

Jim Levy, Irish Jewish Gunfighter of the Old West

By William Rabinowitz

It's been a few quite a few years since Chandler, our grandson, was a little boy. His parents would come down with him every winter, free room and board, and happy Grandparents to baby sit. I doubt they actually came to visit much with the geriatrics but it was a free "vacation". It is not always sun and surf and pool and hot in Boynton Beach, Fl. Sometimes it is actually cold and rainy here.

Today was one of those cold and rainy days. Chandler has long since grown up into a typical American young person more interested in "connecting" in Cancun than vegetating in Boynton Beach anymore. I sat down on the sofa, sweatshirt on, house temperature set to "nursing home" hot, a bowl of popcorn, diet coke and turned on the tube.

Speed channel surfing is a game I used to play with Chandler. We would sit in front of the T.V. and flip through the channels as fast as our fingers would move. The object was to try and identify the show in the micro second that the image flashed on the screen. Grandma Sheila sat in her sitting room away from the enervating commotion. She was always busy needle- pointing another treasured wall hanging that will need to be framed and sold someday at an estate sale.

With my trusty channel changer at my side, I began flipping through the stations, scanning for something that would be of interest as fast as possible. I remembered what it was like when the grandson was young. We faced off in a contest of fortitude, eye-hand coordination, mental acuteness and observation. Speed and precision were essential or you would lose. Our fun filled game was annoying to anyone else in the room. Sheila would do her bit away from us. Chandler's parents would retire to their room for an afternoon "siesta." My grandson and I had a grand time.

Twenty seven channels later my finger zipped and froze. Not quite as agile as I used to be, I backed up to the previous station. It was a movie Chandler and I had watched together, it seemed darned near on the same sort of rainy, cold day in sunny Boynton Beach, 12 years ago – "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral." My hand rested my speedy channel changer back into its table top holster; the Pier One wooden remote control holder box made in Indonesia of dark brown rattan. The decorator said we had to have one or the neighbors would talk about us.

I had not seen the movie in a long time. It brought back memories.

Chandler had never seen the classic 1957 movie starring Burt Lancaster as Wyatt Earp and Kirk Douglas as Doc Holiday. Who knew or cared that in reality, Wyatt Earp lived the rest of his life, unmarried, with Josie Marcus, a Jewish girl he got mixed up with in Tombstone. Kirk Douglas was Jewish. Even the writer of the movie script, Leon Uris, was Jewish. Uris became famous a few years later as the author of the major best seller, *Exodus*.

"Gunfight at the O.K. Corral" was a Western of plainly defined good guys and bad guys. We did not pay much attention that the good in the good guys was a little bit blurry. Westerns stirred the

emotions. They left a firm belief that there really is justice and it had existed once in the Old American West.

I used to go to the afternoon movies, as a kid in the last millennium, with \$.50, twenty-five cents for the movie admission, and twenty five cents for a strawberry ice cream Dixie cup and a bag of potato chips. The best seats were the very front row of the giant silver screened theaters. Scrunching down, I craned my head bent across the back of my seat. The movies filled life in twenty foot high Vista Vision, Panavision, Color-Deluxe images, always boots, hoofs and upwards.

Chandler and I watched “Gunfight at the O.K. Corral”, both of us sighed at the end. Adrenalin had filled us with excitement, emotions, adventure and wow! We hummed the theme music together and sat back on the sofa, munching a second big bowl of popcorn drowning in butter.

Sheila will not let me have any butter or salt on my popcorn anymore.

“Grandpa, were there any Jewish gunfighters?” Chandler asked.

“Well let me remember a bit Chandler,” I said.

I put up my hand and stroked my chin in deep, deep thought.....

“You know that picture of our family I have on my desk with all the old people on it. Can you bring that over,” I asked him.

Chandler retrieved the faded black and white family portrait from the 1920’s. Sitting next to me on the couch, I pointed out to him a very old man seated in the front row off to the side in the picture.

“That Chandler was your great, great Uncle Chaim. He was the first of our family to come to this great country. Somebody told him there was gold on the streets just waiting to be picked up. There wasn’t any. But he was an optimist. A friend told him there was gold & silver for the picking in the west. Go west, he was told, go west. Where in the west to go, the friend never said but Uncle Chaim headed west.

Uncle Chaim never did find any gold. The only silver he saw was from change he made in his clothing store in Pinoche, Nevada. . Pinoche was one of the wildest, silver mining boom towns, as lawless and dangerous and mysterious, as they came,” he told me.



Pinoche, Nevada

“Pinoche, Nevada, Grandpa? Uncle Chaim had a clothing store in Pinoche, Nevada. No, really?” Chandler doubted me.

“Yup, he sure did partner”, I said. He was a rip roaring Westerner until he moved back to Cleveland when the silver ran out and somebody threatened to put a hole in him if he didn’t.”

I lifted my hand like a gun and pointed it at Chandler’s belly. He was fascinated.

“Uncle Chaim told me a story, a true story. You can check the history books if you don’t believe me. The story was about a miner he knew in Pinoche, Nevada.

The miner’s name was Jim Levy. He was born in 1842, in Ireland. His parents were Jewish.

Jim had spent a hard day underground digging for silver. At night, as many miners did, he would head into town and find a bar for a cool beer, maybe few hands of cards, perhaps a young lady to talk to. Jim went outside and sat on the front stoop of the Midnight Star Saloon to smoke a cigarette. He saw a street killing. I remember the date. It is Grandma Sheila’s birthday, May 30, 1871,” I told Chandler.

“Grandma was born in 1871?” Chandler asked.

“No, silly, if you ever said I told you”, I quickly corrected, “she was born in 1871, I will be six feet underground. No, her birthday is May 30. I won’t tell you the year but that is how I remember the date. Uncle Chaim told me of the shooting in Pinoche that Jim witnessed.

Jim was sitting on the front stoop of the Midnight Star Saloon when Michael Casey shot Tom Gasson. He was wounded real bad. Gasson lay on his death bed a whole week before finally passing away. Before he died, he bequeathed \$5,000 to any man who would avenge his killing. It was a lot of money in those days, Chandler, a lot of money.

Well at the coroner's hearing, about the shooting and all, Casey claimed it was self defense. Gasson had fired first. Levy was a witness to the whole sordid affair. He testified that Casey had fired first, in an unprovoked shooting.

The coroner could not come to a decision as to what happened. Mike Casey did. After the hearing he tracked down Levy. He found him buying a few things in a local store. Uncle Chaim claimed it was his store and Jim was buying himself a new pair of pants. Well Chandler, Casey called Jim outside. He challenged him to face his charges in a gunfight, like a real man. Jim did not have a gun but accepted the challenge anyway. Rushing back into Uncle Chaim's store he asked if he had a gun. There was a cold fury in his eye, Uncle Chaim said. There was no fear. Uncle Chaim knew better than to argue and gave him his own six shooter. Pistol in hand, Jim went out looking for Casey.

They found each other in the alley behind Uncle Chaim's store. Jim and Casey squared off just like you see in the movies. Each faced each other, gun in hand ready to kill. Casey was a killer feared by all. They both opened fire, Jim's bullet grazed Casey's head. Casey lunged for Levy, his gun ready to put a bullet in his gut, but Levy fired again hitting Casey in the neck. Casey went down. Levy jumped on Casey and smashed his head in with Uncle Chaim's gun.

Casey never had any intention of a fair fight. In the shadows, he had a sidekick David Neagle waiting to shoot Levy. When Casey went down and Jim jumped on top of him, Neagle came from out of the shadows and shot Jim in the jaw before running away. Jim survived the shooting.

Jim was arrested. When Michael Casey died, Jim was tried and acquitted. It was self defense.

Levy's jaw was shattered. His teeth were mangled. His face was forever scarred into a frightening grotesque look, a warning to anyone who saw him. He collected Tom Gasson's \$5,000 bequest.

Levy never returned to mining. He decided to make his living as a "regulator" a hired gun and as a gambler. For the next decade, he made his way from one wild west town to another, from Virginia City, Nevada, to Cheyenne, Wyoming, Deadwood, South Dakota, Leadville, Colorado to Tombstone and Tucson, Arizona.

Uncle Chaim kept up with what happened to Jim. One time, Jim was in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He had just come up from Denver with two Irish friends, Henry Lyons and Charley Storms. It was March 9, 1877, I *recon* from memory, Chandler. Lyons, Storms, Levy and Charlie Harrison were in high stakes card game at Shingle & Locke's Saloon, when Harrison pushed the table back violently and spit out how he hated despicable Irishmen. He was a real American he said. Harrison was known in Cheyenne as a violent gunfighter with quite a few notches on his gun for men he had killed. No one knew the strangers from Denver. No one knew Levy. Harrison looked straight at Levy and called him a low-down Irish cur.

The gunfight broke out in a flash. Everyone was sure that Levy would be lying on the floor, bleeding from a gaping hole in his gut. It was Harrison who was dead instead. No one had heard

of Jim Levy the gunfighter or his reputation before. Harrison had never bad mouthed Levy for being a Jew. He bad mouthed Levy for being an Irishman.

Some folks said that Lyons also was Jewish. I can't tell you that for sure though.

Once again, Levy just avoided being *launched to God* at the end of a hangman's rope. He was tried and acquitted. He was acquitted provided he never return to Cheyenne.

Levy and his friends left town for the gold rush town of Deadwood, South Dakota. It was a tough place to go with a terrible reputation. Wild Bill Hickock, the famed lawman and gunfighter, had been killed there with a bullet to the back of his head. Hickok slumped forward holding his cards, aces and eights, the dead man's hand. Actually, Chandler, any time you are holding a hand of poker and somebody sneaks up and shoots you, it is a dead man's hand.

Well, Jim and his pals made it up to Deadwood. In Deadwood Jim partnered with Mike Goldman, another gambler and gunman.

Mike Goldman, maybe with Jim's help, captured two bush-wacking robbers up in the hills above Deadwood. The robbers had been working for Prescott Webb. Goldman turned them over to Sheriff Seth Bullock. That was the end of the law abidingness for Jim. He, Storms, Lyons and Goldman roamed the Black Hills looking for business wherever they could find it, legal or otherwise. Maybe it was Sheriff Bullock and his Jewish lifelong friend, business partner and Mayor of Deadwood, Sol Starr, who drove them out, Uncle Chaim did not know. Before the gang left South Dakota, Lyons and Storms had been in a number of gunfights. They had killed three men.; that Uncle Chaim was sure about that.

"Chandler, if you wish to be a gunfighter, it is hard to buy health and life insurance," I looked at him sternly.

"Oh, Grandpa, I know that", Chandler grinned.

"So what happened to Jim Levy, Grandpa?"

"Let me see now", I stopped to stroke my chin and pretended I was deep in thought. A moment went by, then another and another.... I closed my eyes.

"Grandpa – are you awake – what happened to Jim Levy?"

"Jim, oh, yes, Jim... . hmmm.

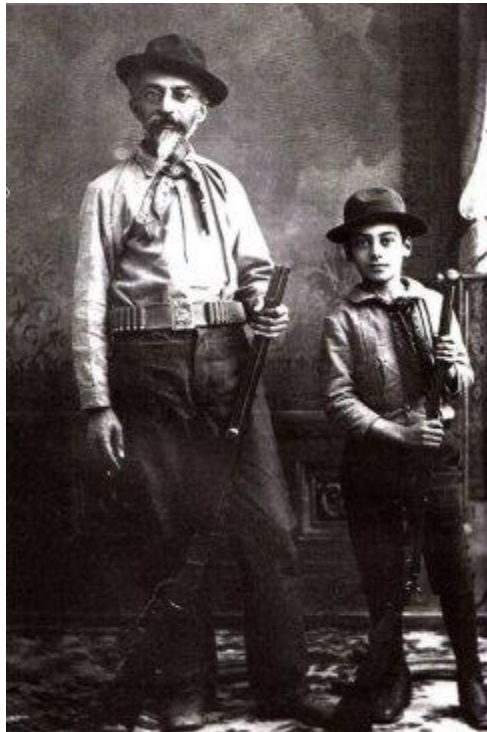
Let me see.... yup, it was June 5, 1882, Jim had been gambling and drinking, at the Fashion Saloon in Tucson, Arizona. Jim was always short tempered especially after his face had been redesigned back in 71 in Pinoche. Don't know what happened for sure but he got into an argument with John Murphy the faro dealer. It got real ugly. Each started calling each other names and riling up each other's temper. There was talk of a shoot out only neither of the men had been allowed to wear their guns into the saloon.

Murphy stalked out fuming. He knew better than to face Levy in a gunfight. Levy stayed behind to drink a few more rounds, gamble and fool around with the saloon's girls. Jim's friends had been careful to keep him away from any guns as he would have shot Murphy as if he were smashing a bug.

Later that night, Jim walked out of the Fashion Saloon heading for his room at the Palace Hotel. He was still unarmed. In the dark, out on the street, John Murphy waited with his friends. As Jim walked by, without a warning, John Murphy pumped three bullets into Jim Levy, killing him instantly.

Murphy and his gang were arrested. They were thrown into the calaboose to await trial but they escaped. They were never seen again.

Jim is buried somewhere in Tucson's cemeteries. It is unknown where. I don't know if he was given a Jewish funeral. Charlie Straus and Nathan Appel lived in Tucson at the time. Charlie became Tucson's first Jewish mayor and Appel, Tucson's first Jewish Sheriff a might later.



Charlie Straus and his son -1883

It was a rough time Chandler. Jim Levy was a gunfighter but you know Chandler, all the stories I have heard about Jim never said he was a particularly bad guy. He was worse than some and better than others. In all told, he was thought to have been in at least 16 gunfights.

Jim Levy was the only known Jewish gunfighter.

At least he was not known as the "baddest of the bad", I continued. "That is what they called Hoodoo Brown from Las Vegas, New Mexico," I said ruefully.

"Hoodoo Brown doesn't sound like a Jewish name Grandpa," Chandler said.

"True enough, Chandler, his real name was Hyman G. Neal. He was supposedly from a good family out of St. Louis. Do I know, for sure if he was Jewish, no. But it is a good story for another time."