

AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Doc Holliday, Margaret Mitchell, and Me

by Victoria Wilcox

“Southern Son: The Saga of Doc Holliday is a family story that sweeps from the Old South to the Wild West – territory I know well. My own family heritage includes Civil War soldiers and a Confederate general, ancestors who crossed the Great Plains in covered wagons, and an actress who starred in early Hollywood Westerns.

“But it was a move from California to Atlanta, Georgia, that inspired my love of all things Southern and introduced me to the white-columned house built by the uncle of the legendary Doc Holliday in the last days before the Civil War. Although the Holliday House was one of Georgia’s only remaining unrestored antebellum homes it was slated to be torn down and replaced by a parking lot, so I organized a community group to save the house and founded a non-profit organization to turn it into a museum site. It’s now the Holliday-Dorsey-Fife House Museum, the centerpiece of a beautiful historic district.

“It was while researching the house and its former owners that I uncovered a story almost too good to be true: the infamous Doc Holliday was kin to *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell who modeled her saintly Melanie on Doc’s real-life sweetheart, his cousin Mattie Holliday. As a writer, I couldn’t resist retelling such an amazing melding of literature and legend. But what began as a Southern love story soon became something larger, as I discovered what Mattie Holliday meant when she reminisced that Doc was ‘*a much different man than the one of western legend.*’ Most of the books written about him were wrong; much of the truth had been hidden for generations by a family ashamed of their prodigal son. The real Doc Holliday was more mystery than history.

“Thus began eighteen years of original research and writing to find the life behind the legend, as I followed Holliday’s trail from Georgia to Texas, from the cowboy capital of Dodge City to the silver boomtown of Tombstone, from Leadville at the top of the Rocky Mountains to New Orleans on the Mississippi River. Along the way I interviewed family members, had access to private files and photographs, searched deeds and wills and legal records that had been long misplaced, reenacted shootings and stage robberies and court trials, traveled by steam engine over the rocky mountains and explored ghost towns, silver mines and sulfur caves, all to understand the man that Mattie Holliday loved.

“Although I originally set out to write a traditional biography of Doc Holliday’s life, there were so many things history couldn’t prove that were likely true and seemed essential to telling his story that I chose the novel format instead. As Mattie had said, Doc wasn’t a legend, just an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances. That’s a great start for historical fiction. But I never let the fiction overwhelm the history, being faithful to true events while exploring literary themes and finding universal truths. *Southern Son* is both a real-life family saga and a story of sin and recompense and the redeeming power of love. As best-selling author Pat Conroy told me when we were both guest speakers at the Margaret Mitchell House in Atlanta, ‘*I wish I’d thought of it!*’

“I had also originally planned to tell the story in one long novel, something like a companion to *Gone with the Wind* as the two works shared some major characters – mine the real life models for the people Margaret Mitchell invented. But Doc’s life story spread so far beyond his Southern roots and had such a defined early, middle, and late period that a trilogy seemed a better fit. Now *Southern Son: The Saga of Doc Holliday* is complete in three novels. The story begins with *Inheritance*, as young John Henry Holliday grows up in Georgia during the turbulent times of Civil War and Reconstruction, and continues in *Gone West* and *The Last Decision*. Together, they are an epic tale of the Old South and the Wild West told on a very personal level, true history dramatized and a good story as well.

“There was another intriguing fact that my research turned up, and that gave me a surprisingly personnel connection to the story: Doc Holliday died on November 8th, and Margaret Mitchell and I were both born on November 8th. Now I’m working on novel about a real-life Caribbean pirate and have discovered that his crew was hung for piracy on November 8th. If I were writing my own story, I’d have to do something with such an interesting coincidence!”