

from Gary McCarthy's

**OUR AMERICAN WEST**

Clay Allison  
*The Cowboy Gunfighter*

Counted among the most dangerous men of his day, Clay Allison differed from his contemporaries in that he was never a frontier lawman or outlaw and always considered himself a hard-working cowhand. But he didn't start out that way. Clay was born on a poor dirt farm in Tennessee in 1840, and until he was twenty-one helped his parents eke out a living. In 1862, Clay enlisted in the Confederacy's Tennessee Light Artillery but was discharged shortly thereafter for a serious "mental disorder". The army surgeon's report reads in part, *"incapable of performing the duties of a soldier because of a blow to the head received many years ago. Emotional or physical excitement produces paroxysmal of mixed character, partly epileptic and partly maniacal."*

Though Clay re-enlisted and served as a scout to the end of the Civil War, the surgeon's term, *"maniacal"* is the key to a pattern of violent behavior that marked him as one of the most savage of gunmen. With his beloved South devastated by the war and overrun by carpetbaggers, Clay and his family moved to Texas and he worked for many of the most prominent ranchers of the period, including Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving. But cowboying is mostly hard work and Clay yearned for excitement. He never lasted long on one job, and very soon his reputation as a hard-drinking, dangerous man began to spread. In 1870, he is reputed to have gotten drunk and killed a man named Johnson

in a knife fight. Ordinarily, such a thing would cause no great stir except that this time, the fight took place in a deep grave that the two combatants had dug for the loser.

Another chilling incident about this time happened when Clay and some friends were drinking in Elizabethtown, New Mexico, and a hysterical woman charged into the saloon screaming that her trapper husband, Charles Kennedy, had murdered their infant. Clay and his friends raced to the woman's cabin, found Kennedy dead drunk and hauled him to jail. When bones were found hidden near the cabin, but medical examiners were unable to identify them as either human or animal, Clay and his friends broke into the jail and strung the bellowing Kennedy from the rafters of a nearby slaughterhouse. And as if justice still had not been served in Allison's fevered mind, he beheaded the corpse, impaled the grisly trophy on a pike and carried it nearly thirty miles to amuse his favorite drinking friends in a Cimarron saloon.

By now, Clay Allison had a gunfighter's reputation and a man named Chunk Colbert was jealous. He decided that killing Clay Allison would make him famous and so he invited Clay to dine with him at the fancy Clifton House. The other patrons no doubt were upset to have two such infamous gunmen eating in their presence, and with good reason. Imagine their surprise when, after the dinner was over and coffee had been served, Chunk Colbert reached for his cup with his left hand above the table while his right streaked for his six-gun under the table. Clay saw the move, drew and fired in the blink of an eyelash, killing Chunk with a bullet through the forehead. Afterwards, Clay was asked why he consented to Chunk's invitation and replied offhandedly, "Because I didn't want to send a man to hell on an empty stomach."

In the 1870's, a powerful group of men called the Santa Fe Ring existed in New Mexico. The ring was composed of politicians, office holders and entrepreneurs who sought to dominate the territory's political and economic affairs. Many of the Santa Fe Ring were rich northerners, a fact which automatically made them Clay Allison's enemies. When the Reverend F.J. Tolby, Cimarron's Methodist minister denounced the Santa Fe Ring,

he was murdered. Clay Allison was incensed. Convinced that a man named Cruz Vega was the assassin, Allison and several of his friends lynched Vega, but not before Vega confessed that his friend, another noted outlaw, Manuel Cardenas, was Tolby's real murderer. Though Cardenas was arrested, Clay and his friends grew impatient and stormed the jail where they shot Cardenas to death.

But this murderous frontier episode still was not quite over. Manuel Cardenas' friend, the greatly feared Pancho Griego swore to even the score. The two enemies met in front of the St. James Hotel on the evening of November 1, 1875. To everyone's amazement, they spoke cordially, walked inside the hotel together and had a drink while the customers beat a hasty retreat. Setting their empty shot glasses down on the polished bar, they drew their guns and three shots from Clay's revolver terminated that bloody New Mexico vendetta.

Years later, after driving a herd of cattle to Wyoming, Clay Allison developed a terrible toothache. The Cheyenne dentist mistakenly drilled a hole in the wrong tooth. Now howling, cussing and in even greater pain, Clay jumped out of the man's dental chair and rushed to another dentist. His pain finally relieved, he returned to the first dentist, bound him in his chair, grabbed the struggling man's pliers and ripped a tooth out of the dentist's mouth while he screamed in agony. Clay later admitted he would have yanked out every one of the man's teeth if the sheriff and half of Cheyenne's population had not come running to the poor dentist's rescue.

Stories abound about how Clay Allison rode into Dodge City and challenged Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp to a gunfight. No one knows exactly what happened, but a peace was made and Allison left with checking in his guns, as was the law, but also without using them to add to his infamous reputation. Perhaps he finally was mellowing with age. Married now and forty-seven years old, the father of one daughter and another on the way, he'd become a moderately successful cattle rancher.

Clay Allison's death in 1887 was not by the gun or the

hangman's rope as you'd expect but by an accident so freakish that it could never be used in fiction. Driving a wagon home after buying supplies and drinking a little whiskey, he toppled out of the wagon seat while reaching for a sack that had fallen into the road. The heavily loaded wagon crushed his neck with its big iron-rimmed wheels and he died in the dust of strangulation. A huge crowd attended his funeral and burial at the Pecos Cemetery in Pecos, Texas, mostly in celebration or out of curiosity, I expect.

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