. He viewed them as average citizens who were overstepping their boundaries by taking the law into their own hands. For weeks there were bad feelings and negative words going between both groups and the situation finally came to a head when the gentleman encountered each other at the O.K. Corral. Reports say that Earp had told the band of cowboys to put their weapons down and put their hands in the air but their demands were dismissed. One person’s perspective would say that the Earp’s were doing their job in trying to disarm the cowboys since average citizens were not allowed to carry guns. After a hail of gunfire was exchanged between the groups, several men were injured but only Billy Clanton, Tom and Frank McLaury succumbed to their injuries and would later pass away.

After a showdown of that magnitude, the citizens in Tombstone were clearly divided as to who they felt was to blame. Soon after the coroner determined the cause of death for the three men, charges were brought against all three Earp’s and Holiday. Although someone would classify the circumstances that led to this case being brought as wild, the events within the courtroom would prove to be the most exciting of them all. The defendants were represented by Thomas Finch. Up to that point he had a pretty good reputation as a lawyer and his actions during these court proceedings would only enhance that well-earned reputation. The two attorneys for the prosecution were Lyttleton Price and Ben Goodrich. The man that was given the responsibility in deciding this case was Wells W. Spicer. Early on the defense realized that they had an advantage with this judge so the typical mundane procedures of a preliminary conference were thrown out the window. Besides just changing his timing in presenting evidence for this case, Finch also proved to be a master in the art of cross examination. After the prosecutions witness was done with direct examination, Finch would proceed to poke holes in their testimony to a point where you began to doubt every word they said. If that wasn’t enough, he would then attack their character in a way that I’m pretty sure wouldn’t be allowed in today’s court rooms. As a result of Finch’s’ crafty work in the courtroom, the charges against his clients were dropped.

After seeing how this scenario played out from begging to end, I think the judge absolutely made the right decision. I will admit though that Finch’s expertise in discrediting the prosecutions witness made it hard for the judge to find any legitimate charge that the defendants could be convicted of. As far as technology goes, if there was a camera set up near the O.K. Corral then we could easily refer to that tape and see exactly what transpired. As old as this case is, the concept at work here is simple and very relevant. The prosecution could not meet their “beyond a reasonable doubt” standard and the case was dismissed.

Work Cited

1. The Earp-Holliday Trial: An Account

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/earp/earpaccount.html>

1. Gunfight at the OK Corral

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/WWokcorral.htm>

# Gunfight at the O.K. Corral

# <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunfight_at_the_O.K._Corral>