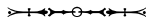


John Ringo
KING *of the* COWBOYS

HIS LIFE AND TIMES
FROM THE HOO DOO WAR
TO TOMBSTONE



SECOND EDITION

DAVID JOHNSON

NUMBER 6 IN THE A. C. GREENE SERIES



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Foreword by Chuck Parsons ©2008 University of North Texas Press

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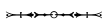
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This one is dedicated with love to Ieva and Kris, the two women
that have made the last thirty plus years of my life special.
You are the best.





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Foreword

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN YEARS after his suicide, the name John Ringo continues to fascinate historians, writers, movie goers and the public at large. The fact that he developed a reputation as a fighting man in Texas before becoming involved in the Tombstone, Arizona Territory conflicts of the early 1880s only added to his reputation. One obituary spoke of him as a well-known individual who needed no introduction. In fact one editor called him the “King of the Cowboys” when that word was synonymous with the words “rustler” or “hardcase.”

Even without such works as Stuart N. Lake’s fictionalized biography of Wyatt Earp, in which the claim is made that Earp cleaned up the wild cow-towns of Kansas, as well as bringing law to Arizona Territory, Ringo would have no doubt become a famous—or notorious—individual of the Old West. Lake’s book, *Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshal*, published in 1931, tended to downplay Ringo’s importance in the Tombstone saga, certainly not giving him the attention Walter Noble Burns did in his *Tombstone: An Iliad of the Southwest*, wherein Ringo becomes the Hamlet of the Southwest, quoting Shakespeare and speaking Latin among other languages. These two works brought great attention to Ringo’s name; numerous magazine articles also focused on Ringo as well, mainly during his Tombstone period. Today the writings of Lake and Burns are considered semi-fictional; certainly what either author said of Ringo is to be treated with caution.

Ironically Wyatt Earp, who, according to some writers, killed Ringo but in reality did not, gained immortality in gunfighter literature by creating the myth of his own invincibility. Earp’s initial efforts at getting his life story into print with the help of John Flood, failed

miserably. Only through the literary talent of Stuart N. Lake did this man's name become a household word. Consequently there are perhaps over a score of biographies of various degrees of accuracy available to the Earp buffs.

Ringo was just the opposite, never trying to gain notoriety, at times perhaps covering his "paper trail," much to the dismay of the serious historian. Had he been followed around by an *amanuensis*, however, his reaction no doubt would have been whatever the 19th century equivalent of "get lost" was. But Ringo's life needs to be told; his career needs to be researched and recorded accurately. Now, over a dozen decades after his body was discovered, Ringo has achieved the status of a celebrity. Two recent efforts from Hollywood—*Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp*—have John Ringo as a prominent character, in particular the former.

Prior to these recent films Hollywood gave some attention to Ringo, albeit basically in name only. In 1939 John Ford produced what some have called the "best western ever made"—*Stagecoach*—which catapulted John Wayne to stardom for his portrayal of the Ringo Kid. If not the character, at least the name was taken over by this United Artists production. A little over a decade after *Stagecoach* another top Hollywood star utilized the name: Gregory Peck starred in the role of Jimmy Ringo in the 1950 production *The Gunfighter*. Here there is little similarity to the real life Ringo's career. Peck portrays an aging gunfighter who wishes to forget his violent past, yet younger would-be gunfighters want to challenge him to take on his reputation. Of course he can not simply forget his past to live normally and must sacrifice his own life.

In 1954 Republic Pictures produced a series of television westerns, *Stories of the Century*, released now in DVD format entitled *Legends of the Old West*—placing their hero, railroad detective Matt Clark, up against most of the big names of the Old West: Doc Holliday, Geronimo, Judge Roy Bean, Quantrill, and of course John Ringo. There is still very little factual about the production, in spite of the claim that the story was "based on official newspaper files and records." Ringo

is described as a “famous and notorious gunfighter and smuggler” although no smuggling is portrayed in the program, unless an oblique reference to cattle rustling can be counted as “smuggling.” Ringo is also described as the “most dangerous killer in Arizona.” In reality he killed no one in Arizona Territory. Ringo has become a fatalist, knowing he will succumb to the dread 19th century disease of tuberculosis. Thus life is meaningless to him, his only apparent desire being to live a life of relative opulence with good liquor, fancy clothes, and occasionally killing someone with his “handkerchief duel” wherein Ringo and the opponent each grab hold of the ends of an oversized handkerchief, draw their pistols and at such close range one or both will be shot to death. Curiously in this production Ringo does die in July of 1882, as did the real Ringo, and close to water, although it is a lake instead of the creek which actually coursed its way close to the tree in which Ringo sat and took his own life. Here Ringo dies of thirst after trying to escape detective Matt Clark’s pursuit of him across the deadly *Jornada del Muerto*. No bullet in the head brain here.

Due to the popularity of television’s *Bonanza*, star actor-turned-singer Lorne Greene recorded a ballad with Ringo’s name which became a popular hit. In it, Ringo is found near death by the ballad singer. Then the two men’s paths diverge—the narrator becoming a lawman while Ringo becomes an outlaw. Recovering from his wounds Ringo practices the fast draw and becomes deadly accurate with his six-shooter. The lines are haunting and beautiful: “With lead and blood he gained such fame/ All through the West they feared the name . . . of Ringo.”

Thus, with Hollywood productions of little value, television programs with only a trace of accuracy, even a song—and perhaps a ballet and countless periodicals featuring stories dealing in some aspect of Ringo’s career—it is not surprising that the authentic life of John Peters Ringo remained largely undocumented. It is not easy to devote years to studying the life of a man who cared little for preserving a paper trail, avoided the law on occasion, chose to live on the outskirts of the law, abused liquor and played with Fate at the gambling tables.

What Dave Johnson has done with this revised and expanded biography of one of the Old West's most popular figures is to delve into those hard-to-locate records to determine who the real John Ringo was. In so doing he has without a doubt read miles and miles of microfilm, visited courthouses numerous times where Ringo lived, searched newspapers, court records, documents in a multitude of archives, conducted interviews with descendants of Ringo's contemporaries. Previous Ringo "biographers" obviously could have devoted the time and energy to search out obscure records, but chose not to. Literary creativity is much easier. The passion to learn as much as possible about the life of the man who may indeed have been a Hamlet among outlaws, as well as King of the Cowboys, was not present within those other writers and historians, as it has been in Dave Johnson. Western buffs as well as students of American history and biography are to be grateful to Johnson for this accomplishment, providing us with a complete biography of the gunfighter from Indiana, John Peters Ringo.

Chuck Parsons
Luling, Texas
September 2006

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CHAPTER

“I pray God we may get along safely”

MOST WRITERS BEGIN JOHN RINGO'S LIFE during 1864 using Mary Ringo's journal, kept during their trip to California. It was originally transcribed by Mattie Ringo in 1942. Only three months after she finished it, Mattie died, and another fourteen years passed before her children published a printed version of her transcript in limited edition.¹ In 1989 the journal was first published commercially and made available for researchers.²

Unfortunately however, it has been used indiscriminately as “evidence” for predetermined agendas. Using the journal as his authority, one writer suggests the document indicates Mary was neither “given to thoughtful observations and effusions” nor prone to either introspection or analysis, adding that her “lack of grammatical skills leads to the conclusion that she lacked the skills necessary for clarification of her thoughts.”³ It is a harsh judgment, but is the journal alone, as printed by grandson Frank Cushing, adequate for this determination considering the circumstances under which it was written? Dr. William K. Hall had access to the diary in 1970. Hall insightfully writes, “I find the diary quite interesting although a bit laconic. But when you think back to the conditions under which it was written—the extreme



Mary Peters Ringo. *Courtesy author's collection.*

hardships and the intense fatigue the poor woman must have suffered you are amazed she had the courage at the end of the day to write anything at all.”⁴

A note in the journal provides further insight. “The contents of this *Journal of Mrs. Mary Ringo*’ was taken from a copy of the original manuscript which has become quite illegible over the past ninety-two years. We have followed the original spelling, punctuation and capitalization.”⁵ If the original journal was “quite illegible” in 1956, it doubtless was already quite faded when Mattie transcribed it in 1942. Combined with Mattie’s failing eyesight, this could contribute to irregularities of grammar.

Obviously Mary kept the journal for her own pleasure. When she wrote it is unlikely she considered that historical researchers would be interested in her family. The journal was intended as a memory jogger for her letters home and for her own amusement. Mary also had five children, two of them less than five years old, was pregnant with a sixth, and had to maintain a family on the trail. It is a wonder that she managed to keep a journal at all.

The family left Liberty on May 18, 1864. Mattie recalled: "We had two large covered wagons, one drawn by oxen and one by mules, we brought a lot of things, a large bed and dresser, a number of heavy books besides all the things necessary for a long trip."⁶ That the family needed two wagons, one of which carried "heavy books" does not indicate poverty or illiteracy. Many families had far less.

Mary recorded their departure with obvious sadness. "Left my family and started on my long trip across the plains, went 10 miles, had some trouble with the oxen and camped for the night and here I took my first lesson in camp life, cooked my supper and went to bed but couldn't sleep until after the chickens crowed for day and after a short nap I awoke."⁷

On May 19 they reached Leavenworth, Kansas. Mary reports that "the children have the pleasure of seeing a steamboat." After crossing the river, they purchased supplies in town. John was driving the oxen. Here a "gentleman by the name of Owen drives the mules up in the city for me while Mr. Ringo helps Johnny with the oxen here."

The following day the Tipton, "Cirby," [*sic*: Kirby] and "Dr. Moors" families joined the Ringos in Leavenworth.⁸ One of the Tiptons' wheels broke and the party stopped to repair it. Mary's entries for the next several days record little more than the weather and distance traveled. On June 1, rain forced the train to stop. Mary noted that the "gentlemen went fishing and caught a great many fish." The company spent the evening listening to some of the travelers playing their violins.

Six days later, on June 7, 1864, the train experienced its initial brush with sudden, violent death: "Today Johnnie got his foot hurt quite badly by the wheels running over it . . . a little boy was run over by a wagon

and killed and a wagon master by the name of Hase [Hays?] killed one of his teamsters, shot him through the head. The murdered man leaves a wife and children.”⁹

The company remained in camp on the eighth to hunt. “We lay over for the gentlemen to go buffalo hunting, they stay all day and until one o’clock at night, they came back very much elated having killed a nice buffalo . . . Johnnie goes along not withstanding his foot is very sore, he says they saw a great many Elk and Antelopes.”

As June progressed Mary’s entries grew longer. On the twelfth she posted letters to her sisters, Vienna and Enna.¹⁰ The following day they reached Fort Phil Kearny, where hopes for letters from home were dashed. The next day, Mary noted that John was ill: “Johnnie has a chill when we stop and now seems quite sick. I hope it may not be anything serious. Johnnie remains quite sick tonight.”

John’s illness did not prevent the company from moving on the following day. On June 18 Mary noted they “passed fewer ranches than any day yet.” They also found an Indian scaffold, which they observed but did not molest. Mary found it of extreme interest, noting that the body was “not straightened as we straighten our dead but the feet are doubled round most to its head and it is tied up in blankets.”

On the twenty-first the company stopped to gather wood. “Mr. Ringo, John and Allie [Martin Albert Ringo] take the wagon and go up a canyon some 2 ½ mi. and get plenty of good dry Cedar, they tell me it is the most beautiful place in these mountains, every variety of flowers. We hitch up at noon and travel 10 miles and camp on a lake called Fremont—it is a beautiful place.” This is hardly the writing of a woman “not given to thoughtful observations.” Of Lake Fremont she writes: “To look at it you would not think it any ways deep but it was over the cattle[']s back[s], we had a laughable time driving them across the lake, some of them would jump in and go under as though they enjoyed it very much.”

Similar entries follow. On June 23 she saw some antelope she thought were “beautiful.” Three days later she and Martin walked to the river whose “water does look so swift, they are crossing wagons quite

fast." She also wrote that Indians visited the camp. One had a saber, and when asked "where he got it, he said he killed a soldier and took it."

Mary had natural curiosity and humor. On July 9 she notes she "saw some beautiful flowers." On July 11 she recorded a more sobering event. "This morning we have to mend the wagon and I take a long walk and climb to the top of the highest bluff, on one of them is the grave of W. Cramer who was shot by accident. We have several Indians to come in our camps and trade for buffalo robes and antelope skins. . . . In the night the wolves come in and howl and scares me a good deal at first."

Mary's enthusiasm continued unabated. On July 13, 1864, they passed "the great Courthouse rock . . . I would have been delighted to have gone up close to it." The following day they passed Chimney Rock. Mary writes "this is another grand edifice, you can see it for some 20 miles, it is a 150 feet high, the chimney being some 70 feet in height." Mary also noted mundane matters. On the night of July 13-14 one of the Ringos' mules, Kate, ran off with a horse belonging to the Tipton family. Martin spent most of the day hunting for the wayward animals before finding them.

What none of the train knew was that troubles with the Sioux were continuing. On August 18, 1862, the Santee Sioux had gone on the warpath in Minnesota. The uprising has been ascribed to "a combination of ineptitude and deceit, cultural and racial arrogance, and obscene cheating and greed" that pushed the Santee beyond endurance.¹¹ Into this war zone the emigrants now rode.

On July 15 the train had a brush with an Indian war party. They had traveled about ten miles to a "telegraph office" where they were warned of war parties attacking wagon trains. "We did not think much of it and had gone on some 2 miles when they attacked [*sic*] two of our wagons." The wagons had taken the wrong road but the main group moved on "knowing that they could see us and would cross the prairie and come to us."

At that moment of vulnerability, the Indians attacked. The wagons were lucky. Firing from the train forced the attackers to flee across the

river where they killed a man on another train. The same day a wagon train led by a Mr. Morris joined that of the Ringo family, swelling the number of wagons to sixty-two.

On July 16 they passed Scott's Bluff. Three days later there was a near tragic encounter with Indians. The party had traveled some ten miles at night but formed a defensive corral twice, "thinking the Indians were going to attack us but we mistook friendly Indians and one of our train fired at them . . ." Fortunately no one was injured. Mary anticipated trouble "as the Indian has gone to the Fort to inform against us." Her premonition was correct. The immigrants were detained until they made peace with the Indians by paying them flour, bacon, sugar, and coffee. At Fort Laramie Mary also received a letter from her twin sister Martha.

The train left the fort on July 21. On July 25 news of hostilities arrived. "This morning early some emigrants came to camp who had a man killed by the Indians last night . . . I pray God we may get along safely." Two days later, Mary wrote, "We find posted on a tree a notice that the Indians have killed six men near here. We hear they had a fight ahead of us." Tensions ran high, and on July 28 Mary wrote that a raiding party killed some men and took the women prisoner three miles from camp, in what is known as the Kelly-Larimer massacre.¹²

It was a harrowing time. On the twenty-ninth the party passed "the corpse of a man lying by the side of the road, scalped." The same night a man named Davis went out to gather his horses and was shot through the arm.¹³ The wagon train spent some tense moments awaiting an attack, and the men guarded the train through the night.

Worse came on July 30. William H. Davenport wrote:

The shooting of Mr. Davis created considerable excitement in camp, as we expected to be attacked by Indians in force. The whole company stood guard during the night so as to be prepared in case we were attacked. Just after daylight on the morning of the 30th ult. Mr. Ringo stepped outside of the wagons, as I suppose for the purpose of looking around to see if Indians were in sight, and his shot gun went off accidentally in his own hands, the load entering at his right eye

and coming out at the top of his head. At the report of his gun I saw his hat blown up twenty feet in the air and his brains were scattered all directions. . . . He was buried near the place he was shot in as decent a manner as was possible with the facilities on the plains.¹⁴

The shock of Martin's death to Mary was profound: "And now Oh God comes the saddest record of my life for this day my husband accidentally shot himself and was buried by the wayside and oh, my heart is breaking, if I had no children how gladly would I lay me down with my dead . . . may no one ever suffer the anguish that is breaking my heart, my little children are crying all the time."¹⁵

A modern writer states Martin received a quick burial in a hidden grave.¹⁶ This baseless tale is not supported by Davenport's account. In 1982 historian Ed Bartholomew located the grave. Bartholomew described the discovery succinctly: "in 1982 I worked hundreds of miles of the Oregon Trail and finally walked up to two lonely graves. I knelt down in the brush and inspected a flat gravestone which evidently had lain there over a century . . . I made out a faint inscription on the nearly buried headstone. It read simply, 'M. RINGO.'"¹⁷

Martin was killed while raising his gun. It got "caught in his boot strap as the boots were worn over his pants."¹⁸ His death was a brutal blow to the family, and sympathetic government officials offered Mary an escort of soldiers to return to Missouri. She declined because it "wouldn't seem like home without father."¹⁹

The train moved onward on July 31. "I and Allie drive our mules they are very gentle and go so nicely." One author has seized on this and poses the question of where John was.²⁰ The journal clearly states John had driven the oxen since leaving Liberty.²¹ "Young John was 14 years old. A young man doing a man[']s work. It was his duty and obligation to see the family through to San Jose." John was certainly capable. "Young John was a crack shot at 14 years of age. He provided much of the caravan with birds and game along the way."²² For all practical purposes John Ringo left his childhood behind that tragic day in Wyoming.



Martin Ringo's gravesite. *Courtesy author's collection.*

Mary was undecided about her plans. The *Liberty Tribune* reported “Mrs. Ringo thinks of going to Salt Lake and of disposing of her outfit at that point and taking the stage from there to California.”²³ Mary’s journal entries do reflect grief, but her interest in her surroundings continued. At the Platte River she noted on August 1, “There is a company of soldiers here who seem to be very fearful of an attack from the Indians.” The following day she writes: “I am so anxious to be moving, time seems so long to me. This morning quite early a good many of the Rappahoes [Arapaho] tribe came in to camp but seemed quite friendly . . . every one is very kind but I am so lonely and tonight Fanny has an attack of cholremorbus and after she gets easy I

rest better than I have any night since the death of my dear husband. Oh God help me to bear this hard trial." And on August 8: "We passed Independence Rock and it is a grand sight, many names are carved there, some few of whom I knew." At Hell's Gate on August 9 she wrote, "I do not think it an appropriate name for the grand and sublime scenery." August 14: "the night is beautiful. We pass several trains and their campfires look so cheerful." On August 21 she wrote "This is the most beautiful river I ever saw—tis very rapid and the water looks green and is very clear." Near Church Buttes on August 24 she found "the sand hills are grand looking domes."

On August 26 they reached Fort Bridger, in what is now Wyoming. John, driving the slower ox wagon, arrived later. August 28 was Sunday, and Mary writes that they stopped. "I am glad that we do. I do not think it is right to travel on the Sabbath."

The wagon train arrived at Salt Lake City on September 6, remaining three days. Mary was reminded of how far they were from home. She received two letters, both written to Martin. One was from her sister Mattie, the other from Elias F. Halliday. Mary toyed with the idea of selling her outfit but was advised not to. She then hired John Donly to drive the oxen so that her son John could drive the mules.

After September 8, Mary's entries became shorter. On the twenty-first she noted that their mule, Bet, was sick. The next significant entry is dated October 6 and hints that something may have gone wrong with her pregnancy: "had a very bad hill to climb and a worse one to descend. I walk down which brings on a spell of sickness for tonight I am very poorly."

On October 7, the family reached Austin, Nevada, where Mary was pleasantly surprised to see her cousin Charley Peters "and my old acquaintance Mr. Ford from Liberty, Mo. They are very kind and assist me to dispose of my oxen and wagon." On October 8 Mary Ringo wrote her final journal entry: "We remain in Austin, Nev."

Mary Ringo and her daughters are portrayed as "humorless," "lacking in introspective powers," and having a "strong religious background."²⁴ The journal shows this assessment both incorrect and unfair.

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While she was certainly religious, the harsh judgment based on her journal and unsubstantiated statements of people who never knew her are wrong. Between May 18 and October 8, 1864, there were twenty Sundays and Mary wrote on every one. Only four reference religious topics. On June 19 she heard a good sermon, and on the twenty-sixth hoped to hear another. The other two entries were August 21 and 28, after Martin's death. Religion did not dominate her. What concerned her most, when not occupied with her children, were her surroundings. Judged from a neutral standpoint she emerges as a well rounded, literate woman.