Legends of the Old Southwest Straddling the borders between the myth of the West and the myth of the South are those heroes and writers who are associated with the humour and legends of the Old Southwest.And if 'The Fight' illustrates the strategy of comedy, then another tale in Georgia Scenes, 'The "Charm- ing Creature" as a Wife', illustrates the other approach. In the latter tale, the reader is told how the son of 'a plain, practical, sensible farmer' was ruined by marriage to the only child of a wealthy cotton merchant: a creature infected by what the nar- rator calls 'town dignity' - which involves an inordinate sense of her own worth, a preference for the glittering social world where she was brought up, and a failure to appreciate the 'order, neatness, and cleanness' of her husband's home and com- munity. There is no doubt where the narrator's sympathies lie here. On every possible occasion, he criticizes or makes fun of the pretensions of the 'charming creature', her idleness and 'irregular hours', and her longing to return to the fash- ionable world of town. Eventually, she gets her way; the couple leave the simple, rural world she detests, and in their new urban surroundings the husband sinks melodramatically into debt, drunkenness, illness and an early grave. The story then ends with the narrator pointing the moral of his tale: which, unsurprisingly, has to do not only with the pretensions but with the dangers of all those known as 'charming creatures'. It is a rather different moral from the one drawn at the end of 'The Fight'. In that story, all that the nineteenth century associated with the word 'culture' - taste of a certain genteel kind, 'schools, colleges, and benevolent associations' - is held up for approval; it provides a convenient vantage point from which to look down on the 'barbarism and cruelty' of the frontier. In 'The "Charm- ing Creature" ', however, that very same culture is mocked - words like 'refine- ment' and 'fashionable' become terms of abuse - and the idea of the 'natural' becomes the touchstone.Longstreet's probable motives for writing in this way were ones he shared with many other Southwestern humorists: among them, Joseph Glover Baldwin (1815–64), author of The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi (1853), Johnson Jones Hooper (1815–62), who wrote Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers (1845), and Thomas Bangs Thorpe, whose stories about what he called 'a hardy and indomitable race' of frontier people were collected in The Big Bear of Arkansas; and Other Sketches Illustrative of Character and Incidents in the South-West (1845).Davy, who boasted that he relied on 'natural-born sense instead of law learning', was soon turned by skilful politicians into a frontier hero, whose picturesque eccentricities, country humour, tall tales, shrewd native wit and rowdy pioneer spirit were all magnified and cel- ebrated.But soon after that, tales of the legendary frontiersman had begun to spread, by word of mouth, songs and poems, almanacs (known as Crockett Almanacs), and by such publications as The Lion of the West (1831) by James Kirke Paulding, Sketches and Eccentricities of Colonel David Crockett of West Tennessee (1833) by Mathew St Claire Clarke (1798–1842?) and An Account of Colonel Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East (1835).By this means, violence could be interpreted as an excess of high spirits and honest energy; apparent moral anarchy was metamorphosed into a reassertion of con- ventional principles; and the disruption of established social patterns could be regarded as a crucial step on the road to the recovery of a deeply traditional democratic ideal.The sketches were linked by the appearance in nearly all of them of a narrator bearing a suspicious resemblance to the author himself - a kindly, generous but occasionally pompous and patronizing man who tended to treat his subjects as if they were specimens of some strange form of life, with a mixture of

curiosity and amusement.A healthy distance was maintainedfrom characters who were presented not so much as individuals as in terms of their common behavioural patterns; and the combined effect of the detachment, the condescension and the generalizing tendency was to create an impression some- where between folktale and caricature, legend and cartoon.As a professional gentleman and a Whig, Longstreet was inclined to nervousness about the crude habits of frontier life: a life characterized by what Baldwin, in Flush Times, called 'vulgarity - ignorance - unmitigated rowdyism .They also appeared in magazines and newspapers, like the Spirit of the Times, which specialized in tales of the frontier and sporting sketches, and in almanacs - among them, the Crockett Almanacs, which did not confine themselves to the exploits of Davy.In the Preface to Georgia Scenes, Longstreet claimed proudly that he was filling in a 'chasm in history that has always been overlooked'; and 'The Fight' illustrates how he reconciled this claim with the demands of comedy.Davy Crockett became, more and more, a larger than life figure whose exploits, a mixture of the comic and the legendary, turned him into an embodiment of the rough spirit and even rougher individualism of the frontier.'Thanks to the Christian religion, to schools, colleges, and benevolent associations,' he explains, 'such scenes of barbarism and cruelty as that which I have been describing are now of rare occurrence, though they may still be occasionally met with in some of the new counties.'The simplicity and the exaggeration that create the comic note are there, in effect, because they enable Longstreet to show what is different about people like Bob and Bill, and emphasize that at the expense of any qualities they may share, in a Wordsworthian sense, with the rest of humanity.Serving in Congress from 1827 to 1831, and from 1833 to 1835, he was quickly adopted by Whig politicians, oppos- ing the populist hero Andrew Jackson, who saw in Crockett a useful tool for associating their party with backwoods democracy.Pouring 'about a ton on't over the sun's face', he got the sun loose; then, Crockett says, concluding his brag, 'I lit my pipe by the blaze o' his top-knot, shouldered my bear, an' walked home, introducin' people to the fresh daylight with a piece of sunrise in my pocket'.Crockett and Fink inhabit an interesting borderland between 'popular' and 'high' culture, the political and the legendary, oral folk tradition and published literature.And the narrator concludes by reassuring the, presumably genteel, reader that more refined habits and customs have now arrived.So, in an eminently understandable way, Longstreet and other Southwestern humorists attempted to distance their frontier surroundings, to place them in a framework that would make them manageable and known.A Georgia lawyer and academic, Longstreet published Georgia Scenes: Characters, Incidents &c, in the First Half-Century of the Republic in 1835.In a series of sketches varying from the descriptive to the dramatic, Longstreet presented his readers with illustrations of life in the remoter parts of the state.In one story, 'Sunrise in His Pocket', which appeared first in one of the posthumous almanacs, Davy tells a tall tale of how he got the sun moving again after it had 'got jammed between two cakes o' ice'.Fink announces, in this extended celebration of himself: I'm a reg'lar screamer from the ol' Massassip!I'm half wild horse and half cock-eyed alligator and the rest o' me is crooked snags an' red- hot snappin' turtle .The tone of the de- scription is humorous but the writer clearly hopes that, by means of his humour, he will show something significant about backwoods character: its simplicity, its rough energy, its notions of justice and its capacity for violence.Another way of doing it was via legend: they also tried to identify the rough, rude world they saw around them with a familiar rural type - the plain

farmer, with his straightforward approach to things, his raw integrity and earthy language, and above all his muscular self-reliance. Simultaneously beautiful and tongue-in-cheek, swaggering and comic, the story captures nicely the rough pride of the hero of these stories and his refusal to take himself too seriously. He evidently helped to foster that legend by telling tales about himself, but it was others who wrote the tales down, among them the newspapermen Thomas Bangs Thorpe (1810-56) and Joseph M. Field (1815-78). The stories about Fink appeared in books, the earliest of which was The Last of the Boatmen by Morgan Neville published in 1829. 'Bill presented a hideous spectacle,' he goes on. 'About a third of his nose, at the lower extremity, was bit off, and his face so swelled that it was difficult to discover in it anything of the human visage.' One way of doing this was via the humour: by its means, violence was transformed into play, social anarchy into curious spectacle, and fear and anxiety into mild amusement. As for heroes, the notable figures here are Davy Crockett (1786-1836) and Mike Fink (1770?-1823?). With the help of a ghost writer, Crockett wrote A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett, of the State of Tennessee (1834): a book clearly designed to help him gain or retain political popularity. Perhaps the most famous piece of prose associated with Fink is 'Mike Fink's Brag', which achieved circulation around 1835-6. It captures perfectly the exuberance, the brute humour and animal vitality of the old frontier, and its absolute belief in itself. The first writer to make the legends and humour of the Old Southwest part of the literary tradition was Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870). One of the sketches, for example, 'The Fight', describes a country scrap in detail and then ends with a lengthy description of the two fighters' wounds. Cock-a-doddle-do! whoop!....

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