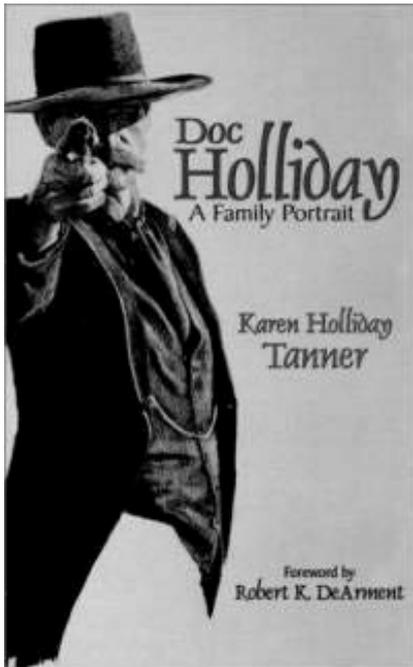




Dentist at the OK Corral: Doc Holliday minus the myths*

Rufus M. Ross **



A number of biographies have been written on the Doc, most of which have suffered from lack of knowledge, overactive imaginations or deliberate fabrications. An account by Karen Holliday Tanner is the most authentic, based as it is on family history and memorabilia.¹

According to the family bible, John Henry Holliday was born at Griffin, Georgia, on August 15, 1851.² Unfortunately, it was immediately evident that he had a cleft palate and harelip, a condition that was to recur several times in future Holliday generations. Sessional records show that he was baptised in March, 1852. John Henry's uncle was Dr Henry Holliday, a respected physician, and his wife's cousin was Crawford Williamson Long. Dr Long was the first surgeon to use ether as

an anaesthetic in 1842 but did not publish his findings until 1849. When he was eight weeks old Drs Holliday and Crawford Long corrected the defects successfully although several years of speech therapy followed. Nevertheless, he was left with a slight speech impediment and some scarring of his lip, a blemish which would be well concealed in future years by his moustache.

John Henry was 10 years old when the American Civil War broke out in April, 1861. His family, who were staunch supporters of the Confederate cause, suffered considerable hardship as a result of the defeat of the Southern States; nevertheless money was found to pay his \$5 matriculation and tuition fees of \$100 to allow him to commence his dental training on Monday October 3, 1870, at the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery in Philadelphia.

John Henry Holliday's Dental Training

The course started with a five-month period of instruction consisting of a two-hour lecture and demonstration in the morning and another similar programme in the afternoon. His course work included chemistry,

mechanical dentistry and metallurgy, dental pathology and therapeutics, dental histology and operative dentistry, physiology and microscopic anatomy plus anatomy and surgery.³ On Saturdays, Holliday took part in clinical work, assisted by demonstrators in the college's 2,000 square feet operating room containing 28 chairs. Students were expected to provide their own instruments and "keep them in perfect order." Candidates for graduation had to be 21 years of age and have studied under a private preceptor (qualified dental supervisor) for at least two years, including his course of instruction at the college.

Attendances on two full courses of lectures in the institution were required but satisfactory evidence of having attended one full course in "any respectable dental or medical school" would be considered equivalent to the first course of lectures in the college. Satisfactory evidence of having been in practice for five years inclusive of the term of pupilage would be considered equivalent to the first course of lectures.

During his first year, Holliday attended to about 39 patients, completed 32 fillings, and extracted 38 teeth. Among the many operations with which he is credited was the construction and fitting of a bridge and making a swaged gold crown for a six-year-old girl. This crown was reputed to have lasted until the patient died in 1967 at the age of 102.

In March, 1871, Holliday returned to his home town, now renamed Valdosta, and, as required by the college, undertook clinical work, for a period of eight months, under the supervision of his preceptor, Dr Lucian Frederick Frink. Frink was a friend of John Henry's father, Major Henry Holliday. John Henry worked with Dr Frink until October of 1871, returning to college to resume his studies on November 6 for an additional 22 weeks of instruction and the preparation of a thesis entitled *Diseases of the Teeth*. His final presentation was the provision of all necessary treatment for a patient and the construction and fitting of an artificial denture, and presenting the patient before his professor of mechanical dentistry. Having satisfied the requirements of the college he graduated on Friday March 1, 1872 with the degree of DDS. The total length of the course was approximately 17 months.

After graduating John Henry moved to Atlanta and on July 26, 1872, was in practice with Dr Arthur C. Ford.⁴ It was soon after Christmas 1872 that the newly qualified dentist began losing weight and developed a nagging cough. Six months later, in the summer of 1873, he discovered that he had contracted pulmonary tuberculosis, a disease which had presumably killed his mother, Alice. His uncle, Dr John S. Holliday, now retired, advised him to adopt a regime which included a climate of warm, dry air, a nutritious diet and prolonged rest during convalescence. This was the widely held belief of most well-informed physicians at that time.

It was decided after a family conference that John Henry should depart for Dallas, Texas, where he arrived in the third week of September, 1873. By prior arrangement he was met at the station by his new partner, Dr John A Seegar, who had been practising in Dallas since 1869. The practice was situated at 56 Elm Street, one of Dallas's main thoroughfares, and about a mile from Dr Seegar's home where John Henry had been made a welcome guest by his wife and five children. At this time he became a prominent member of a temperance organisation: ironic in view of his subsequent history.

By the end of the year Dallas's rapid expansion came to an end and allied to his ailment John Henry found it increasingly difficult to maintain a successful practice. Consequently he found that he had a considerable amount of leisure time and it was not long before he discovered the St Charles saloon on Main Street with its gaming tables.

He was also a regular at the Alhambra saloon and Johnny Thompson's Varieties Bella Union, the headquarters for the majority of Dallas's gamblers, where the newcomer was welcomed with open arms. They were not aware that the young dentist had been well schooled by the Holliday's Negro slave, Sophie, in the finer points of "skinning", a gambling game very popular among the slaves. Faro, at which Holliday was to become adept, was a similar game based on betting on the odds of certain cards turning up when dealt by the dealer. With his mathematical ability, he soon discovered his prowess as a gambler, poker and faro player and before long was able to provide himself with a good supplemental income and rapidly developed a reputation as a respected gambler in town. He was also starting to drink heavily. Bat Masterton, city marshal of Dodge City, was reported as saying that gambling was not only the principal and best paying industry in town (Dallas) but was also the most respectable, even more so than dentistry or medicine.

In March, 1874, the partnership with Dr Seegar was dissolved and John Henry set up on his own, but gambling and drinking became his main occupation and he appeared before the local court on an illegal gambling charge. Soon after this he sold up his practice and moved to Denison, Texas, described as the lowest of the low with respect to prostitution, variety shows and gambling joints. He returned to Dallas to bring in the New Year and was involved in a fracas with a saloon keeper called Charlie Austin. The local newspaper reported the event thus:

"Dr Holliday and Mr [Charles W] Austin, a saloon keeper, relieved the monotony of the noise of fire-crackers by taking a couple of shots at each other yesterday afternoon. The cheerful note of the peaceful six-shooter is heard once more among us. Both shooters were arrested. " Later he was charged with assault to murder but was found not guilty.

John Henry left Denison on the El Paso stage heading for Denver but stopped off in Fort Griffin, a town with two thousand transient hunters and cowboys. Their presence and their money attracted drifters, gamblers and the ubiquitous prostitutes. The settlement had the reputation of being the wildest community on the Texas frontier. Once again he found himself in a scrape with the law, having been charged with gambling in a house selling spirituous liquors. Anxious to avoid further trouble he moved on without clearing up this minor matter.

John Henry drifted through the West - Jacksboro, Texas; Pueblo and Denver, Colorado; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Deadwood, South Dakota; Dodge City, Kansas; Trinidad and Leadville, Colorado; Las Vegas and finally Tombstone, Arizona. During this nomadic period he gained a reputation as a drinker, fighter and killer, although the number of his victims varies from account to account, from half-a-dozen to 50. He also had an on-and-off relationship with one Kate Elder, known as "Big Nose Kate." There is no evidence that they were married. She, it is said, saved his life when he was about to be lynched by a mob in Fort Griffin. After a short stay in Dodge City, Kate and the Doc moved to Las Vegas when his health deteriorated. Once again he opened a dental practice, but the weather in Las Vegas that year was unseasonable and they returned to Dodge City.

Having saved the life of Wyatt Earp in Dodge City, he had become an adopted member of the Earp family and when finally he found his way to Tombstone, Arizona, he joined up with the Earp brothers, Virgil, Morgan and Wyatt, in the celebrated gun fight at the O.K. Corral against the Clanton gang, when three of the gang were shot dead.

The fight at the OK Corral

The Clanton Gang, Isaac (Ike) Clanton and his brother William (Billy); Thomas and Frank McLowry, were the protagonists in the gunfight with Wyatt Earp, his brothers, Virgil and Morgan, and Doc Holliday. According to an eye-witness, the latter were an imposing group, all around six feet tall and attired in dark suits and coats. Reuben Coleman, a local miner, approached the group with the news that he had just seen Ike and Billy Clanton with Frank and Tom McLauray (known as "the cowboys") at the O.K. Corral. They were armed and obviously looking for trouble. Coleman had suggested to the corrupt Sheriff Behan; whose hostility to the Doc and the Earps was well known, that he should disarm the troublesome group before anyone got hurt. This warning was apparently disregarded. The same suggestion was made to Marshal Virgil Earp. The latter in an effort to convey an air of authority borrowed Doc's cane.

The marshal, accompanied by his brothers and Doc who had all been appointed deputies, moved to disarm the Clantons and the McLaurays

knowing full well that they would not give up their arms peacefully. As they turned into Fremont Street, they saw that their quarry had been joined by Billy Claiborne, the quintet were apparently waiting outside a boarding house run by C S Fly, where the Doc had been staying. Unaware that he had already left, they were hoping to catch him by surprise as he emerged.

As they approached the cowboys, Doc heard one of the Earps say, "Let them have it." Doc replied, "All right." Then marshal Earp called out to the gang, "Throw up your hands." Immediately two shots were heard. It was not known for certain who fired the first shot but it was most probably Wyatt Earp hitting Frank McLaury in the stomach. During the next 20 to 30 seconds, as the shooting became general, Billy Clanton was struck by several bullets and at this point Doc fired his shotgun hitting Tom McLaury who staggered several yards down Fremont Street and fell dead. Morgan Earp was hit in the right shoulder while his brother Virgil was wounded in the calf.

At this point Doc threw away his shotgun and started firing with his pistol at the wounded Frank McLaury only about twelve feet in front of him. McLaury yelled, "I've got you this time." Doc replied, "Blaze away! You're a daisy if you have," firing at McLaury at the same time as Morgan. Doc was hit in the shoulder shouting, "I am shot right through." About this time, Virgil Earp and McLaury fell and Doc ran towards him shouting, "The son-of-a-bitch has got me and I mean to kill him." But Frank McLaury was in his death throes from wounds in his head and abdomen. Within minutes the shooting ended; the McLaury brothers and Billy Clinton were dead, Ike Clanton and >>

Billy Claiborne had escaped death when they fled. Doc returned to his room at Fly's boarding house and according to Kate Elder, came in, sat on the bed, and cried, "Oh, this is just awful – awful."

He was obviously distressed and when she asked if he was hurt, he said no, but when he removed his clothing there was a red streak across his hip where a bullet had grazed him.

At the coroner's inquest held three days later on October 29, John Henry Holliday and the three Earp brothers were charged with the killings of Billy Clanton and the McLaury brothers. Virgil and Morgan Earp, due to their wounds, were not in court. Wyatt and Doc were arrested by Sheriff Behan but released on bail of ten thousand dollars each by Justice Wells Spencer. However Will McLaury, an attorney by profession and brother of the dead men, arrived from Texas and was able to force the judge to have them re-arrested without bail. On November 4 they were released on a writ of Habeas Corpus, but this time the bail was set at just two thousand dollars, which sum was provided by a number of people, and the pair were freed.

Wyatt and his allies were now the defendants and were forced to show cause why they should not be indicted for deliberate and unprovoked murder. The local paper, the *Nugget*, controlled by Sheriff Behan's cohorts, churned out its propaganda and pressed the charges with considerable inaccuracies, but dwelt on the charge that there had been a misuse of police power for private ends. Subsequently, Wyatt and Doc were cleared and later a Grand Jury took the same view.

The Doc's health deteriorated rapidly and from then on (1882) he was again a drifter. At this time Doc and Kate had separated but on hearing about his condition, she responded to his request to join him at Glenwood, where once again he tried to carry out dental work, but his violent coughing made this impossible. Kate used her small savings to sustain them when he could no longer work. In October he became delirious and he died on November 8, 1887, in the Glenwood Hotel, Glenwood Springs, Colorado, where he had gone for treatment for tuberculosis.

Doc Holliday, highly skilled dentist, became known as one of the most skilful gamblers and speediest, deadliest man with a six shooter in the "Wild West." Unfortunately it was this expertise with cards and gun and not his dental dexterity that he will be remembered for.

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1 Karen Holliday Tanner, *Doc Holliday, A Family Portrait*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

2 *Ibid.*, p.13

3 Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery, *Annual Announcements*, 1871-72.

4 *Ibid*, p.72