

The Molly Maguires

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

On the wall of the old county jail in what was then Mauch Chunk (today's Jim Thorpe), Pennsylvania, is a handprint that, according to folklore, was made by Alex Campbell. He was one of the four members of an Irish labor organization called the Molly Maguires, who was executed on June 21, 1877. Insisting he was innocent, Campbell declared that "this is proof of my words. That mark will never be wiped out." And it never has. (Sixteen more men were executed later).

The Ancient Order of Hibernians is America's oldest Irish Catholic Fraternal Organization founded concurrently in the coal-mining region of Pennsylvania and in New York City in May 1836. In New York, the AOH was founded at St. James Church on May 4, 1836 to protect the clergy and churches from the violent American Nativists who attacked Irish Catholic immigrants and Church property. However, in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania, the Molly Maguires operated as a labor organization, in secrecy, under the guise of the AOH.

The term Molly Maguire is said to have been an actual woman, a widow, who would not leave her cottage when Protestant Irish, English, Welsh, or Scottish attempted to remove her from her home. "Take this from the son of a Molly Maguire!" was heard before an offensive person of authority was bashed accordingly. These were dark times of persecution for Irish Catholics and were not to get better by crossing the Atlantic. So, this transplanted rural secret society that had traditionally resisted attacks on their communities by landlords and their agents through violence and intimidation, was transferred to the coal fields of Pennsylvania thus, creating the struggle between the miners and management.

Working conditions were terrible in the Pennsylvania mines in the 1860's and 1870's – safety regulations were non-existent or neglected; breaker boys as young as six worked picking slate; families lived in poor company owned houses, and were forced to shop at company stores; nothing except a few dollars compensated those injured or the families of those killed in this dangerous trade; and foreman frequently abused workers or undervalued the quantity of coal mined, which determined their wages. In many cases, workers wound up owing their employers at the end of each month. Essentially, these circumstances made it difficult for miners to get out of poverty and improve their quality of life.

Despite the ethnic rivalries among the miners (particularly between the Irish and Welsh) they managed to organize themselves into a union called the Workingmen's Benevolent Association. The Great Panic of 1873 (one of the worst depressions in American history) gave mine bosses the opportunity to attack the wages and conditions of the miners. They imposed a new contract on the workforce by lowering pay rates between 10% to 20%. This led to the "Long Strike" of 1875 which lasted seven months and saw the governor order in troops to the region.

After seeing their attempts to remedy their grievances through the union fail, some Irish American miners turned to tactics that had been employed in Ireland in the late 17th and 18th centuries. This oath-bound society made anonymous threats and in some cases violent retribution on those deemed hostile to their community. Thus, the Molly Maguires emerged from this background.

So, instead of Anglo-Irish landlords, Royal Irish Constabulary and their agents; the new targets became mine owners, company policemen and strike breakers. Intimidation, assaults and sometimes murder were employed by the Molly Maguires. They attempted to rectify the grievances they felt would not be dealt with by a legal and political system that was hostile to immigrants and the working class. Many of the Molly Maguires were members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, although not all Hibernians approved of the tactics of the Mollies.

Franklin Gowen was president of both the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company. He brought mine owners together and hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency to root out the Molly Maguires from the coal fields. For two and a half years, James McParland, an Irish Catholic from Ulster, successfully ingratiated himself with the Mollies and worked under cover. He worked, fought, drank, and conspired with his fellow countrymen. He even became secretary of the local AOH division. Some of his reports back to the Pinkerton Detective Agency ended up in the hands of local vigilantes who murdered several Irish miners and the wife of one prominent Irish union member. It was a dangerous time to be a union member in the coal fields as company vigilantes could kill miners or fire into meetings with little fear of reprisal from the forces of 'law and order.'

After McParland's cover was blown, Gowen himself, serving as the district attorney, led the prosecution of the Molly Maguires who were indicted and then convicted largely on McParland's testimony. Twenty men were convicted and hanged on very dubious evidence.

Despite the lack of understanding about the Molly Maguire's, the real issue about the 1877 trial reveals that the domination of Pennsylvania's business outweighed the state's political and legal system. It was one of the most astounding surrenders of sovereignty in American history. A private corporation initiated the investigation through a private detective agency; a private police force arrested the alleged offenders; the coal company attorneys prosecuted them. The state only provided the courtroom and hangman.

The Ancient Order of Hibernians cut its ties with the Molly's by the late 1870s and renewed its association with the Catholic Church. The early divisions in Pennsylvania's coal region were written out of AOH history.

In 1979, more than 100 years following his hanging, John Kehoe, known as the "King of the Mollies", an Irish-born organizer was granted a full pardon by the state of Pennsylvania.