Lewis Wetzel, Indian Fighter. The Life and Times of a Frontier Hero. By C. B. Allman. (New York: The Devon-Adair Company, 1961. $5.00.)

Cecil B. Hartley, in The Life of Lewis Wetzel, published in 1860, makes these statements: “Unfortunately for the memory of Wetzel, no reliable account of him has ever been published. The present generation knows little of his personal history, save as gathered from the exaggerated pages of romance, or the scarcely less painted traditions of the day” (page 15 of the 1860 edition). After reading the 1961 edition of C. B. Allman’s Lewis Wetzel, Indian Fighter, the reviewer believes that the original statements by Hartley still hold true.

The tone of this book is set at the beginning by nineteen stanzas of uncomfortable poetry — a kind of Guest-calypso amalgam (“Stout-Hearted Lewis Wetzel” by Flohus B. Pimpton). The final sour note is sounded when nineteen more stanzas of a third-rate ballad are printed at the end. Between the two ballads Mr. Allman attempts to appeal to all types of readers — genealogists, historians, farmers, and children. The natural result is confusion. The initial slanting of Lewis Wetzel, Indian Fighter may be explained by the fact that it originally ran as a serial in The Pennsylvania Farmer in 1931. Much of the material is here for the construction of a good biography, but this material has not been properly organized, substantiated, or evaluated. The problems engendered in writing the life of a man who was a legend in his own day are formidable, but good biography must separate legend and fact. This was not done. I do not feel that Mr. Allman wished to deceive anyone, but more care should have been taken with notes and credits.

A prime example of Mr. Allman’s failure to name the source of an important statement is on page 187 of his book. Here the author states that Wetzel spent four months with the Lewis and Clark Expedition — “They sent a messenger to him and he finally consented to join them” but he “came back home because the trip was too slow and not exciting enough for him.” This reviewer was unable to find
Wetzel's name mentioned in any of the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, or in the published letters and messages pertaining to the expedition. The Lewis and Clark Expedition is one of the important events in American history and anyone having a part in it becomes, on that ground alone, a person of historic interest. Now if Lewis Wetzel, himself, claimed to have been a member of the expedition, and it can be shown that he was not, then Wetzel becomes a liar. This in turn casts doubt on the validity of many of the tales, for Lewis Wetzel was a "loner," and the ultimate source of many of the incidents had to be Wetzel himself, since he was frequently the sole survivor. On the other hand, if Lewis Bonnett said that Wetzel was with Lewis and Clark, and again the statement could be proved in error, then all of the material Bonnett supplied comes into question. This would seriously weaken the entire Wetzel story. Further, if Wetzel actually took part in the expedition, and that fact can be documented and expanded, surely these four months of Wetzel's life merit more than the six lines which Allman gives them.

Despite its faults, Mr. Allman's book contains a great many facts. Genealogists may find it of some use, for here the documentation is fairly good. The general reader will find many of the Indian stories exciting, and he will absorb something of the temper and mood of the people of the Ohio Valley frontier. The book succeeds, this reviewer thinks, in delineating with honesty the essential character of Lewis Wetzel, but the historical "bone-mover" will find it necessary to use it with extreme caution.

Pittsburgh

Milburn Johnson


Mr. Brandes' book is divided chronologically into three sections: Section One: Meeting the Challenge of a World Economy; Section Two: Hoover Slays the Dragon of Foreign Monopoly; Section Three: Federal Control of American Loans and Investments Abroad.

Mr. Brandes very aptly describes Mr. Hoover's many accomplishments as Secretary of Commerce. It is befitting a writer who obviously has extensive factual knowledge of his subject.