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## THE MOLLY MAGUIRES

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# FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

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by William C. Kashatus III

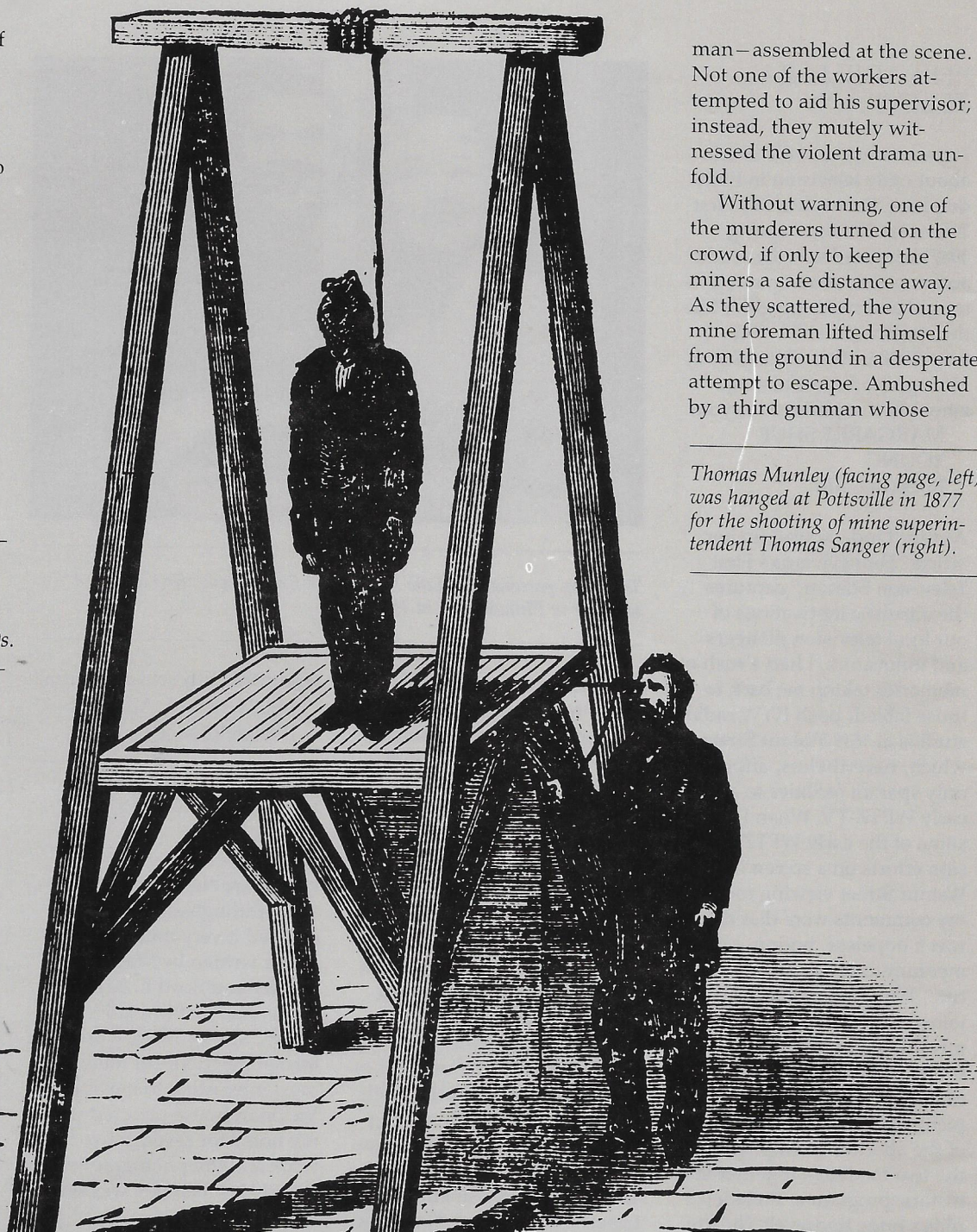
**E**arly on the morning of Wednesday, September 1, 1875, a young English-born mine foreman started from his Schuylkill County residence to the Shenandoah coal colliery where he was employed. A gunshot pierced the air. Scrambling for cover behind a neighbor's house, he was met by another assassin who drew his revolver and fired. Struck in the groin, the young man staggered blindly and fell to the ground.

A small crowd of miners—many of whom were supervised by the injured fore-

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*In Pennsylvania's coal region, nearly two dozen men were hanged for the murders of mining officials during the turbulent 1870s.*

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man— assembled at the scene. Not one of the workers attempted to aid his supervisor; instead, they mutely witnessed the violent drama unfold.

Without warning, one of the murderers turned on the crowd, if only to keep the miners a safe distance away. As they scattered, the young mine foreman lifted himself from the ground in a desperate attempt to escape. Ambushed by a third gunman whose

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*Thomas Munley (facing page, left) was hanged at Pottsville in 1877 for the shooting of mine superintendent Thomas Sanger (right).*

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bullet tore into his forehead, young Thomas Sanger died instantly.

The cold-blooded murder of Thomas Sanger was but one of many brutal and heinous crimes in a sweeping wave of terrorism which paralyzed Pennsylvania's anthracite region following the Civil War. It was not long until these violent acts were attributed to what was characterized as a ruthless Irish-American fraternal organization called the Molly Maguires. Popularly

operators engaged such disparate allies as a detective agency, the commercial newspapers, the state judicial system and, according to several historians, the Catholic Church as well. The success of the Pennsylvania coal operators during the Victorian era illustrates the plight of the working class during the embryonic years of a fledgling labor movement in the United States.

Circumstances prompting the conspiracy were wrought

ments allowed to hazardously deteriorate. The bleak conditions led to work stoppages, full-scale strikes, violence and, in some fashion, early attempts to unionize workers to combat the manipulative powers of the industrialists and investors controlling the capitalist system.

Throughout the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, laborers faced unchecked exploitation due to the intense demand for the fuel in industrial, commercial and domestic

more than fifteen hundred permanently disabled because of inadequate safety measures in the mines. Nevertheless, workers were held in submission with low wages by the coal operators. A coal miner in 1870 earned one dollar and twenty-five cents a day, paid in script—worthless as legal tender, indicating all earnings passed back to the coal company. Subtracted from the earnings were the miner's working supplies, groceries and other household items, all



viewed as a secret society of miners and laborers seeking to improve intolerable working conditions and low wages through terrorism and violence, the Molly Maguires—as an organization or association—may very well have been a fabrication by the coal operators of Pennsylvania's north-eastern counties, conceived to discredit the miners and their union.

By inventing this organization, the employers hoped to quash a budding unionization movement among their disgruntled work forces. In their conspiracy against the labor

by the bitter economic depression plaguing the nation during the 1870s. The formidable railroad industry—which attracted considerable investment following the Civil War—failed and instigated a banking panic. The effects were devastating. The federal government, which depended on the nation's banks and banking industry, literally stood still. Prices plummeted. Businesses began failing. Working families faced unemployment, hunger and despair. Those who continued working were mercilessly exploited: wages were slashed, hours

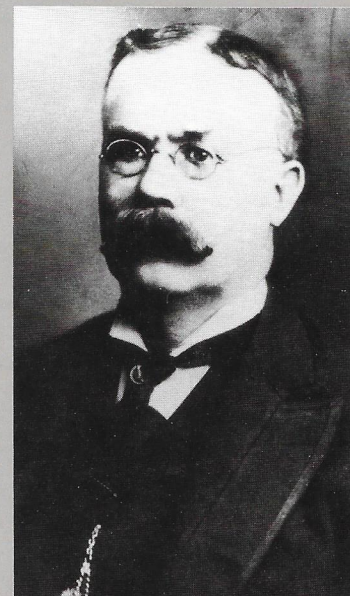
uses. In the deep and dark chasms far below the earth's surface, miners suffered as they worked in poorly ventilated mine shafts, constantly threatened by suffocation and explosions. Coal operators adamantly refused to provide for their safety to avoid additional expenditures. In fact, they did not have to comply with any legislation requiring such protection since their representatives dominated the state legislature. Between 1869 and 1875 in Schuylkill County alone—an area in which Molly Maguire activities would eventu-

purchased at a company-owned store where prices had been inflated from ten to fifty percent more than at an independent store.

If the low wages and poor working conditions were not enough, the pervasive brutality of child labor drove miners and their families to despair. Young boys, beginning about the age of seven, worked in coal breakers, large structures where chunks of coal rumbled along on a conveyor belt to be broken and graded. Known as "breaker boys," these children separated slate from coal by



*The coal region's poverty (above, below) and harsh child labor (facing page) erupted in a bitter struggle between the miners and Franklin B. Gowen (left) and his emissary James McParlan (right).*



miners. In 1870, Schuylkill County's twenty-two thousand employees included fifty-five hundred boys who earned one dollar a week.

Although miners organized the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (W.B.A.) in 1868 to combat the intolerable conditions, the strike was the most effective weapon with which they challenged the ruthless exploitation by the coal operators. The W.B.A. was the miners' first union and had been formally recognized by the coal operators as a legitimate bargaining agency. As early as 1870 the coal operators and the association agreed to a sliding scale of wages based on the prevailing price of coal, and to a fixed minimum wage. Undoubtedly, the union was attracted by the prospect of wage increases if the price of coal should rise. Unfortunately for the miners, however, the price of coal continued to shrink between 1870 and 1875, but the miners were able to maintain a guaranteed minimum wage. Determined to restore their profits, the coal operators not only sought to abolish this minimum wage but to destroy the union as well.

Led by Franklin B. Gowen, president of the powerful Anthracite Board of Trade, the coal operators antagonized the union by importing laborers and employing company police. In December 1874, the operators announced a twenty percent wage cut and insisted that the minimum wage be eliminated. These measures left the union with little choice but to call for a work stoppage effective January 1, 1875. The miners in the northern anthracite fields accepted the wage cuts and returned to work within weeks, but those in the middle and southern coal fields persevered. Hundreds of families awoke each morning to "a breakfast consisting of a crust of bread and a glass of water" while others were driven into the woods "to dig roots and pick herbs for their meals." By June 29, 1875, the

miners to end the strike, disband the union and accept a cut in wages.

After the coal operators crushed the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, the miners needed some vehicle through which they could continue their struggle against Gowen and the allied coal operators. Many of the miners of Celtic descent used their membership in a national Irish fraternal society, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, to re-



establish their union. The local delegate of the Hibernians, Jack Kehoe, had also been involved as a mine-union leader and encouraged this temporary front until another union could be established. Gowen and the Anthracite Board of Trade learned of this strategy and sought to eradicate the local chapter of the Hibernians as they had the union. Not surprisingly then, whenever any miner resorted to an act of violence, whether or not he was a member of the Hibernians, the act was attributed to the organization.

With the aid of the commercial press, Franklin B. Gowen tagged the Ancient Order of Hibernians with the name "Molly Maguires," recalling the murder and violence associated with a militant peasant society of the same name that waged war against the English landlords in Ireland. In reality,

no society in Pennsylvania or in any part of the United States formally called itself the Molly Maguires. But, the sensationalism inspired by Gowen and his colleagues captured the attention of not only Pennsylvanians but of the entire country. On May 14, 1876, *The New York Times* ascribed any militant action taken by a worker in the coal regions to the notorious Molly Maguires. Although not carrying the influence of *The New York Times*, several newspapers

defended the alleged "Mollies." The *Labor Standard* on September 4, 1876, maintained that *The New York Times* "like all other capitalistic journals, is always willing to attribute outrages to the workingmen" when, in fact, a "close investigation might prove that not the Molly Maguires but paid agents of the mine owners were the perpetrators of the outrage." While it cannot be denied that Irish miners resorted to violence—including destruction of coal company property and the murder of mining officials such as Thomas Sanger—their actions were in retaliation for the deceptive schemes of the coal operators. In addition to the sensational journalism, the coal operators subsidized secret vigilante groups to murder and terrorize the labor leaders and their families. It is believed that as many union

organizers were killed by these vigilantes as were company foremen by miners. Regardless of the accuracy of the press reports or the identity of the terrorists, Gowen's tactics proved successful. By December 1876, the Catholic Church had publicly denounced all secret societies, especially those with rituals and vows which might conflict with the church's teaching. The Hibernians and their families were threatened with excommunication by the church, and Catho-

lics throughout the country distanced themselves from any sympathy for the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

The most effective tactic employed by the coal operators was the infiltration of spies among the working force. When the spies could discover no wrongdoing or failed to provide a convincing case of labor intrigue, they simply committed a crime and accused a labor leader of the deed. Murder in the anthracite region actually increased during the years of spy activity. The most famous of these labor spies was James McParlan of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. A self-confessed murderer who openly boasted that he had killed a man in Buffalo, New York, McParlan was hired by Gowen "to plot, to counsel and to perpetrate murders in the coal fields of Pennsylvania." The twenty-

nine year old informant circulated among the miners by assuming the identity of "James McKenna." Claiming to be a miner from Colorado seeking work in the East, McParlan used his Irish birthright to join the Ancient Order of Hibernians through which he befriended labor leaders Jack Kehoe and Thomas Munley. Both of these men were framed by McParlan for the murder of Thomas Sanger, although only Munley was

lin B. Gowen, president of the powerful Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company, served as chief counsel for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in all twenty cases.

James McParlan was called by the Commonwealth to testify first. In his account he claimed to "uncover the murder schemes of the Molly Maguires," and identified both Kehoe and Munley as the assassins of Thomas Sanger, as

and sentenced to two-and-a-half years in the Schuylkill County Prison in Pottsville. Such actions served to dissuade close friends of the defendants, in subsequent trials, from testifying on their behalf.

Following Munley's conviction, the defense argued that it was not "until the emissary of death, James McParlan, had made his advent into this county" that the crimes of the Molly Maguires began. On June 21, 1877, Thomas Munley, along with three labor-leading miners, was executed. By February 1879, the last of the "Molly Maguires" had been executed. Nineteen miners were hanged by the state for murder, while fourteen others went to prison, charged with lesser crimes.

The trial of Thomas Munley, as well as those of other labor leaders, may have been a travesty of justice. The proceedings of the trials reveal collusion by the coal operators who manipulated the press, a national detective agency, the state judicial system, even the Catholic Church, to flagrantly discourage—if not destroy—an emerging labor movement that promised a more hopeful future for the working class than the despair it was forced to tolerate. Spurred by this injustice, Pennsylvania's hard coal miners helped to promote the growth and evolution of a new national labor movement, one which would later prevent the exploitation of generations of working families by a handful of manipulative and seemingly omnipotent industrialists.

Arguments concerning the reality of the Molly Maguires continue to reverberate throughout the vast coal region of Pennsylvania. But behind the saga of the Mollies—even if a creation of the powerful coal operators—lies the deep labor unrest, violence and death. These events certainly qualify the issue to take its legitimate place in Pennsylvania's indus-

tory. It is a chilling chapter in Pennsylvania's history that has intrigued both students and scholars for the last century. And the Molly Maguires will certainly attract the attention of forthcoming labor and social historians. ❖

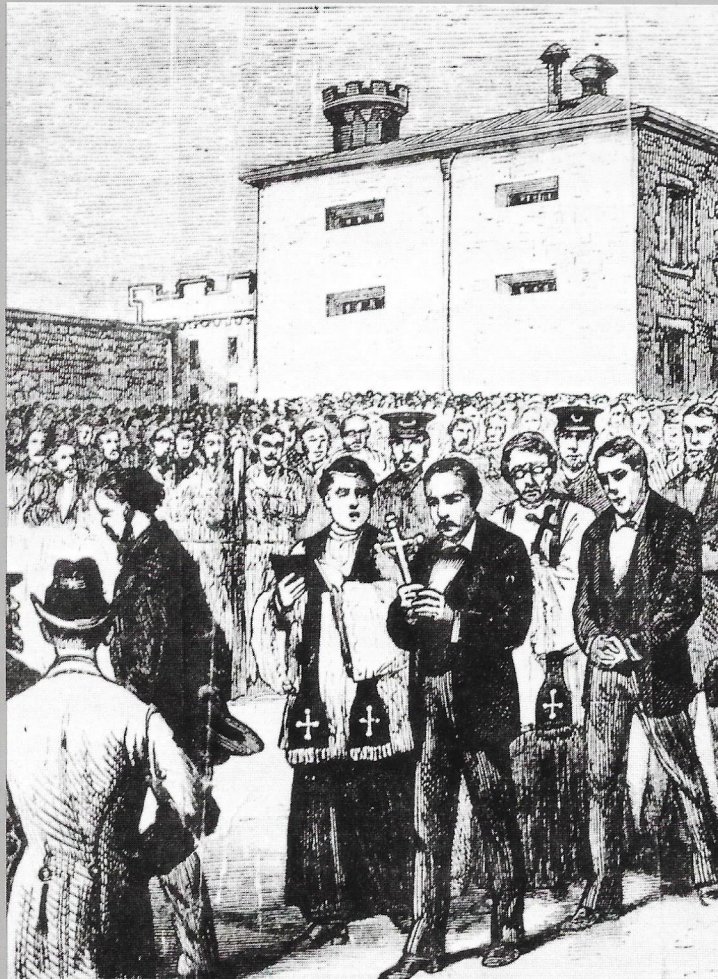
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found guilty. This was only one of many "crimes" the Pinkerton agent uncovered.

Thomas Munley was convicted on McParlan's testimony and on that of other disreputable witnesses who secured immunity for their own crimes. Their accounts, like other testimonies which led to the executions of nineteen coal miners, were simply affirmations elicited by the prosecution's intimidating examination. Not surprisingly, Frank-

both men confided their crime to him. Another witness for the state testified that she had only seen the side view of Sanger's killer and that this "side view looks like the man [Munley] on trial." A third witness recalled that Sanger's murderer had a thin mustache. When asked to further describe the assassin, he could not, making his testimony unconvincing. Another witness, and others who were called to testify for the ac-