

Wyatt Earp's Journey with Judaism

by Justice Robert E. Gordon

Wyatt Earp's modern-day reputation is that of the Old West's toughest and deadliest gunman of his day. He worked in law enforcement as an assistant U.S. marshal and a deputy sheriff and held other law enforcement positions. He was also a gambler, saloon operator, professional boxing referee, gold miner, and worked in the movie industry. He is a cultural icon, a man of law and order, a mythic figure of a West where social control and order were notably absent. Since then, he has been the primary figure in many movies, television shows, biographies that greatly differ, and works of fiction.

Earp's third wife was Josephine Sarah Marcus, who initially was his common law wife who worked alongside of him in the saloon business and in exploring for gold. They lived together for over 50 years until his death on January 13, 1929, at age 80. They had no children as "Sadie" (that is what Wyatt called her) had three miscarriages, one when she was 40 years old.

History reveals that Wyatt always kissed the mezuzah on the front of whatever residence he lived in after his marriage to Sadie. We do not know whether he ever adopted the Jewish religion, but Sadie kept a Jewish home and followed the tradition of her people. Wyatt's good friend "Doc" Holliday called Wyatt the "Jewish Boy." Wyatt's Hollywood friends conducted a funeral for him at the Congregational Church in Los Angeles, California, but Sadie did not attend and later gave him a Jewish funeral. Many books and articles say that Earp was cremated and buried in the Marcus family plot at a Jewish cemetery in Colma, California, and that Sadie was buried alongside him when she died in 1944. A whole marble headstone was placed for both of them and was stolen, and a second stone of granite was then put up and also stolen. Grave robbers dug up his grave; they didn't find his ashes or a body, but they did steal the 300-pound stone. A third headstone memorializing Wyatt and Sadie stands in Colma today. However, the legends surrounding Wyatt Earp even extend to the location of his final resting place. A Jewish cemetery in Carson City, Nevada, next to property where Irving Berlin had a home, has also been identified as the site where Earp's ashes were buried. I visited this grave many times when I visited Lake Tahoe, before his ashes were reportedly moved elsewhere in the early 1990s.

Sadie claimed that the couple were married on a gambling boat, but researchers have been unable to obtain any verification of their marriage and she is referenced to as his common law wife in most historical writings.

Wyatt never referred to himself as Jewish, and we will never know whether he adopted the religion, but in those years, most people in the public eye would hide that fact. Some historians have written that, on the Jewish High Holidays, Sadie usually left the towns they lived in when there was no synagogue to pray in, but Wyatt remained. Actually, in all of these instances, Wyatt held law enforcement positions that required his presence in the town where they lived.

Wyatt and Sadie's reputation has been confused by inaccurate, conflicting, and false stories told about him by others and by the claims of Wyatt and Sadie that cannot be corroborated. But one fact that everyone agrees to is that Wyatt was in many known shootouts and was never wounded. Sadie was depicted as a woman who ran a saloon employing many other women, before and during her relationship with Wyatt – somewhat like Miss Kitty in the "Gunsmoke" series.

In the many books and articles on Wyatt Earp, he is depicted as either a hero or a bum. However, there is only one confirmed instance where his honesty was in question. In his later life, he was the referee in the heavyweight championship fight between Bob Fitzsimmons and Jack Sharkey. Fitzsimmons was winning the fight and had Sharkey, the champion at the time, on the ropes and knocked him out. But Wyatt called it a low blow and awarded the decision to Sharkey. The two judges of the fight did not observe a low blow, nor did the media, or the people in attendance. The newspapers called the fight "fixed," and Wyatt's reputation as a professional boxing referee was tarnished without repair. Other than that instance and some disputed gambling situations, Wyatt Earp's reputation was a man who stood out for law and order in a Wild West.

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