UNFORTUNATELY, stories linking weapons with Wild West heroes appear with almost monotonous regularity. Yet in the mythology of America’s West regularity should never be confused with truth. In researching any accepted belief, truth becomes more elusive and frustrating than popularizers care to admit. Perhaps the most widely accepted of all such stories concerns Wyatt Earp and Colt’s so-called “Buntline Special” revolvers. Legend describes Earp’s gun as sporting a 12-inch barrel and shoulders stock attachment. Garish accounts then have him using this extra-length barrel to subdue a host of hardcases in both Dodge City, and Tombstone. Although a journalistic fabrication, at least as far as Wyatt Earp is concerned, this somewhat awesomely looking weapon remains his trademark in literature and in Hollywood. This gun’s inseparable association with Wyatt Earp has helped scores of writers and film makers transform that individual into one of the frontier’s most fascinating marshals. Yet one is strangely reminded of earlier heroes—Achilles and King Arthur—their feats of derring-do, their mythical weapons and physical prowess. What eventually confronts serious historians is not a man but a grim-visaged caricature into which has been poured little if any semblance of a super myth. The emerging figure bears at most the ingredients of a super myth. The Wyatt Earp is made to embody all the spirit of boldness and self-reliance that most modern audiences find secretly satisfying. Fascinated, viewers visualize their hero going into action, answering to no one—seemingly unerring master of his own destiny. Using this childishly one-dimensional view of the American West, lesser men find emotional escape in the person of Wyatt Earp.
Yet the Buntline Special is more than just a physical prop in an ever-widening fantasy. It is accepted by many as a historical fact inexorably linked to Wyatt Earp’s actual life. We are told again and again of dime-novelist Ned Buntline giving such guns to Earp and four other worthy Dodge City peace officers some time during the summer of 1876. The talented journalist Stuart N. Lake, who understood well the value of dramatic devices, first published this story 40 years ago and countless persons have been retelling it ever since. Dare question the tale’s authenticity in some circles and you are greeted with gasps of disbelief and shown, as an antidote to your foolishness, passage after passage from Lake’s highly controversial book *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal*.

First published on October 7, 1931, after a four-part sneak preview in *The Saturday Evening Post*, this frontier thriller, through numerous editions, eventually became the most popular and influential of its genre. Serving as the basis for a number of motion pictures and a highly popular television series, Lake’s grandiloquent Wild West saga has reached millions of fans over the years. Stuart Lake boldly claimed he had persuaded Wyatt Earp, just before the man’s death, to give “a firsthand and a factual account of his career” for the book *Saturday Review* subsequently called “a rare contribution to authentic Western history.” Not wishing to be outdone, the New York *Times* two months later added, “the . . . book is a notable contribution to the history of our Western and Southwestern frontier.” As late as 1961, one writer characterized Lake’s book as “the bible of cowtown literature.”

With such vigorous praise it’s no wonder that for years it went unchallenged as Wyatt Earp’s definitive biography. More recently, however, this book has passed under the discerning eye of qualified historians more cautious with their praise. The Buntline Special tale is now sharing the close scrutiny of serious Earp researchers and Colt firearms authorities. Not accepting Lake’s version so quickly, these experts note the absence of any supporting evidence from pre-*Frontier Marshal* secondary sources or available primary documentation.

According to Lake, Wyatt Earp’s fame spread beyond the boundaries of Kansas prompting pulp-writer Ned Buntline to visit

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Dodge City in the summer of 1876. He came, we are told, to repay Wyatt and four of his colleagues whose exploits had supplied the writer with “material for hundreds of frontier yarns.” But this claim lacks the ring of truth. A close look at Buntline’s works—a prolific outpouring until his death in 1886—shows he seldom devoted his erratic talents to Western themes. All his Western stories combined wouldn’t begin to approach the volume claimed by Stuart Lake as being solely inspired by the Dodge City crowd—not to mention other possible sources.

Since Ned didn’t write many Western yarns, readers may well ask: why then did he supposedly contact these five Dodge City characters? The question, therefore, is not only did he present the guns at all, but would he have done so as payment of a literary debt? On this note Ned Buntline’s actual writing career, together with his many personal quirks, must be examined. In doing so it is hoped the mystery surrounding that writer’s reported actions in 1876 can be solved. If, for whatever reason, he remained uninterested in writing many Western stories, the Buntline Special’s historical credibility immediately loses much of its glamour.

Born Edward Zane Carroll Judson at Harpersfield, N.Y., on March 20, 1821, Ned Buntline (Judson’s most well-known nom-de-plume) began his literary career soon after receiving an acting midshipman’s appointment in 1838. Although only a boy of 17, Judson anonymously contributed his first story to Lewis Gaylord Clark’s prestigious magazine The Knickerbocker. Over the next several years he sent a deluge of swashbuckling sea thrillers to various publications, including for a time Ballou’s Pictorial, The Flag of the Union, and The Dollar Magazine.

Judson resigned from the navy in 1842 and two years later launched the ill-fated Ned Buntline’s Magazine at Pittsburgh in association with his father and one Henry Beeler. After its early demise Ned assumed the role of newspaper publisher at Paducah, Ky., with a political scandal sheet entitled Ned Buntline’s Own.

7. It is also to remember that dime novelists in this period, who did write of the West, invariably used Indian fighters and scouts as their main characters—never “gunfighters” or lawmen. It is true Jesse James received some coverage as an outlaw, but this was nothing more than an American appropriation of the long-traditional Robin Hood theme. Sheriff Pat Garrett was used in later years, but only as a peripheral character in the act of chasing the real “hero,” Billy the Kid.
9. Ibid., p. 169. Soon after this, Judson adopted the pen name Ned Buntline. The word “buntline” is a nautical term referring to the ropes attached to the foot of square sails and used in drawing them to the yards for furling.
After a few months he discontinued the publication in order to serve as editor of the newly formed *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review*. This venture too folded within a short time.

In November, 1845, ex-editor Buntline reportedly earned $600 by single-handedly capturing two men wanted for murder at Eddyville, Ky. On March 14, the following year, he shot and killed Robert Porterfield, the husband of one of his teenage admirers at Nashville. Buntline vainly protested his innocence by claiming, "No proof has ever been advanced that I ever touched her hand." 11 This line of defense is deceiving as the trend of opinion suggested actions of a far more intimate nature. At the trial following this shooting Porterfield’s brother, along with a number of his friends, fired several shots at Ned, who wisely bolted from the defense table and fled the crowded courtroom through an open window.

He darted across the street seeking refuge in the old City Hotel, but not before being shot in the chest by some unknown assailant and hit on the head with a rock thrown by a passing Negro. With a lynch mob at his heels Buntline jumped to an adjoining building but missed his grip. He reportedly fell some 50 feet and was crippled for life. That night the mob stormed the jail and hanged the amorous writer from a conveniently placed awning post. Through the timely intervention of a friend Buntline survived that night’s revelry and eventually returned to court with a successful plea of self-defense.

Undaunted by either literary or personal reverses, Ned returned to New York City and resurrected *Ned Buntline’s Own* in 1848. He continued to edit issues of this journalistic rag even after being stiffly fined and sentenced to 12 months in Blackwell’s Island Prison. Ned had helped instigate the Astor Place Opera House riots in May, 1849, by appointing himself champion of American actor Edwin Forrest over his English counterpart William Charles Macready. These two famous tragedians had been feuding openly for some time, over personal slights both real and imagined, but Ned chose to base his judgment solely on terms of rabid nationalism and not on either man’s thespian talents. To him this controversy represented nothing more than an extension of the American Revolution and the War of 1812.

With Buntline’s on-the-spot encouragement a riot erupted on the evening of May 10. New York’s militia commander, Maj. Gen. Charles W. Sandford, ordered his troops forward after it became clear the police would soon be overrun. As the soldiers advanced

upon them, the mob, made up of Bowery hangers-on, desperately
tried to join their numerous ticket-holding sympathizers already
inside the fashionable theater. Foiled in this attempt to gain entry,
they began pelting the troops with cobblestones torn hurriedly from
the street. The volume of this deluge forced the cavalry support
to be withdrawn and severely thinned the ranks of infantry as
they cleared the area around the building. Several volleys of
musket fire were frantically ordered and this point-blank attack
finally succeeded in driving the 10,000 self-styled “drama critics”
along Lafayette Place, Eighth street and onto Broadway.

Anticipating another assault, General Sandford ordered two six-
pound brass cannon, each loaded with grapeshot, moved into posi-
tion along with fresh troops. The cannon stood in silence. Willing
to advance in the face of arrest, minor injury, and even gunshot
wounds, the Bowery boys wisely drew the line at absorbing the awe-
some effects of grapeshot. As they could not be cajoled by anyone
into sacrificing themselves further over the question of Forrest’s vs.
Macready’s fitness to portray Macbeth, the riot ended. Even so,
more men died on the streets that night from Ned Buntline’s irra-
tional urging than on the stage from Shakespeare’s pen—some 23
killed and at least 22 wounded.\footnote{12}

Buntline had been seen leading the mob outside the theater and
when so advised, Police Chief George Matsell “immediately ordered
his arrest, which was promptly effected.”\footnote{13} Ned was soon released
on payment of a $1,000 bond. But before his trial and sentencing,
he suffered the further humiliation of a thorough beating at Guy’s
Philadelphia House at the hands of Edward McGowan (later a
prominent figure in both California and Arizona) whom Ned had
violently attacked via the printed word. McGowan, however, pre-
ferred fists and he soon sent the vanquished “hero of a hundred
duels” sprawling on the street outside the saloon. Yet this example
of pugilistic failure did not dull Buntline’s luster in the eyes of an
admiring public. For upon his release from prison in 1850, his
supporters, including members of many political and patriotic or-
ganizations, gave him an enthusiastic welcome. This included, of
all things, a band playing “Hail to the Chief.”\footnote{14}

One source has characterized Ned as “cheap, boisterous, an incor-
grigible liar, and a general bad egg. His writing was all trash and

12. Account of the Terrific and Fatal Riot at the New-York Astor Place Opera House
14. Fred E. Pond, Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline” With Ned Buntline’s Anec-
dote of “Frank Forrester” and Chapter of Angling Sketches (New York, The Cadmus Book
Shop, 1919), p. 50.
he himself a rascal of the first order.” 15 Perhaps slightly overstated, this view does contain elements of truth. Yet Buntline’s many friends continually tried to list his name with the greatest in American literature. This honor would elude him, however, since quality always remained one of Ned’s numerous shortcomings.

Buntline also spent much of his time defending the temperance crusade, but from most evidence it appears he didn’t follow the dictates of that movement too closely. Nor, as already noted, was he the prolific Western writer most people—including Stuart Lake—were led to believe. Besides turning out daring sea adventures and temperance tracts, Buntline wrote at least one hymn, many stories concerning life in New York, accounts of the Mexican war (in which he did not serve), articles on sport fishing as well as vicious attacks on foreigners used by the “Order of United Americans,” a secret society he helped organize in 1847. The Know-Nothing party absorbed the group five years later.

Also in 1852 Ned found himself indicted for his role in a violent anti-German election riot in St. Louis. He escaped this pass the law made in his direction by jumping bail and taking refuge some 50 miles to the east in Carlyle, Ill. There, it appears, he edited another newspaper. In time Ned returned to New York City and continued his xenophobic political agitation. Buntline and his third wife soon toured all the Eastern states on behalf of nativism. After the Know-Nothing party dissolved in 1856 Ned returned to his home in Delaware county, New York, to continue writing. He later joined the Republican party.

Ned Buntline’s fame as a writer of Western yarns rests chiefly on his part in promoting “Buffalo Bill” Cody into a nationally known pulp and stage hero. Returning in 1869 from an unsuccessful Pacific coast tour on behalf of temperance and Americanism, Buntline met Cody at Fort McPherson, Neb. Regardless of what “Buffalo Bill” may have said, or legends have since expanded, Ned Buntline hadn’t gone West in search of literary material. He simply met Cody by chance. Ned’s “discovery of a western hero was, then, quite coincidental.” 16 Buntline did however begin using this character before anyone else, in a story entitled “Buffalo Bill, the King of Border Men!” Street & Smith’s New York Weekly began serializing this grandiloquent opus on December 23, 1869. Although first on the market, Ned only wrote a total of four “Buffalo Bill” adventures.

Prentiss Ingraham, W. Bert Foster and nearly a dozen other equally sensationalistic writers later expanded this meager output into the lengthy series known today.

Buntline also claimed to have written the stage production, “The Scouts of the Prairie! And Red Deviltry As It Is,” in only four hours. After a quick perusal most critics tended to accept Ned’s boast. Some even went so far as to ask why it took so long. Chicago witnessed the debut performance on December 16, 1872. The critics wrote mocking reviews, but even though “Buffalo Bill” managed to forget all his lines the audiences loved it.

Even conceding the total absence of quality, Ned hadn’t composed the script as quickly as he claimed. Instead, he simply used the New York Weekly installments from his own story, “Buffalo Bill’s Last Victory; or, Dove Eye the Lodge Queen,” to provide the basis for his retitled melodrama.

During the first act the buckskin-clad Ned Buntline, portraying a character named Cale Durg, delivered a temperance lecture while strapped to an Indian torture post. This took place, noted one bored critic, even though Cale Durg “managed to keep drunk for several days without a drop of anything.” 17 Ned had deliberately designed this scene in order to give himself a role comparable in stature to those enjoyed by “Buffalo Bill” and “Texas Jack” Omohundro. Although Buntline was killed off in the second act, many critics lamented that it hadn’t taken place in the first. Considering the coverage given the play by the Chicago Times, it is possible Ned Buntline chose an inopportune moment to advertise his own peculiar dramatic flare. “On the whole, it is not probable that Chicago will ever look upon the like again,” the Times prophesied hopefully on December 18. “Such a combination of incongruous drama, execrable acting, renowned performers, mixed audience, intolerable stench, scalping, blood and thunder, is not likely to be vouchsafed to a city a second time, even Chicago.”

The notoriety Ned gained from Cody’s first stage performance also caused him some annoyance in St. Louis. Authorities there rearrested him on the charge of participating in the 1852 election riot. 18 Some suggest he again jumped bail while others feel he planned the entire affair to help publicize the play. The latter,

17. Chicago Tribune, December 17, 1872.
18. Chicago Evening Journal, December 27, 1872. As an out and out fabrication Buntline had earlier claimed, from the confines of the Fort Monroe (Virginia) guardhouse, “I have served the United States nearly half my life and never before have been under arrest or had a charge preferred against me.”—Edward Z. C. Judson to Maj. Gen. John A. Dix, March 9, 1863. This letter is even more intriguing when one remembers Ned’s numerous brushes with the law resulting in court appearances and, on occasion, prison respite of various lengths. Throughout his life Ned Buntline proved himself an accomplished liar.
however, seems unlikely. In any event, when one considers this situation along with Buntline’s other colorful escapades—including his reported duels and numerous marriages—it becomes clear he easily qualifies as a rogue by anyone’s standards.

However, attempting to establish an association between Ned Buntline and Wyatt Earp proves more difficult than just relating Ned’s sordid background. In order to disprove Stuart Lake’s account of Buntline’s presentation, some writers have him reporting in Frontier Marshal that it took place in Dodge City in 1875. Continuing, these writers suggest it therefore couldn’t have happened since Wyatt Earp wasn’t living in Dodge that year.19

All this would be true except Lake doesn’t give 1875 as the date of the presentation. He clearly has Earp resigning from the Wichita police force after a series of urgent pleas for help from Dodge City’s mayor, George Hoover. In this version Wyatt does not arrive in the “Cowboy Capital” until the morning of May 17, 1876. From Lake’s narrative the Buntline Special incident had to occur later that year. Much of this confusion over dates undoubtedly comes from Jay Monaghan’s 1952 biography of Ned Buntline. Monaghan cites Stuart Lake as his source but erroneously places the presentation in the fall of 1875.20 Later writers studying the Buntline Special yarn, and in turn using Monaghan as a source, have simply appropriated the wrong date.

Through a careful examination of contemporary sources, which disagree with Stuart Lake’s version, it is possible—and also necessary to this narrative—to trace the circumstances of Wyatt Earp’s sudden exodus from Wichita. On April 2, 1876, he got into some trouble with William Smith, an ex-city marshal (by appointment) who had announced his candidacy for that post. The difficulty developed soon after Smith reportedly made some questionable remarks regarding Marshal Mike Meagher sending for Wyatt’s brothers to join him as Wichita policemen.

Actually the tenseness of the local political situation did as much to promote trouble as did Smith’s harmless, but ill-advised statements which the press duly noted “furnished no just grounds for an attack, and upon ordinary occasions [they doubted if Earp] would have given them a second thought.”21 But Wyatt “had fight on the brain” and his rough manhandling, in Meagher’s presence, of candidate Smith brought about his immediate arrest for violating “the peace and order of the city.” Judge J. M. Atwood

21. Wichita Weekly Beacon, April 5, 1876.
then imposed a fine of $30 and costs in case No. 347, The City of Wichita vs. Wyatt S. Earp. Because of this affair the city council eventually removed Wyatt from the police force. The Wichita Weekly Beacon reported on April 5: "The good order of the city was properly vindicated in the fining and dismissal of Erp [sic]. It is but justice to Earp to say he has made an excellent officer, and hitherto his conduct has been unexceptionable."

Done to quell the false rumor suggesting the incumbent Mike Meagher and his assistant wished "to put the rival candidate . . . hors de combat," the dismissal left Wyatt without visible means of support. On April 19 the newly elected city council failed to reinstate him by a vote of two for and six against. A second ballot produced a tie, but then the council chose to take no further action on the matter even though Meagher had handily defeated ex-Marshall Smith for reelection 15 days earlier.22

Although the newspaper reported his dismissal on April 5, Wyatt must have performed some duties before the city council officially considered his reappointment on the 19th. On May 8 they agreed to pay him $40 for 20 days' service in April.23 However, two days later the police committee submitted certain recommendations, including: "The script of W. Earp & John Behrens [sic] be with-held from payment until all money collected by them for the city be turned over to the city Treasurer." They further suggested that the city council direct the marshal to "enforce the Vagrant act in the case of the 2 Erps."24 These are thought to be Wyatt and his older brother James, who had resided in Wichita himself for at least two years.

On May 22 the city council "sanctioned and accepted" the police committee's report. Being officially pressured to leave Wichita, Wyatt Earp traveled west to Dodge City. The pending vagrancy

23. Ibid., p. 112.
24. "Miscellaneous Papers," Records of the City of Wichita. The council's action is understandable considering the political atmosphere of Wichita. The town had just experienced a degree of sanctimoniousness under Mayor George E. Harris (1875), and though James G. Hope (an exponent of cowboy liberalism) regained the mayoralty in 1876, Wichita remained unprepared to resume immediately its former customs; especially since dependence on the Texas cattle trade was quickly becoming a thing of the past. As a clan the Earp family's reputation was not the best. In May, 1874 (when William Smith served as town marshal), Bessie, the wife of Wyatt's older brother James, found herself charged as a common prostitute. She paid a fine of $8 and $2 costs. This remained a monthly ritual thru March, 1875. On June 5, 1874, she and one "Sallie Earp" had been arrested and briefly jailed after pleading guilty to keeping "a bawdy house" on Douglas avenue near the Arkansas river bridge. The charge was later dismissed on motion of their attorney, William Baldwin.—State of Kansas vs. Bessie Earp and Sallie Earp, Case No. 614. "Records of the Sedwick County District Court," September term, 1874. On April 21, 1875, Wyatt received his appointment as a policeman, serving under Mike Meagher. Earlier the press had referred to "Wyatt Earp" as an "officer" but his actual status is still uncertain.—Wichita City Eagle, October 29, 1874. It can only be assumed that Wyatt's appointment, rather than his moral influence, explains the absence of Bessie Earp's continued enumeration on the city's prostitution fine lists.
charge provided the necessary stimulation, and not, as Stuart Lake would have us believe, a series of apocryphal telegrams from George M. Hoover—a wholesale liquor dealer and saloon owner as well as erstwhile mayor of that prairie metropolis. The Wichita Weekly Beacon announced on May 24: “Wyatt Earp has been put on the police force at Dodge City.”

The only Dodge City newspapers on file with the Kansas State Historical Society for 1876 are the October 14 and December 30 issues of the Dodge City Times. In both papers the official directory lists Wyatt as “Deputy Marshal,” working for the 307-pound city marshal Lawrence E. Deger.25 Earp is similarly mentioned on March 24 and 31, 1877, the next issues filed. Although newspaper coverage of Wyatt’s first cattle season in Dodge City is presently unavailable to researchers, an item printed in the personal column of the Times on July 7, 1877, does shed some light on his activities and local reputation as a peace officer the previous summer:

Wyatt Earp, who was on our city police force last summer, is in town again. We hope he will accept a position on the force once more. He had a quiet way of taking the most desperate characters into custody which invariably gave one the impression that the city was able to enforce her mandates and preserve her dignity. It wasn’t considered policy to draw a gun on Wyatt unless you got the drop and meant to burn powder without any preliminary talk.

Stuart N. Lake reports the Buntline Special presentation as taking place during that period. More precisely, he has it occurring some time between Wyatt’s arrival in May and the July “excitement over gold discoveries at Deadwood, South Dakota.” Lake then has Wyatt and his younger brother Morgan leaving Dodge City on September 9, 1876, to join that rush.

Buntline was so grateful to the Dodge City peace officers for the color they supplied that he set about arming them as befitted their accomplishments. He sent to the Colt’s factory for five special forty-five caliber six-guns of regulation single-action style, but with barrels four inches longer than standard—a foot in length—making them eighteen inches over all.26 Each gun had a demountable walnut rifle stock, with a thumbscrew arrangement to fit the

25. Deger’s weight—Ellis County Star, Hays City, April 6, 1876—did not seem to hinder his performance as an officer in the slightest way. From all accounts he appears to have been very efficient in his duties. He hardly qualifies as the mere “figurehead” appointment presented by Stuart Lake—a view then repeated by later writers.

26. Since the standard barrel length of Colt’s Single Action Army revolver was 7½ inches, four inches longer could not be “a foot in length.” As another contradiction on length, Lake, in his personal notes, referred to the guns as having 10-inch barrels. The recent “Wyatt Earp Commemorative” was sold by the Colt Company with an advertised 16¾-inch barrel. No explanation is given for this further departure from Stuart Lake’s published description.

27. Earlier, Lake gave an almost identical version as quoted above except from this point he concludes the sentence with: “... by which the stock could be fastened to the side plates, thus fitting the six-gun for use as a shoulder piece in long-range shooting.”

weapon for a shoulder-piece in long-range shooting. A buckskin thong slung the stock to belt or saddle-horn when not in use. The walnut butt of each gun had the word 'Ned' carved deeply in the wood and each was accompanied by a hand-tooled holster modeled for the weapon. The author gave a 'Buntline Special'—as he called the guns—to Wyatt Earp, Charles Bassett, Bat Masterson, Bill Tilghman, and Neal Brown.²⁸

In Frontier Marshal's next paragraph Lake presents a direct quote from Wyatt Earp concerning his personal opinion of the weapon. The authenticity of this quote will be considered later in this narrative.

'There was a lot of talk in Dodge about the specials slowing us on the draw,' Wyatt recalled. 'Bat and Bill Tilghman cut off the barrels to make them standard length, but Bassett, Brown, and I kept ours as they came. Mine was my favorite over any other gun. I could jerk it as fast as I could my old one and I carried it at my right hip throughout my career as marshal. With it I did most of the six-gun work I had to do. My second gun, which I carried at my left hip, was the standard Colt's frontier model forty-five caliber, single-action six-shooter with the seven-and-one-half-inch barrel, the gun we called "the Peacemaker."'²⁹

Although Lake contends that Ned Buntline chose to repay these five men "for the color they supplied," it doesn't appear that any was needed to launch Ned into another bombastic opus—especially inasmuch as he seldom used real people or historical events as the basis for any of his stories. One of his defenders, Leon Mead, stated he felt Buntline's "methods of work were inspirational ... without previous deliberation."³⁰ Or as Ned himself described his writing process:

I once wrote a book of six hundred and ten pages in sixty-two hours. During that time I scarcely ate or slept. I never lay out plots in advance. I shouldn't know how to do it, for how can I know what my people may take it into their heads to do? First, I invent a title. When I hit on a good one I consider the story about half finished. It is the thing of prime importance. After I begin I push ahead as fast as I can write, never blotting out anything I have once written and never making a correction or modification . . . . If a book does not suit me when I have finished it, I simply throw it in the fire and begin again without any reference to the discarded text.³¹

Aside from the fact that Buntline's writing technique required only a vivid imagination and not the personal inspiration Lake's description suggests, it is doubtful whether many people outside of Dodge City or Wichita even knew much of Earp, Brown, or Tilghman as early as 1876. Charlie Bassett may have enjoyed some reputation since he held a prominent position as sheriff of Ford

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²⁸. Lake, Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal, pp. 145-146. In contemporary Kansas sources Brown's first name is usually spelled "Neil."
²⁹. Ibid., p. 146.
³⁰. As quoted in Pond, Life and Adventures ... , p. 108.
county. However, the chances of anyone east of Kansas City being familiar with him are remote. Bat Masterson had achieved some degree of fame through his participation in the widely publicized Battle of Adobe Walls in 1874, and his subsequent two-months of scouting for the army. Yet no dime novelist ever used him as a character. Thus, except for Masterson, none of these men even sported reputations worthy of a Ned Buntline's exploitation.

Even so, Stuart Lake still insisted that George Hoover urged Earp to come to Dodge City in 1876 "largely because of Wyatt's frontier-wide reputation as the fastest man with a six-gun then living." 32 The truth is Wyatt Earp had no "frontier-wide reputation" for anything in May of 1876. And when one considers the manner and circumstances of his sudden removal from the Wichita police force, this in itself seems to preclude any visit by the famous Mr. Buntline.

Ned might have been interested in presenting Wyatt with a special Colt revolver had Earp arrested Ben Thompson in Ellsworth in August, 1873, as Lake described. Ben's brother Billy had shotgunned the county sheriff, Chauncey B. Whitney, during a drunken argument and Ben, an English-born Texas gambler of notorious reputation, held off the town's officials, thus allowing his brother's escape. Yet it is clear from all available sources, including reports from numerous eyewitnesses, court records, and contemporary newspaper accounts, that Wyatt Earp had nothing whatsoever to do with the incident. 33 Actually, Ellsworth county Deputy Sheriff Edward O. Hougue "received the arms of Ben Thompson.

33. Floyd B. Streeteet, Ben Thompson: Man With a Gun (New York, Frederick Fell, Inc., 1957), p. 101. In describing this event of August 15, 1873, Stuart Lake not only demonstrated a lack of research (erroneously placing it on the 18th aside from having Earp involved) but also his limited knowledge of Colt firearms. One gets the impression after reading Frontier Marshal that everyone that day wore one or two Colt .45's strapped to their hips. Lake has Wyatt entering Jerome Beebe's store and asking for "a pair of second-hand forty-fives." New guns, he said, might have slowed him down. The problem is, no Colt .45's, new or used, were available that August-to Wyatt Earp or anyone else on the Ellsworth plaza. Only some 200 were assembled through the year 1873, but, since government orders received an understandable preference, none was sold commercially until September 2, when the New York firm of Schuyler, Hartley & Graham purchased a few for resale.
34. Ellsworth Reporter, August 21, 1873. In late 1928 Harold R. Hymes, then owner-editor of the paper, supplied Stuart Lake with a complete typescript of the article from which this item is taken, along with two others of related interest. When Lake quoted the article, however, he chose to conveniently delete the reference to Ed Hougue (often mistakenly spelled "Hogue" in contemporary accounts). Interestingly enough, in Dodge City three years later the Ellsworth affair-Wyatt Earp, as assistant marshal, arrested Hougue himself the undersheriff of Ford county, for "fighting and disturbing the peace and quiet of the City.

35. The City of Dodge City vs. Edward O. Hougue, "Records of the Ford County District Court," July 1, 1876. On the surface this may seem an odd turn of events, inasmuch as Wyatt Earp also served as a deputy sheriff (along with his younger brother Morgan) concurrently with his duties as assistant city marshal. Thus, in regard to county legal matters, Wyatt theoretically worked under Ed Hougue. So while carrying out his duties for Dodge City he arrested one of his Ford county superiors. Actually such situations, of officers holding a variety of official positions simultaneously, was a fairly common practice on the frontier. In this light Wyatt's action was not all that strange, and such seeming conflicts of authority seldom caused extreme personal difficulty; although this
"absent in the country" during this affair—an unsupportable statement.

Although Lake has Buntline coming west to repay five "peace officers," it doesn’t appear all of the men named even fitted that category in 1876, much less that they were worthy of such an honor.

No contemporary records presently available confirm any official position as Dodge City peace officers to Neil Brown or Bill Tilghman in 1876. Mrs. Tilghman's biography of her husband does mention he served as a special deputy sheriff under Charles Bassett in 1874. Yet no records exist to support her claim. However, later in the text she wrote that both Bill and Neil Brown became Marshal Deger's assistants in early 1878. This statement is in error since during that period Edward J. Masterson—and not Larry Deger—served as city marshal. There is no documentary evidence suggesting either Brown or Tilghman ever worked under Ed Masterson and the records for 1878 are virtually complete regarding names of Dodge City officers. It is also interesting to consider that while outlining her husband's career in an earlier account, published just two years after his death, Zoe Tilghman did not mention the supposed Dodge City service in either 1874 or 1878, although she did comment on Bill's later service in both Ford county and Dodge City.

Regardless of his status, Tilghman found himself arrested twice in early 1878. The first of these came in February for his alleged participation in the Kinsley train robbery the previous January 27. Bat Masterson, then sheriff of Ford county, arrested Bill the second time in mid-April on the charge of stealing two horses in nearby Ness county. Both cases ended with a dismissal of all charges. Yet, it's significant to note that none of the newspaper accounts of these two incidents mention Bill Tilghman as being or ever having been a member of the Dodge City police force or a deputy sheriff of Ford county.

Actually, existing records point out that during the period of Tilghman's legal difficulties his occupation consisted of a partnership with Henry Garis in the Crystal Palace saloon at Dodge City,
not police work. As could be expected, Stuart Lake ignores this point and conveniently has Tilghman acting as Charlie Bassett's deputy while Wyatt Earp lived in Dodge. Yet there is no record of his ever doing so. After he served briefly as Sheriff Pat Sughru's deputy, William Tilghman did become Dodge City's marshal—but not until April 10, 1884. These are thought to be his first experiences as an official Dodge City area peace officer.\(^{38}\)

Contrary to Wyatt Earp's own statement made in 1896 (or at least by-lined to his credit) that he had assigned Bat Masterson his assistant 20 years before,\(^{39}\) Bat apparently served only briefly as a Dodge City officer. This did not occur as early as 1876, although during the summer of that year Bat served, along with Wyatt Earp, as a Ford county deputy sheriff under Charlie Bassett.\(^{40}\) Bassett would appoint Masterson his undersheriff the following year. City Marshal Deger then named Bat a special policeman on September 17, 1877. There is no record of his terminal date but on October 2 the city council voted to pay him $25 for his services.\(^{41}\) This suggests only 10 days of duty at the salary rate of $2.50 per day then in effect for policemen.

Deger's decision to hire Masterson was probably not his own. A deep feeling of animosity had existed between the two men for some time. The marshal had found occasion to pistol-whip and jail Bat early that summer (1877) for interfering with the arrest of a well-known town sport, the ubiquitous Bobby Gill (Robert Gilmore), a high roller described by a contemporary as "one of the most notorious characters and . . . the best all-around 'sure thing' man that ever struck Dodge City."\(^{42}\) Later, as under sheriff, Masterson partially repaid Deger for this embarrassing incident by forcing his resignation as a deputy sheriff. It seems likely, therefore, that Bat's temporary appointment to the Dodge City force came

38. In claiming Tilghman a Dodge City officer earlier than his 1884 marshalship, some chroniclers have pointed to his inclusion in the posse which apprehended Jim Kenedy following the shooting death of Fannie Keenan (Dora Hand) in Dodge City on October 4, 1878. The Dodge City Times clearly described the group on October 12: "The party consisted of Sheriff Masterson, Marshal Bassett, Assistant Wyatt Earp, Deputy Duffy and Wm. Tilghman, as intrepid a posse as ever pulled a trigger." Tilghman is given no official title, as were all the others, but seems to have served simply as a "posseman" in this instance. Civilians often assisted authorities in this manner—seldom collecting fees but sharing any rewards subsequently received. The deputy U.S. marshals working for Judge Isaac C. Parker's famous federal district court at Fort Smith, Ark., used the posseman system to great advantage during this same period.

39. Wyatt S. Earp, "Wyatt Earp's Tribute to Bat Masterson, the Hero of 'Dobe Walls,"' San Francisco Examiner, August 16, 1896.

40. Although the suggestion is often made that Bat Masterson's whereabouts between March, 1875, and the spring of 1877 are unknown, various legal documents in the Ford county district court prove both his and Wyatt Earp's status as county peace officers in the summer of 1876. Even Wyatt's father, Nicholas Porter Earp, received a nominal payment from Ford county during this period for some undisclosed service.—"Ford County Commissioner's Journal—A," July 5, 1876, p. 146.

41. Dodge City Times, October 6, 1877.

42. Robert M. Wright, Dodge City the Cowboy Capital and the Great Southwest (Wichita, Kan., Wichita Eagle Press, 1913), pp. 227-228.
through pressure from his older brother Ed, then the assistant marshal, and their friends on the city council.

In any event, Bat was apparently not overjoyed while working for Marshal Deger since he is reported to have said privately some time later that he “resented even as a young man the trivial duties” performed by Dodge City officers. But Bat Masterson dreamed of bolder things and on January 14, 1878, he became sheriff of Ford county, after having defeated his old nemesis Larry Deger by a scant three-vote margin the previous November. To make Masterson appear the more popular choice, Lake has him winning by a two-to-one ratio in Frontier Marshal. A state constitutional provision had prohibited Charlie Bassett—who first entered office by a special election in mid-1873—from seeking a third complete two-year term.

On December 15, 1877, the Dodge City Times announced that Mayor James H. “Dog” Kelley had appointed Bassett, while still sheriff, to replace Edward J. Masterson as assistant marshal. Eleven days earlier the city council had named Ed to succeed the dismissed Larry Deger as city marshal. Deger’s removal was the result of a six-month personal grievance on the part of Mayor Kelley and was not due to inefficiency. After Bat became sheriff he immediately appointed Charlie Bassett his undersheriff. As many other Dodge City area peace officers had done before him, Bassett performed these concurrent duties even after becoming city marshal, following the murder of Edward Masterson by drunken cowboys on April 9, 1878.

James Masterson and Neil Brown received appointments as marshal and assistant marshal of Dodge City on November 4, 1879, to fill the vacancies caused by the earlier resignations of Charlie Bassett and Wyatt Earp. This is believed to be the first time Neil Brown served as a Dodge City peace officer. He certainly was not part of the force in 1876, or soon thereafter. The city council reappointed both him and Masterson to those positions on May 4, 1880. He should not be confused with John Brown, a temporary officer who eventually served as assistant marshal for a short time in 1878 before being demoted to a policeman after one of Wyatt Earp’s periodic returns to Dodge City.

44. For the sake of convenience, Stuart Lake says Deger resigned prior to the festive Fourth of July (1877) holiday because of his inability to control rowdy Texans. Mayor Kelley then supposedly wired Wyatt Earp in Cheyenne to please return at once to Dodge City and accept the hurriedly vacated marshal’s chair. This account simply does not coincide with clearly establishable facts. For though Wyatt Earp served intermittently as an assistant town marshal and deputy county sheriff, he was never the marshal of Dodge, although a newspaper once reported Wyatt being offered and accepting, “the Marshalship of Dodge City.”—Wichita Eagle, May 16, 1878.
The answer to why Ned Buntline would have gone to all the trouble necessary to present personally his so-called "Buntline Specials" (weapons Stuart Lake wanted us to believe bespelled the "accomplishments," either unsubstantiated or unspecified, of five men virtually unknown outside of Kansas) is not to be found by reviewing the facts. It must be remembered that in all probability only three of the men mentioned by Lake, Bassett, Earp, and Masterson, held any official positions near Dodge City in the summer of 1876. Besides, Bassett and Masterson weren't city officers that year but rather county officers. Stuart Lake, however, insisted on referring to all five as "Dodge City peace officers." Nor in Frontier Marshal is it explained how or where the intrepid dime novelist mysteriously gathered the many colorful tales from "Wyatt Earp and his associates," for which he chose to repay each of them with a specially ordered Colt revolver.

Popularizer Harry Sinclair Drago ignores this point completely by explaining that Ned simply decided to go to Dodge City with his Buntline Specials solely for the personal publicity and not to repay anyone. Continuing, Drago claims that after arriving in Dodge Buntline organized a ceremony calculated for this purpose "with Billy Petillon of the Ford County Globe . . . and other reporters present." 45 Discrepancies in this story include the fact that Petillon never worked on the Ford County Globe, which didn't even begin official publication until January 1, 1878. Nor, as will be clearly shown later, could the presentation have taken place after that date.

Drago went on, mentioning photographs being taken of this event and that "Eastern newspapers used the story with pictures, and the 'Buntline Special' took its place in frontier history." However, he doesn't explain what kind of "pictures," since no technique of reproducing photographs for newspapers was in use in the 1870's. Yet, no such accounts—with or without accompanying illustrations—have ever been seen. When questioned, Drago conveniently failed to recall the source for his statements; although he informed this author that he personally did not remember seeing any pictures or newspaper accounts of Ned Buntline making presentations of weapons to anyone in Dodge City. It should also be pointed out that all the issues of the Ford County Globe are in existence but no reference to the ceremony so colorfully described by writer Drago appears in any of them.

45. Harry Sinclair Drago, Great American Cattle Trails, the Story of the Old Cow Paths of the East and the Longhorn Highways of the Plains (New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965), p. 209. W. F. Petillon was later associated with the Dodge City Democrat, but it didn't begin publication until December 29, 1893.
A "Buntline Special," 16-inch barrel, which was never shipped from the factory. It is on display in the firearms collection of the Connecticut State Library, Hartford.

The .45 Colt single action revolver which William B. "Bat" Masterson purchased from the Colt company on July 30, 1885. "Bat's" letter specified that the barrel length should be "the same length that the ejecting rod is," its finish should be nickel, and the grips, gutta percha. The photo and information courtesy Richard P. Mellon and Colt's.
Tombstone, Ariz., about 1881, looking southeast. The reproduction courtesy the Arizona Historical Society, Tucson.
Allen street, Tombstone, looking east, with a parade in progress. Main entrance to O. K. Corral in clump of trees, top center. Photo courtesy the author, W. B. Shillingberg.
William B. "Bat" Masterson, one of Dodge City's "heroes," who was reported to have received a "Buntline Special."

Lawrence "Larry" Deger, an early Dodge City marshal, was later mayor. Photo courtesy George Henrichs.
Then, confusing matters further, we are told by another prolific writer that not only did Ned Buntline make a great deal of money from the stories the officers' inspiration provided, but that "Wyatt Earp's reputation grew through the tales from Buntline's pen. . . ." 40 Ned never wrote anything about Earps, although writers are still claiming the contrary.47 Nor is Lake's statement of Buntline writing stories about Bat Masterson's role in Dodge City an accurate one. Earp and Masterson never became dime-novel heroes. Besides, Ned Buntline himself seldom wrote on Western subjects.48

Despite speculation to the contrary, it can be fairly well established that Ned spent 1876-1877 east of the Mississippi river. By spring, 1876, he began fearing serious trouble in the person of his sometime wife, Lovanche L. Judson. Actually she had married him twice—once in 1853 and again 10 years later. To date no divorce record, dissolving their final union, can be found. Descending from the Kingston train, she arrived at Stamford, N. Y., armed with a court order and sufficient female determination to force a financial showdown over Ned's reluctance to support her. Being well acquainted with Lovanche's temperament, Buntline wisely retreated from his more familiar Delaware county haunts. He wished to avoid the embarrassment of any chance encounters. Luckily for Ned his close friend, attorney F. R. Gilbert, proved an able interceptor. Gilbert quickly soothed the ruffled feathers of the twice Mrs. Judson by arranging a generous financial settlement on the condition she immediately leave town. This done, Buntline once more felt secure enough to appear on the streets.

He was soon gone again, this time for his annual fishing trip. Ned's last wife, Anne Fuller, accompanied him on this excursion which took the couple to the Adirondacks and Catskills in New York as well as to the Poconos in nearby Pennsylvania. His wife proved such an adept hand with rod and tackle that Ned wrote some articles for the American Angler designed to encourage more women's interest in that sport. He also sent a continual stream of

48. Even Buntline's first "Buffalo Bill" story had been serialized in the New York Weekly as a combination Western-Civil War adventure, not simply as a Western. In this story, Cody not only fought Indians but also pursued border guerrillas as well as fight at the Battle of Pea Ridge (Arkansas), something not even the real "Buffalo Bill" claimed to have done. Even at that, Ned Buntline didn't bother to write another "Buffalo Bill" tale for three years. Although Ned only wrote a total of four stories about Cody, he is generally credited, however erroneously, with most of them. All this is not meant to suggest Buntline didn't write other Western tales. He did, but his Western output did not constitute the bulk of his writing—certainly not the "hundreds of frontier yarns" mentioned by Stuart Lake as having been inspired by those five fellows in Dodge City.
articles to Street & Smith’s New York Weekly to help defray expenses.

With Lovanche and fishing temporarily behind him, and the year 1876 being the centennial anniversary of the United States, Ned deliberately returned home in time to plan his own Fourth of July celebration. He announced to the local press an intention of making his annual pyrotechnic display more dramatic than usual, with a number of special attractions. Some writers say the news of Custer’s defeat near the Little Big Horn dampened Buntline’s plans. Although an often repeated tale, this hardly seems likely since word of that disaster did not reach New York newspapers until July 6. Later news items published in July concerning Buntline prove he stayed near Stamford during this period. He spent much of his time relaxing at his secluded 120-acre Eagle’s Nest retreat, several miles to the southwest.

It can be assumed Ned went fishing again in late August, as he once wrote a friend and later biographer, Fred Pond, saying, “it has been my habit for years . . . to spend the last day of the trout season over on the crystal Beaverkill, and the last day of August found me . . . ready to see the season out.” Ned and his wife then visited the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, after which he returned home and by mid-September became involved in yet another political controversy. Being a Republican he naturally offered his services to that cause in the upcoming election. At a rally, organized by the party’s county chairman with Ned’s vocal skills in mind, Buntline spoke so impassionately on behalf of the Democratic candidate he was summarily read out of his own party in disgust.

Buntline’s 1876 thrust into political oratory having been viewed as less than a complete success, at least by the Republicans, Ned retired from the speaker’s rostrum and returned to his writing. On January 16, 1877, he broke two ribs falling on some ice at Stamford but later that year delivered a series of lectures for the Judson Library Foundation. With his wife expecting a baby that spring, Ned stayed fairly close to home. At no time during 1876-1877 did he sojourn west to Dodge City.

Nearly all published accounts printed since Frontier Marshal have adopted Stuart Lake’s version of the Buntline Special tale in its entirety. This includes Haven and Belden’s massive volume

49. Stamford (N. Y.) Mirror, July 4, 1876.
50. Ibid., July 18, 25, 27, 1876.
51. Pond, Life and Adventures . . . ., p. 94.
52. Stamford Mirror, September 19, 1876; and, Monaghan, The Great Rascal . . . ., p. 264.
A History of the Colt Revolver (1940). In addition, many writers, unsatisfied with Lake’s original 1930-1931 description, have unleashed their own well-oiled imaginations and produced variations not contained in Frontier Marshal or The Saturday Evening Post articles.

These colorful inventions are generally presented with such a matter-of-fact air of authenticity that most Western buffs accept them immediately as fact. As a result there is much unnecessary confusion when one attempts to separate one story’s origin from another. For example, one article reports, “there is testimony to the effect that” Bat Masterson used his Buntline Special while in Dodge City.53 But the writer fails to identify the source of this “testimony,” nor has anyone else discovered it. The result of such practice is obvious. The more serious-minded reader has no way of knowing if the report is based on some contemporary document, or newspaper story, or is merely the semifictional meanderings of one of Masterson’s biographers.54

For the sake of argument, assume momentarily that Bat had received one of Ned Buntline “Specials.” He then, in all probability, would have cut the barrel down. Available evidence points out Masterson preferred a shorter barrelled gun than the Buntline would have been. Between October, 1879, and October, 1885, he ordered at least eight Single Action Army revolvers directly from the Colt factory.55 He kept some for his own use while giving the others to friends as gifts. The first of these, marked “W. B. Masterson,” sported a 7½-inch barrel. Yet, of the remaining seven, two had 5½-inch barrels while the rest were 4¾-inches in length.

From Dodge City in late July, 1885, using the stationery of Cary & Wright’s Opera House Saloon, Bat ordered two guns from Colt for his personal use. Among other things he specified the barrels to be “about the same length that the Ejection rod is.”56 This would make them 4¾-inches long. Both guns were nickel-plated and had gutta percha (hard rubber) grips of the still pop-

54. For example, see Richard O’Conner, Bat Masterson (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957), pp. 82, 144. While O’Conner uses most of Stuart Lake’s references to Masterson, he, for some reason, claims Bat did use a Buntline Special in Dodge City. Lake, it must be remembered, has Wyatt Earp saying both Masterson and Tilghman cut their barrels down. Without citing his sources, O’Conner further claims Bat used the Buntline as late as 1878 (the incident referred to actually took place in 1879) when he “whacked” two of the three men from Clay county, Missouri, who had come to Dodge supposedly “determined to have it out with Masterson and Earp.” In truth these men, traveling through Kansas on their way to Leadville, Colo., simply “believed they could ‘take’ Dodge City,” and weren’t after anyone in particular.—Dodge City Times, May 10, 1879. The newspaper, of course, made no mention of any “Buntline Special” Colts.
ular “eagle” design. One of these weapons is presently in the Richard P. Mellon collection.

Aside from the confusion concerning Masterson, another source goes so far as to say that on his way to Dodge City “Judson had stopped off in North Platte and presented his friend Bill Cody with a ‘Buntline Special’.” 57 In discounting this tale it is interesting to ponder “Buffalo Bill’s” precise whereabouts at the time Ned Buntline supposedly traveled to southwestern Kansas. It seems Cody spent much of this time scouting for Col. (Bvt. Maj. Gen.) Nelson A. Miles during that officer’s campaigns following the Custer fiasco. On July 17, 1876, he reportedly killed “Yellow Hand, a sub-war chief of the Southern Cheyennes.” 58 Trying to separate the truth from fiction regarding the countless embellishments surrounding this tale is unnecessary here. Ever since Cody and Buntline quarreled over the division of profits from the first extended tour of “The Scouts of the Prairie,” in 1872-1873, they were no longer very close. It therefore seems highly unlikely that Ned would have bothered to consider “Buffalo Bill” in any give-away scheme.

Even the famous James Butler Hickok is included in Buntline’s presentation by another adventuresome author. 59 Yet “Wild Bill” died from an assassin’s bullet in Deadwood soon after Stuart Lake has Ned Buntline arriving in Dodge City. Aside from this point, it is fairly well-known that Hickok preferred a smaller caliber percussion revolver. “There is little likelihood that Hickok used a Peacemaker,” concludes “Wild Bill’s” latest biographer, Joseph G. Rosa. 60 It should also be pointed out that Hickok and Ned Buntline were not good friends. Buntline killed off “Wild Bill Hitchcock” in his first “Buffalo Bill” story and the real “Wild Bill” seems to have resented this fictional incident. 61 What made it even more embarrassing to that controversial pistolero was that Ned had the dastardly deed performed by two women, Ruby Blazes and Sallie Perkins.

The countless alterations of Stuart Lake’s original Buntline Special story can be dismissed as quickly as the three mentioned here regarding Bat Masterson, “Buffalo Bill” Cody, and “Wild Bill” Hickok. They are nothing more than the products of their authors’ overworked imaginations.

57. Drago, Great American Cattle Trails . . , p. 209.
58. Ellis County Star, Hays, August 3, 1876.
61. Mendota (Ill.) Bulletin, April 11, 1873.
One of the earliest published statements not fully accepting Stuart Lake's Buntline tale comes from Colt firearms authority John E. Parsons in his book *The Peacemaker and Its Rivals* (1950). An examination of this interesting volume reveals that after mentioning Lake's account Parsons adds the significant statement: "The making up of this special order has not been traced in the Colt Company records, which do, however, indicate that Peacemakers with 10 inch and 16 inch barrels were supplied on occasion." 62 Even so, Parsons does not completely discount the legend, suggesting instead that Ned Buntline may have "found the inspiration for his presentations at the Philadelphia World's Fair of 1876, where the attachable skeleton stock formed part of the Colt exhibit." 63

Actually, Colt's ledgers account for the sale of just over half of the so-called "Buntline Specials" (until 1957 the company never officially used this designation) manufactured within the original group of roughly 30 weapons. 64 One other, not listed in the company's ledgers as ever being shipped, is in the Colt collection at the Connecticut State Library, Hartford. The remaining revolvers must have either been sold, given as display models and salesman's samples to Colt dealers, or altered at the factory and sold with shorter barrels, since Colt is presently not in possession of them. 65 From this original group, three were chambered in .44 W. C. F. while the rest are assumed to be .45's. 66 Except for three 10-inch barrels, all the revolvers originally listed are 16-inch—none are 12-inch.

Recently one writer vainly tried to reconcile the fact of no 12-inch Colts being available by theorizing, "... it is possible that Ned Buntline bought the guns from a Colt dealer and had the barrels cut down to 12 inches because he loved to be different." 67 Con-

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63. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97. The Stamford Mirror on December 26, 1876, carried an article by Ned Buntline, credited to the New York Weekly, entitled "Going to the Centennial." However, it contains nothing about long-barreled revolvers. One wonders if the guns Colt displayed there made any impression on Ned at all.
64. Ned Buntline in no way influenced Colt's decision to manufacture guns with extra-length barrels. The Colt company had actually been doing so for some time, even on their early percussion revolvers. Some models of the Paterson Colt, for example, were assembled with 16-inch barrels before production finally ceased in 1842.—R. L. Wilson, *The Evolution of the Colt Firearm from the Robert Q. Sutherland Collection* (Published by Robert Q. Sutherland, 1967), p. 4.
65. This situation has led to widespread counterfeiting of existing Colt single actions, and collectors and history buffs alike should therefore approach all such guns with extreme caution.
67. George E. Virgines, "The Weapons of Wyatt Earp," *Golden West*, Freeport, N.Y., v. 6, no. 2 (January, 1970), p. 53. Had Buntline wanted guns with 12-inch barrels he could simply have ordered them—an easier method than having longer barrels cut back. It was the Colt company's policy to supply, on a special-order basis, any length a customer desired. Because of this practice, many Peacemakers are now found with an assorted variety of non-standard barrel lengths.
sidering the small number of 16-inch Colts manufactured, had Buntline been interested they would certainly have proved unique enough for even his erratic temperament. It should be pointed out that Colt did not ship a 12-inch Peacemaker until August 30, 1892. 68 This gun was, of course, not in the original group, being in a much higher serial number range. Besides, Ned Buntline had died in 1886.

Although Colt displayed some long-barreled single actions at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, it was not until December 1, 1877, that any left the Hartford assembly plant for actual sale. Besides, five guns were not involved in this shipment, nor were they sent to Ned Buntline or even to a New York dealer. Instead, this order consisted of four 16-inch .45 caliber single actions, assembled with the now rare semi-flattop frame (not “regulation ... style”), shipped to B. Kittredge & Co. of Cincinnati, Colt’s main Western agent. 69 These guns, advertised with a “long carbine barrel,” sold for $5 above the standard price.

The point concerning the actual number of guns presented, an important consideration here, doesn’t affect some writers at all. One of these even claimed Ned gave “about a dozen of his ‘Buntline Specials’ to famous, and infamous, people of the West.” 70 From statements such as this, Western legends grow beyond all manageable proportions.

Some suggest these four Kittredge revolvers are the elusive Dodge City Buntline Specials. If this is true, the reduced presentation (from five men to four) could not possibly have taken place until early 1878—not in 1876. Yet Wyatt Earp wasn’t in Dodge City the first few months of that year. On January 22, 1878, the Ford County Globe noted: “Wyatt Earp, our old assistant Marshal, is at Ft. Clark, Texas.” After visiting several places in the Lone Star state, Wyatt returned to Dodge City on May 8. Three days later he replaced John Brown as assistant city marshal while receiving a warm welcome from the local press. 71

Nor could the presentation have taken place soon after Wyatt’s return. Ned Buntline’s whereabouts can be accounted for and he certainly didn’t spend mid-1878 traveling to Dodge City loaded down with give-away Colts. His health had begun giving him trouble the previous summer, forcing the normally active writer

71. Dodge City Times, May 11, 1878; and Ford County Globe, Dodge City, May 14, 1878.
to remain in bed during the entire month of August—presumably with gout. Because of this Buntline decided to spend the winter of 1877-1878 in the Deep South, after first visiting a number of Civil War battlefields.\textsuperscript{72} He hoped a milder climate would help soothe the pain caused by old wounds, including those suffered during his 50-foot fall from the City Hotel in Nashville in 1846. Ned also complained, with more drama than accuracy, of “a wound received in June, ’63.”\textsuperscript{73} Without benefit of facts he told of a bullet lodged near his spinal column, which had proved impossible to remove. This, in turn, caused a great deal of pain from sciatica. At any rate, Buntline returned to New York in April and spent the entire summer of 1878 at his home outside Stamford.\textsuperscript{74}

On May 20, 1878, Colt filled an order for a long-barreled Single Action Army for C. G. Wingard. Fitted with a 10-inch barrel, this gun apparently had been rechambered at the factory in .44 caliber as the trigger guard was clearly restamped “.44 CF” over “.45 cal.”\textsuperscript{75} Wingard must have been amply satisfied for on October 4 he ordered an additional 10-inch .44 caliber Colt single action. These two .44’s and the four Kittredge .45’s are the only weapons of this type known to be shipped from Colt before 1880 and the eccentric Mr. Buntline certainly did not give them to any Kansas “lawmen.” Nor did Ned have any connection with these revolvers, which is the reason the Colt Company never referred to them as “Buntline Specials.” Besides, only four of these weapons are .45’s, whereas Stuart Lake said all five guns presented in Dodge City were of that caliber.

It is true Colt sent five more long-barreled single action .45’s to B. Kittredge & Co. in March, 1880 (one as a salesman’s sample), but by then Wyatt Earp no longer lived in Kansas. Leaving Dodge City in early September, he arrived in Tombstone on December 1, 1879.\textsuperscript{76} At the time Colt shipped those five guns to Ohio, Wyatt

72. Stamford Mirror, December 11, 1877.

73. Bond, Life and Adventures . . . . , p. 100. This “war-wound” makes a colorful story but it never happened, at least not in June, 1863. On April 27 of that year Judson suffered a general court-martial (he had been placed under arrest on March 22) and was found guilty of being “Absent without leave.”—“General Order No. 26,” Headquarters U. S. Forces, Suffolk, Va. He received a two-month sentence in the regimental guardhouse. His military record in the National Archives shows that Private Judson (he had been reduced in rank from sergeant but would call himself “Colonel” in later years) was under confinement in May and June, 1863, and then “sick in Hampton Hts. Fort Monroe Va” until February, 1864, before finally being transferred to the Invalid Corps in March. Had he been wounded in battle his service record would have so stated. Even Ned’s biographer Jay Monaghan simply said: “In prison Ned claimed illness and was hospitalized.”

74. Stamford Mirror, April 9, 1878.


worked as a stagecoach messenger and professional gambler in southeastern Arizona.  

An interesting idea comes from long-time Colt expert William B. Edwards, although his skepticism of Stuart Lake’s Buntline Special tale is clear from reading his comments on Colt’s Single Action Army. Edwards’s idea came from Lake saying, “each gun had a demountable walnut rifle stock.” Since Colt sold only nickle-plated brass skeleton stocks with their S. A. A. (the full walnut style ended with the percussion era) Edwards feels if the weapons existed at all they could have been gunsmithed variations. He correctly points out the existence of such guns. Colt dealers such as Schuyler, Hartley & Graham in New York and later Joseph C. Grubb & Co. of Philadelphia supplied special order wooden stocks for the Single Action Army, though the Colt company itself did not. Yet some writers don’t attempt any explanation of this minor discrepancy in Lake’s story but simply have Ned presenting the guns with skeleton stocks. Edwards, however, didn’t choose to “adjust” the story to fit known facts. Instead he tackled the problem with his usual enthusiasm. The result is a very tempting theory for Stuart Lake fans.

If the two recipients Bat Masterson and Bill Tilghman “cut off” the barrels of their Buntlines as Lake claimed, “or gave them away as presents” as yet another writer details, the remaining 12-inch guns could now be lost to history. In any case, Colt certainly would have no record of them. But, as intriguing as Edwards’s theory may appear on the surface, it must be remembered that its acceptance means a deletion of all major descriptive portions of Stuart Lake’s original passage. The entire story then ceases to have any foundation, since, contrary to the claim that “Wyatt Earp made the ‘Buntline Special’ famous,” no published account

77. Frank Waters, The Earp Brothers of Tombstone, the Story of Mrs. Virgil Earp (New York, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1960), p. 96. Wyatt did not become a full-time Arizona peace officer until the end of July, 1880, when Pima county Sheriff Charles A. Shibell appointed him a deputy for the Tombstone district.—The Weekly Nugget, Tombstone, and Tombstone Epitaph, July 29, 1880. Wyatt served with distinction, as records and numerous press reports clearly prove, until early November when he resigned. The press reported Wyatt’s decision with regret.—The Daily Nugget, Tombstone, November 12, 1880. Sheriff Shibell did not dismiss Earp as many writers falsely maintain. However, Wyatt would not receive a deputy U.S. marshal’s appointment until December 29, 1881. His brother Virgil, who had received a similar appointment on November 27, 1879, had been seriously wounded from ambush on the streets of Tombstone the night before. Wyatt then telegraphed the territorial capital at Prescott for federal authority from Arizona’s United States marshal, Crawley P. Dake. From Phoenix, where operators intercepted Wyatt’s message for the visiting marshal’s decision, Dake “immediately telegraphed the appointment requested.”—Phoenix Herald, December 30, 1881.


of Ned Buntline’s presentation can be found which predates Lake’s writings.

Since the evidence thus far examined seems to disprove any “Buntline Specials” being presented in Dodge City, a review must be made of those events where Wyatt Earp is said to have used the weapon. This approach is necessary on the slim chance Stuart Lake simply gave a garbled rendering of an otherwise true story. In doing so historical accuracy will be satisfied.

Fortunately for those interested in documented history, before Wyatt Earp died on January 13, 1929, he left to John H. Flood, Jr., all his personal material, including a number of his guns. Earp remained rather remarkable in that, above all else, he kept meticulous records—letters, business papers, maps, receipts, and even ticket stubs. From 1904 until Wyatt’s death, John Flood served as his mining partner and secretary. They eventually became close personal friends. In shorthand, Flood methodically transcribed Wyatt Earp’s dictated life story. After Wyatt’s death in Los Angeles he carefully preserved the thousands of items he and Earp had saved over the years.

This entire collection, including Wyatt’s guns and Flood’s copies of the yet unpublished autobiography, is now the property of Western historian John D. Gilchriese. Mr. Gilchriese also gathered much additional material, after an exhaustive 30-year search, which fully documents Earp’s life.

No hint of the Buntline Special appears within this treasury of Earpiana—although Wyatt supposedly told Stuart Lake, “mine was my favorite over any other gun.” If the Buntlines “caused a lot of talk in Dodge” it certainly didn’t impress Wyatt Earp enough to note the incident. John Flood admitted being confused after reading Lake’s Buntline Special story in The Saturday Evening Post. Flood later remarked to John Gilchriese that he and Mr. Earp discussed weapons in detail many times but no mention was ever made of such a gun.82 Also, the late Raymond Thorp told a story about Wyatt Earp showing him a revolver in the late fall of 1914. At that time, he said, Wyatt carried a Colt S. A. A. with a 5½-inch barrel. Thorp claimed Earp told him, “I don’t like a gun with a longer barrel. Sometimes an inch or two makes a difference when you want to jerk it quickly.” 83

Together with this, a careful examination of Wyatt Earp’s career reveals he seldom fired a gun in anger. He found it unnecessary

82. Conversations between John D. Gilchriese and the author.
to kill anyone until the late 1881 Clanton-McLaury fight in Tombstone. Wyatt once wrote a friend saying, “I never carried a gun only upon occasion and that was while on duty as an officer of the law. . . .” 84 Not only did Wyatt Earp seldom carry weapons, even during his Kansas and Arizona years, but he was never the two-gun man” pictured by Stuart Lake in Frontier Marshal. 85 It is clear after a careful examination of his letters and other personal records that Wyatt felt nothing but contempt for those who walked the streets heavily armed for no apparent reason. Earp harbored no fetish about deadly weapons.

Besides reporting Wyatt knocking several people cold with the Buntline Special and relating a totally fictitious story of Earp backing down Clay Allison by shoving a six-gun into his ribs, Lake mistakenly has Wyatt Earp killing a young Texan named George Hoyt 86 in Dodge City in 1878. This supposedly took place after the cowboy unsuccessfully tried to collect a $1,000 bounty placed on Earp’s head by several influential cattlemen who objected to Wyatt’s iron-handed rule of the cowboy capital. 87

Lake’s version has Wyatt standing in front of the Comique theater as Hoy[t] rides by at a gallop firing three .45 caliber revolver slugs into the building, missing him by inches. Lake goes on to say, “Wyatt went into action toward the horseman, jerking his Colt’s as he jumped.” 88 By that writer’s own reasoning this gun is the Colt Buntline Special since he placed the presentation two years before, aside from having Wyatt remark, “. . . I carried it at my right hip throughout my career as marshal.”

According to more reliable contemporary accounts, a small group of Texans simply decided to fire some random shots into the rear of Ben Springer’s newly opened Comique theater before leaving town early on the morning of July 26, 1878. Luckily no one in the dancehall was hurt as the private boxes were unoccupied and the bullets passed too high to hit anyone on the dance floor. Assistant Marshal Earp and Policeman James Masterson responded to the scene and “together with several citizens, turned their pistols loose in the direction of the flying horsemen.” 89 As the riders crossed the Arkansas river bridge south of town, George Hoy[t] “fell

84. Wyatt S. Earp to John Hays Hammond, May 21, 1925.
85. Numerous conversations between John Gilchrist and the author.
86. With the exception of the Ford County Globe’s first mention of this shooting in its July 30 issue, contemporary Dodge City sources favored the spelling George “Hoy.”
87. In keeping with his blood-and-thunder theme, Stuart Lake had reported two other attempts to collect this mythical bounty, including a down-and-out cowboy firing through Wyatt’s window at the Dodge House with a shotgun, supplied by an unnamed herd boss for the occasion. Neither Dodge City newspaper mentioned these incidents.
89. Ford County Globe, July 30, 1878.
from his horse from weakness caused by a wound in the arm which he had received during the fracas." 90

As his friends escaped, Earp and Masterson carried the badly wounded man to Dr. Thomas L. McCarty’s office on Front street for medical assistance. Hoy[t] died from his wound on August 21. In an 1896 newspaper article, Wyatt Earp claimed he killed the young Texan, 91 but there is no way of crediting the fatal shot. With so many persons firing, he could just as easily been wounded by James Masterson, one of the “several citizens” in the crowd, or even accidently by one of his friends.

However, no group of Texas cattlemen ever placed a bounty on Wyatt’s head, although Stuart Lake assures us young Hoy[t] confessed to such a plot before he died. Yet no contemporary reference can be found supporting this outlandish claim. 92 It is also interesting to consider Bat Masterson’s description of Hoy[t]’s action: “The cow-boy rode right by Wyatt who was standing outside the main entrance to the showshop, but evidently did not notice him, else he would not in all probability have acted as he did.” 93 Masterson, of course, mentions no bounty or any “Buntline Special” Colts.

The rest of Wyatt’s Dodge City use of the Buntline Special, according to Stuart Lake, consisted of “buffaloing” overzealous lawbreakers. The most colorful of these incidents supposedly occurred around September 24, 1878, when, aided by his friend Doc Holli day, the consumptive gun-fighting dentist, Wyatt arrested Tobe Driskill, Ed Morrison, and some 25 of their gun-toting comrades in front of the Long Branch saloon. In reply to Doc’s query of what should be done with their captives, Lake explains, “Wyatt Earp took a single step toward Ed Morrison and, before that individual or any of his followers sensed what was happening, laid the barrel of his Buntline Special over the cowboy’s head.” 94 Doc Holliday then intervened before one of the crowd could “pot-shot” Earp by wounding the misguided fellow in the shoulder. “Next morning Driskill and Morrison were fined one hundred dollars apiece, and each of the others, twenty-five dollars.” 95

90. Dodge City Times, July 27, 1878.
91. Wyatt S. Earp, San Francisco Examiner, August 16, 1896.
92. Stuart Lake assured his readers that “the Globe verified and later published Hoyt’s story” of being hired to kill Wyatt Earp. Yet no such “story” ever appeared in the Ford County Globe or in any other Dodge City newspaper. Actually, the Globe reported on July 80 that the young Texan claimed “not to have done any shooting,” but had simply been the victim of bad company.
95. Ibid., p. 214.
The trouble with this tale is that in all likelihood it never took place. Although Wyatt Earp admitted Doc Holliday once saved his life in Dodge City,\(^{96}\) the incident did not occur as Lake described. First of all, there is no mention of this affair in either Dodge City newspaper and files for that period are complete. Secondly, this story is unsupported by entries in the docket of the police judge.

The late Stanley Vestal enjoyed access to this vital source, which has since disappeared. However, Vestal recorded the information that between July 5, 1878, and August 5, 1879, "... Wyatt Earp arrested or filed complaints against thirty-five persons."\(^{97}\) Yet the names of Tobe Driskill and Ed Morrison are not listed. While it is conceivable some arrests may have escaped entry in the police judge’s docket, a mass action involving 25 armed and defiant men would hardly go unnoticed by both the court recorder and Dodge City’s two newspapers. The pages of the press actually point out that the Driskill boys, Tobe and Bud, spent much of this time in the field, at one point with Captain Hemphill’s company, during the Dull Knife scare. Marauding Indians had reportedly killed two herders at the Driskill’s camp.

Aside from Wyatt’s pistol-whipping arrest of Curly Bill Brocius, following the shooting of Tombstone city marshal, Fred White, in October of 1880,\(^{98}\) or his similar manhandling of Tom McLaury one year later,\(^{99}\) the most famous instance of Wyatt Earp raising a weapon against human adversaries is now legendary. This celebrated clash, involving three of the Earp brothers, Virgil, Wyatt, and Morgan, together with Doc Holliday, against Ike and Billy Clanton and their allies Frank and Tom McLaury, erupted on Wednesday afternoon, October 26, 1881. For over four decades Western authors and motion picture writers have postured this

\(^{96}\) “Transcript of Testimony” (Document No. 94), Territory of Arizona vs. Morgan Earp, et al., defendants, deposition of Wyatt S. Earp, p. 138.


\(^{99}\) One witness to this beating later testified that the gun Wyatt Earp used to strike Tom McLaury seemed “an old pistol; pretty large, 14 or 16 inches long.”—“Transcript of Testimony” (Document No. 94), Territory of Arizona vs. Morgan Earp, et al., defendants, deposition of A. Bauer, p. 69. This description is not, however, of a Buntline Special for the overall length of the weapon Wyatt Earp used that day (to be discussed later) would have appeared that long. An additional point one must consider is that a Colt Single Action Army revolver with a 12-inch barrel would measure 17 inches in overall length. But, since none was available in that size, one need only consider the length with a 16-inch barrel to realize that it is not the weapon described above.
desperate battle as the “Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.” A chilling but inaccurate sobriquet!

It is clear that the Earp party, walking west along Fremont street, did not hesitate at the O.K. Corral’s rear entrance but continued four lots further on. There, all but Doc Holliday swung into a vacant lot situated between Camillus S. Fly’s lodging house and photographic gallery on the east, and shielded from Third street to the west by a wooden frame dwelling near the corner. Former Tombstone mayor and prominent businessman William A. Harwood owned this small frame house as well as the vacant space where the fight began.

After the shooting started, the three Earps backed from the vacant lot on Virgil’s order, joining Doc Holliday already in the street. There the battle reached its peak, concluding some 30 seconds later. In its wake, Billy Clanton sat dazed outside the lot where he had fallen. Mortally wounded, the 19-year-old Clanton cried desperately for more cartridges as Mr. Fly, himself armed with a Henry rifle, disarmed the youth. Tom McLaury, his body badly torn by buckshot, slumped near death at the base of a two-span telegraph pole on the corner of Third street while his brother Frank lay dead on the north side of Fremont.

Though shot through the right calf, Virgil Earp stood over his younger brother Morgan, seriously wounded by Billy Clanton’s fire. Doc Holliday was superficially grazed along his lower back; but luck stood with Wyatt as he emerged unharmed. Leaving his younger brother and two companions to their fate, Ike Clanton had scurried to safety after frantically begging Wyatt to spare his life. Unharmed but shaken, Ike sought immediate refuge in a Mexican dancehall on Allen street. Cochise county sheriff, John H. Behan, later testified he finally found Clanton at Judge Lucas’s old Toughnut street office. Two additional hangers-on, William Clainborne and Wesley Fuller, had also run as the firing began.

The circumstances promoting this battle are both complicated and bizarre but needn’t be discussed for purposes of this study. Yet the fight itself is important as Stuart Lake mentions the Bunt-
line Special. He describes the opening exchange of shots with his usual sense of drama:

Frank McLowery [sic] and Billy Clanton jerked and fired their six-guns simultaneously. Both turned loose on Wyatt Earp, the shots with which they opened the famous battle of the O. K. Corral echoing from the adobe walls as one.

Fast as the two rustlers were at getting into action from a start with guns half-drawn, Wyatt Earp was deadlier. Frank McLowery’s bullet tore through the skirt of Wyatt’s coat on the right, Billy Clanton’s ripped the marshal’s sleeve, but before either could fire again, Wyatt’s Buntline Special roared; the slug struck Frank McLowery squarely in the abdomen, just above the belt buckle.¹⁰¹

By Wyatt Earp’s own admission at his and Doc Holliday’s subsequent court appearance, he carried his revolver in an overcoat pocket. Wyatt read his testimony from a document carefully prepared with help from his attorney New York-born Thomas Fitch—the 53-year-old “Silver Tongued Orator of the Pacific Slope.”¹⁰² Earp’s remarks, transcribed by the court reporter, read as follows:

We had walked a few steps further and I saw Behan leave the party and come toward us. Every few steps he would look back as if he apprehended danger. I heard him say to Virgil Earp, “For God’s sake, don’t go down there, you will get murdered.” Virgil replied, “I am going to disarm them”—he, Virgil, being in the lead. When I and Morgan Earp came up to Behan he said, “I have disarmed them.” When he said this, I took my pistol, which I had in my hand, under my coat, and put it in my overcoat pocket. Behan then passed up the street and we walked on down.¹⁰³

Wyatt had good reason to wear an overcoat. In his later reminiscence, Tombstone mayor and Epitaph editor John P. Clum described the day as “bright and the air crisp.”¹⁰⁴ Still another Tombstone resident recalled, “I remember that just before three o’clock . . . it commenced to snow and sleet.”¹⁰⁵ The daily journal of George W. Parsons notes snow, high winds, and extremely cold temperatures on the following morning of October 27.¹⁰⁶ Available evidence proves that on the morning before the fight, Wyatt

¹⁰². Wyatt Earp could hardly have made a better choice for legal counsel. Born in New York in 1838, Thomas Fitch came to the Pacific Coast from Milwaukee in 1860. He read law and became a Nevada lawyer three years later. That same year he was elected to the California legislature and then served as a member of the Nevada constitutional convention in 1864. The years 1865-1866 found him district attorney of Washoe county, Nevada, and in 1868 Fitch represented his state in congress. He then became attorney for Brigham Young and the Mormon church. After several years at this task in Salt Lake City he went to Arizona, to be elected to the territorial legislature in 1879. From Prescott Fitch subsequently removed to Tombstone—quickly becoming one of the most important mining centers in the Southwest.
Earp took delivery of a new greatcoat containing a special canvas pocket to carry his revolver. Anyone handling a 7½-inch “cavalry length” Colt single action will concede an overcoat pocket would have to be large to handle it adequately. For practical purposes, however, concealing a 12-inch is hardly possible while unthinkable with a 16-inch.

This point is not terribly important since in the now famous encounter of October 26, 1881, Wyatt Earp used an eight-inch .44 caliber 1869 American model Smith & Wesson. John Clum had graciously given this finely engraved nickel-plated revolver to Wyatt as a gift. Earp later told John Flood he had used this gun in the street fight with the Clantons and McLaury’s. Unlike Stuart Lake, Wyatt Earp never mentioned a Colt “Buntline Special” at any time. This Smith & Wesson revolver is presently in the John D. Gilchriese collection.

Stuart Lake, not wishing to remain idle while something dramatic was happening, soon has Wyatt unlimbering the Buntline Special again in March, 1882, after the cowardly assassination of his younger brother Morgan. On his own, without legal sanction or authority to act, Wyatt Earp sought personal revenge. First he shotgunned Frank Stilwell, a suspected stage robber and former deputy under Johnny Behan, in Tucson’s rail yard. Stilwell died as the train, carrying Morgan’s coffin together with Virgil and his wife Allie, pulled out for California.

Lake then says Earp killed one “Indian Charlie” (Florentino Cruz) at Pete Spence’s ranch (actually a wood camp) in the Dragoon mountains. He went on to explain that before Wyatt fired he counted to three slowly in Spanish, thereby giving the inexperienced Florentino a fair chance to draw, but, confessed Lake, “Indian Charlie was no finished gun-fighter.” Thus: “The Buntline Special flashed from the holster, and roared three times.” Needless to say, Florentino quickly vanished from the historical scene amid bluish smoke and hot lead—typically dramatic, but somewhat inaccurate. After examining the coroner’s inquest on Florentino, all available newspaper accounts, Wyatt’s hand-drawn maps of this incident as well as his verbal presentation,

108. Frank Stilwell, a younger brother of well-known army scout Simpson E. “Comanche Jack” Stilwell, had acquired an unsavory reputation in Arizona, despite statements to the contrary made by some present-day writers. He shot one Jesus Bega through the lung, near Miller’s ranch outside Prescott, and nearly killed him because the newly hired Mexican cook served tea instead of coffee on his first day at work.—Weekly Arizona Miner, Prescott, October 19, 1877. In Tombstone 2¼ years later both Stilwell and one Jack Cassidy escaped a grand jury indictment, for lack of evidence, in the brutal stoneclubbing murder of J. Van Houten near the old Brunckow Mine on November 9, 1879.—The Weekly Nugget, March 18, 1880. This, then, was the man John Behan felt justified in appointing a Cochise county deputy sheriff.

given in amazing detail to John Flood, it is clear Stuart Lake’s version is more an example of blood-and-thunder journalism than of accurate historical prose. It is a fact that Wyatt Earp did not count to three in Spanish—or in any other language—before shooting Florentino Cruz.

Lake quickly shifts the point of action west, across the San Pedro valley, to Iron Springs in the Whetstone mountains. Here he has Wyatt wounding two men and possibly a third with the Buntline Special, after first dispatching “Curly Bill” Brocius in a bloody shotgun duel. Many of Wyatt’s detractors strongly maintain this fight never occurred. They say Earp simply invented the story in an attempt to enhance his own reputation. However, after disregarding all senseless conjecture and examining the historical facts, the leading Earp authority feels the evidence fully supports Wyatt’s claim of killing Brocius. This exhaustive examination also produced no mention of, or even an illusion to, the Buntline Special.

On May 22, 1882, the Denver Republican published an extensive interview with the consumptive Doc Holliday, then in jail awaiting possible extradition to Arizona to answer for his part in the killings precipitated by Morgan Earp’s assassination. In this interview Doc tells of Wyatt killing “Curly Bill” with a shotgun, but unfortunately for the still numerous Stuart Lake stalwarts, he mentions no long-barreled revolvers.

Unlike Holliday, Wyatt Earp remained out of prison and spent his time gambling in several Rocky mountain towns. Colorado Gov. Frederick W. Pitkin finally refused to honor an Arizona extradition request on May 29, 1882. Doc Holliday and the Earps (Wyatt and Warren) were then safe from Arizona prosecution.


112. Morgan’s death occurred in Campbell & Hatch’s saloon and billiard parlor in Tombstone on Saturday evening, March 18, 1882. Although Stuart Lake has Wyatt firing three shots from his Buntline Special into the rear alley where Morgan’s assassins had stood, a complete examination of all contemporary sources reveals he did not fire at all. Wyatt apparently made no move whatever toward the alley but instead attended his fatally wounded brother.

113. Rocky Mountain News, Denver, May 30, 1882. The failure to extradite Doc Holliday from Colorado caused an array of inquisitive stirrings among territorial newspapers, many of which correctly suspected power other than that of normal judicial process had been responsible for Doc’s release. On June 1, 1882, the Arizona Daily Star, Tucson, printed: “Governor Tritle to Governor Pitkin; ‘My dear brother, let this blow pass!’ It passed.”

114. Warren, youngest of the six Earp brothers, played only a minor role during his family’s stay in Tombstone. This included brief service from time to time under Virgil, himself chief of police. Even as early as mid-1881 Warren Earp was appointed one of 21 special policemen hired to control looting following Tombstone’s first disastrous fire of June 22. On this occasion he received four dollars for his efforts. Nineteen years later Warren was killed by John Boyett, as a culmination of the old Tombstone feud, in the Headquarters saloon at Wilcox, situated in the Sulphur Springs valley east of Tombstone and the Dragoon mountains. Virgil Earp later avenged his brother’s death by killing the man he felt more responsible for the deed than the actual assassin.—Conversations between John Gilchrist and the author.
A line drawing in the San Francisco (Calif.) Examiner depicting Wyatt Earp surrendering his revolver to Police Captain Wittman before refereeing the Sharkey-Fitzsimmons fight on December 2, 1896. Copy courtesy the Bancroft Library.
Ed Englestadt, Wyatt Earp, and John P. Clum on the beach at Nome, Alas., at the turn of the century. Photo courtesy W. B. Shillingberg.
since the territorial authorities declined to take any further action. Although Doc still faced a minor charge in Pueblo, Wyatt gambled freely throughout much of the West.

On May 31, 1883, Earp returned to Dodge City to aid his longtime friend Luke Short, part owner of the Long Branch saloon, during the "Dodge City Saloon War."\textsuperscript{115} This explosive situation ended with the formation of the so-called "Dodge City Peace Commission." Luke Short's troubles with the city administration received widespread press coverage—including the prowess with weaponry exhibited by various participants. The Kansas City (Mo.) Journal printed on May 15, 1883:

[Bat Masterson's] presence in Kansas City means just one thing, and that is he is going to visit Dodge City. Masterson precedes by twenty-four hours a few other pleasant gentlemen who are on their way to the tea party at Dodge. One of them is Wyatt Earp . . . [who is] famous in the cheerful business of depopulating the country. He has killed within our personal knowledge six men, and is popularly accredited with relegating to the dust no less than ten of his fellow men.

The men involved in this affair did not take these garbled renditions of their lethal accomplishments too seriously. In this spirit of fairplay the "Peace Commission" had its photograph taken by Mr. Conkling before disbanding.\textsuperscript{116} This picture included all the supposed Buntline Special recipients except Bill Tilghman. And since these men seldom displayed weapons, no arms of any sort are visible.

In Frontier Marshal Stuart Lake mentions the Buntline Special for the last time in connection with Wyatt's position as referee of the controversial Sharkey-Fitzsimmons heavyweight bout. This fight, sponsored by the National Athletic Club, was staged at Mechanics' Pavilion in San Francisco on December 2, 1896.

Near 12 o'clock on the day of the contest, according to Lake, as Wyatt Earp prepared for an afternoon at the races, the fight's promoters and a representative of the National Athletic Club asked him to act as referee. He agreed only if no other suitable person could be found. Then, with just five minutes before the bout's scheduled opening, they supposedly summoned him to Mechanics' Pavilion from "Goodfellow's Restaurant, across the street."\textsuperscript{117} "The crowd howled for Earp," as Wyatt stepped into the ring and reportedly gave a short speech telling the assembled fans how he

\textsuperscript{115} Ford County Globe, June 5, 1883.

\textsuperscript{116} Dodge City Times, June 14, 1883.

\textsuperscript{117} Lake, Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal, p. 367. Actually the restaurant was called "The Good Fellows' Grotto," located on Market opposite Eighth street. Wyatt Earp did not wait there in any anticipation of duty's call.
would call the fight as he saw it. He then stripped off his coat, and 
the twenty-thousand did roar.” Lake records this moment in the 
form of a quote from Wyatt Earp:

‘I had completely forgotten how I was dressed,’ Wyatt recalled, ‘and 
there on my right hip, the old Buntline forty-five with its twelve-inch barrel 
and the walnut butt, stuck out like a cannon. I know I turned red to my heels 
as I unbuckled the gun and handed it to Police Captain Whitman [sic], who 
sat at the ringside.’ 118

Lake justifies Wyatt carrying a weapon by explaining the pres-
eence of a gang of thieves victimizing gamblers and other innocents 
in route by streetcar from the Ingleside race track to downtown 
San Francisco. Earp carried large sums of money which he did not 
intend losing without a fight.

As with outlining other portions of Wyatt Earp’s life, Stuart Lake 
is not accurate in his handling of the Sharkey-Fitzsimmons affair. 
Actually Wyatt knew long before of the decision naming him refe-
eree. Promoters James J. Groom and John G. Gibbs decided on 
Earp after Fitzsimmons’ manager and brother-in-law, Martin Ju-
lian, steadfastly objected to all previously suggested persons. 
Julian later delayed the bout while arguing with officials in the 
ring his fear of Wyatt having a financial interest in the fight’s out-
come.

Earp did appear armed at ringside to Captain of Police George 
W. Wittman, who approached the ex-officer asking him to sur-
render his weapon. He could not, explained the captain, referee 
the bout wearing a gun. Wyatt calmly asked Wittman to step into 
a side room where he would gladly go along with the officer’s re-
quest. Although he never explained why, Wittman told Earp he 
felt it improper to speak privately with the referee, so Wyatt vol-
untarily surrendered his revolver without fanfare.

Concerning the gun’s appearance, one contemporary newspaper 
reported: “The offending weapon is of the pattern known as the 
‘Frontier Colts.’ It is of 45-caliber, single action and has an eight-
inch barrel.” 119 Wittman eventually turned the gun over to Pat-
rick Crowley, chief of the San Francisco Police Department. This 
newspaper item hardly identifies Wyatt’s revolver as the Buntline 
Special. Any standard length (7½-inch) Colt Single Action Army 
would bear an identical description if viewed at a distance by an 
untrained eye.

Bob Fitzsimmons carried the fight until the eighth round when

118. Ibid., p. 388.
119. San Francisco Examiner, December 4, 1896. At no time do any San Francisco 
area newspapers describe the gun as having a 12- or 16-inch barrel.
Wyatt stopped the bout on a foul. Earp awarded the decision to Sharkey, who attendants carried out as “limp as a rag.” The following evening, Policeman Frank W. Riley placed Wyatt Earp under arrest in a restaurant on Stockton street near O’Farrell. He did so on orders from Captain Wittman, who charged Earp with carrying a concealed weapon at Mechanics’ Pavilion. Wittman later explained his action, “I would have arrested you at the fight, but fearing serious trouble I concluded to wait until to-day.” 120 The good captain didn’t say whether he feared “serious trouble” from the excited crowd or an armed Wyatt Earp.

After two postponements Judge Charles A. Low of the city’s Police Court No. 4, found Wyatt guilty. Ordered to pay a $50 fine or spend 21 days in the county jail, Earp wisely chose the former and forfeited his previously paid bail in that amount. During the course of his hearing, Wyatt explained why he carried a gun. His statement disagrees with Stuart Lake’s version of highwaymen waylaying streetcar passengers from Ingleside. Earp simply said he was “under a verbal contract . . . with Wells, Fargo & Co. and the Southern Pacific Company, [and] was liable to be called into the field at a moment’s notice.” 121

With the conclusion of the Sharkey-Fitzsimmons affair, Stuart Lake does not mention the Buntline Special again. Since Frontier Marshal’s release in 1931, numerous persons interested in Wyatt Earp have pondered what became of the weapon he supposedly claimed was his “favorite over any other gun.” All attempts to contact Lake himself for some detailed explanation ended in failure. Remaining puzzled, these first serious Wyatt Earp students, and veteran Colt firearms collectors, began trying to unearth clues of their own. Many stories were uncovered, discussed, dissected, written about, and finally discarded. Of all these, the one which seemed more plausible to members of this group involved Wyatt, while in Nome, Alas., lending his prized Buntline Special to a friend carrying the United States mail. The story, first published in 1955, concludes:

The mail-carrier, reaching a precarious situation requiring the immediate lightening of his small whaleboat, threw the gun over-board together with other impediments, and thus the “Buntline” now lies at the cold, wet bottom of the Pacific Ocean! 122

Although disproved by the subsequent scholarship of both its author and the historians involved with him in examining the initial

120. San Francisco Chronicle, December 4, 1896.
121. Ibid., December 11, 1896.
122. du Mont, “‘Buntline Special’ Colt,” p. 25.
account, this colorful dunking story appears without any attempt at clarification in a recent book on Colt’s Single Action Army.123 Some writers have even transferred the point of action from Alaska to the Yukon. A look at the historical record proves Wyatt Earp never visited the Yukon, although he did spend time in Alaska, involved in various enterprises at the turn of the century. These included the operation of the Dexter Saloon at Nome. Later Wyatt opened the Second Class Saloon in that city with the encouragement of his friend E. J. “Lucky” Baldwin.

Through careful research all stories regarding the Buntline Special’s demise can ultimately be traced to someone else’s imagination, not Stuart Lake’s. Other writers have simply perpetuated an ever-expanding legend using Lake’s semifictional account of Wyatt Earp’s life as their foundation. Yet not only are we continually told of Wyatt’s unnamed friend losing the Buntline off Alaska, but to confuse matters even further, Western artist Lea F. McCarty quoted a fellow named Arthur M. King in a national Western pulp magazine as saying:

Hell no. He never wore any gun when I knew him. He used to let it lay up in the seat of that old Franklin car of his and he’d go get it if he wanted to lay it across the head of some galoot who was looking for trouble. That was his long-barreled Buntline that the dime-novelist Ned Buntline gave to Wyatt and Bat Masterson and Luke Short, you know. He carried that thing in the back of that car all the time I worked with him through 1910 to about 1912.124

However, this portion of the Buntline Special legend cleared itself up. For in the following issue of the magazine a reader questioned the point of mentioning the Buntline after 1900 by citing the Alaskan dunking story. McCarty eventually replied, “I was in error when I wrote that Mr. King had seen Earp with the Buntline. He never had.”125

Another “quote” which must now be considered in some detail appears in Frontier Marshal as the second paragraph describing the Buntline Specials (supra, p. 123). It is written as coming directly from Wyatt Earp himself. In his book Stuart Lake quotes Earp extensively and these are constantly being cited as primary source statements supporting that writer’s version of events.

The question therefore must be asked: how accurate is Lake in presenting direct quotes from Wyatt Earp? Stuart Lake claimed


he persuaded Wyatt "to devote the closing months of his long life to the narration of his full story." Actually, Lake only saw Wyatt a few times and Earp, approaching 81, did not wish to discuss in great detail his many adventures on the frontier. It now appears certain that Wyatt Earp became acquainted with his future biographer, on a face-to-face basis, only seven months before he died, although Stuart Lake had written to him for the first time some months before. From the standpoint of the Earps, Wyatt’s third wife, Josephine, eventually became the chief prod behind the project--after Lake finally overcame her initial apprehension. Josie certainly hoped to gain financially from the book’s success.

Aside from writing a number of letters, such as to his friend from Tombstone days, Fred J. Dodge, and having a few casual visits with Lake, Wyatt didn’t seem overcome with enthusiasm about this projected biography. He was interested, to be sure, but after all he and John Flood had already completed their own detailed writing of his full story. A careful examination of Earp’s correspondence with Lake, and with others from time to time, proves

126. Lake, Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal, p. ix. Lake’s use of the word “narration” is interesting because it suggests Wyatt Earp indeed dictated direct statements for the book. Yet, as will be carefully shown, Lake later admitted this hadn’t been the case.

127. Stuart N. Lake to Wyatt S. Earp, June 15, 1928; and, Wyatt S. Earp to Stuart N. Lake, July 22, 1928. From the contents of the two letters cited, and a number of others examined, it appears Lake didn’t actually see Wyatt Earp personally until June 19, 1928. Their second meeting took place on August 2. In Frontier Marshal Lake falsely claimed he and Wyatt carried on a “two-year series of conversations which [were] transcribed” into that book.

128. Stuart Lake first tried to contact Wyatt Earp by letter in late December, 1927—using an address supplied by the Arizona Pioneers’ Historical Society. This address proving incorrect, Lake, still seeking Earp’s whereabouts, wrote to C. H. Brownell at Vidal, Calif., on January 4, 1928. Brownell, owner of a local general store and friendly with the Earps, answered with the requested information two days later. Thus Lake did not send his initial letter to Wyatt Earp until January 9, 1928. It is therefore quite clear that the two men did not even carry on two-year’s correspondence much less a “two-year series of conversations.”

129. Frank Waters, The Colorado (New York, Rinehart & Company, 1946), p. 224. Josephine continually bragged to Virgil Earp’s wife, Alle, of the “jackpot” Lake’s book had brought her. However, she personally received very little. After reading the proofs, Josie complained privately to Lake about the selected title, she preferred simply Wyatt Earp, as well as the book’s style. She wrote: “Thus far, what I have read of the story impresses me more as that of the blood and thunder type than a biography.”—Josephine S. Earp to Stuart N. Lake, January 27, 1931. Josie’s complaint is even more interesting in light of Lake’s claim to Wyatt, on September 22, 1928, that he intended “to turn out an accurate picture of a time and of a man, rather than any wild tale of blood-letting and whupping gunplay.”

130. To try and show that Wyatt voiced more dedication to this project than was actually the case, Stuart Lake uses a portion of what he suggests is a letter written to him by Earp: “What actually occurred in Tombstone, for example, was only a matter of weeks; it was not my whole life. My friends have urged repeatedly that I make the truth known in print. Now, you and I shall do it, and correct many mythic tales.”—Lake, Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshal, p. 373. Yet this “quote” is not to be found in any of Wyatt’s letters to Lake. However, a strong feeling of suspicion arises when one notes the similarity in the wording of this passage compared with one in Wyatt’s letter to John Hays Hammond dated May 30, 1925: “What actually occurred [sic] in Tombstone is only a matter of weeks. My friends have urged that I make this known on printed sheets. Perhaps I shall; it will correct many mythic tales.” Wyatt was of course referring here to the proposed John Flood manuscript. Lake definitely saw a copy of this letter, Earp sent him one, along with a number of others, and Lake responded, as to seeing it. Stuart Lake, then, seems to have just reordered the Earp-Hammond letter for his own use, as he also uses other portions of it that are simply far too similar—almost word for word—not to arouse a high degree of suspicion as to what happened.
Wyatt remained extremely cautious, almost aloof, about the information he chose to discuss—it being very limited indeed. These letters are far more interesting for what they don’t say than from what they actually contain. Since Earp provided Stuart Lake with little actual help, he forced the writer to turn heavily to other sources to construct his story.

A comparison of Lake’s “quotes” with Wyatt Earp’s genuine statements—in early letters, his dictation to John Flood, etc.—reveals a startling difference in their rhythmic pattern. This difference is not evident between the quotes and narrative used in *Frontier Marshal*. So at best these quotes are highly suspect. Others have noticed this phenomenal similarity and some, such as the late Burton Rascoe, have publicly expressed their doubts:

I reserve judgment as to whether Lake is telling the truth or not . . . . I can distinguish no difference between the personal rhythm and prose style of Earp and Lake. It is certainly a remarkable coincidence if Earp’s and Lake’s personal rhythm and style were so indistinguishable, especially inasmuch as Earp was a man of action all his life and Lake . . . . a professional writer of long standing and considerable skill.131

Even witnesses unfriendly to Wyatt have challenged the authenticity of Lake’s writings on these grounds. One such source is quoted as saying, “I want to assure you that these stories presumed to have come from Wyatt himself, have not a vestige of truth. It isn’t like Wyatt to have told them and I often wonder if he did . . . . I never heard Wyatt talk like that.”132 If one believes the accuracy of Lake’s Earp quotes he must also accept the Buntline Special tale since the writer has Wyatt Earp personally acknowledge the weapon through that literary devise.

Regardless of such widespread speculation, Stuart Lake solves this mystery himself. Lake admitted in writing to the publishers of Frank Waters’s book *The Colorado* (1946) that he and he alone was responsible for Earp’s “quotes” in *Frontier Marshal*. As Waters recalled,

. . . . while most of Lake’s book consisted of allegedly verbatim quotations from Wyatt, Lake in his letter to my publishers affirmed that Wyatt never dictated a word to him, never saw a word of his writing, and died two years before the book was published. Lake thus denied the purported authenticity of his own book, and admitted sole responsibility for its wholly romantic, untrue, and fictitious contents.133


133. Waters, *The Earp Brothers of Tombstone*, p. 9; and conversation between Frank Waters and the author.
Wyatt had definitely wanted to read the manuscript—to protect himself. When Lake let it be known he planned on sending portions to his New York agent, Earp quickly vetoed the idea saying it would be unfair to him personally. "... there may be changes or corrections that I would want to make, and nobody should know its contents until I have read it over thoroughly." Three days after writing these words, Wyatt Earp died—before ever seeing a page of Stuart Lake’s manuscript.

Lake further confessed to Burton Rascoe that he had received no direct quotes from Wyatt since Earp, he said, “was inarticulate. In speech he was at best monosyllabic.” Oddly enough, those people having the most direct contact with Wyatt Earp never complained of an inability to understand clearly what he had to say. Wyatt certainly didn’t possess the literary style of a Stuart N. Lake, but this supposed vocabulary deficiency is not apparent in the shorthand notes of Earp’s verbal reminiscences taken by John Flood in preparation of Wyatt’s autobiography. Even though he seems to be the only person having this extreme difficulty, Lake went on to tell Burton Rascoe that he, therefore, “felt journalistically justified in inventing the Earp manuscript.” (Italics added.)

Thus Stuart Lake has himself more than once denied the authenticity of all quoted passages credited to Wyatt Earp in Frontier Marshal. Yet in a seeming paradox, Lake once told Western writer Eugene Manlove Rhodes: “my story is true. Every word of it is documented. . . .” A strange boast since he later admitted inventing his own book. All of Lake’s “Earp quotes” are simply imaginary statements. So, in complete fairness, Stuart Lake, and not Wyatt Earp, must be given the responsibility for their contents, both in terms of style and lack of accuracy—a point the most venomous Earp critics have conveniently overlooked.

Examining in depth the story behind the Buntline Specials: Colt’s records, Ned Buntline’s activities, Wyatt Earp’s career, and Lake’s inventions, together with other writings, produce a continuous chain of damning evidence. The most revealing fact remains that nowhere has there been found an account of this affair, published or otherwise, predating Stuart Lake’s writings—not even in the theatrically florid jottings of Alfred Henry Lewis or in Walter Noble Burns’s often-maligned book Tombstone (1927).

134. Stuart N. Lake to Wyatt S. Earp, January 7, 1929.
135. Wyatt S. Earp to Stuart N. Lake, January 10, 1929.
137. Ibid.
Wyatt Earp personally never acknowledged such a weapon to anyone, including his long-time friend John Flood, his Hollywood admirer William S. Hart (who questioned Wyatt carefully regarding weapons he used on the frontier), in the series of newspaper articles he authorized or in the number or press interviews he granted. Nor did any of his contemporaries remember seeing him with the Buntline or hearing him mention the Special. Mary Katherine Holliday (Doc’s wife) vociferously denied ever seeing Wyatt with such a gun. Stuart Lake did “quote” Bat Masterson telling of Earp using the Buntline in Dodge City, but no known authenticated statements from Masterson exist to link Wyatt Earp, himself, or anyone else with the “Buntline Specials.”

One Lake apologizer recently said of the Buntlines: “There is too much evidence in the writings by and about the men who owned them to doubt their existence.” Interestingly enough, he then fails to produce a single substantiated particle of this supposed evidence. This writer seems content to hinge his entire argument on Wyatt Earp’s “quote” (as invented by Stuart Lake). Since the authenticity of that passage has already been proved spurious in preceding paragraphs, nothing more needs to be added here. But Lake’s self-appointed champion presents no other examples of the primary source material he so positively claims will prove the existence of the Buntline Specials. Odd perhaps, but an understandable omission, since there is no contemporary evidence he could possibly cite. Nor does he list the title of a single secondary source published prior to Stuart Lake which includes the Buntline presentation.

As already noted, it’s possible to formulate other theories but doing so requires the discarding of Lake’s original story. So, in attempting to prove something having absolutely no basis other than one writer’s comments, it becomes necessary to contradict the tale until the original version, for all practical purposes, no longer exists. But then the legend itself is suddenly without origin. Any

139. The author is aware of two accounts, one given by George Bolds and the other written by George Earp, one of Wyatt’s cousins, in which both claim to have seen Earp with the Buntline Special in Dodge City in the late 1870’s.—James D. Horan, Across the Cimarron (New York, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1956), p. 76, based on interviews with George Bolds; and George W. Earp, “I Rode With Wyatt Earp,” Reader’s Digest, Pleasantville, N.Y., v. 73, no. 440 (December, 1958), p. 182. Both accounts were published long after the appearance of Frontier Marshal. A close examination of each reveals they are so garbled as to render themselves of little or no value as historical sources. They instead appear to be more an example of acquired information mentally substituted for an event claimed to have been experienced decades before.

140. Mrs. Holliday’s dictated life story—unpublished manuscript—cited through the courtesy of John D. Gilchriese. Kate Holliday, of course, lived to see the publication of Frontier Marshal but considered it a piece of fiction. Virgil Earp’s wife, Allie, being more direct, called the book “a pack and passel of lies!”

variation disregarding Lake’s story so completely becomes as much a fantasy as the parent account published over 40 years ago.

In 1907 Bat Masterson wrote a series of vignettes for Alfred Henry Lewis’s *Human Life* magazine entitled “Famous Gun Fighters of the Western Frontier.” His choices included two of the supposed Buntline Special recipients, Wyatt Earp and Bill Tilghman. Nowhere in these two articles does Bat mention the Buntline Specials.\(^{142}\) Nor did Thomas Masterson, Bat’s younger brother and an admirer of Wyatt, bring up the subject in providing material for a Wichita newspaper article in 1938, although he alluded to *Frontier Marshal*: “Mr. Masterson says that much of the stuff written about Earp is false. . . . Stuart Lake recently wrote a biography of Earp and Mr. Masterson says that Lake did not always present the true picture but allowed exaggeration to get into his book.”\(^{143}\) Furthermore, Mrs. Tilghman significantly fails to mention Buntline, either the weapon or the man, in the lengthy biography she wrote about her husband’s career.

Since the Buntline presentation story is so blatantly false, readers may well ask: why would Stuart Lake have invented it? There are a number of plausible theories. First, the Buntline Special’s odd appearance makes Wyatt Earp stand out from the crowd. This, in turn, helps mold him into the West’s truly unique marshal—exactly what Stuart Lake hoped for. It wasn’t by accident he reported Bat Masterson and Bill Tilghman cutting their Specials back to standard size, for then no one but Wyatt could become famous through its use. Charlie Bassett and Neil Brown presented no competition, since, outside of a handful of serious researchers, no one knows much about their careers. This is not the case with Masterson and Tilghman, so Lake very conveniently has them without their Buntline Specials two sentences after receiving them.

By giving five men the guns instead of just Wyatt, and allowing two others to keep theirs, Lake made the story sound less contrived and therefore more authentic. Yet, for all practical purposes, he limits the weapon’s use solely to his super-hero Wyatt Earp.

Another theory with merit is that at the time Stuart Lake was writing *Frontier Marshal* “Wild Bill” Hickok remained the most popular Western blood-and-thunder hero. Since it was generally believed, albeit with some confusion, that Hickok had received a pair of silver-mounted, engraved revolvers with ivory grips (pre-

\(^{142}\) In another turn of the century article, Bat speaks critically of six-shooters in general, saying they “had a tendency to shoot too high and to the left.”—William Barclay “Bat” Masterson, “The Tenderfoot’s Turn” (reprinted), *Gun Quarterly*, v. 1, no. 2 (Fall, 1990), p. 66. This article would have proven an excellent opportunity for Masterson to have condemned the Buntline Specials, but he made no mention of Wyatt’s “favorite.”

\(^{143}\) *Wichita Eagle*, July 24, 1938.
sumed to be 1851 navy Colts),\textsuperscript{144} why not Wyatt Earp? If special guns are good enough for Hickok a special gun is certainly good enough for Earp. Thus the birth of a still deeply entrenched Western legend.

The “Buntline Specials” are simply the product of a literary myth. Their purported authenticity has purposely been covered here with as much depth and detail as possible within acceptable space limits. For obvious reasons, the author also felt it necessary to discuss the voluminous literature which has grown up around the Buntline Specials—in all cases expanding the legend even more. This was not done for the sake of personal chastisement of their authors’ efforts, nor as a comic interlude, but rather for a clearer understanding of the historical perspective.

The conclusions, therefore, as to the complete falseness of the tale are derived from what the author hopes is a reasonable interpretation of all available evidence, positive as well as negative, which remains the only valid means of approaching historical questions of this nature. Stuart Lake failed to do this in his glorification of Wyatt, as have Earp’s detractors. As one authority concludes:

The complex life of Wyatt Earp is difficult to comprehend and analyze, when prejudice destroys logic and foregone conclusions based on personal dislike overshadow any firm attempt at historical rationalization. To do Wyatt Earp justice one must not only present the documented facts, but also place him in the perspective of the conditions then existing on the frontier that helped to mold him into the unique person that he was.\textsuperscript{145}

It is hoped that within the limited scope of this study that goal has been at least partially achieved without traveling too far afield into other aspects of Wyatt Earp’s or Ned Buntline’s fascinating life stories.

Over the years Wyatt Earp has become a part of the great American legend, ranking in stature with the most prominent semi-mythical figures of the American West. The Buntline Special, too, has become a major part of this myth—a bizarre melange of truth and fiction, documentation and speculation, misrepresentation of facts through ignorance and through deliberate distortion as well as outright lies and inventive prose. Thus, the picture most Americans have of this man remains the shadowy image of a deep-rooted fantasy. But when the real Wyatt Earp is finally drawn into focus for the general public, many will be surprised to realize that truth is far more intriguing than fiction.

\textsuperscript{144} Although these pistols were thought to have come from one of two sources—Sen. Henry M. Wilson in appreciation for Hickok’s services in guiding him and a party of friends during an 1869 tour of the West, or from the Union Pacific railroad as a reward for “Wild Bill’s” “cleaning up” of Hays City—Hickok’s latest biographer now feels that all the available evidence suggests the entire story to be a hoax.—Joseph C. Rosa to the author, September 23, 1971.

\textsuperscript{145} John D. Gilchriese, reviewer, Wyatt Earp 1848 to 1880 the Untold Story and Wyatt Earp 1879 to 1892 the Man & the Myth, by Ed Bartholomew.—Arizona and the West, v. 7, no. 2 (Spring, 1965), p. 68.