

Henry Was The Friend Of Good Guys, Bad Guys, And Indians!

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By W.H. Lamb

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Henry C. Hooker (1828-1907) Founder of the Sierra Bonita Ranch, First American Cattle Ranch in Arizona (1872).
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I've always admired the late, great actor and patriot, Charlton Heston, who was a staunch friend of our Second Amendment firearm liberties for most of his life, and as President of the National Rifle Association for 5 years, he stood firm and strong in his support of our Constitutional liberties. He was also a staunch supporter of the liberties of all Americans, having marched with Dr. Martin King in the "civil rights" struggles of the 1960's.

While I didn't always support some of Dr. King's ideas or admire some of his associates, I did then and do now agree that our venerable Constitution must apply to all Americans, or it applies to none of us. Mr. Heston believed likewise, and was never afraid to "stand up" and be counted, even when it was politically unpopular to do so. And believe me, as President of the NRA for several years he took tremendous "heat" and personal vilification from the ill-informed mouth breathers and the scurrilous progressive/socialist/Dumbocrat supporters of disarming Americans who delighted in attacking him and his support of our Constitutional right to keep and bear arms for all lawful purposes.

But Charlton Heston is not the topic of this article. A character he portrayed in the film, **Tombstone**, released in 1993, caught my eye when I was researching historical information regarding that "wild and wooly" place in the desolate Arizona Territory, the 1880's silver mining "boomtown" of Tombstone, where I spent a memorable day with my wife way back in 1979 (yes—we did walk on the site of the famous "**Gunfight At The O.K. Corral**"). In that exciting film, not entirely historically accurate, Heston portrayed rancher **Henry Clay Hooker (1828-1907)**, who was a **real** person who lived a fairly exciting life. I'm indebted to *Wikipedia* and to the article by Martin T. Smith in *Nevada Trivia*, titled "*Henry Clay Hooker*", for the basics of this story of a self-made cattle baron, and I've quoted somewhat from both of those sources.

Most Americans have never heard of Henry Hooker, other than to possibly recall Wyatt Earp's reference to his friend, Henry Hooker, in the "Tombstone" film. Many might assume he was a fictional character,

but in actuality Hooker was a very prominent and quite wealthy rancher—an old west "cattle baron"—who formed the first cattle ranch

in Arizona Territory, which ultimately became the largest American ranch in the land ruled (and threatened) by the Apache Native People. Hooker was not a Westerner at all. He was born in New Hampshire, on a farm in Hinsdale that had belonged to his great-grandfather. His youthful "travel lust" took him to Kansas City, Missouri in 1849, where he worked for the U.S. Indian Dept. Perhaps Kansas City got "too populated" for him, because in 1852 he moved west and settled in El Dorado County, California. A few years later, in 1856, he married Elizabeth Rockwell. Hooker

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worked as a miner for a short time then they moved to a place called Hangtown, California, which later was renamed Placerville (probably a wise decision). In Hangtown he opened a mercantile/hardware store, selling supplies to the locals and mostly to the miners who flocked to the area.

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To supplement his income needs for his growing family, Hooker would periodically buy cattle there in California and drive them over the Sierra Nevada Mountains to sell to the inhabitants of Carson City or Genoa, Nevada. Eventually his cattle “sideline” became quite profitable. Disaster struck, however, in August of 1865, when a fire wiped out most of Hangtown, including Hooker’s business and home, leaving them with only the clothes on their backs and about \$1000 cash he had hidden away. Ever resourceful, Hooker knew that the miners working on the new “Comstock Lode” in Nevada would pay just about anything for something “different” to eat. Accordingly, he bought 500 turkeys for \$1.50 each (about \$24 in today’s currency), hired a “turkey drover”, bought two herding dogs, and started off driving his “herd” of turkeys over the mountains.

Disaster almost descended upon Hooker during his “turkey drive”, for near his destination his turkeys balked and refused to move. Using his dogs to try to move them, they so startled the birds that they all took flight right off a cliff, but resettled themselves down in the valley below, which as fate would have it, was close to his destination. Hooker rounded them up and “drove” them right through the middle of Carson City, where he sold them for \$5.00 each, realizing a tidy profit of \$1750 (about \$28,000 in today’s currency).

HENRY’S TURKEYS STARTED HIS FORTUNE

Hooker arrived in the sparsely populated (except for the Apaches) Arizona Territory in 1867 with the profits from the sale of his “turkey herd”. He brought 10,000 Longhorns from Texas into this area in 1872 and began supplying beef to the U.S. Military. During one of his cattle drives from Texas into Arizona Territory, his herd stampeded. He finally found them grazing in a fertile and verdant valley with lots of water and tall grass. This was later named “Sulphur Springs Valley”, and it was here that Henry Hooker eventually settled with his family to try to become a successful cattle rancher. But the local Apaches also knew of this valley and considered it theirs. Constant raids against the few white settlers who had ventured into the area had discouraged permanent settlement, and Hooker experienced constant raids against him by the local Apaches.

When The War For Southern Independence ended, the U.S. Army built a post at Fort Grant, about ten miles from Sulphur Springs Valley, and this greatly reduced threats from Apache raids. By 1872, with his large herd in place in the valley, he made the decision to locate his ranch there. He named it **Sierra Bonita Ranch** because of the good views of the mountains that rimmed the valley. Hooker built a large main ranch house and a smaller adobe fort to defend his family and ranch hands against the still occasional raids by the Apaches (these buildings still exist on the ranch). Hooker tried hard to become friends with the local Apache tribes and did succeed to some extent. Within a few years he became what was described as “a trusted friend of Cochise, the Apache Chief”.

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In 1876, with his herd increasing and his ranch prospering, Hooker hired William Bonny, better known as “Billy the Kid”, as one of his ranch hands. Bonny was still a teenager at this time, but had already decided that “honest work” was not for him, despite Hooker’s attempts to keep Bonny on the “right side of the law”. Sometime during these years (I have not been able to document when or how), Hooker befriended Wyatt Earp and his brother, Virgil Earp. On March 27, 1882, after the famous “Earp Vendetta Ride” against the “Cowboys Gang”, Hooker gave shelter to the Earps and their “posse” as they were attempting to leave Arizona Territory and go to New Mexico. Hooker provided new high quality horses to the Earps and the others and refused to accept Wyatt’s proffered payment for them. This historical incident was portrayed in the film, *Tombstone*, which I mentioned previously.

Henry Hooker was always a bit of an “Eastern dude” his entire life, and he **never** wore western or “cowboy” clothing, and even when he was working his cattle out on the range he always wore a suit and a tie. But he established a profitable and very large ranch in those days, and by 1891 he was running around 1.5 million cattle on his open range of around a quarter of a million acres. He survived a disastrous drought in 1891 which wiped out half of his herd, a drought caused in part by overgrazing. But his Sierra Bonita Ranch prospered, and by the time of his death in 1907, Hooker was the wealthiest rancher in Arizona, and his ranch was the largest in that territory. As of 2005, Sierra Bonita was still owned and operated by Henry Hooker’s grand daughter, and was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1964. Today the ranch is much smaller—a “mere” 45,000 acres—but is still being operated as a cattle ranch by Jesse Hooker Davis, the great, great, great grandson of Henry Hooker. It all started with Henry’s decision to drive a flock of turkeys over the mountains, something that no one had done before! Using the free enterprise system of his young nation, he was willing to “take a risk” for the possibility of great rewards, and his risks paid off. That’s a good lesson for all of us to apply today, especially the nauseating socialists who believe that the world owes them a living.