Josie Marcus and the Legend of Wyatt Earp

By Barbara Fischkin

WYATT EARP was an icon of the American West. Both an outlaw and a lawman, he was the only man to walk away uninjured from the legendary Gunfight at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona.

But he also attended family Passover Seders — and maybe even wore a yarmulke. Perhaps more tellingly, he is buried in the synagogue-affiliated Hills of Eternity Cemetery outside of San Francisco.

For almost 50 years Earp lived with a common-law wife who was Jewish. Her name was Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp and she was a colorful, remarkable, often confounding adventurer.

She was also mostly absent from history. Then, earlier this year, Lady at the O.K. Corral: The True Story of Josephine Marcus by University Dean Ann Kirschner of Macaulay Honors College was published by Harper Collins. And with that, Kirschner lifted a woman who was emblematic of Americana out of the heap of obscurity.

“We finally have the definitive story of Josie Earp, a key player not only in the events leading up to and after the infamous shoot-out but in crafting much of the mythology that’s been widely accepted ever since,” writes Jeff Guinn, a respected Earp researcher.

A noted beauty as a young woman, Josephine journeyed as an actress from her family home in San Francisco and wound up in Tombstone where she met Earp.

Ultimately, she was a participant in and a witness to more than eight decades of crucial American history, including the Alaskan gold rush, San Francisco in the Gay Nineties and the coming-of-age of Hollywood.

And every so often she retreated with her fabled mate to life lived rough in the desert. The assistance of her students, now graduates. To help shape her vision of Josephine, she discussed her research with them. They were her sounding boards. And in turn the students learned how authors write books.

“I had one of the most memorable weekends of my life working with Ann,” says graduate Dan Blondell, now the content manager at the Central Park Conservancy. “We went to Massachusetts to view a never-before analyzed and barely read archive of Josephine’s letters... research is detective work.”

About her writing process, Kirschner says she has never taken a leave to write her books. She sometimes researches while traveling, writes in the early mornings and on vacations. As for her next book, she says she’s waiting to feel “an itch. Books are like mosquito bites. They itch. It’s not there yet.” Nothing yet to compete with the story of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp, which the University dean calls “a magnificent obsession.”