AN ACCOUNT OF MIKE FINK

George Swetnam

It seems singular that a search of every known thing published in this century about Mike Fink, the "last of the keelboatmen," fails to show any reference to what is probably the most trustworthy account preserved for us, and internal evidence indicates it must have been unknown to the writers.

This account appears in "North Fayette Township," in History of Allegheny Co., Pennsylvania . . . (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts and Co., 1876), p. 151. The local parts are evidently drawn from conversations with elderly residents of the township, and its statement that his family was German (a language in which Fink means "finch") instead of Scotch-Irish, as often reported, has been confirmed by present-day descendants of one of his brothers.

In view of the fact that this has been so often overlooked and that the work itself is now rare and unavailable to many researchers except at great trouble and expense, it might be well to publish it in the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine to give it a wider currency.

One of the first mills in the township was built at Noblestown by Colonel [Henry] Noble, before 1800.

It was a mill of some importance at that time, for Mike Fink, one of the early celebrities of the township, made his first trip to New Orleans with a cargo of flour from there.

Robinson's Run was then high, and Mike ran the flour down to the mouth of Chartier's Creek, in a small boat. It was then reloaded upon a keel-boat and taken down the river. Mike Fink was born in Maryland about 1780. His father and mother were German, and came to Pittsburgh in 1789. In 1790 they bought a tract of land in North Fayette. There Mike grew up to be one of the most brutal roughs that any border country ever produced. His only happiness was found in fighting and low amusements, and his name became a by-word from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.

He could drink a quart of whisky and not feel it, and was a giant in strength and endurance.

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[Following four paragraphs about widely known incidents.]

Noblestown and vicinity was the scene of his revelries. A family by the name of McKillip lived near there, between whom and the Finks a perpetual feud existed. The fights between Mick [sic] Fink and Sam McKillip are treasured up to this day in the memories of the early settlers. Mike was generally victorious, but Sam was always ready to fight again whenever they met, whether at the store, tavern, or low dance. This practice continued for many years, until in one of their knock-downs Mike bit off Sam's nose, — a proceeding so dishonorable and opposed to pugilistic rules that Sam would never condescend to fight with him again. The tavern in which this noted bully obtained his whisky, caroused, and made night hideous with his drunken orgies, is still standing in Noblestown. He was killed while on an expedition up the Missouri River.

This mention should certainly explode the myth of Fink's having served with Wayne or otherwise been an Indian fighter in his youth. While there were probably some fifteen-year-olds serving with Wayne or in other raids, it is unbelievable that such a facet of his life would have been neglected by the old-timers and neighbors who cherished his legends.