

A Single Sword in Monongahela Valley History

by John Kudlik

ANTIQUES SEEM SO much more alive when an historical association can be attached to them, but the passage of time usually renders old pieces — and their owners, of course — mute. However, I have a sword that is an exception.

It is clearly a well-used item. The scabbard is dented, the gold etching that adorned the blade long ago faded under a thin film of rust, and the white ivory handle has aged to a sepia brown color. An inscription engraved on the scabbard remains clear enough, though, and unusually descriptive.

Given to my grandfather

Captain Joseph Shepler

by James Warne

who used it in 1812.

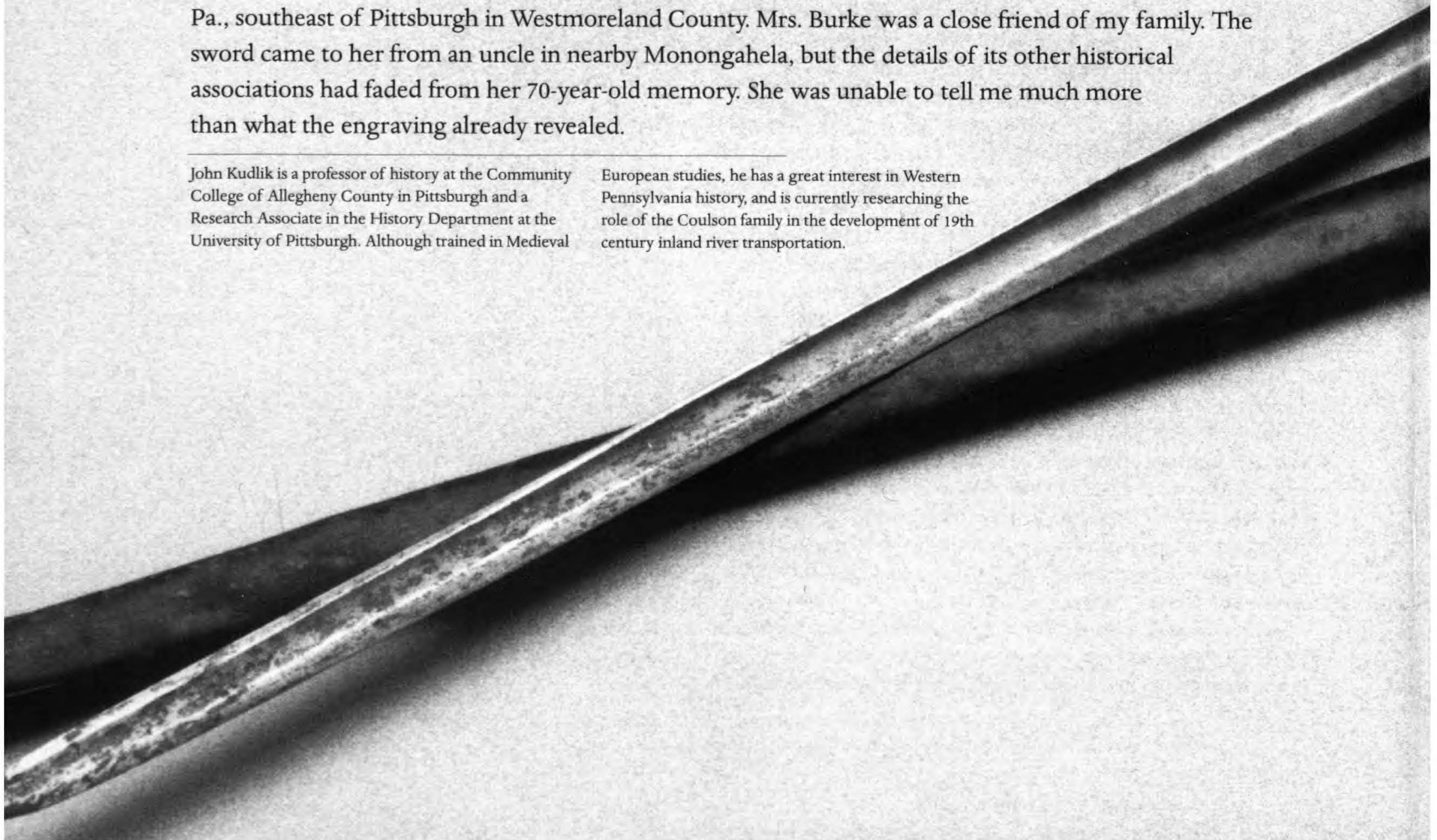
Joseph S. Coulson Mon City, Pa

1892

The weapon was given to me more than 30 years ago by the late Lucy Adams Burke of Monessen, Pa., southeast of Pittsburgh in Westmoreland County. Mrs. Burke was a close friend of my family. The sword came to her from an uncle in nearby Monongahela, but the details of its other historical associations had faded from her 70-year-old memory. She was unable to tell me much more than what the engraving already revealed.

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European studies, he has a great interest in Western Pennsylvania history, and is currently researching the role of the Coulson family in the development of 19th century inland river transportation.





Mrs. Burke's grandparents were Captain Martin Coulson, a steamboat man who had retired to a farm near Monongahela, and Violet Shepler Coulson, the daughter of Captain Joseph Shepler. When their son Joseph Coulson (Mrs. Burke's uncle) died, the sword was among a number of interesting heirlooms that she received. When my turn came to be the curator, it hung on the wall for many years before the clues in the inscription were used for further research into its pedigree. This antique proved to be quite eloquent about all three of its 19th-century owners, and their pasts reveal interesting facets of Monongahela Valley history.

The original owner, James Warne, was born near the village of Sunnyside in Forward Township, Allegheny County, in 1779. He was well-educated by the standards of the day at Uniontown Academy in Uniontown, Pa., and intended to become either an attorney or a minister. Shortly after leaving school, he moved to Parkinson's Ferry (Monongahela) and married into the Parkinson family. He soon began his own business constructing keel and flat boats for the rapidly expanding inland river markets that came with the push west. Boat-building and other mercantile activities occasionally had Warne travelling as far as New Orleans in the Ohio-Mississippi trade.

Martial sentiments traditionally ran high in the Monongahela area. In 1807, James Warne organized a local volunteer infantry company, the Williamsport Rangers. They regularly met for drills and festivities and were referred to frequently in Washington County newspapers as a highly visible part of the community. In 1811, as anti-British feeling grew closer to open hostility, many new recruits joined the company and Warne received a captain's commission from the governor of Pennsylvania and his company was attached to the 53rd Regiment of the state militia organization. When the War of 1812 was declared, they immediately volunteered for six months' service.

His company was initially attached to the 53rd Regiment of the state militia organization. Rallying near Meadville, Crawford County, with units from other counties, the Rangers were reassigned to a battalion of the 3rd Pennsylvania Infantry. Warne was promoted to the rank of major and appointed to the regimental staff in September 1812. Their regiment marched north to Buffalo, joining a large American force poised to cross the Niagara River and invade British Canada near Fort Erie, Ontario. For the most part, the War of 1812 proved to be a fiasco, and the Niagara campaign was a particular disaster. Many of the Pennsylvania men were opposed to crossing the border, stating, "We are here to guard the Constitution, not to invade Canada!" Clumsy generals countermanded each other, supplies never arrived, and boats could not be assembled in sufficient numbers for an assault. The soldiers were ill-equipped for winter service. They suffered cold and were under-fed in a dismal encampment, awaiting orders.



Mrs. Joseph Shepler



Captain Joseph Shepler

After months of false starts and pointless troop movements, the Pennsylvania men were in a mutinous mood. In December 1812, their term of service about to expire, they were discharged, angrily making their way back to Western Pennsylvania on foot through the snowdrifts.

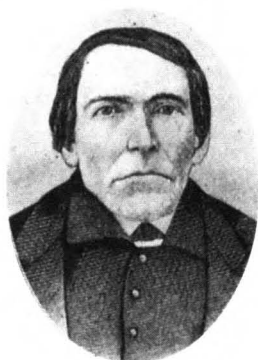
In earlier times, the Williamsport Rangers had frequently paraded and drilled to the pride of Monongahela. But, notes one account, arriving home in early 1813 so worn and sick dampened their military ardor forever: "The Rangers were never seen on parade again; Independence Day and the ear-splitting music of fifes and drums were not even enough to arouse them." A new militia company was eventually founded, but Major Warne refused its command. He continued in the boat-building business and went on to operate one of the first window glass factories in Western Pennsylvania, dying in 1855 a highly respected gentleman and patriarch of a large family.

When and how Warne acquired the sword is unknown. It is a staff officer's weapon which suggests that he held the rank of major by the time he owned it. An expert in 19th century American arms recently examined the piece and said that an 1812 date could not be ruled out. However, certain design features were also diagnostic of the 1815-1820 period. If it was part of a presentation by appreciative citizens hoping to lure the officer back into service, it would not have happened long after the war — but it must be said that they failed: James Warne's military days ended forever in January 1813.



The circumstances surrounding the weapon passing over to its next owner, Captain Joseph Shepler, are likewise unknown. They were not related by family. The land on which Warne's glass factory stood, on the west side of Chess Street in Monongahela, was later owned by the Shepler family. Other than this fact, there is no record of any connection between the two men, except that they shared the experience of regional militia service.

Joseph Shepler was born in Rostraver Township, Westmore-



Major James Warne



Joe Coulson

land County, in 1807. His ancestors were German immigrants who arrived in Western Pennsylvania well before the Revolutionary War. His maternal grandfather was said to be the first white settler in the township, arriving in the mid-1750s, as one account states, "in the days of General Braddock's expedition." Joseph Shepler was a lifelong resident of the Rostraver area and a prominent farmer who acquired several large properties. He built a magnificent homestead in the 1830s which still stands as a unique architectural landmark on a hill near Rehoboth Church.

At the young age of 21, Shepler became captain of the first company of the 88th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. In 1835, he was elected commander of the Monongahela Blues — the successor to Major Warne's old militia unit. Perhaps some celebration of this occasion was the reason the sword changed owners? By 1840, Shepler was associated with the Rostraver Cavalry and remained an officer of that company until retiring from militia service around 1847.

Old histories spoke of him as a military man by nature: "his voice and commanding appearance, together with his knowledge of tactics, gave him first rank as an officer." Captain Shepler also had great interest in politics, serving in a variety of elected offices over the years. Like many Western Pennsylvanians of the period, he was a Jeffersonian-Jacksonian Democrat "committed to the principles enunciated by those two men." He died in 1892 and was carried to his grave in Belle Vernon Cemetery by eight grandsons.

The subsequent owner of the sword was one of those grandsons, Joseph Shepler Coulson (the Coulson in the inscription). He was not a military man and probably never had an occasion to use the sword as a personal weapon or ornament. Judging from the engraving, however, it must have meant a great deal to him as an heirloom.

Coulson lived an interesting life. He was born on the Shepler farm in 1859. His father, Martin Coulson, was a river man on the Monongahela, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers. In 1870, the senior Coulson and his brothers joined a handful of Pittsburgh entrepreneurs building and sailing a fleet of steamboats into the newly

opened Dakota and Montana territories. They founded the Missouri River Transportation Company, which did a tremendous business carrying immigrants and supplying forts, towns, and Indian agencies along the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. Two of their boats, the *Far West* and the *Josephine*, kept General George Custer's 7th Cavalry provisioned on its ill-fated expedition against the Sioux in 1876. Martin Coulson was captain of the *Josephine* that year.

As a teenager, Joseph Coulson frequently accompanied his father on these voyages to learn the family business. By the time he was 20, he was working as an on-board clerk with the Coulson Line steamers. Judging from family papers, he saw a great deal of the wild west from the decks of steamboats. He retired in the late 1880s. For many years thereafter, he and his father raised thoroughbred horses on their farm a few miles west of Monongahela.

The fact that "Uncle Joe," as Mrs. Burke fondly remembered him, had the history of the ownership of the sword engraved on it in 1892, the year of Joseph Shepler's death, suggests he may have been motivated by that event. His grandfather had had a reputation for remembering every detail of history about the region dating back to his boyhood. It seems likely that there were other stories associated with the sword that are now long forgotten. Joseph Coulson retained possession until his death in 1942. The sword then passed on to his niece, Shepler's great-granddaughter. As a boy, I marvelled at the sword when my family would visit Lucy Burke's apartment, and imagined it surrounded by bugles, flags, fifes and drums. I was a happy lad when Mrs. Burke gave it to me in 1961, a few months before she died.

Completing this research ended one illusion. It does not seem likely that the sword ever led an electrifying charge across a battlefield! Still, it was handed along through a great deal of history during the past 180 or so years; it is highly symbolic of the spirit of the early 19th century. It amazes me that a brief inscription, with its unique genealogical content, can bring a bygone era into slightly sharper focus. It tells tales of regional and national history, of family continuity in the Monongahela Valley, and of a deeply rooted militia spirit that was an important dynamic in the social and political makeup of early America. ❁

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