

The Ancient Order of Hibernia and the Molly McGuires

by Jim Steinberg

On the morning of June 21, 1877, the final chapter of the Molly McGuires began. In Mauch Chunk (now called Jim Thorpe) Pennsylvania, four convicted members of the Molly McGuires were hung. By 10:57 A.M. "Yellow Jack" Donohue, Edward Kelley, Micheal J. Doyle, and Alex Campbell were dead. In Pottsville Pennsylvania, by twos starting at 11 A.M., six more Mollies were hung. James Boyle, Hugh McGeheh, James Roarity, James Carroll, Thomas Duffy, and Thomas Munley. From March 25, 1878 to January 16, 1879, nine more members of the Molly McGuires were executed in various towns of Pennsylvania. Finally, on October 9, 1879 in Sunbury, the 20th and last of the Molly McGuires to be hung was Peter McManus. Three decades of terror and lawlessness in the coal fields of Pennsylvania were over.

Who were the Molly McGuires? Where did they come from? According to one source, the Mollies were named after the 17th century Irish partisan Connor Maguire and the fact that they were sometimes dressed in woman's clothing for purposes of security. Originally formed in 1845 in Ireland to oppose the landlords, they came to the United States to escape the Irish potato famine. In the United States, a prerequisite for joining was membership in the Ancient Order of Hibernia. The Ancient Order of Hibernia was formed in Ireland in 1565 to resist the power of the English. It was sort of a Catholic answer to the Orange party in Ireland. Started in the United States in 1836, its symbols are the Irish harp and the clover. The Ancient Order of Hibernia still exists today.

Shortly after the civil war, the U.S. experienced a depression. The difficulty of foreign workers finding jobs in the face of veterans preference, plus low wages and poor working conditions in the mines did not contribute to good relations. The Irish miners often found themselves working for absentee landlords who were their old hated enemies, the English. The miners often lived in two room shacks, with one family in each tiny room. Additional irritation was the view of the superintendent's multiple floor homes on spacious lots. The Irish received poor treatment at the hands of the English and Welsh who had little respect for them.

The activities of the Mollies may have began early in the 1850's. Unlike the fledgling labor movement with which they have often been confused, the Mollies engaged in a form of terrorism. Until 1877, three counties of Pennsylvania were virtually at the mercy of the violence of the Mollies. Between 1862 and 1875 in Schuylkill County alone, there were 142 murders and 212 felony assaults that went unsolved. A substantial portion of victims were mine officials. Sometimes, before the violence, the victim would receive a "coffin notice" signed by a "Son of Molly McGuire."

Cause injury to a Molly McGuire by firing him, and a mine official risked being beaten or killed. Just cause for a firing did not ameliorate the risks. The official's home might be burned, the colliery where he worked might be blown up. Molly justice could be fast. Being a secret society, one could not be sure who was or wasn't a Molly or the friend of one. Speak the wrong words to the wrong person and serious trouble could arrive swiftly. Even the clergy wasn't immune. Though there were many Irish who did not approve of the Molly McGuires, their power became sufficient that opposition was virtually non-existent.

Ultimately, the mine operators became irritated enough that they hired the Pinkerton detective agency to destroy the Mollies. Allen Pinkerton decided to do this by planting a spy within the organization. This task fell to James McParland, an Irish immigrant himself. Using the name of James McKenna in the guise of a murder fugitive, he became popular with the Irish miners. He became a member of the Mollies, and eventually ascended to the position of secretary. During this time, McParland was tipping the authorities whenever he could, to prevent murders and other acts of violence.

McParland himself came under suspicion and even had to evade men sent by the Mollies to kill him. But for the Molly McGuires, time was running out. The Pinkertons had a list from McParland of 375 Mollies and what their crimes were. On May 6, 1876, in Pottsville, James McParland appeared as a witness for the state against the Molly McGuires.

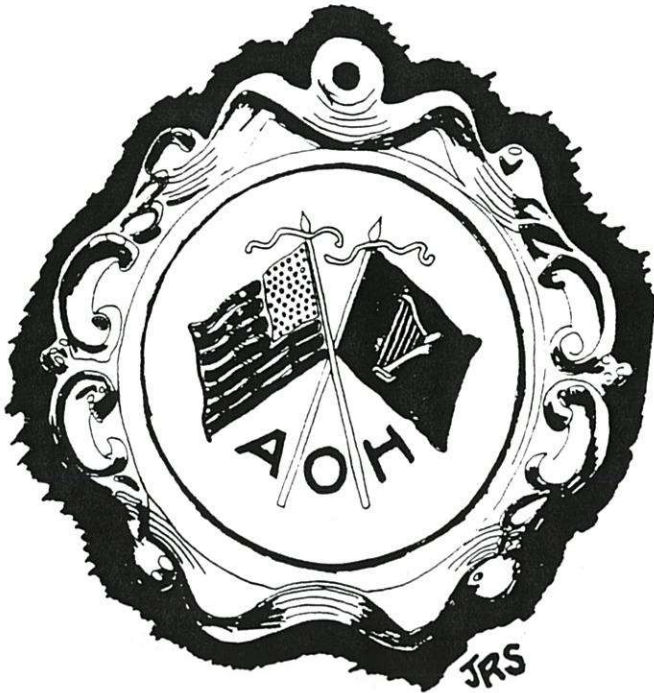
One by one, 21 men were convicted of murder and sentenced to hang. The death sentence of one John O'Neal, a moron, was reprieved to a life sentence. In May of 1877, the Ancient Order of Hibernia revoked the charters of almost all its chapters in Schuylkill, Carbon, Northumberland, and Columbia counties.

Most of the convictions of the Mollies revolved around the information provided by one man and a few of the accused who turned states evidence. Some of these informants later repudiated their testimony. Some of the

convicted were likely innocent. By today's standards of justice, some of the evidence is not considered very convincing. James McParland was rewarded with a job in the western United States.

References:

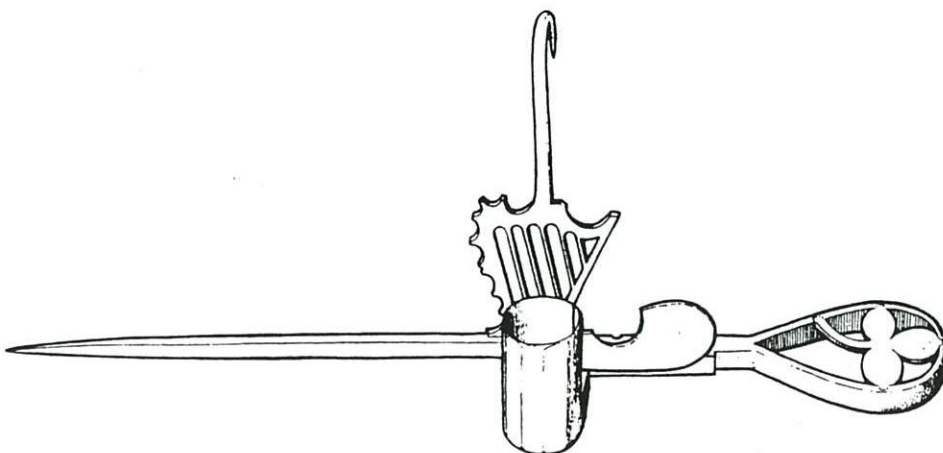
1. Lament for the Molly Maguires, Arthur H. Lewis, 1964, Harcourt, Brace & World
2. A Pictorial History of American Mining, Howard N. & Lucille L. Sloane, 1970 Crown Publishers.
3. Organized Labor in American History, Philip Taft, 1964, Harper & Row
4. Collector's Guide to Miner's Candlesticks, Wendell E. Wilson & Ted Bobrink, 1984, Mineralogical Record.



The Ancient Order of Hibernia medallion shown above measures 1.5 inches in diameter. The metal is of a gold finish with the middle area being white. The U.S. flag is in red, white, and blue. The Irish flag is a yellow (gold?) harp on a field of green. The flagpoles and ribbons are done in yellow. Lettering is black. From the Jim Steinberg collection.



The AOH lapel pin shown above is 5/8 inch tall. The base metal of the pin is brass. The background color of the face is white. All the clovers are done in green. Brass provides the color of the sun rising over the hills, the fraternal shaking hands and the Irish harp. The pin borders are green. From the Jim Steinberg collection.



A fancy candlestick from Tombstone, Arizona with the AOH harp and clovers. From the Jim Steinberg collection.