



Gallery of Gunfighters

Part 1 – The Art of Gunfighting

“God created men; Colonel Colt made them equal.” In the wild ‘n woolly towns of the western frontier during the 1870’s and 1880’s, many men would sooner go out on the streets without their pants rather than without their six-gun.

Gunfighting was a very complex art. It required courage, speed, steadiness and co-ordination. Hundreds of men died finding ways to improve the state of the “art.” Bat Masterson, one of the most respected lawmen in the west, had some good advice for would-be gunfighters. He said to never try to bluff a man with a gun. A pistol is made to kill the other fellow with and for no other reason. Never reach for a gun without planning to shoot to kill. Masterson also recommended that to stop a man with a gun never aim along the barrel. Hold the gun tightly and point the barrel in the same manner that you instinctively point your finger. If a man couldn’t learn to aim that way, he would never be a successful gunfighter.

When it came to drawing a gun, there were many variations. Gunfighters did not always wear their six-gun in the conventional holster as they do on TV or in the movies. Some simply carried them in their waistband, pants pocket or coat pocket.

Wild Bill Hickok probably never wore a holster. He would stick two revolvers, always the old fashioned cap and ball type (with a cap and ball pistol, loose powder is poured into each chamber and a lead ball is pressed on top), into his sash or waistband, butts pointing towards his belt buckle. In cold weather it would be next to impossible to draw from a holster under a coat, so six-guns were usually carried in a coat pocket.

A variety of special holsters also evolved. The swivel holster had a slot into which a pin mounted on the gun was placed. No leather surrounded the gun, and all that was needed was to swivel the gun on the pin and fire. A second type of swivel holster had the holster attached to the belt by a rivet. The whole holster would be swiveled on the rivet and the bullet fired through an opening in the toe of the holster. Swivel holsters were very quick but shooting from them not very accurate. Various vest-type holsters and shoulder holsters were also used. Some had pockets for the six-guns, and others used spring-like clips to hold the weapon in place.

When it came to drawing a gun from a holster and firing there were several methods to choose from, depending somewhat on the type of pistol. A single-action revolver was

one that had to have the hammer cocked, usually with the thumb, before the trigger could drop the hammer. When drawing this type of gun, the trigger was pulled back as soon as the hand gripped the gun. As the gun was drawn the thumb pulled back the hammer and when the gun is pointed, the hammer was released. A double-action revolver was a type where pulling the trigger automatically cocked the gun and dropped the hammer. In drawing this type, the trigger could not be pulled until the gun cleared the holster. This is **marginally** slower than firing a single-action type, but on the first shot only. Either type could be modified by “disconnecting” the trigger, and/or sometimes shortening the barrel. This made either type faster to fire and/or draw.

Either type of gun could be “fanned”. Fanning entails holding the gun in one hand and striking the hammer with the side of the other hand to pull it back and let it fall. Fanning, according to many old-timers, including Wyatt Earp, was by far the fastest way to unload a six-gun, but was very rarely used by the top gunfighters in a life-and death situation. Wyatt Earp held gun fanners in contempt, and other old-timers, including some Texas Rangers, stated that they had never seen fanning used in a fight but only as a stunt. Yet some credence must be given to such use.

Another much debated subject is that of only loading five shells in a six-gun and leaving the chamber under the hammer (the sixth) empty. This supposedly would protect the wearer of the gun from accidentally firing and blowing a hole in his foot or leg. This appears to be largely ignored by most gunfighters, although occasionally practices. The only way in which a gun could go off accidentally, without revolving the chamber and placing a bullet under the hammer, would be to strike or drop the gun directly on the end of the hammer with great force: an unlikely occurrence although one occasionally reads of it happening today. Additionally, the Colt Frontier model six-gun, a very popular weapon, had a safety notch which held an un-cocked hammer away from the shell.

Many gunslingers carried two six-guns, but never fired them simultaneously. They would either alternate shots between the two if they were ambidextrous, or they would first empty one gun and then switch to the other.

A number of other stunts frequently seen in the movies were rarely used in gunfights. Among these is the so-called “Road Agent’s Spin.” For this trick, one pretends to present his six-shooter to another person with the butt up and towards them and with the trigger finger inside the trigger guard. He would then spin the gun on the index finger until the butt of the gun fell into his hand and the barrel pointed toward the opponent. Such stunts were rarely relied on in a fight, and were mainly used to develop dexterity. Another trick was known as the “Border Shift,” where the gun was quickly tossed from hand to hand, butt first to barrel first, usually too late for the one trying it.

Gunfights were usually short in duration, particularly indoors. Smokeless powder was not introduced until the 1890’s and if a battle lasted more than a few shots, the room quickly became enveloped in clouds of smoke. As in all other forms of competition, the best man usually won. (Shooting from ambush was fairly common and the typical Westerner realized this fact all too well.)

Someone once calculated that the average life span of the West’s 250 most dangerous gunslingers was 32 years. That’s not much considering that a few lived into

their 70's and 80's. He who lived by the gun frequently died by the gun; or on the short end of a long rope.

Part II: John “DOC” Holliday (AKA Tom McKey)

John Henry Holliday, the man who some say helped put sixteen men in the ground, was born about 1851 in Griffin, Georgia. During the late 1860's, Holliday studied to become a dentist, although historians disagree as to whether he attended college in Baltimore or served an apprenticeship under a practicing dentist in Georgia. About this time, he contracted a form of tuberculosis (commonly called “consumption” or “lung fever” in those days).

Holliday left Georgia because of his ailment (and there are persistent stories that he killed one or more men in Georgia) in 1873 and moved to Dallas, Texas where he practiced dentistry with another man. There Doc became disillusioned with the world as he saw it (again, possibly because of his lung condition) and took to heavy drinking and gambling, practicing dentistry only when he needed more money to gamble. He became quite proficient with cards and could both use and detect all the tricks of the trade. His reputation for fearlessness started to build during his stay in Dallas, when he traded shots with a saloon owner. Some say he killed a soldier in Jacksboro, Texas. He wound up in Fort Griffin, Texas, in 1877, where he met Wyatt Earp. Allegedly, he killed a man in a knife fight over a card game, and escaped when his mistress set fire to the building where he was being held.

From Fort Griffin, Doc eventually moved on to Dodge City, Kansas. On the way, he became involved in a knife fight with a gambler in Denver, and severely cut him up. In 1878, Doc set up a dentistry practice in Dodge, to earn more money to gamble. There he formed his famous friendship with Wyatt Earp, then a Deputy City Marshall, by coming to Wyatt's rescue. Earp had been cornered by an angry group of Texans, and was in a tight spot, when Doc appeared. A cowboy behind Wyatt was drawing his gun when Doc called out a warning and wounded the backshooter. Doc and Wyatt then proceeded to bluff their way through the situation with no additional shooting, and a friendship for life was formed.

When Holliday left Dodge he moved to Las Vegas, New Mexico, then as rough a town as any in the west. The move was, typically, not without its share of adventures, and Doc is said to have shot a gambler in Colorado on the way. In Las Vegas (1879), Doc operated a saloon with another man and was soon involved in one or possibly two shootings. Allegedly Doc wounded a gambler in one of the battles. The other fight shows the development of Doc's “philosophy” at this point in time. Doc was now living one day at a time. He had practically no fear of death because he expected to die soon from either Tuberculosis or lead poisoning (the lead being administered the hard way). A man named Gordon, who had a grudge against Holliday's saloon operation, decided it was time to shoot the place up. He approached the saloon and fired several shots into it. Holliday then stepped from the saloon and killed Gordon.

By 1880, Doc had moved to join Wyatt Earp in Tombstone, Arizona, where he finally achieved the reputation of one of the most dangerous gunslingers alive. Doc made many enemies from diverse sources. Doc was quite temperamental and had a bad temper

when under the influence of alcohol, which was a lot of the time. He trusted no man save Wyatt Earp and would gladly have swindled an acquaintance if given the chance. However, he was a man of his word, and once his word was given, it was kept. He had one fight in the Oriental Saloon in which he shot the owner and a bartender. Doc was indicted, but nothing came of the charges.

If conditions had been right, THE classic gunfight in the history of the west might have occurred in Tombstone. Doc was standing with Wyatt outside a saloon when they were approached by John Ringo, considered by many to be the deadliest man in the southwest. Ringo and Earp had been feuding since the Earp party had arrived in town, and now Ringo had decided to have it out with Wyatt. Ringo challenged Wyatt to step out into the street. Earp, who was running for office in town at that time, realized that a shootout wouldn't help his campaign, so he told Ringo to forget it and walked into the saloon. Ringo, still spoiling for a fight, then challenged Holliday, and the game dentist replied, "Any time". Then, so the story goes, Ringo pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and extended to Doc saying that he should take the other end and that all they needed was three feet. Doc took a corner and both men squared off to draw. At that range, and considering the lightning speed of both men, one, and possibly both, would probably have died in the next split second if the town mayor hadn't broken them up. Ringo and Holliday almost shot it out on a second occasion, but were broken up by a deputy. Doc had been bad-mouthing Ringo, and Ringo had tracked him down and called him out.

Doc was also involved in the gunfight at the OK Corral (this is elaborated on in TSR's BOOT HILL rules), where three men were killed by Holliday, Wyatt Earp and Earp's brothers, Virgil and Morgan. The feud which led to the battle ended only after Virgil Earp was crippled, Morgan Earp killed and three or more of the Earp's' enemies lay dead. Wyatt and Doc then fled Tombstone (they were wanted, perhaps unjustly, for the killings) and went to Colorado in 1882.

There Holliday went on his own again, and in 1884 he was in Leadville. By this time his TB was becoming acute. His five foot ten inch frame was so thin that he had the appearance of a walking corpse. Doc wounded a man and was acquitted of the shooting. He died on November 8, 1887 and his last words were, "This is funny." Indeed it was, because the famed dentist/gunfighter had died in bed of TB and alcoholism and not of gunshot wounds.

The following ratings are based on a scale of 01-100 and are compatible with TSR's BOOT HILL rules. High numbers are better except in the Gambler Rating, where a low number is best.

Speed 98

Gun Accuracy 96

Throwing Accuracy 89

Bravery 98

Strength 02

Experience 11

Gambler Rating 10

Part III: Ben Thompson

Bat Masterson once said, "Others missed at times, but Ben Thompson was as delicate and certain in action as a Swiss watch." Bat also stated that "It is very doubtful if in his time there was another man who equaled him with a pistol in a life and death struggle." That was mighty high praise coming from a man like Masterson. Bat was not only one of the West's most respected lawmen and a gunfighter of high repute himself, but he was also personally acquainted with such gunslingers as Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Johnny Ringo, Luke Short, Bill Tilghman, Clay Allison, and Wild Bill Hickock.

Thompson's life was one wild adventure after another. Born in England on November 11, 1842, he came with his family to Austin, Texas, at the age of nine. Ben and his brother Billy (the family troublemaker who Ben had to constantly rescue from various scrapes) both became proficient with guns at an early age. Before Ben was eighteen, he was involved in two shootings and several Indian fights, killing at least one man.

When the Civil War started, Ben joined the Confederate Army. The action and adventure appealed to Ben, but the regimented life-style of army camps did not. Ben was usually in trouble for running gambling games, bootlegging whiskey and fighting with his superiors. After killing one of his officers, Ben hid until his enlistment expired and promptly re-enlisted. Before the war ended, Ben had killed at least two more men in gunfights. After the war, Ben was jailed briefly, but escaped to Mexico where he joined the Emperor Maximilian's army. Ben fought well for this new army and became a captain or major (depending on what account is studied) before Maximilian's armies were defeated. During his course in Mexico he incidentally shot and killed a Mexican policeman who crossed him.

Returning to Texas, Ben opened several gambling establishments. His prosperity didn't last long, though, because he was sentenced to four years in prison for shooting his brother-in-law. Released in 1870 after serving two years, Ben drifted north. By 1871 he was in the rough-and-tumble cow town of Abilene, Kansas. There he opened a saloon with Phil Coe, but his good fortune ended when Coe was killed by Wild Bill Hickock. Thompson had no written contract with Coe, and consequently lost his interest in the saloon. In 1873 Ben and his brother, Billy, had a feud with the lawmen in Ellsworth, Kansas, which resulted in Billy's accidental killing of the Sheriff. Billy fled and Ben moved on.

When the trail drives ended each year, and the gambling became slow, Ben would return to Austin. But trouble followed him, and in December of 1876 he had a gunfight in which he killed two men. Mark Wilson owned a saloon/theatre in Austin which Ben frequented. Wilson had a row with a friend of Thompson's. Ben and his friend later attended a show at Wilson's place, and someone set off a string of firecrackers. Wilson accused Ben and his comrade, and threats were exchanged. Wilson got a shotgun and fired at Ben, missing. Ben returned the fire hitting Wilson four times. Meanwhile, Wilson's bartender fired at Thompson with a rifle and Ben shot him in the mouth as the bartender ducked behind the bar. Both Wilson and the bartender died. Ben was acquitted for the killings.

After other adventuring, including a short stay in Tombstone, Arizona, Ben ran for Austin City Marshall about a year before the gunfight at the OK Corral in 1879 and

was defeated. In 1880, he ran again and won. Under Ben's leadership, the Austin police department brought about an amazing reduction in the city's crime rate. The new responsibilities did not change Ben, however. He still continued to gamble and shoot up the town when things got slow, but this was not enough to discourage the people, and he was re-elected in the next election.

Ben did not finish his second term. He became involved in a feud with a San Antonio variety house owner, Jack Harris, and killed him. In the long, drawn-out legal battle that ensued Ben resigned his job as Marshall though he was eventually acquitted. The feud did not end, however, as Harris' partners, Simms and Foster, still carried it on. In 1884, Thompson met John King Fisher, another famous gunfighter, and they made the rounds of the Austin bars. They then went to San Antonio where Fisher suggested that they visit Foster, who was a friend of Fisher's. Ben agreed, and they went to the theatre. Simms and Foster had been warned of their coming and set up a trap. Thompson and Fisher were arguing with Simms and Foster when a fusillade erupted. When the smoke cleared, Ben had been hit by nine bullets and Fisher had been hit by thirteen. Foster and one of his friends, a man named Coy were also hit. Coy lived, but Foster's leg was amputated and he eventually died of complications. At the inquest, the doctors who performed the autopsy contended that the shots killing Thompson and Fisher had come from a curtained booth behind and above the men, but a jury decided that the shooting had been by Foster, Simms and Coy, and in self-defense.

Thus died Ben Thompson; on March 11, 1884 at the age of 41. He was, in this author's opinion, one of the four most dangerous gunfighters who ever lived. He had killed at least eight men and probably as many as sixteen (although some report up to thirty-two killings), only to die in an ambush.

The following are subjective ratings of Ben Thompson's abilities in terms of TSR's BOOT HILL rules.

Speed — 99

Gun Accuracy — 98

Throwing Accuracy — 78

Bravery — 98

Strength — 80

Experience — 15

Gambler Rating — 15