



The Signevierist

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Insurance Industry Badges

Last year I mentioned that while our organization has a few purists who choose to collect only fire marks, many of our members also collect what I call “peripherals”. I would define a “peripheral” as any insurance related item that is NOT a fire mark. Examples range from books to signs to letter openers to trade cards to currency and the list goes on and on! Some might ask, “Why spend time and treasure on peripherals when one could be developing a nice collection of only fire marks?” My answer is very simple.... because it is FUN! Many would also add, it is usually much cheaper.

Peripherals are a great avenue to contemporary history and are nice companion pieces to fire marks in one’s collection. They can offer additional information on a particular company or a particular time or event. In many cases, they take up much less space. All the above are true when one collects badges related to the insurance industry. Some readers know that in the early days of insurance some entities called a fire mark a “badge”. For the purpose of this article, the badges being referenced were utilized as identification and were worn or carried in a case or pocket much like badges of police officers or fire fighters. This article hopes to share the various uses of badges by insurers.

Types of Insurance Related Badges

A) Special Purpose to Identify Company Employees – Often employees of an insurance company would have specific training and skills that would qualify them for special activities. A great example of this would be employees hired to carefully examine risks for insurability or inspectors who would review the condition and maintenance of boilers, furnaces, and other hardware. The badge and a business card with a photo were used to confirm their representation and authority.



B) Company Security Force – Many companies had their own employed security personnel who kept buildings, assets, and employees safe. Others contracted with security companies to furnish these services. In most cases, the insurance company furnished badges to be used by these individuals and the badges usually identified the company.



C) Company Fire Departments – While somewhat uncommon, there were some companies who had their own fire departments that were designed to protect buildings, assets, and employees. Badges would be issued to those specific employees for use when serving in that role.



D) Wartime Identification Badges – During World War II, many businesses and industries either were required or chose to issue employee identification badges for all or some of their employees. In some cases, the badges had the name and photo of the individual while other times only a company name and employee number were issued.



E) Fire Department Issued Fire Line Passes – In many major cities, the local fire departments would issue “Line Passes” to individuals. In some cases, they were given to dignitaries and elected officials and in other situations they were issued to insurance company employees who needed to access the fire scene (i.e., property loss adjusters). These badges were usually marked with the role of the bearer and included the name of the Fire Department.



F) Insurance Sponsored Fire Brigades – This was more common in Great Britain and has been addressed in great depth in the book, Badges of Extinction. Badges such as those shown in the book were very elaborate and are very challenging to acquire. They would have been worn by the fireman.

G) Fire Patrols – Some of the larger cities (and even some of the smaller burghs) had company sponsored Insurance Fire Patrol. Many times, multiple companies would contribute to their operation. These individuals were often travelling around their community looking for fires or potential fires. Oftentimes they would identify hazardous situations and offer potential remedies.



Photos used in this article were furnished by the author, Logan Smith, and member Scott Tippen.

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SEEN ON NETFLIX

While watching episode 2 of “Wyatt Earp and the Cowboy War” on Netflix, I suddenly saw a British fire mark on the building housing the Sheriff’s office in Tombstone, Arizona. Sixteen minutes and ten seconds into the film, there, plain as day, and in color, was a Royal Insurance Company fire mark. Needless to say, I was quite excited to see it and wanted to know whether it was historically accurate and what were the Wright and Bulau numbers.

The film depicts the gunfight at the OK Corral on October 26, 1881. The Royal Insurance Company entered the United States in 1851 and I was able to determine that the Royal began writing insurance in Arizona in 1881, the same year as the gunfight. The mark’s presence on the Sheriff’s office is historically accurate. From what I could make of the photo, the Wright and Bulau numbers are W95A or B / B891 or 892.

It appears that the film's producers took the time to accurately use a fire mark that depicted the competition of fire insurance companies to expand insurance protection for the growing economy of Arizona.

It's not too often you get to watch a good film and see a fire mark at the same time.

Bob Shea

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THE ABCs of AMERICAN FIRE MARKS

S is for the Shawnee Fire Insurance Company, Topeka, Kansas
Bulau 469, 469-X-1&2

Originally organized March 1882 as the Kansas Farmers' Fire Insurance Company, Abilene, Kansas, a mutual, it was reorganized on February 1, 1893, as a stock company with the name Shawnee Fire Insurance Company and moved to Topeka, Kansas. The Kansas Farmers' had recently been involved in a notable controversy with a judge and the insurance commissioner concerning its soundness and tendency to resist paying claims, but the change of city and the addition of \$100,000 paid in capital allowed the matter to cool off. The new company was the first stock fire insurance company organized in Kansas and was greeted with favorable reviews and endorsements.



The company continued to grow, and on December 31, 1909, boasted premium income of over \$1,500,000, with a surplus of \$192,984. While their 1909 Annual Report to the Kansas Insurance Department was greeted favorably in Kansas, it

was viewed differently by the industry. Best's Insurance Reports noted that its high volume of business for its limited resources was an "undesirable condition." The company had grown too fast, and the unearned premium reserve was too high in relation to its earnings. With a 1909 loss ratio of 61.1% and an expense ratio of 41.2%, the Shawnee Fire had an underwriting loss of \$47,902 and decrease of surplus, \$9,458. Even with an underwriting loss, the Shawnee still paid a \$30,000 dividend to the stockholders

On September 20, 1910, the majority stock owners, who also happened to be the chief executives of the company, decided to sell to and reinsure in the National Fire Insurance Company of Hartford. The sale price was not announced but thought to be \$300 a share at a par value of \$100. That would be a price of about \$600,000 on a capital of \$200,000; quite a large profit even for a company that had paid an average of 15% dividends for the past three years. Even with these warning signs, the National Fire welcomed the deal as a way to increase a large book of business and agents in Kansas and Oklahoma.

While all this was transpiring, Minnesota and Virginia auditors from the National Association of Insurance Commissioners completed their audit of the Shawnee Fire and made its report to the September 1910 meeting of the Commissioners' National Convention. The auditors accused the Shawnee officers of filing fraudulent annual statements for years. By grossly understating unearned and outstanding premiums, and unadjusted losses over the years, the company's 1909 statement showing \$200,000 capital and almost the same in surplus was false. Actually, both capital and surplus were wiped out and the company was insolvent to the amount of \$100,000. Also, the company borrowed large sums of money on notes issued by its officers. Additionally, for years Vice President and manager, James W. Going, had monthly deposits, not as salary, made to his account solely based on his signature. The auditors noted that there were evidences of criminality in various transactions, which would be forwarded to the Kansas authorities.

Even though all this was reported in the insurance press at the time, there were no repercussions. The National Fire had to be aware of the unearned premium deficiency as a result of the reinsurance transfer but didn't raise any objections. They got what they wanted, and no policyholders were injured. Mr. Going let it be known that he was going to retire and move to California. He showed up a few years later as underwriting manager at a surplus line's reciprocal in Chicago.

The Old Underwriter

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Newly Discovered Fire Marks

Two marks were recently discovered that will be added to our addendum. The first is a size variant of a mark already documented in Footprints of Assurance as B.105 from the Aetna Insurance Company, Hartford, CT. B.105 has listed measurements of 7 ¼ inches X 3 13/16 inches while the variant has much smaller dimensions of 5 7/8 inches X 3 inches. This mark was sold in the 2023 FMCA convention as lot number 97 and was previously in the collection of Bill Evenden. It will be classified as B.105-V-A.



The second new discovery is unfortunately a mark that is unable to be identified due to the condition of the mark. The top clearly says "Insured" but the bottom is worn and cannot be read. If anyone has any further information on this mark, please reach out to the editor or Bob Shea. This mark is available for sale on the site fireantiques.org for \$300 if anyone is interested. It will be classified as US-UA-1 as an unidentified mark until further information surfaces.



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A couple of eBay finds for your viewing pleasure!

