

The Coal & Iron Police

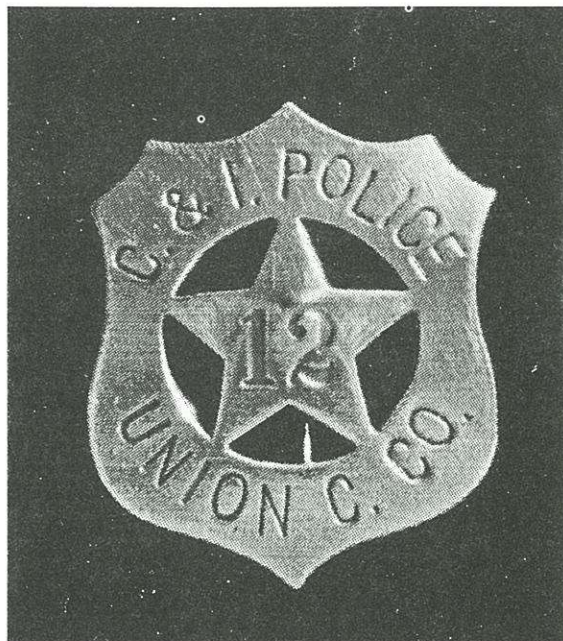
by Dave Johnson

The coal and iron, and later the steel, industries early on found it expedient to employ their own security forces. Ostensibly for the protection of company property, these coal and iron police were often the only recognized police force in company towns. In many cases these private police forces were utilized by the coal mining and steel companies to impose their will upon their employees. The company police were used successfully for many years to prevent unionization. Union members and sympathizers would find themselves fired and ejected from company housing for union activities. The company police broke up union meetings and beat up striking miners, as well as protecting strike breakers from striking workers. In many cases their activities were undertaken outside of company property.

In Pennsylvania this private police system had become accepted to the point that in 1866 the Pennsylvania State Legislature formally established the Coal and Iron Police as an official agency with local commanders (usually a coal



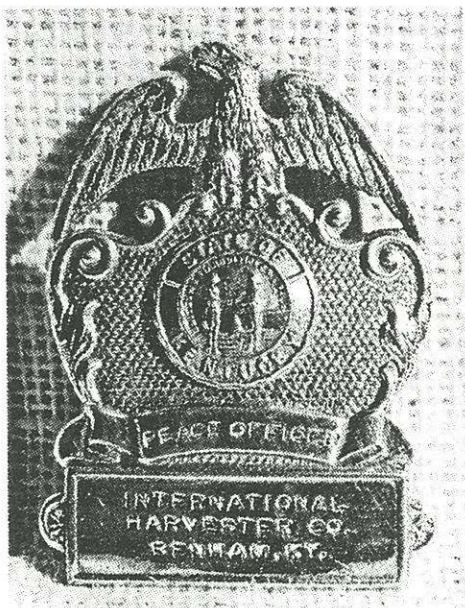
Coal Police. (Dave Johnson collection).



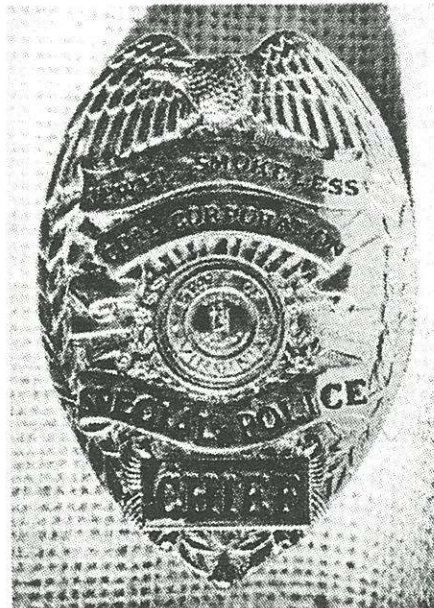
Brass badge. (Bill Lorah collection).

or iron company superintendent). While sanctioned by state government all costs of the Coal and Iron Police were to be paid by the coal and iron companies. The enabling legislation granted the Coal and Iron Police broad police powers on mine and mill property and in company towns. This private police system grew to the point that by 1900 there were officially more than 5000 Coal and Iron Police in Pennsylvania. There was no requirement that the Coal and Iron Police wear any type of uniform, to identify themselves as police officers, this was most effective in their union-breaking activities.

The powers of the Coal and Iron Police in Pennsylvania were not curtailed until April of 1929 when Governor John S. Fisher, by executive order, ordered that industrial police wear uniforms, that their jurisdiction be restricted to the actual protection of company property and that they be prohibited from "undue violence in making arrests", unnecessary display or use of weapons, and profanity. This action was the result of public pressure brought to bear



*International Harvester badge.
(D. Johnson collection)*



*Peace Officer badge.
(D. Johnson collection)*

first is a brass Coal and Iron Police badge from Bill Lorah's collection. It appears to have been used by the Union Carbide Co.

The Coal Police badge with the Pennsylvania state seal in the center differs from most Coal and Iron Police badges.

The Special Police Chief's badge with the Virginia state seal in the center is from the Jewel Smokeless Coal Corporation. This firm operated mines in Virginia in the 1920-1940's.

on the governor after three Pittsburgh Coal Corporation police beat to death a man named John Barkowski. While their powers were diminished somewhat by the Governor's Executive Order, the Coal and Iron Police remained as a viable security force for some years after this.

While not state authorized, many other coal producing states had their own forms of company police. Some companies hired mine "guards" from established firms such as the Pinkerton and Baldwin-Felts Detective Agencies. In other cases mining companies held such sway at the county level that they were able to pay for hiring additional deputy sheriffs to serve as company police. These hired deputies were generally given no law enforcement training and were hired more for their ability and willingness to crack skulls than any other reason. These

company funded deputies were used extensively in the Eastern Kentucky coal fields to combat unionization efforts by the United Mine Workers in the 1920's and 1930's. It was through some of their activities that Harlan County became known as "Bloody Harlan". In some cases there were "mine guards" who were direct employees of the mining company as well as company "police" and "peace officers" in company towns. As with the Coal and Iron Police, all these privately funded security forces were used by the company to force their will upon their employees to varying degrees. Whether viewed today as good or bad, from a historical perspective the actions of company police earned the undying enmity of workers and their families.

Pictured here are four examples of badges used by company security forces. The

The Peace Officer badge with the Kentucky state seal in the center is from the International Harvester Company's town of Benham, KY. The Wisconsin Steel Co., Incorporated, a subsidiary of IHC had their Benham Coal and Coke Works located in Benham, where they mined coal and produced coke for shipment to the firm's steel mill in South Chicago. Coke production began in 1912 and by 1920 there were 408 coke ovens in continual operation. Benham and nearby Lynch (U.S. Steel Corp.) were progressive company towns for their time exhibiting none of the shoddy and poorly maintained company housing seen in most coal company towns. In both towns there were a YMCA facility, library, school, fire department, park and athletic field and several churches, all built and maintained at company expense.