

# **MOTHER JONES**

**The Most Dangerous Woman**

**in America**



**ELLIOTT J. GORN**

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## MOTHER JONES

for it too, a meaningful death, one filled with absolution. Her inclination to find betrayal in the world—not just among businessmen and politicians but also among comrades—fed the ideal of martyrdom. She needed to feel more virtuous than others, alone in her righteousness. Part of being Mother Jones was living on the fringe, denying comfort; she must be the most pure, the most dedicated. Thus the sadness that always lingered beneath the turbulent surface. She countered that sadness by losing herself in the turbulence with spectacular acts of courage and moral righteousness that courted danger, even death. And so she returned to West Virginia and Colorado.

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## “Medieval West Virginia”

In 1913, Mother Jones reached the height of her fame and influence. She thrust herself into the spotlight during a violent strike in West Virginia. By the time the strike ended, she had become one of the most famous women in America, and her legions of admirers and detractors would never again be so vociferous in her praise and damnation. “Medieval West Virginia,” Mother Jones concluded of the Mountain State. “With its tent colonies on the bleak hills! With its grim men and women! When I get to the other side, I shall tell God almighty about West Virginia.”<sup>1</sup>

## “The Revolution Is Here”

When Mother Jones left the Socialists and rejoined the UMW, more coal came from West Virginia than ever before. Coal production in southern Appalachia multiplied fivefold between 1900 and 1930, and by 1912, the flow of West Virginia coal crossing the Central Competitive Field into the Great Lakes market had become a flood. It was a high-quality product, mined out of rich veins and shipped at especially low freight rates.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, West Virginia coal was cheap because the miners worked

more for less pay than their counterparts in the unionized Middle West. In 1912, coal miners in West Virginia's southern field earned a little over thirty-eight cents per ton, only about two-thirds the amount of the Central Competitive Field's lowest-paid men. Still, more impoverished Appalachian farmers, more African Americans, and more immigrants came looking for work.<sup>3</sup>

Coal operators believed that success in business justified their control over the mining communities. They paid deference to the ideal of social mobility but felt that miners were a shiftless lot on whom freedom and opportunity were wasted. The operators wanted hard work and steady habits from their men but thought of mining folk as "uncivilized" people who must be educated or coerced into modern ways. Above all, mine owners and managers were anti-union. The labor movement, they believed, was a conspiracy to disrupt the natural harmony of interests between labor and capital.<sup>4</sup>

Anti-union repression was the most important reason for the United Mine Workers' failure in West Virginia, but there were other factors. Organizing efforts also foundered because mine families still had space to carve out decent lives for themselves, so many felt they did not need the union. Life in the mining camps, though far from ideal, was not desperate. Miners received low pay, but coal was plentiful and relatively easy to mine. As long as market demand remained high, families could scrape by. They supplemented their incomes by raising produce and livestock, by taking in boarders, and even by distilling and selling bootleg liquor. And operators had not yet imposed such discipline that the men were invariably forced to work ten or twelve hours per day.<sup>5</sup>

But life in the company towns had started to change by 1912. Despite growing ethnic diversity, a rough awareness of shared class identity permeated the camps. Whites might look askance at blacks, and blacks at immigrants, but beyond that was a work culture that bound them together as miners, a mining-camp life that united them as families. There was a developing consciousness of a common set of grievances. That the companies preferred to hire miners with families proved especially important, because such men were more likely to join the union than simply move on to the next mining town in hopes

of a better deal. Families gave men a stake in their communities and something to fight for.<sup>6</sup>

The unique religion of the mines flowed into unionism. Most communities had churches owned by the companies and preachers hired by the operators. Catholic immigrants, mountain Methodists, and black Baptists all brought different Christian outlooks to the mine camps. The company churches failed to recognize denominational differences and therefore garnered only limited loyalty. The official ministers had to toe the company line, but an underground religious tradition offered much more latitude. This sometimes included the conflation of Christian and union imagery, as the community of saints and the community of labor merged. Declared one miner-preacher, "I say to you that any man in this gathering today . . . who does not join this strike and stand by it, even until death—for the sake of the children, is not worthy to call himself a Christian because he is not willing to stand up for the Kingdom of Heaven." In the hands of such men, Christianity and labor organizing became part of a single prophetic tradition; Scripture offered a vision of social justice and a charter for belief in the movement.<sup>7</sup>

By 1912, then, change had come to West Virginia. Mine families from diverse backgrounds felt a growing identity with each other, and coming events only deepened the sense of solidarity. The operators, too, increasingly identified with one another as a distinct group. Many of them believed—falsely—that mine companies in the Central Competitive Field now financed UMW efforts to organize West Virginia and thereby keep cheap coal out of the marketplace. Such fears reveal just how embattled the operators felt. So when the time came to discuss new terms in 1912, the division between labor and management already ran deep.<sup>8</sup>

Paint and Cabin Creeks are two small parallel streams that roll north toward the Kanawha River. They cut sharp valleys—no more than twenty-five miles long and often barely wide enough for train tracks and a road—that held rich reserves of coal. The mines were generally small operations, run on thin profit margins. Since the 1904 strike, most of the mines on Paint Creek had remained organized, making the area one of the few UMW strongholds in the state.<sup>9</sup>

In March 1912, the UMW asked that the new contract for union miners in the Kanawha River Valley include a small raise and an automatic payroll deduction for union dues. At first the operators balked, then many conceded after sporadic work stoppages. But some refused to give in out of fear that even a small increase in costs would drive their product from the marketplace. Led by Quinn Morton, the manager of the largest Paint Creek mines, they ended negotiations and withdrew recognition of the union. The miners, including hundreds previously not UMW members, went on strike. Morton evicted families from their homes, forcing the displaced to set up a tent colony at Holly Grove near the mouth of Paint Creek. Soon miners on non-union Cabin Creek demanded union recognition, the restoration of the rights of free speech and assembly, an end to the blacklisting of discharged workers, accurate scales with the miners' own representatives guarding against short-weighting, and freedom to trade outside the company stores. Once again, the operators refused.<sup>10</sup>

Tensions escalated as the companies brought in thousands of strikebreakers and hired more armed guards, who began a campaign of intimidation. The strike originated with the rank and file, and their leaders came not from the national office but from the mines themselves, men like Frank Keeney and Bill Blizzard, two miners in their early twenties. As the strike spread, company guards loaded families and their belongings onto railroad cars, rode them out of the valleys, and dumped them along the tracks. The mine folk lived in tents; hunger and unsanitary conditions spread diseases throughout the community. Meanwhile, the companies built concrete fortresses to guard the mines and began advertising in eastern papers for new workers: "Steady Employment at Good Wages in the Mines of West Virginia, No Strikes, Free Transportation." Before it was over, the strike named for two small West Virginia streams became one of the longest and bloodiest labor conflicts in American history.<sup>11</sup>

Mother Jones came back to West Virginia just as the crisis began to boil. She had kept her usual hectic schedule as her rift with the Socialists deepened. A lively speech before the UMW convention in January 1911 signaled her full-time return to the labor movement. She was her feisty old self. She described judges whose bodies, souls, and brains—

"though they never had much brains"—were owned by the corporations, and promised that the day was not far off when the workers would throw them in prison rather than the other way around ("Put that down, Mr. Reporter, so the judges will know it!"). She told the men about strikebreakers:

I know how a scab is made up. One time there was an old barrel up near heaven, and all of heaven got permeated with the odor. God Almighty said, "What is that stuff that smells so?" He was told it was some rotten chemical down there in a barrel and was asked what could be done with it. He said, "Spill it on a lot of bad clay and maybe you can turn out a scab."

Then she was off again, to New York, Ohio, California.<sup>12</sup>

She was in Butte, Montana, speaking on behalf of copper miners when she heard about the walkout on Paint Creek, a site she had helped organize in 1904. According to her autobiography, she canceled her speaking engagements, tied up all of her possessions in a black shawl—"I like to travel light"—and headed for West Virginia. She arrived in early June. Near the tent colony at Holly Grove was a fort armed with a machine gun and manned by Baldwin-Felts guards to defend the Paint Creek Collieries Company office. The two sides engaged in virtual open warfare, with pitched battles and military-style maneuvers.<sup>13</sup>

A reporter for *The Charleston Daily Gazette* who covered Mother Jones's first speech observed how she climbed a steep hill unassisted to the meeting ground, where she spoke for an hour with more animation than others half her age. He interviewed her afterward, and despite her break with the Socialists, her ideas still echoed theirs: "I am simply a social revolutionist. . . . I believe in collective ownership of the means of wealth." She added, "When force is used to hinder the worker in his efforts to obtain the things which are his, he has the right to meet force with force." Some of the most effective UMW organizers in West Virginia were socialists with whom she worked closely, and the radical press gave her respectful coverage.<sup>14</sup>

Mother Jones was ubiquitous in West Virginia over the next year. Sometimes she spoke in the no-man's-lands, where most organizers feared to go. When the companies owned the roads, she walked in the creeks to get to "free soil" where civil liberties were still in force. Her rhetoric grew increasingly militant, incendiary in the eyes of the operators. According to one report, she invited the mildly progressive Republican governor William E. Glasscock to a rally she held in the capital. When the governor failed to attend this "living petition," she denounced him to the crowd: "You can expect no help from such a goddamned dirty coward . . . whom, for modesty's sake, we shall call 'Crystal Peter.' But I warn this little Governor that unless he rides Paint Creek and Cabin Creek of these goddamned Baldwin-Felts mine-guard thugs, there is going to be one hell of a lot of bloodletting in these hills." The source of this story was a mine operator, who claimed that Mother Jones then told her audience, "Arm yourselves, return home and kill every goddamned mine guard on the creeks, blow up the mines, and drive the damned scabs out of the valleys." He added that once, on Cabin Creek, she held up the bloodied jacket of a Baldwin-Felts agent and declared, "This is the first time I ever saw a goddamned mine guard's coat decorated to suit me," and she had swatches of the garment cut up and distributed to the crowd.<sup>15</sup>

Although she did not shy away from strong language or invective, and she increasingly encouraged the miners to respond to violence with gunfire of their own, this report distorts her words. Her most militant calls generally were couched in defensive terms, and there is plenty of evidence that she directed miners to obey the National Guard and to respect private property. Still, she did urge the men to acquire guns. And though she may not have been the crazed incendiary her enemies portrayed, her rhetoric was escalating.<sup>16</sup>

During August and September 1912, the Coal Operators Association hired a stenographer to follow Mother Jones and record her words, so although most of her speeches have not survived, half a dozen verbatim transcripts reveal the core of her message. These were open-air meetings with thousands of listeners, held in public places like the levee in Charleston, on the capitol steps, and at a baseball park in Montgomery. On July 26, after sixteen perished in a battle between

guards and miners at Mucklow, Governor Glasscock sent in three companies of the state militia to restore order. In response, Mother Jones insisted that the brutal mine guards no longer be tolerated: "We are law-abiding citizens, we will destroy no property, we will take no life, but if a fellow comes to my home and outrages my wife, by the Eternal he will pay the penalty. I will send him to his God in the repair shop. (Loud applause.) The man who doesn't do it hasn't got a drop of revolutionary blood in his veins."<sup>17</sup>

Because workers produced the wealth that paid the guards, those same workers had the right to get rid of them. Still, there was a studied ambiguity to her words: "I am not going to say to you don't molest the operators. It is they who hire the dogs to shoot you. (Applause.) I am not asking you to do it, but if he is going to oppress you, deal with him." At her most militant, she came very close to declaring war on the private detectives: "Now when you kill a handful of guards they raise a great howl. You are to blame because you didn't clean them up. (Loud applause.) When you go at it again, do business." And later, "IF THE GOVERNOR WON'T MAKE THEM GO THEN WE WILL MAKE THEM GO." She added that if Glasscock declared martial law, the men should bury their guns in the woods rather than give them up.<sup>18</sup>

Mother Jones's speeches were powerful tools of persuasion. She not only addressed the immediate issues at hand, she helped give shape to the larger ideas and feelings of her listeners. Reproduced on the printed page, however, her words lose some of their power. Without the music of her voice—her brogue, her cadence, her gestures, her interactions with the audience—the speeches seem a bit flat. Sometimes stenographers garbled her words, and because her style was so emotional, Mother Jones's sentences often grew sloppy, her syntax careless. Still, we can feel her oratorical power.

She told her listeners that they were on a crusade: "We are doing God's holy work, we are breaking the chains that bind you, we are putting the fear of God into the robbers." The union's mission and the Lord's were one: "We marched the mountains, every one who took up Christ's doctrine—not the hypocrites but the fighters." She still rejected institutional religion, still called clerics "sky pilots," still said that YMCAs and churches and the Salvation Army were built on the

"bleached bones of workers," for they did nothing but give people a false sense of contentment. The miners cheered as she described how the "big fellows" always sat in the front pews, singing "All for Jesus," when in fact they "robbed for Jesus, murdered for Jesus." You could hear them forty miles away, praying for their daily bread, but then muttering, "Oh, Lord Jesus, fix it so I can get three or four fellows' bread."<sup>19</sup>

She invoked the Old Testament to show that true religion and the labor movement came from God: "He commanded the prophets thousands of years ago to go down and redeem the Israelites that were in bondage, and he organized the men into a union." She contrasted the institutional religion of the bosses with the open-air religion of the workers, an immanent faith manifesting itself right where they stood:

The star that rose in Bethlehem has crossed the world, it has risen here; see it slowly breaking through the clouds. The Star of Bethlehem will usher in the new day and new time and new philosophy—and if you are only true you will be free—if you are only men.

The good fight on earth and the good fight in heaven were one:

We have fought together, we have hungered together, we have marched together, but I can see victory in the heavens for you. I can see the hand above you guiding and inspiring you to move onward and upward. No white flag—we cannot raise it, we must not raise it. We must redeem the world.<sup>20</sup>

Above all, Mother Jones's speeches gave working people faith in themselves. Neither bosses, ministers, nor politicians would change things—"we, the people, have got to do it." When she berated the miners for their cowardice and questioned their masculinity, the message behind her scolding was always to take heart and to do their manly duty. To those betrayed by the promise of American life, for those whom the gleaming consumer world presented in all the magazines

and newspapers of the day seemed so distant, her speeches pledged dramatic transformations: "Take possession of that state house, that ground is yours." Or, "We build the jails, and when we get ready we will put *them* behind the bars. That may happen very soon—things happen overnight." And again, "Go with me up those creeks, and see the blood-hounds of the mine owners. . . . I went up there and they followed me like hounds. But some day I will follow them. When I see them go to Hell, I will get the coal and pile it up on them." She spoke of earlier strikes, told her people that defeats never lasted, that a new day brought victory: "You have suffered, I know how you have suffered. I was with you nearly three years in this state. I went to jail, went to the Federal courts, but I never took any back water. I still unfurl the red flag of industrial freedom, no tyrant's face shall you know, and I call you today into that freedom."<sup>21</sup>

This was no mere trade-union fight for a little more money; it was a principled struggle for human dignity, for the rights of American citizens. Oppression, Mother Jones reminded her listeners, not only crushed the poor, it perverted the rich. She told the operators to come out of hiding, visit the tent colonies, and see how the women and children lived. How could capitalists sleep at night? she asked. Then she turned to one of her stock sketches, the society lady with her dog:

I saw her coming down the street the other day in an automobile. . . . I looked at her and then looked at the poodle. I watched the poodle—every now and again the poodle would squint its eye at her and turn up its nose when it got a look at her. (Laughter and applause.) He seemed to say: "You corrupt, rotten, decayed piece of humanity, my royal dogship is degraded sitting beside you."

The high-class burglars created ladies, she concluded, but God Almighty made women. She repeated her old story of the mine owner who, when asked why he failed to use sufficient timber to prop up the ceilings, resulting in a fatal cave-in, replied that "dagos" were cheaper than props. Then she imagined for her listeners a better day, when they would own the mines, when the first would be last, and they would



say to the likes of William Howard Taft and Teddy Roosevelt, "You have had a devil of a good time, [now] go in and dig coal."<sup>22</sup>

Her authority came from her dedication to the cause, from "measuring steel in the dead of night with the blood-hounds of the ruling class." She always exaggerated her age now, claiming to be eighty years old when in fact she was seventy-three. The greater age made her vigor and courage all the more remarkable, as she pledged to her listeners, "I will be eighty more, for I have got a contract with God Almighty to stay with you until your chains are broken." She told her boys that she had worked in the mines on the night shift and the day shift for twenty-five years, even helping load coal sometimes but always passing out literature and talking union. She used her own life as an example of courting danger and never backing down: "I have been in jail more than once, and I expect to go again. If you are too cowardly to fight, I will fight. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, actually to the Lord you ought, just to see one old woman who is not afraid."<sup>23</sup>

It was her lived struggle, made palpable by her stories, that gave her the authority to say to working families, "Take this advice from Mother." She scolded, coaxed, comforted, and she upheld standards to which her children must measure up. She spoke the miners' language, cursing, fulminating, weeping, cajoling. And as always, she embodied fearlessness in labor's cause, fearlessness that grew out of faith in ultimate justice: "When I know I am right fighting for these children of mine, there is no governor, no court, no president will terrify or muzzle me." She made her fighting spirit their own. "Be good," she told her people at the end of one speech, "Mother is going to stay with you."<sup>24</sup>

The theme of a brighter day coming permeated her addresses. She gave expression to the mine families' grievances, their rage at the companies, but over and over again, she emphasized that the struggle was for a better life for their children. To Charleston she brought one hundred little ones, who marched the streets with banners reading WE ARE THE BABES THAT SLEEP IN THE WOODS and WE WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL AND NOT TO THE MINES. She organized the women: STRIKERS' WIVES ARE NOW INCITED, read a headline in the *Wheeling Register* after one of her meetings. Above all, she gave her audiences a vision of the future based on



8. Mother Jones in a West Virginia mine camp, helping out with the children. Her name became associated with "Medieval West Virginia" more than with any other state (Courtesy Newberry Library)

solidarity, not selfish individualism. Together they would transform their lives: "I will be with you at midnight," she told her children, "or when the battle rages, when the last bullet ceases, but I will be in my joy, as an old saint said:

*Oh, God of the mighty clan,  
God grant that the woman who suffered for you,  
Suffered not for a coward, but Oh, for a man.  
God grant that the woman who suffered for you,  
Suffered not for a coward, but Oh, for a fighting man."*

When she finished and they passed the hat for those most in need, an old miner came up to Mother Jones: "Here is ten dollars, I will go and borrow more. Shake hands with me, an old union miner. . . . I don't care if this was the last cent I had, I will give it to Mother."<sup>25</sup>

But some discordant notes sounded too in these otherwise moving



speeches. Most jarring was the extent to which Mary Jones seems to have believed her own mythology. Even granting her enormous influence over mine families, she indulged in some striking self-puffery, blurring the line, for example, between herself and the "old saint" who invoked the God of the mighty clan. "That is my mission," she declared at the end of one speech, "to do what I can to raise humanity." She went on, "The miners are close to me. The steel workers are. I go among them all. One time when I took up the Mexican question I went to Congress to save some lives. . . . [T]hey appealed to me and said, 'It's up to you, Mother, to save our lives.' " Mother Jones clearly had influence and was an extraordinary organizer. By creating herself as a mythic figure, she gave the powerless someone to rally around. But was Mary Jones starting to believe her own fiction? Biblical cadences about herself—"I will be in my joy" and "I go among them all"—were more than a little presumptuous.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps in all of the children's cries and the workers' pleas for aid she heard echoes of her past. It was, after all, the helplessness she felt in 1867—the horror of watching her husband and children die—that sent her on the road. Whereas she stood powerless and alone before yellow fever, now she was an all-powerful, life-saving mother. But the relationship of a mother and her children is always a difficult one. Children grow up, resent being scolded, lead their own lives. And mothers, finally, have more influence than control. With her magnificent words as *Mother Jones*, she reached for power that society had denied her as a woman. Her persona gave her far more influence than she might otherwise hope to have. The metaphors she deployed, however, also suggested the confines of her situation, for they placed her and her "boys" in a relationship that offered them only limited control of their condition.<sup>27</sup>

Still, there is no denying the effectiveness of this iron-willed working-class woman. Ralph Chaplin, the Wobbly poet, shared the podium with Mother Jones in Charleston:

She might have been any coal miner's wife ablaze with righteous fury when her brood was in danger. Her voice shrilled as she shook her fist at the coal operators, the mine guards, the union officials. . . . She prayed and

cursed and pleaded, raising her clenched and trembling hands, asking heaven to bear witness. . . . The miners loved it and laughed, cheered, hooted, and even cried as she spoke to them.

Lawrence Lynch, a writer who supported the operators' position and described the Cabin Creek strike in words not complimentary to the union, declared:

Head and shoulders above all the other agitators in ability and forcefulness stands "Mother" Jones. . . . She is the woman most loved by the miners and most feared by the operators. . . . She knows no fear and is as much at home in jail as on the platform. In either situation she wields a greater power over the miners than does any other agitator.

And Fred Mooney, a miner who became secretary of West Virginia's UMW District 17, wrote:

She could permeate a group of strikers with more fight than could any living human being. She fired them with enthusiasm, she burned them with criticism, then cried with them because of their abuses. The miners loved, worshipped, and adored her. And well they might, because there was no night too dark, no danger too great for her to face, if in her judgement "her boys" needed her.

She knew the mine families' sorrows, bore their burdens, shared their hopes. And she was as tough as the steel their coal produced.<sup>28</sup>

### "Organize Us! Organize Us!"

Charles Cabell, one of the largest operators on Cabin Creek, was a classic paternalist. Living conditions for his miners were relatively good, but he was virulently anti-union. Cabin Creek—"Russia," as Mother

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Jones called it—was even more isolated than Paint Creek, and mine guards had effectively cut off access to it for years. Union men told legends of organizers who got in but came out in a box. No one, Mother Jones later recalled, “was allowed in the Cabin Creek district without explaining his reason for being there to the gunmen who patrolled the roads, all of which belonged to the coal company.” She asked some sympathetic railroad men to spread the word that she would hold a meeting in Eskdale on August 6, 1912. Mine Workers officials warned her not to organize on Cabin Creek, but she went in anyway.<sup>29</sup>

At Eskdale, according to her autobiography, she listened as a member of the national board of the UMW counseled moderation. She rose and addressed the miners:

“You men have come over the mountains,” said I, “twelve, sixteen miles. Your clothes are thin. Your shoes are out at the toes. Your wives and little ones are cold and hungry! You have been robbed and enslaved for years! And now Billy Sunday comes to you and tells you to be good and patient and trust to justice! What silly trash to tell to men whose goodness and patience has cried out to a deaf world.”

I could see the tears in the eyes of those poor fellows. They looked up into my face as much as to say, “My God, Mother, have you brought us a ray of hope?”

Someone screamed, “Organize us, Mother!”

Then they all began shouting . . . “Organize us! Organize us!”

“March over to that dark church on the corner and I will give you the obligation,” said I.

The men started marching. In the dark the spies could not identify them.

“You can’t organize those men,” said the board member, “because you haven’t the ritual.”

“The ritual, hell,” said I. “I’ll make one up!”

“They have to pay fifteen dollars for a charter,” said he.

## “MEDIEVAL WEST VIRGINIA”

“I will get them their charter,” said I. “Why these poor wretches haven’t fifteen cents for a sandwich. All you care about is your salary regardless of the destiny of these men.”

On the steps of the darkened church, I organized those men. They raised their hands and took the obligation to the Union.

This story is greatly embellished, of course. The version Mother Jones told ten years earlier to the Commission on Industrial Relations had no craven stooge interested only in his salary, warning her that she lacked authority to organize the men. But once again, her autobiography contains metaphorical, if not strictly literal, truths. The whole passage reads like an ecstatic religious service. Metaphor became fact as men listened to her speeches, put aside their tools, and joined the strike.<sup>30</sup>

The Cabin Creek operators feared Mother Jones more than pestilence, according to the reporter Harold West of the *Baltimore Sun*, and they accused her of everything from using profane language to inciting riot. Above all, management charged that she bred discontent and that her words provoked violence. J. R. Thomas, a vice president at Carbon Coal Company, testified that his miners were happy until Mother Jones arrived on Cabin Creek. His boss, Charles Cabell, added that by mid-August, shortly after she arrived, previously contented men were at fever pitch. L. D. Burns, the superintendent of the Dry Branch Coal Company, told a state investigating committee that Mother Jones offered to supply guns to three or four men, who then intimidated two hundred others into striking. The operators understood the problem as a contagion spreading through the coal camps: outside agitators made incendiary speeches; a handful of malcontents intimidated the men into quitting work; lawlessness and violence followed.<sup>31</sup>

They were wrong that outsiders’ bitter words alone made their workers unhappy, but they were right that organizers—“the notorious ‘Mother Jones’ ” prime among them—held great power over mine families. Mother Jones’s speeches articulated the discontents of the coal towns; her body offered a model of physical courage; her spirit taught hope and perseverance. On one level, she turned the symbol-

ism of old age on its head; rather than being an emblem of the past, of bygone days, she made herself into the voice of transcendence. But at the same time, Mother Jones's age and her long history in the movement gave legitimacy to her claims that the union represented a return to true patriotism, to authentic Christianity, to the genuine ways of old. She turned American civil religion to the cause of radical social change.<sup>32</sup>

One of her stories in particular shows how she shaped narratives to her purposes. A few days after the speech at Eskdale, she moved with several of her boys to the town of Red Warrior. They started down the road but soon found their way blocked by mine guards armed with rifles and a machine gun. Mother Jones spoke quietly to the guards and persuaded them to let her pass. Within a short time, however, she turned this small incident into a legend. When she told about it to the Commission on Industrial Relations in 1915, she emphasized how she put her hand on the barrel of the machine gun, how one of the guards, his lip quivering, ordered her to take her hand off, how she refused and said to the Baldwin-Felts men, "You have yourselves mothers and wives and children probably, and I don't want to hear their groans; and I don't want to hear the groans of the mothers and wives and children of my boys; don't you hurt them." She told the detectives she had work to do up the creek, and she persuaded them all to shake hands, saying, "Let us have peace on this creek."<sup>33</sup>

She continued to work this story into her speeches, and by the time it found its way into her autobiography, she had inflated it to epic proportions:

I walked up to the gunmen and put my hand over the muzzle of the gun. Then I just looked at those gunmen, very quiet, and said nothing. . . .

"Take your hands off that gun, you hell-cat!" yelled a fellow called Mayfield, crouching like a tiger to spring at me.

I kept my hand on the muzzle of the gun. "Sir," said I, "my class goes into the mines. They bring out the metal that makes this gun. This is my gun! . . . My class is not

fighting you, not you. They are fighting with bare fists and empty stomachs the men who rob them and deprive their children of childhood."

Her words shamed the guards, according to this 1925 account, but Mayfield still threatened to turn the machine gun on her. She told him that if he did, his own blood would redden Cabin Creek, and she pointed to the hilltops: "Up there in the mountain I have five hundred miners. They are marching armed to the meeting I am going to address. If you start shooting, they will finish the game." There were no armed men in the hills, just a few rabbits, but the ruse allowed her and her boys to move on to Red Warrior, which they organized that night. Although Mother Jones's work did not really proceed with such dramatic triumphs of good over evil, the drama of her language persuaded more and more men to join the union. Before August was over, the UMW had brought most of the Cabin Creek miners into the strike.<sup>34</sup>

In the midst of Mother Jones's efforts, as the confrontation deepened, Governor Glasscock made a personal tour of the strike zone, appointed a commission to recommend a settlement, then declared martial law on September 2. To counter the state of "insurrection" that threatened life and property, twelve hundred troops entered the area to disarm the guards and the miners. They seized hundreds of guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Glasscock authorized the military to court-martial citizens despite the fact that the regular civil courts continued operating, a clear violation of constitutional liberties but one that the West Virginia Supreme Court upheld. Sixty-six individuals—almost all of them union officials, striking miners, and members of the Socialist Party—were arrested, tried by the military court, and imprisoned. Glasscock's declaration of martial law became an excuse for a massive abuse of power. The military took jurisdiction over cases that began before a state of insurrection was declared and that occurred far outside the martial-law zone. Equally important, prisoners' rights to legal counsel, to not incriminate themselves, to habeas corpus, and to trial by jury were suspended.<sup>35</sup>

Despite martial law, Mother Jones continued her work. She orga-

nized mine women to harass strikebreakers, and she rallied children of the tent colonies into protest parades. She traveled throughout the region, then on to New York City to explain the strike, raise funds, and gain publicity. Then she and UMW vice president Frank Hayes went to Washington to testify that employment agencies violated state laws against peonage by importing thousands of men into West Virginia and forcing them to labor against their will. Several of these strikebreakers fled the mines and were secreted away at night by union men who knew the hills. Sometimes the Baldwin-Felts guards waited in ambush, brought the workers back to the mines, then killed their deliverers; sometimes other union men lay in wait for retaliation.<sup>36</sup>

While Mother Jones was out of state, Governor Glasscock's commission produced its report. The group consisted of Bishop P. J. Donahue of the Wheeling Diocese, state militia captain S. L. Walker, and state tax commissioner Fred O. Blue—a sky pilot, but no miners or working men, Mother Jones observed. The commission criticized the mine-guard system for its violations of American liberties, argued that company stores charged exorbitant prices, agreed that the companies cheated the men at the scales. But it also declared miners to be well paid in West Virginia and accused the UMW of stirring discontent and intimidating nonmembers. The commission ignored the key issues: the right to organize, union recognition, and the abolition of the guard system. With the commission offering no solutions and the operators still refusing to negotiate, the situation could only decay. Glasscock quietly withdrew the troops early in the new year, and the shooting recommenced. With things heating up once more, Mother Jones returned just in time for the most dramatic moments of the strike.<sup>37</sup>

On February 7, a Paint Creek strikebreaker was injured on the job. Union men shot at him and his doctor as they made their way to the hospital in Holly Grove. A group of heavily armed mine guards moved in, but the strikers repulsed them, then kept up a steady barrage against the fort at Mucklow. The mine operator Quinn Morton quickly gathered weapons, contacted local sheriffs, who raised a posse, and with the cooperation of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad rode a darkened armored train that night, the Bull Moose Special, toward the strikers' tent colony. Morton and the posse fired rifles and a machine gun into the miners' tents, killing one man and wounding a woman.<sup>38</sup>

Violence escalated, there were several casualties at Mucklow, and Governor Glasscock once again sent in the National Guard. Mother Jones called for a meeting with Glasscock to protest the troops' arresting union men and no one else. Bearing a petition, she headed for Charleston with a few dozen supporters. When they arrived on February 13, *The Charleston Daily Gazette* warned that she came at the head of five hundred armed miners to assassinate the governor. City Hall's bell tower rang out a riot warning, while local police and National Guard troops massed to defend the capitol. Mother Jones never made it past the Charleston train station. She was arrested by the military authorities, then transported back into the strike zone, to the town of Pratt, West Virginia, where the military prosecutor indicted her and forty-seven others. No mine guards were charged.<sup>39</sup>

Most of the union men were held in a bull pen, a converted railroad warehouse. The militia commandeered a boardinghouse, confined Mother Jones there, and posted two sentries to guard her. She was allowed to send and receive censored mail, to go for an occasional walk (she persuaded one of the guards to accompany her to a nearby village for beer), and to give a few closely watched interviews (under martial law, most news from the strike zone was embargoed). Arrested along with Mother Jones were the editor Charles Boswell of the socialist *Labor Argus* and UMW organizers Charles Batley and Paul J. Paulson. Attorneys for these four brought habeas corpus proceedings before the West Virginia Supreme Court. In the case *In re Mary Jones, et al.*, the court refused to limit the power of the governor to declare martial law or the right of the military tribunal to arrest and detain individuals. The judges went further, ruling that a state of war existed in the strike zone and that good evidence linked Mary Jones and the others to riot and insurrection, justifying their detention. Defense attorneys advised their clients not to enter a plea or testify before the military court, whose jurisdiction and legitimacy they continued to deny.<sup>40</sup>

The trial began on March 7, just three days after a new governor, Republican Henry D. Hatfield, took office. The charge was conspiracy that resulted in murder, and then further conspiracy to aid the killers in their escape. These were capital crimes under martial law, punishable by death if the court so ruled and the governor agreed. Mother Jones told the tribunal that she would make no defense in her own be-

half: "Whatever I have done in West Virginia I have done it all over the United States, and when I get out, I will do it again." The others also refused to plead.<sup>41</sup>

The trial focused on Mother Jones's alleged incendiarism, and the state had only inconclusive evidence against her. The most detailed documents entered into the record were transcripts of the speeches she gave in August and September, which were far from unequivocal calls to violence. She had urged the miners to defend their families with guns if necessary, but she had also told them to remain sober, obey the law, protect property, and respect the militia. All of her speeches, rallies, marches, and petitions were well within the established limits of American civil liberties.<sup>42</sup>

What Mother Jones had been guilty of was flagrant disrespect for the governor, disdain for public officials, and contempt for property owners. Her swearing was not ladylike, her attacks on clerics blasphemous. She was an elderly woman who failed to observe social niceties in public places. Her characterization of West Virginia as a police state and her attacks on mine operators as rapacious murderers defied the national mythology of free enterprise. And worst of all, the miners listened. Her enemies were right—she was a prodigious troublemaker. In his closing remarks to the military court, the prosecutor, Judge Advocate and Lieutenant Colonel George S. Wallace, argued that Mother Jones held a large share of responsibility for the recent violence but added, "I frankly say that I do not think the evidence is very strong against her."<sup>43</sup>

No record survives of the military tribunal's decision, but we know that twenty-five prisoners were released unconditionally by Governor Hatfield on March 20 and nineteen more on the promise of good behavior two days later, while eleven were remanded to local jails or the state penitentiary. Mother Jones must have been found guilty, for she was kept under house arrest. No one knew how long the prisoners would be held—or even if they might be executed—but it was clear that the government had singled out the most radical and effective leaders. If the state's aim was to silence the outspoken, it succeeded for a while, but it failed in the long run. For a month, a news embargo meant that little was heard from the military zone, a major setback for

the union because publicity had been an important weapon. Once the trial began on March 7, however, the dam started to crumble. What could make better copy than the court-martial of an eighty-year-old woman? On March 11, *The New York Times* ran a story on page 1, "Mother Jones' Defiant," emphasizing the possibility of death by firing squad: "I am 80 years old and I haven't long to live anyhow," she said. "Since I have to die, I would rather die for the cause to which I have given so much of my life."<sup>44</sup>

In the pages of *Collier's*, Mother Jones told the journalist Cora Older, "I can raise just as much hell in jail as anywhere," and she did. "While one of these, my boys, are in prison, I am in prison," she declared in the *United Mine Workers Journal*; "If they want to stop my protest against the unjust conditions, the brutal use of force and murder . . . let them stand me against a wall and shoot me." She told *Miners' Magazine* that West Virginia officials offered her freedom if she would leave the state and not come back. "You bring your guns," she replied, "and put me up against that tree outside of this bastille and riddle me with bullets, but I will never surrender my rights to remain in this state as long as it suits my business to do so."<sup>45</sup>

Even her prison correspondence was written for dramatic effect. To Idaho senator William Borah, who called for an investigation when the troubles first erupted on the creeks, she offered her gratitude on behalf of "the crushed and persecuted slaves of the coal mines." She added, "This is just what the old monarchy did [to] my grandparents 90 years ago in Ireland." Writing to Caroline Lloyd, Mother Jones compared conditions in West Virginia to the Spanish Inquisition and called the military tribunal the most infamous court since the Middle Ages. At the end of her note, she appended, "I am scratching this off in a hurry. It goes out underground. I am watched on all sides of my room. . . . I am writing it blindly for I have to watch the window." In a second letter to Lloyd, she wrote, "When I know my doom I will Tell I was tryed 4 weeks ago by the Drum Head Military Court. I have not recd. my Sentence yet. . . . I'll die fighting the Crew of Pirates." Her return address: "Pratt W. Va., Military Bastille (In Russianized America)."<sup>46</sup>

Others began beating the drums for her. Writing in the *Appeal to Reason*, Eugene Debs remembered his old friend—this "heroine of a



thousand battles . . . this intrepid old warrior in labor's cause, this scarred old soldier of the revolution"—as a commanding general and called for the left to rise in revolt if the "corporate brigands" murdered her. He concluded, "Mother Jones, we salute you, and we swear that the bullpen shall not be your grave!"<sup>47</sup>

Letters from individuals, petitions from socialist clubs, resolutions from union locals poured into the White House and the Labor Department. T. J. Llewellyn wrote from Missouri to the new Secretary of Labor, William Wilson, "I have carried a gun three times in industrial wars in this country, and by the eternal, if any harm comes to the old Mother, I'm not too old nor by the same token too cowardly to carry it again." He signed himself "one of 'Mother Jones' boys." Margaret R. Duvall warned Secretary Wilson to expect an aroused working class "more dreadful than this country has ever seen" if their "brothers and sister" died in prison. A. Van Tassel of Conneaut, Ohio, begged the President to restore republican government and free the miners' angel: "This beautiful hero of the labor movement has committed no crime, but is being slowly murdered because she insisted on agitating and educating the workers to realize their true status in society."<sup>48</sup>

In the old song-poem tradition, J. A. Bradley of Lancaster, Ohio, wrote in the *United Mine Workers Journal*:

*We love her for her constant voice,  
Raised ever 'gainst wrongs and ills,  
For healing the bodies, bruised and torn,  
In the factories, mines and mills. . . .*

*No truer words than those last words,  
"They know not what they do,"  
They nailed a Son upon a cross,  
And would smite a Mother, too.*

Not only workers but middle-class Americans—merchants, insurance agents, auto dealers, booksellers, accountants, even real estate brokers—expressed their outrage at the cavalier treatment of constitutional liberties in West Virginia and the trampling on women's protected status.<sup>49</sup>

Popular outrage made its way into the press. In May, Harold West published a long article, "Civil War in the West Virginia Coal Mines," in *The Survey*. West wrote that he entered the mine country a neutral observer but came away pro-labor. There had been plenty of violence on both sides, he noted; the operators genuinely were squeezed by market pressures in their efforts to get coal into the lake trade at a profit. Nonetheless, West sketched in broad outline a system of peonage—making workers perpetually indebted to the companies, gouging on rents and goods, retaining private guards to keep workers in line. West charged that families were kept poor and their rights denied because it paid. He concluded by quoting former governor W. M. O. Dawson—Glasscock's predecessor—that many West Virginia mines practiced "robbery of the poor and oppression of the weak."<sup>50</sup>

Protests notwithstanding, the state kept Mother Jones under arrest as part of a larger strategy of quashing dissent, shutting down the strike, and imposing a settlement. She remained incarcerated for nearly three months, much of the time in poor health. The use of martial law on a hitherto unheard-of scale set a precedent for state intervention in labor affairs frightening in its implications. Civil liberties as embodied in the right of habeas corpus, the use of arrest warrants, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Ex Parte Milligan* (which strictly limited the scope of military tribunals) were ignored. The state court-martialed over one hundred individuals, almost all of them unionists, and when two socialist newspapers urged miners to reject a compromise settlement, Governor Hatfield sent troops to shut them down, jail the editors, and destroy their presses. In contrast, the guards who rode the Bull Moose Special, shot up Holly Grove, and committed countless other acts of terrorism were never even detained.<sup>51</sup>

As it turned out, the governor's strategy failed. Hatfield began "negotiations" while Mother Jones and the others were still under arrest. The operators agreed to a nine-hour day, the workers' right to select their own checkweighmen, semimonthly pay, and no blacklisting of union miners, concessions that had been won in previous strikes or were part of state law but were never enforced. The points uppermost for the mine families, union recognition and an end to the guard system, were not addressed. Although hesitant to make any concessions, the operators knew a good deal when they saw it; besides, the strike was

a year old and getting costlier all the time. UMW president John White attempted to hold out for union recognition. Hatfield responded that he would imprison anyone not cooperating with his settlement plan on grounds that they abetted the insurrection. In late April, both sides agreed, and the UMW ratified the pact, not with a rank-and-file vote, which probably would have failed, but through a district convention.<sup>52</sup>

The settlement outraged miners on Paint and Cabin Creeks, but when they threatened to continue their strike, Hatfield issued an ultimatum ordering them to return to work or face deportation from West Virginia. Not only did the national UMW leadership endorse the settlement, but a special committee of the Socialist Party consisting of Eugene Debs, Victor Berger, and Adolph Germer also praised the agreement and exonerated Governor Hatfield of wrongdoing. Local militants and radicals were furious, especially when their newspapers were shut down by the state. Mother Jones heard about the settlement while still under confinement. Though willing to accept these terms as the best outcome of a bad situation, she was appalled at the Socialists' whitewash of the government, and she would continue to nurse her grudges against them. But with the militia in place to enforce the governor's policies, the men went back into the mines.<sup>53</sup>

A few days later, the U.S. Senate debated conditions in the coal fields. Senator John Worth Kern of Indiana, the majority leader, asked for an investigation into violations of immigration, contract-labor, peonage, and civil liberty laws. Senator Nathan Goff of West Virginia argued that an investigation was unnecessary, called Mary Jones the mother of agitators, and seconded Governor Hatfield in declaring that she was not incarcerated but merely confined to a pleasant boarding-house. Senator Kern pulled out the telegram Mother Jones had sent him on May 4 and read it aloud: "From out of the military prison walls, where I have been forced to pass my eighty-first milestone of life, I plead with you for the honor of this Nation. I send you the groans and tears of men, women, and children as I have heard them in this State, and beg you to force that investigation. Children yet unborn will rise and bless you." Kern timed the moment perfectly; the Senate authorized the investigation amid a flurry of national publicity.<sup>54</sup>

On May 8, embarrassed by the attention Kern's move generated, Hatfield freed Mother Jones, convinced that his settlement still would hold. Less than two weeks after her release, she addressed an auditorium of well-wishers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and already West Virginia stories had become part of her repertoire. She told how she ignored warnings not to go to Cabin Creek: "I didn't come out on a stretcher. I raised hell." She advised the miners to stay armed: "The Governor wants your guns. Don't you dare give up any of them. If you are forced to use them, you use them." She pleaded for unity in the labor movement: "You trades unions must stop wrangling with the I.W.W., and the I.W.W. must stop wrangling with the trades unions. . . . I know Industrial unionism is coming, and you can't stop it."<sup>55</sup>

Less than a month after the settlement, hearings before a U.S. Senate subcommittee publicized the outrages that martial law concealed. Meanwhile, miners chafed at the Hatfield-imposed settlement. Wildcat strikes broke out at the end of June on Paint and Cabin Creeks. With the Senate investigation exposing the abuses of the previous year, the state had little leverage to compel the miners back to work. The operators conceded the dues checkoff at Paint Creek and the right to arbitration at Cabin Creek, de facto recognition of the union. Soon, the entire central portion of the state was organized by the United Mine Workers. Though the mine guards were not eliminated, and operators in West Virginia's southernmost fields remained adamantly anti-union, it was a major victory.<sup>56</sup>

Mother Jones's role had been an important one. She brought national publicity, even congressional intervention, at the crucial moment. More important, her words and fearless presence rallied the rank and file, who were ripe for strong action. Her salary was paid by the national office of the UMW, but her ideas fit better with local militants. By the time the final settlement came, the mine families had gained a new sense of themselves. On the surface, when the miners' contract expired at the beginning of April 1912, money was their main concern. But they moved toward much larger issues of freedom, dignity, and the rights of citizens. They would not relinquish their liberty as Americans to the owners of property, they would demand decent material lives for themselves and their children, and they



would do it together. They would indeed question the legitimacy—the Americanness—of a system that gave everything to a few, nothing to many.<sup>57</sup>

The dramatic scenes in West Virginia's mountains added the most spectacular chapter yet to the legend of Mother Jones. Her crowning moments were played out on the national stage, but as always, it was the radical and unionist press that lavished the most praise on the old woman. Declared *The Christian Socialist*, "She is God's great ministering angel, the incarnate spirit of motherhood, a mighty prophetess of the coming reign of justice, love and joy." *Miners' Magazine* observed, "A few years more, and 'Mother' Jones will be sleeping in the bosom of Mother Earth, but when the history of the labor movement is written and there is recorded the glad tidings of labor's emancipation, the name of 'Mother' Jones will shed a halo of lustre upon every chapter." "Martyrdom," the *International* added, "would be her apotheosis."<sup>58</sup>

#### "Search for the Mosquito!"

Passing through New York City just three weeks after her release, Mother Jones gave lengthy, reflective interviews. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* called her "perhaps the most remarkable woman in America" and devoted a long story to her. She described living with the mine families on Paint and Cabin Creeks. She told the story of the strike, but when she turned from these events of the moment, she gave a thoughtful assessment of the labor movement. Mother Jones criticized the Socialists as too idealistic, the IWW as reckless, the AFL as hidebound; but she added that socialism was inevitable, praised the Wobblies for bringing countless dispossessed workers into an industrial union, and commended the trade unionists for their tireless work and powerful organizations. She mused on how to heal divisions and build on the movement's strengths. Perhaps not coincidentally, in calling for unity among American workers, she also made the most blatantly racist comment of her long career, complaining that both the "Japs" and the "Hindus" were entering the country in large numbers and becoming a serious menace to labor in the western states.<sup>59</sup>

That same day, *The New York Times* also featured her in a long interview. The reporter was startled at her moderate tone: "I had expected much incendiary talk in uncouth English and found an educated woman, careful of her speech and sentiments. If she had a red flag with her, she kept it in her satchel with her comb and brush and powder puff. She has a powder puff. That too astonished me." Clearly, Mother Jones decided to let the coal operators and West Virginia officials look like the extremists while she took the high road. She criticized fanaticism, praised all moderates, including a few government and business leaders. She seldom exposed her private feelings to anyone, not even in personal letters, so it was a rare thing for the *Times* to catch her in a moment of introspection.<sup>60</sup>

She said something remarkable in this interview: "My husband died of yellow fever in the South . . . and the same disease made other widows by the tens of thousands. It is making no more widows, because we now have mastered it. The world is suffering, today, from an industrial yellow fever, not less fatal, but I am certain, as preventable." The cause of yellow fever had only been discovered a few years before. Mother Jones rarely mentioned the deaths of George and her children to that disease back in 1867, and then only in passing. But now she turned the scientific breakthrough that might have saved them thirty years earlier into a metaphor: "Search for the mosquito! That ought to be a slogan with investigators on both sides of the labor question." Child-labor legislation was science's first triumph, and people like herself were simply trying to "drain the industrial swamps." There it was: her mission was to conquer yellow fever. Mother Jones would do the work Mary Jones could not; she would save the children.<sup>61</sup>

She probed even more deeply into her own past for the *Times*. She told her old story about going south to investigate conditions in the cotton mills, but this time the story took a new turn. She described meeting a widow and three children who worked fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, all powerless to escape their peonage. "I abducted the whole family," Mother Jones recalled:

It was a real abduction, for they went almost against their will. They could not believe escape to be a possibility. I

shall never forget that night. . . . We drove along the miles of road, my charges shivering in fear, although the night was moist and hot, with all the qualms which might have thrilled us had we been a party of the antebellum abolitionists and escaping negro slaves. Always listening for the baying of bloodhounds, we reached the station, climbed furtively aboard the train, and started off. My charges all broke down then, quite hysterically. The strain had been so great!

The story, Mother Jones concluded, revealed the possibility of change, and she observed how genuine progress was being made now that many states had passed child-labor legislation.<sup>62</sup>

At her greatest moment of fame and triumph, Mother Jones chose to bring up—albeit obliquely—the subjects she mentioned so rarely, yellow fever and the death of her family in Memphis. Her call to find the mosquito causing industrial ills made explicit the tie between watching her family die and her need to save others. She made the connection even clearer by linking those horrifying days almost a half century ago to a story about leading a widow and children out of the South. Later in the interview, she went on at length about neglectful mothers and about how women must stay at home and raise their families. She declared that “the average human being only wants a quiet home, a well-fed, comfortable family, so situated that its happiness is possible.” She might well have been describing herself, George Jones, and their children in autumn 1867. Clearly, in this *Times* interview, she made a leap of fantasy. For a moment, she imagined her personal history magically changed. Rather than passively watch her babies die in the Old South after the Civil War, she returned, strong and transformed, to rescue them. No longer the “spiritless and hopeless” widow, “bowed by the weight of misery impossible to describe in words,” Mary Jones came back to deliver her family. The woman warrior whose strength of purpose saved the day supplanted the heartsick mourner of 1867.<sup>63</sup>

It was pure fantasy, of course. Nothing could rescue her long-dead loved ones. But saving Mary Jones was not a fantasy, and the character

she created, Mother Jones, was no fantasy either. Out of famine, plague, and fire, out of grief and helplessness, dauntless Mother Jones had emerged and triumphed. Martyr and savior, the old woman of the labor movement was real enough to help save those who could not save themselves—workers, their families, and Mary Jones herself.