

## **The True Story of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency**

By John Velke III, Published by Montevallo Historical Press ([www.mhpress.com](http://www.mhpress.com)) 2004 368 pages.

History is a perspective. It is a cyclical phenomenon that reveals trends which repeat themselves at different times. Historical exploration is akin to peeling the skins off an onion; with each new layer providing a different view. Unfortunately, the history of the Security Industry is not well known. Policing and Investigation history are also given short shrift in texts and academic journals. This book helps correct that and sheds some light on what is for many, an undiscovered subject. THE TRUE STORY OF THE BALDWIN-FELTS DETECTIVE AGENCY contains 20 chapters and 6 appendices. The author begins by describing his own 20 + year study of the Agency. The “journey” began when Velke met a descendant of a judge who was murdered in his 1912 Hillsville, Virginia courtroom along with the local sheriff. Velke later came across several substantial files of correspondence from Baldwin-Felts Agency officials, Virginia Governor Mann and officials of the Norfolk and Southern Railroads. Finally, Velke’s “journey” culminated with meeting a high school teacher who had shown MATEWAN to his students; not realizing that the film portrayal was fictional and heavily biased. From there the author decided to write a more balanced, accurate history of the Baldwin-Felts Agency.

The Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency played a prominent role in the infamous “Ludlow Massacre” of 1914 in which the Colorado National Guard killed 2 women and 12 children (while the Agency was not involved in this horrific action; it’s involvement in the strike which led up to the massacre smeared its image). The Agency also guarded much of the nation’s infrastructure during World War I and apprehended German intelligence agents and saboteurs. German agents smuggled heroin and sold it to soldiers to make them addicted. They set fires, spread disinformation and contaminated the milk supply at Ft. Leavenworth with nitrogenous germs. German agents also sabotaged hand carried fire extinguishers by filling them with gasoline. The reader cannot help but see the historical parallels between this period and the latter Cold War Era as well as the contemporary war on terrorism. “Homeland Security” in WW1.

The Baldwin-Felts Agency is probably best known due to the 1920 “Matewan Massacre” where seven of its agents in Matewan, West Virginia were gunned down during a strike. The quintessential ‘sleeper’ film MATEWAN starring Chris Cooper, Mary McDonald, James Earl Jones and Kevin Tighe as a deliciously nasty Baldwin-Felts agent is where most people would have heard the name. But there is much more to the Baldwin-Felts legacy. Agency founder William G. Baldwin was retained along with a newspaper editor to investigate the high profile 1906 incident in Brownsville, Texas where black soldiers reportedly shot up the town. Baldwin-Felts also played the leading role in bringing the violent participants of the feud between the Hatfield’s and McCoys to justice.

The one contributed chapter is “The Guns of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency” ; written by Richard A. Mann II, a railroad police agent and firearms instructor who discusses how the railroad and mining towns attracted an array of criminals; similar to the American West. These towns were havens for murderers, robbers, moonshiners and other assorted miscreants.

Mann also points out that reliable documentation supports the premise that Agency founder William G. Baldwin was in more gunfights than Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp combined. Velke also includes news media accounts; a “Sample Coal Company Housing Agreement”, telegrams, union notices and excerpts of John D. Rockefeller’s speeches in 1915 following the “Ludlow Massacre”. These provide a multi-faceted perspective on the Agency.

Aside from the more intriguing historical info on high profile events; the book delves into how railroad police operated. Baldwin-Felts had numerous contracts with railroads. There is in-depth discussion of frauds perpetrated against railroads as well as how the Agency dealt with trespassers on railroad property. The bomb assassination of former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg and a 1904 railroad depot dynamiting that killed 26 non-union miners persons are described. Note that Velke’s casualty total is well above that reported in other sources (14-16).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century terrorist practice of wrecking trains is covered; although the author could have provided more statistics on casualties. By doing so he would have unveiled the topic more effectively. It may be, however, that such information is lacking: this reviewer has noticed that other train derailments of old, such as those perpetrated by the Mollie Maguires, do not include the numbers of people killed and injured.

There is also discussion of “secret service work” whereby undercover agents reported on union activities. This service was provided by competitors of Baldwin-Felts; it was a common practice and is certainly deserving of attention.

Throughout the text the author discusses the violence, deception and general nastiness perpetrated by organized labor personnel. Treatment is given to “Mother Jones” a well known union agitator who advocated violence against mine owners as well as “the Baldwin-Felts thugs”. The extensive amount of gunfire at many West Virginia strikes is detailed. The miners had guns and used them. And there were lots of miners.

The author portrays many organized labor leaders and groups in a negative light and provides the rationale for doing so. His documentation seems adequate but some would argue with his view. Many readers may be of the mindset that the contract security firms, business owners that employed them and local police were brutal and repressive with no redeeming values. Obviously, this popular perspective is over-simplistic. In all probability there were significant threats which required such measures. Some more ‘ammunition’ for Velke’s assertions is really all that is needed. The book is an excellent treatment of key events and figures in the history of security and private investigation. It also adds to our knowledge of railroad policing. The author is to be lauded for bringing these topics to light. Furthermore, it is an enjoyable read that is highly recommended for students and instructors of Security and Investigation.

Reviewer: Chris Hertig, CPP, CPOI has taught History relating to Terrorism, Law Enforcement and Security as both a Nuclear Security Training Administrator and later as a college professor. He has been a long time member of the ASIS Academic Programs Council (Professional Development Council) and the International Foundation for Protection Officers board of directors.

