

THE "HISTORIAN" People Would Fistfight For Fun

The Pennsylvania Germans in this area, Lutherans, Reformed, and Mennonite, tended toward pacifism, but there are stories about locals fighting around here. There are several about nonresistant Mennonites fighting bullies who attacked them. One goes that a bully was attacking a Mennonite wearing his plain cut coat. The Mennonite finally had enough of the rough treatment. He took off his plain coat, hung it on a peg, and told the bully, "Dat hengtr der Mennischt. Nau rechel mit mir." (There hangs the Mennonite. Now reckon with me). And proceeded to knock out the bully. There is one about "Der Gross Issac Kolb" (Big Issac Kolb), too. A bully was picking on him and looking for a fight. After a while it became too much for Kolb. He grabbed the bully and sat the fellow down in a chair so hard it collapsed the chair legs.

But as a whole, the Germans found street and tavern brawls unseemly. However, their Anglo neighbors were more quick to "put up fists."

The last century commonly found drunken ruffians bullying, brawling, fist-fighting, clubbing and the like. From various sources it seems clear that the town bully and his followers were a fixture of nineteenth century town life. Two excellent primary sources to explore this idea are, first, the History of the Life, Travels, and Incidents of Col. Hugh Lindsay...Written by Himself printed in Macungie in 1883 and also, History of my Own times by William Otter also written by himself and printed in Emmitsburg in 1835.

Hugh Lindsay grew up as a showman and traveled the state with early circuses, menageries, and the like. Sometimes he and one or two others would put on shows of their own. In seemingly every other town they came to the town bullies and toughs would attack the showmen. A typical event occurred as he was passing through a Pennsylvania tavern to the room where he was to perform: "I had on the clown dress, and in passing through a big bully of a fellow, named Strow, hit me on the head with a large piece of watermelon, which flew all to pieces about the room, and the people in the room set up a great laugh, about the clown being hit over the head with a piece of watermelon. I said I would pay one dollar to anyone who would tell who hit me. Up jumped Strow and said he did it, so I put up fists and knocked him down, and at the same time told him that was his dollar."

Examples abound. At the next town, "Towards evening the party of roughs came rank and file, tore down the canvas and yelled like hyenas; we went at them in earnest---Johnson and Danforth fought like lions, every man they struck fell to the ground..."

In passing Lindsay notes that, "At another time, with the menagerie we exhibited at New Hope, Bucks County, a Mr. Still kept the hotel where we had put up. Mr. Still was a powerful, large, athletic man. This hotel had been closed for some time, as no tenant would take it, on account of the Delaware river men, rowdies that had become so rough and outrageous that the owner of the property could get no one to take it....The rowdies frequently came there to attack him from the first day he took possession of the house....They had some awful times with these rowdies before we came there to exhibit." Later some rowdies came over from Lambertville and at the hotel, "Hats and blood flew, women screamed and babies squalled."

Of course, Lindsay was a showman and all of his adventures needn't be taken quite at face value, but there is little doubt that he describes the general tenor of the times.

My other source is the life story of William Otter. He was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1789 and immigrated when a young man, the meanest bully to ever disembark in Philadelphia. You would not have wanted to know him!

A classic bully, always with his gang of followers, Otter delighted in every sort of meanness, usually described as fun and a "spree" and ending in a fight. In Philadelphia: "The Irish and the sailors were engaged in deadly conflict and without further ceremony we entered the list of combatants and espoused the cause of the sailors. The mob fought from the door of the church to Irish town, being the distance of about one fourth of a mile, and kept on fighting all the night, Lane and myself in company with three or four more who came with Lane went into a grogshop in Irish town and asked the keeper of the shop for a half pint of rum, he told us to clear out for a set of rascals; we fell to and waled the grogshop keeper and two more hands who seemed to espouse his cause, most elegantly, his wife went down in the cellar and we shut her down in the cellar, and took possession of the shop;...we fell to and drank as much as we pleased...the mob came in and began to break bottles, glasses, pitchers, barrels and all and everything they could find in the shop and fought till daylight...."

Also in Philadelphia: "After the Irishman's spree was over, our boss sent Jacob Smith and myself to whitewash the Spanish ambassador's house [Otter was a plasterer.]; a black woman of uncommon size carried blackberries [in a basket on her head] about for sale. I told Jacob Smith that if he would engage the black woman in conversation that I would pour a bucket full of whitewash soup over the blackberries; he did as I requested, and when they were in full glee in their conversation, I let slip my whitewash souse upon her blackberries, and gave them a decent whitewash coat. ...By the time I had got downstairs and inquired of her what was the matter she took the basket from her head and said that some rascal had blinded her for the lime got into her eyes..." Otter expressed great concern to her and vilified such rascals who would do such a thing. Otter's life story is a gleeful record of brawling, nasty tricks, and outright meanness.

However, in the early days there was little shooting reported, perhaps because handguns were still a rarity.

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