

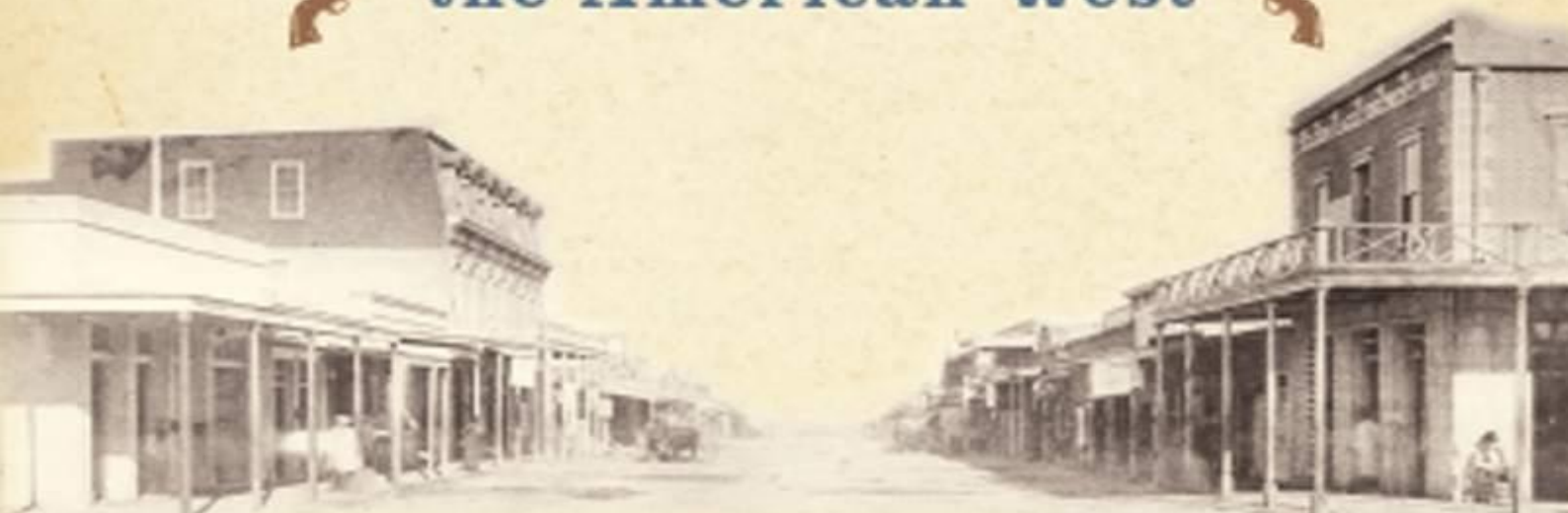
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# THE LAST GUNFIGHT



The Real Story of the Shootout at  
the O.K. Corral—And How It Changed  
the American West



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*Author of Go Down Together*

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### ON THE AFTERNOON OF OCTOBER 26, 1881,

in a vacant lot in Tombstone, Arizona, a confrontation between eight armed men erupted in a deadly shootout. The gunfight at the O.K. Corral shaped how future generations came to view the old West. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and the Clantons became the stuff of legends, symbolic of a West populated by good guys in white hats and villains in black ones, and where law enforcement largely consisted of sheriffs and outlaws facing off at high noon on the main streets of dusty, desolate towns where every man packed at least one six-shooter on his hips. It's colorful stuff—but the truth is even better.

As *The Last Gunfight* makes clear, the real story of the O.K. Corral and the West is far different from what we've been led to believe by countless TV Westerns and Hollywood films. Drawing on new material from private collections—including diaries, letters, and Wyatt Earp's own hand-drawn sketch of the shootout's conclusion—as well as documentary research in Tombstone and Arizona archives and dozens of interviews, award-winning author Jeff Guinn gives us a startlingly different and far more fascinating picture of what the West was like, who the Earps and Doc Holliday and their cowboy adversaries really were, what actually happened on that cold day in Tombstone, and why.

The gunfight did not actually occur in the O.K. Corral, and it was in no way a defining battle between frontier forces of good and evil. Combining newfound facts with cinematic storytelling, Guinn depicts an accidental if inevitable clash between competing social, political, and economic forces representing the old West of ruggedly independent

ranchers and cowboys and the emerging new West of wealthy mining interests and well-heeled town folk.

With its masterful storytelling, fresh research, and memorable characters—the Earps, cattle rustlers, frontier prostitutes, renegade Apaches, and Tombstone itself, a beguiling hybrid of elegance and decadence—*The Last Gunfight* is both hugely entertaining and illuminating, and the definitive work on the Wild West's greatest shootout.



**JEFF GUINN** is the bestselling author of numerous books of fiction and nonfiction, including *Go Down Together: The True, Untold Story of Bonnie and Clyde*, which was a finalist for the Edgar Award in 2010. A member of the Texas Institute of Letters and the Texas Literary Hall of Fame, he lives in Fort Worth, Texas.

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# GUNFIGHT

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It Changed the American West*

## JEFF GUINN

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For Andrea Ahles Koos:  
Let no opinion go unexpressed.



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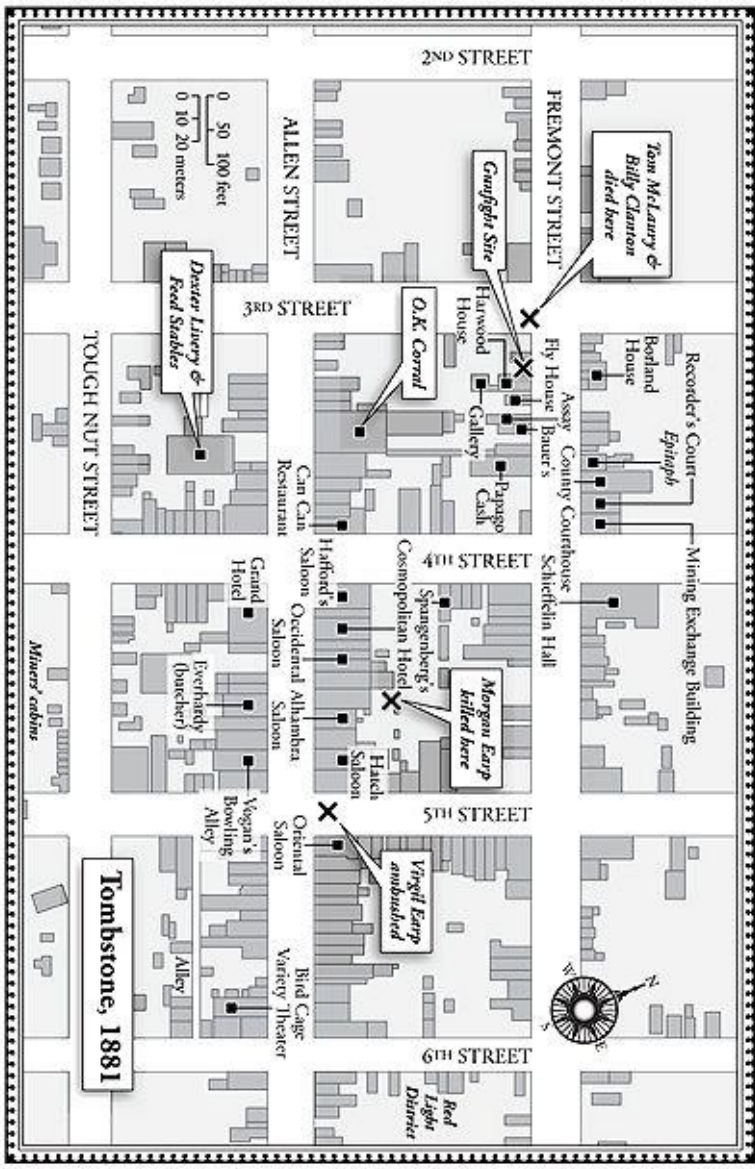
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# THE LAST GUNFIGHT



# TOMBSTONE THAT MORNING

Virgil Earp was determined to sleep in on Wednesday, October 26, 1881. The Tombstone police chief tumbled into bed around 6 A.M. after participating in an all-night poker game at the Occidental Saloon. Among others, he'd played against Johnny Behan, the county sheriff, and local ranchers Ike Clanton and Tom McLaury. Before sitting down to play cards, Clanton had spent much of the night threatening the chief's brother Wyatt and Wyatt's gambler pal, Doc Holliday. At one point he and Holliday had to be separated. Holliday eventually headed home to his room in a boardinghouse, but Clanton kept drinking and getting more worked up.

As chief of police, even off-duty and playing in a card game, Virgil Earp always remained alert for possible trouble. But empty threats were common in Western saloons. Men had a few drinks to go, many, promised to commit mayhem on somebody else, and forgot all about it the next day when they sobered up. Ike Clanton had a reputation in Tombstone as a loudmouth who fired off hot air, not hot lead. Virgil didn't take him too seriously. When the marathon poker game finally concluded—afterward, nobody seemed to remember who won or lost, so no huge sums could have changed hands—Clanton swore again to Virgil that he was going to get his guns and then settle things with Holliday the next time he saw him. He added that it seemed Virgil was part of a group conspiring against him. The Earps and Doc Holliday, Clanton warned, had better get ready to fight. The police chief replied that he was going to get some sleep, Ike should do the same, and he better not cause any problems while Virgil was in bed.

[Dawn on that Wednesday morning](#) broke bitterly cold in southeastern Arizona Territory, so it was good time to stay warm under the covers. A storm was on the way; Thursday would bring sleet and snow. Extremes in weather had been common all year in the region. The blazing heat of summer was given, but April through early July had been the hottest and driest in memory. When rain finally did come in July and intermittently thereafter, it frequently arrived as a deluge. Just weeks earlier, much of sprawling Cochise County—roughly the size of the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined—had been drenched. The desert soil, baked rock-hard by the sun under a coating of sand, didn't absorb moisture well, and roads throughout the county flooded. Now biting winds whipped down from the north, causing the temperature to plummet. It was not a comfortable morning to be outdoors.

[Yet as Virgil Earp fell asleep](#), the main streets of Tombstone still bustled with people. It was always that way, every hour of every day. Tombstone was a mining town, built over a warren of underground tunnels and surrounded by a bristling ring of hoists, smelters, and other structures manned nonstop in a frenzied communal effort to wring as much profit from the earth as possible. The mines operated in shifts, never closing, so neither did many of the town's dazzling array of shops, restaurants, and saloons. Weather, like the time of day, made no difference. Broiling, freezing, day, night, Tombstone pulsed with frantic energy. In some form or another, everyone there was on the make.

For the better part of twenty years, Virgil Earp and his brothers, James, Wyatt, and Morgan, had roamed the American frontier, trying to make the great fortune and secure the leading places in the community that their family had coveted, and failed to achieve, for generations. Tombstone, they hoped, was where their dreams would finally come true. Virgil was police chief and a United States deputy marshal, James had a "sampling room" saloon, Wyatt and Morgan sometimes worked for



Wells Fargo, and all four brothers owned shares of mine property in and around town. Wyatt had hopes of being elected county sheriff in another year, a job with the potential to pay him as much as \$40,000 a year—the kind of wealth that might gain the Earps admittance to Tombstone’s highest social circles. Finally, they would be *somebody*.

Tombstone was a place where such things could happen. Thirty miles from the Mexican border and seventy miles from Tucson, [the town was well known throughout the country](#), mentioned frequently in the business sections of major newspapers from New York City to San Francisco. Its silver mines were said to be the richest since the legendary Comstock Lode was discovered in Nevada Territory in 1859. Legitimate investors, less savory speculators, prospectors in search of strikes that would make their fortunes, and experienced miners looking for work constantly flooded into town, along with those hopeful of siphoning off some of the rumored riches into their own pockets—lawyers, merchants, gamblers, saloonkeepers, prostitutes. In that way, Tombstone was typical of any mining boomtown.

[Yet it was also unique](#). By design as much as by accident, Tombstone was a cultural contradiction: one where the usual mining camp demimonde delights of fixed card games, brothels, and cheap rotgut coexisted amicably with swank hotels and restaurants, world-class stage entertainment, and priced blended whiskies of the sort sipped in the finest East Coast metropolitan watering holes. Civic leaders were about to debate the advisability of installing sewer lines, and telephones linked the major mines and the busy Mining Exchange Building, as well as a few of Tombstone’s glitziest hotels. The town was an addictive hybrid of elegance and decadence, [a place soon to be described](#) in one prominent travel magazine as “a spasm of modernism.” Tombstone deserved the description. In many ways the town was the logical culmination of what, in just over a century, the American West had come to represent: Limitless opportunities for any man to achieve any ambition, no matter how lofty or unlikely. On this chilly morning, there was no other place like Tombstone in all of Arizona Territory or in much of America.

Thanks to stringent ordinances prohibiting guns to be carried within city limits, [Tombstone was mostly a safe place](#), too. It was inevitable, in any community with so many saloons patronized by prideful, hard-drinking men, that alcohol-fueled testosterone overflow periodically resulted in fist fights or drunken attempts at gunplay. More often, bellowed threats like Ike Clanton’s against the Earps and Doc Holliday were never carried out. The efficient town police force sent prospective combatants home to sleep it off, or else locked them up for the night and took them to court to be fined the next morning for disturbing the peace. As the sun rose on October 26, the vast majority of Tombstone residents had never witnessed, much less participated in, physical violence or gunplay within town limits. [Billy Breakenridge, who served](#) several years as a Cochise County deputy sheriff, later claimed that “I never heard of a house [in Tombstone] being robbed, or anyone being held up in the city, and it was perfectly safe for any lady or gentleman to pass along the streets, day or night without being molested.” The most substantive proof came in August 1881, when Chief Earp informed the city council that things were so quiet, the town police force could be reduced to three men—himself and two officers, though he reserved the right to appoint civilians as “special deputies” if necessary. (When he testified in a trial in Tucson in mid-October, Chief Earp named his brothers Wyatt and Morgan to serve as special deputies while he was away.) In town, Virgil Earp had a well-deserved reputation as an impartial enforcer of the law; during the broiling heat of summer 1881, he even arrested Wyatt for disturbing the peace and fighting. Wyatt had to pay a \$20 fine.

But there was ongoing concern among town leaders about a group they believed not only threatened local tranquillity, but Tombstone’s future prosperity. In the surrounding area, particularly in the smaller settlements of San Simon, Charleston, and Galeyville, a loosely knit band of desperadoes collectively known as “cowboys” engaged in raucous lifestyles that frequently crossed over into

lawbreaking. The cowboys rustled openly; because of beef shortages in Cochise County, butchers and consumers didn't much care where cattle were purloined, so long as the majority of them were stolen from Mexican rather than American herds. In exchange for a cut of the profits, small ranchers in the area such as the Clantons and McLaurys gladly grazed the rustled stock on their property until it was fattened enough for sale. The cowboys were also suspected—it was never proven—of attacking Mexican pack trains bringing goods across the border to trade, and of raiding Mexican settlements in much the same manner as renegade Apaches. International tension resulted. Members of President Chester A. Arthur's cabinet were consulting with territorial officials about it.

Clashing opinions about the cowboys ramped up an already bitter political feud in Cochise County and Tombstone, the county seat. The town's rival newspapers were engaged in all-out editorial warfare. The *Nugget* was unabashedly Democrat in its leanings, favoring minimal government intervention on territorial and local issues, and claiming that "cowboy depredations" were grossly exaggerated by area leaders who wanted to enrich themselves at the expense of individual freedoms. The Republican *Epitaph* took the opposite view: [The cowboys were menaces](#) not only to local safety, but to Tombstone's reputation. There had been several area stage robberies in the last seven months, surely carried out by cowboys. The *Epitaph* demanded federal intervention, currently forbidden by a congressional edict; meanwhile, John Clum, the newspaper's publisher and mayor of Tombstone, joined other civic leaders to form the Tombstone Citizens Safety Committee, ready when needed to mete out swift vigilante justice. In an August 1881 editorial, Clum wrote, "When the civil authorities are insufficient or unwilling to protect a community, the people are justified in taking the law into their own hands and ridding themselves of the dangerous characters who make murder and robbery their business." It was a slap at county sheriff Behan, who rarely arrested cowboys and occasionally managed to let them escape jail when he did, and [an equally blunt warning](#) to Tombstone police chief Virgil Earp: If he ever failed to keep the cowboys under control while they were in town, his bosses would do it for him.

The last thing Virgil Earp wanted was armed, trigger-happy civilians stalking cowboys on Tombstone's streets. It took the judgment of an experienced lawman like the town police chief to know when to act decisively, and when to let situations fizzle out of their own accord. Ike Clanton's babbling threats to "fix" Doc Holliday and the police chief and his brothers were good examples. Virgil could have arrested him, but guessed that Ike would cool down. As the sun came up on Tombstone the Wednesday, Clanton was probably snoring in a drunken stupor in a town hotel. When Ike woke up with a hellacious hangover, he'd stumble back to his ranch. It was nothing to lose sleep over, and Virgil didn't intend to.

But around nine in the morning, policeman A. G. Bronk roused Virgil after just a few hours of slumber to tell him that Ike Clanton was staggering around town, now armed and still drunk, threatening to kill all the Earp brothers and their friend Doc Holliday on sight. The chief told Bronk not to worry about it, then rolled over and went back to sleep.

About six hours after that, three men died, with a fourth soon to be assassinated and a fifth crippled for life. Yet the impact of the bloody events in and just outside a cramped Tombstone vacant lot extended far beyond the fates of the eight men directly involved. What has come to be called "The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" became a pivotal moment in American annals because of misunderstandings, exaggerations, and outright lies about it provided impetus for future generations to form a skewed, one-dimensional view of frontier history. In fact, it represented an unintentional, inevitable, clash between evolving social, political, and economic forces, though the Earps and the Clantons and the McLaurys and Doc Holliday had no notion of that when they began pulling triggers. The real story of Tombstone, and of the American West, is far more complex than a cartoonish confrontation between good guys and bad guys. Much of the subsequent misinterpretation can be

directly traced back to that critical moment on a freezing October morning in 1881 when sleepy, well-meaning Virgil Earp guessed wrong.

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# Chapter One

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## THE WEST

If it had been up to Daniel Boone, America's frontier expansion would have begun with the creation of a new state named Transylvania.

In 1775, not long before the first shots of the Revolutionary War, Boone led a small expedition through the Cumberland Gap in the Alleghenies, entering what would eventually become the state of Kentucky. At the time, it was the western flank of the vast British colony called Virginia. Boone had already made several trips to the region since the late 1760s. Now he came as an investor rather than an explorer. Boone worked for the Transylvania Company, a business venture intended by colonial entrepreneur Richard Henderson to enrich himself and his partners by anticipating westward migration and the demand for land there. Boone staked out a site, founded a settlement he immodestly named Boonesborough, and joined Henderson in selling lots to other pioneers. The partners then proposed Boonesborough as the county seat of a colony called Transylvania, but Britain turned them down. After the war, the undaunted duo applied to the Continental Congress to recognize Transylvania as a state. They were rebuffed again; there was some question whether Henderson, Boone, and the partners owned the land at all. They claimed they'd acquired it in an agreement with the Cherokee Indians, but other tribes disputed the legitimacy of Cherokee ownership. Like the state of Transylvania, [Boonesborough didn't work out](#) as planned. By the end of the eighteenth century it was a virtual ghost town. Boone himself was gone twenty years before that, moving further west in hopes of acquiring the *right* land that would make him rich and influential. He was among the first Americans with that goal, and, for a while, Boone remained the exception rather than the rule.

In the early years of the new nation, the public perception and the reality of the West were the same. People of limited means yearned to own land, the West was where they could, and that was all there was to it. Most Americans were farmers, or wanted to be if they could acquire sufficient property. Within the settled regions of the original thirteen states, that was a problem. The most desirable farmland was spoken for; much of it was tied up in large private estates. Particularly along the most heavily settled eastern seaboard of the newly minted United States, land was at a premium. The geographic alternatives for landless Americans were limited. To the north, menacing Britain guarded the border of Canada. To the south, the equally powerful Spanish controlled Florida. The only available direction for expansion was westward, beyond the Allegheny Mountains that formed the spines of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland. Everyone knew there were great sprawling expanses in that direction, and, for those willing to endure hard work and danger it was possible to acquire land of their own and make their living from it. Few hoped for anything more than a subsistence existence growing enough crops and bagging enough wild game to feed their families and survive in minimal comfort, not luxury. For the earliest frontier settlers, that was enough. While Daniel Boone and his namesake town didn't win over many of his fellow pioneers, the trail he blazed into the Western wilderness did. The Cumberland Gap became a popular route in America's expansion to the west.

Congress did what it could to encourage Western settlement. [Its goal, until 1890](#) when the government declared that there was no more American frontier left to settle, was to get as much public land into private hands as possible. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 declared that the federal government would oversee territorial legislatures—a grandiose concept, since America had yet to acquire any new land to be designated as a national territory. But the fledgling nation was clear



going to expand, and, when it did, rules had to be in place for how much autonomy settlers would have. The basic answer was: Not much. Whenever five thousand eligible voters were present (meaning adult white males), territories could elect assemblies—but the U.S. Congress could veto any law passed by these assemblies, and territorial governors and judges would be appointed by the national government. Only when a territory's population reached sixty thousand could it petition Congress to become a state. Until then, any territory was essentially a vassal colony, useful to the United States for the space it would add and the contributions it might make to the national economy.

The obvious priority was finding territory to acquire, and America soon butted up against a formidable obstacle to westward expansion. Spain controlled the mouth of the Mississippi River, whose north-south route was critical to American commerce. In 1802, Spain shut down New Orleans to U.S. shipping. President Thomas Jefferson tried to acquire New Orleans and part of Florida from the Spanish, but they ceded their vast "Louisiana" holdings (which extended well up through the continental heartland to the southern border of Canada) to France instead. Here, America stumbled into luck. Napoleon's main concerns were extending his power in Europe and putting down a slave insurrection in France's colony of Haiti. Jefferson acquired the vast Louisiana Territory for \$15 million; it added more than 800,000 square miles to the United States, immediately doubling the size of the country. Now there was ample land for the early waves of American settlers. The problem was no one could be sure just how much. The boundaries between Louisiana and Spanish holdings in the Southwest weren't clear. The Lewis and Clark Expedition had angled northwest to the Pacific coast. Many settlers simply set out in a westward direction, hoping for the best.

These early pioneers were obliged to cooperate rather than compete. Personality conflicts had to be overlooked for the greater good. Everyone had the same goal. They wanted their own land—and welcomed neighbors with the same ambition. The failure of one endangered the chances of the rest. Few farmed exclusively; they had to contribute to the community beyond that. One might have a knack for basic blacksmithing. Another could build and operate a small gristmill. Few of the settlers had much money, or thought that they ever would.

But as American settlement of the West expanded so did the ambitions of some pioneers. Much of the exploring and settling could now be done by boat—with the Louisiana Purchase, America commanded two mighty rivers, the Mississippi and the Missouri. The rivers made it easier to travel and to ship manufactured goods from east to west, and raw materials from west to east. There had been fur traders in North America since European and British settlers originally reached its shores. They hunted animals with limited success and acquired most of their pelts from Indian tribes. The French dominated the fur trade in mid-continent. In the early 1800s after the Louisiana Purchase, Americans were anxious to do the same. Animal furs brought good prices in East Coast markets where they could be turned into hats and coat collars and lap robes. The first American "mountain men" made their way west, in the process bringing beaver and sea otter to the brink of extinction in some regions. Westward expansion often destroyed aspects of the wilderness in the process of settling it.

Some of the mountain men blazed new trails, always moving farther west. Jim Bridger was among the first white men to reach the Great Salt Lake. John Colter, who initially came west with Lewis and Clark, described geysers to disbelieving listeners. Kit Carson ranged all the way to what would become California. These mountain men were also businessmen, glad to live wild and free but devoted to making all the money they could while doing it. The process involved competition—most mountain men were affiliated with rival fur trading companies. Each had his preferred hunting grounds and Indian trading partners, and wanted to keep them for himself. Too much cooperation hurt potential profit.

Settlers now coming west to farm were aware of the new financial possibilities. [One, with a cle](#)

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