That Big Hearted Virgil Earp

Tall, dark, and handsome? --all of that. Virgil Earp and his brothers were big buffalo-shouldered guys who could make every man bellied up to the bar feel prune-ish. The Earps were Iowans, did some growing up here, anyway, their father a gold-digger forever looking west.

I'm talking Wyatt Earp here of OK Corral fame. He was an Iowan. Raised here, in Pella, tulips and wooden shoes down a straight-and-narrow path of Calvinist righteousness. Once upon a time, law-bible-toting, Dutch-speaking Pella was home to the Earp brothers of shelf full of dime novels.

Wyatt's the star, but Wyatt's hero was his big brother Virgil, who got his little brother his very first badge. Virgil got a start in "lawing," as the boys used to call it, as a brothel bouncer. Seems the Earps had a thing for being the law and running brothels.

That, of course, was long after God-fearing Pella.

Virgil served three years in the Civil War, but before he left he got married--sort of--to a sweet Dutch girl named Ellen Rysdam, who had his baby a bit before Pella thought that child should have arrived.

He never took a bullet in the war, but Virge Earp was reported to have been killed, a fable some believe fabricated by two fathers with no real interest in a marriage that never should have been. Once Ellen Rysdam got to believing Virge was dead, she remarried and moved to Oregon. Weren't many tears shed either, people say.

Old man Earp led a wagon train of Pella folks out to California, and soon enough the boys were looking for gold, taking "lawing" jobs for cash to make those dreams come true. Deadwood, Dodge City, Tombstone—each became
home to Pella's Earps, quick learners when it came drink and cards and fisticuffs.

Virgil made his name in Prescott, Arizona, when he toted his Winchester down the street, giving chase to two gunslingers who'd shot at a woman's dog. When he got there, guns were drawn and blazing. Virgil's rifle took out both roisters. The Earps were the wild west.

Even though Virge and Allie, his wife, never had kids, Virge had a thing about children and dogs. "Sounds like some kind of testimonial," his sister-in-law Josephine wrote in her memoir of life with the Earps, "but it's not."

Virgil took a bullet at the OK Corral, then got hit again a few months later, blindsided by some hombre toting a shotgun. Pretty much lost that arm. "Allie," he told his wife, "don't you worry 'cause I still got one arm left to hug you."

Virgil Earp never stopped chasing dreams. Stick a pin in every boom town where he and the Earps left a mark, and the West would be a cushion. He got out to Oregon just twice, and once doesn't count because he's buried there, in Portland, where he visited only once in his life.

Here's what happened. A woman sent a note to let him know she was his daughter; her mother was that Dutch girl he should never have married, the one who thought him dead in the war. That daughter sent Virge and Allie a note, told him who she was; and just like that, Virge and Allie showed up in Portland.

"It was a meeting of great feelings," his sister-in-law remembered, "and after these had been dispensed with, they went to her home." Virge's good wife says this: "All these years and me and Virge never had a baby, and here was
Virge finding out for the first time in his life he had a grown-up young lady daughter, Jane,” the daughter of that Iowa girl.

Virge and Allie went back to Esmeralda County, Nevada, where, as a one-armed sheriff, he smoked his last cigar at 62 years of age. Before he died, he made clear he wanted to be buried near his only daughter.

Call me silly, but there’s joy in that big circle Virgil Earp made, and it’s got an Iowa feel, doesn’t it? --him ending up in a place he called home even though he’d never lived there.

Whole story wouldn’t have made a dime novel; but I for one believe it’s a sweet Iowa tale well worth telling.