MOTHER JONES
(MARY HARRIS JONES)

BORN: MAY 1, 1830, CORK, IRELAND. DIED: NOVEMBER 30, 1930, SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND. FATHER: RICHARD HARRIS (NATURALIZED AMERICAN CITIZEN). MOTHER: NAME UNCERTAIN (BELIEVED TO BE MARGARET OR ELLEN). MARRIED: GEORGE JONES, 1861. FOUR CHILDREN, NAMES UNKNOWN (ALL DIED 1867).

JOINED KNIGHTS OF LABOR, 1879. COFOUNDER, INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD, 1905. ORGANIZER, UNITED MINE WORKERS, 1900–20.

I went up to the miners' camp in Holly Grove where all through the winter, through snow and ice and blizzard, men and women and little children had shuddered in canvas tents that America might be a better country to live in. I listened to their stories. I talked to Mrs. Sevilla whose unborn child had been kicked dead by gunmen while her husband was out looking for work. I talked with widows, whose husbands had been shot by the gunmen; with children whose frightened faces talked more effectively than their baby tongues. I learned how the scabs had been recruited in the cities, locked in boxcars, and delivered to the mines like so much pork.

"I think the strike is lost, Mother," said an old miner whose son had been killed.

"Lost! Not until your souls are lost!" said I.

MARY HARRIS JONES IN 1914
FROM *The Autobiography of Mother Jones,* 1925

Mother Jones's name weaves in and out of the major events of labor history: from the time the first union admitted women in 1879, to the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905, to the Great Steel Strike of 1919. She captured the imagination of American workers in a way that no one else has before or since. To know of her life is to know that for millions of immigrant laborers, life in America was hell. Her will to resist the tyranny of industrial owners was legendary among workers. Her courage was infectious, and it was this the owners feared most.

Consistent with the legend of Mother Jones, any account of her life begins in controversy. She claimed to have been born on May 1, 1830, in Cork, Ireland. The place is probably right and the month and day may be right, but the year seems to be wrong. According to school and work records she would have had to have been born in 1838 or 1839. Toronto Normal School records show that in 1858 a student named Maria Harris was eighteen. The signature of Maria Harris corresponds to that of Mother Jones. If one accepts Mother Jones's 1830 birthdate, there is a span of nine years in her youth that is completely unaccounted for. It may have been that as she grew older her flair for the dramatic prompted her to capitalize on a "grandmother image" and magnify her years. Under oath in court she tended to be more truthful about her age. At her trial in West Virginia in 1902, a newspaper reported that "She confessed to sixty years."

The image of a pink-cheeked old woman who dared to go to the center of brutal strikes was potent and effective. Like Harriet Tubman's poor-old-bent-over-black-woman disguise, Mother Jones's grandmother role was inspired camouflage. Her sense of drama enabled her to capture public attention for the plight of people who were politically powerless.

She was drawn to the miners, although it was child labor that aroused her most spectacular activities. Although she had ample opportunities in countless newspaper interviews, public hearings, and other forums to tell about her childhood and youth, she never did. The only personal details she provided were those that she shared in common with the anonymous immigrants who made up much of the American labor force. It was as though she wanted

people to know that the only parts of her life that mattered were her personal suffering, struggle, and resistance. In the opening statement of her autobiography she summed up the themes of her life.

> I was born in the city of Cork, Ireland, in 1830. My people were poor. For generations they had fought for Ireland's freedom. Many of my folks have died in that struggle. My father, Richard Harris, came to America in 1835, and as soon as he had become an American citizen he sent for his family. His work as a laborer with railway construction crews took him to Toronto, Canada. Here I was brought up but always as a child of an American citizen. Of that citizenship I have ever been proud.

Her father, Richard Harris, had settled in Burlington, Vermont, and he became a naturalized American citizen in 1850. The knowledge Mary Harris gained from her father about the working of railroads gave her a mobility not available to many other union organizers. She once evaded a two-hundred-man militia in Colorado by avoiding the train stations and going at night to the section house, where the cars stood ready to be coupled to the train. An old section hand found her walking the ties. Mother Jones introduced herself, said she had a ticket on the "sleeper going south," and asked to be put aboard. She was sound asleep by the time the train eased into the station to let its first passengers on under the watchful eyes of the soldiers.

In Toronto Mary Harris went to public school and then to Toronto Normal School, a teachers college, from which she was graduated in 1859. Her first job was in Monroe, Michigan, as a teacher in a convent school. According to the convent records, "Miss M. Harris entered the house as a secular teacher on August 31, 1859. . . . She remained until March 8, 1860 at which time she was paid in full . . . $36.43."

Although she claimed she never liked teaching, she was a natural teacher. Every speech she gave was a history lesson in the labor movement. Between strikes she used to talk at union meetings about the development of the labor movement in England, and at the end of the meeting she sold a book called *Merrie England*, which described socialism in the simple personal terms of the workers' struggles in England. She always encouraged "her boys," as she called them, to learn more English, improve their minds, and read

rather than spend time in the saloon. Some of them listened to her, and she was their first impetus for self-education.

What she didn't like about teaching was "bossing little children," and after almost seven months in the convent school she left to try to be a dressmaker in Chicago. By the following fall she had given up on dressmaking and was in Memphis, Tennessee, for another teaching job.

For her time Mary Harris was a well-educated woman. Although she could always pull out an Irish brogue when she needed it, she spoke well and wrote extremely well. Her letters have few misspellings, excellent punctuation, and good grammar. Had she wanted, it would have been very easy for her to marry into the middle class. Instead, she married George Jones, an itinerant blacksmith and organizer for the Iron Moulders' Union in Memphis, Tennessee. They were married in 1861, and she did some traveling with him—"missionary work" she called it—trying to convince iron workers to overcome the threats of blacklisting, firings, and cries of "traitor" to join the union. The Iron Moulders' Union had been founded only in 1859, and it was the first successful union to organize members across state lines.

The Joneses lived in a poor section of Memphis, not too far from the foundry where George Jones worked. They had four children—three boys and a girl—within four years. The Civil War did not seem to greatly touch their lives except to increase work for iron workers.

In 1867, an epidemic of yellow fever broke out in Memphis. The rich left town; the poor had no place to go. There were few doctors or nurses to help the poor. Once a house was known to have a fever victim, the house was quarantined to visitors. The air was filled with the stench of burning sulfur, for it was believed that sulfur fumes warded off the fever. City officials banned all public assemblies. Churches were closed. People did not leave their homes if they didn't have to. Wagons driven by masked and hooded men creaked through the streets to pick up the dead. It was not so very different from the death wagon drivers who called "Bring out your dead" in the plague-infested towns of the Middle Ages.

Across the street from Mary Jones, ten persons lay dead from the plague. "The dead surrounded us. . . . All about my house I could hear weeping and the cries of delirium."

One by one Mary Jones's children caught the fever and slowly

died. "I washed their little bodies," she said simply, "and got them ready for burial." Then her husband caught the fever and died. "I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could. Other homes were as stricken as mine. All day long—all night long, I heard the grating of the wheels of the death cart."

Some inner resource saved her from the abyss of personal despair. Over fifty years later, when the women of Colorado saw their husbands shot down and their children burned to death in a fourteen-month struggle culminating in the Ludlow Massacre, she knew from her own experience what they suffered. "Get out and fight," she told them. "Fight like hell till you go to heaven!" She explained, "That was the only way I knew to comfort them." It was either fight or not survive.

After the Iron Moulders' Union buried her husband, she got a permit to help nurse the remaining victims. When the epidemic was over she packed up her few belongings and went back to Chicago.

For the next four years she worked as a dressmaker. Apparently she was very good and opened her own shop on Washington Street near the lake. Dress was always significant in her life and she was concerned about her appearance, which was impeccably ladylike. Her demure costume was a wonderful foil for her fiery speeches and rough language. As one news reporter wrote:

> A casual glance at the blue-eyed, pink-skinned, white-haired woman, in her mid-Victorian dress of black, with its fussy touches, and her bonnet of black lace, with its violets and lavender ribbon . . . does not suggest that here is the greatest fighting spirit that American womanhood has developed in our time.

A West Virginia miner's daughter remembers that when Mother Jones used to come around she showed the miners' wives how to make bonnets and encouraged them to give up the kerchiefs they always wore on their heads. Perhaps it was her way of trying to break down the dress distinctions that separated the miners' wives from the mine owners' wives. Another West Virginia woman, Mrs. Utt, remembers that her mother would not let her go to Mother Jones's meetings because her language was so rough. Mother Jones used a lot of "damns" and "hells" in her speech and was not afraid to

use strong words, especially in relation to the "pig-eyed" mine owners or other enemies of the workers. It was a way of deflating authority, of thumbing her nose at those who were in power, and letting her audience know that they could do it too. During a particularly brutal strike in West Virginia one mine owner remembers her referring to the governor of the state, a man named Glasscock, as "Crystal peter" and "Crystal cock."

It always gave a wonderful lift to the miners' spirits to see this tiny—she was about five feet tall—sedately dressed woman, swearing like a trouper.

The course of her dressmaking business changed in 1871 when Mrs. O'Leary's cow tipped over the lantern and caused the Great Chicago Fire. Three hundred people died. The fire destroyed eighteen thousand houses, and ninety thousand people were left homeless. Mary Jones was burned out, her business and home completely destroyed. All she had left after the fire were the clothes on her back. For the second time everything in her life had been obliterated—and after that it was as though she had nothing left to fear.

Never again did she try to accumulate any possessions or make a home for herself. "I reside wherever there is a good fight against wrong," she used to say and it was true. Home was never again a fixed place.

"After the Chicago fire," Jones said, "I became more and more engrossed in the labor struggle and I decided to take an active part in the efforts of the working people to better the conditions under which they worked and lived."

Like many women in the labor movement, Mary Jones got involved because of the work of her husband. She got to know many of the Iron Moulders in Chicago who were affiliated with a two-year-old organization known as the Knights of Labor. According to its founding charter, the Knights of Labor was "an organization of working people of every craft . . . skilled and unskilled . . . with members of every creed and color. . . ." After the fire Mary Jones began to go to meetings that the Knights of Labor held in an old fire-scorched building near St. Mary's Church, where she had been living along with hundreds of other homeless refugees. To her the Knights, which had to hold meetings secretly because people who attended were persecuted and blacklisted by employers, seemed "a worthy, even sacred

cause." She became a supporter—women were not officially admitted as members until 1879—listing her trade as "dressmaker" on the application. The cause of labor and the vision of the Knights of Labor opened a new world to her. She began to spend her "evenings at their meetings, listening to splendid speakers. . . ."

Three important developments occurred during these Knights of Labor meetings. First, she was exposed to the ideas of socialism and the historical facts behind the organization of workers in England and other European countries. (She went to Europe in 1873 and again in 1881 to learn more about the conditions of workers in England, Ireland, France, Austria, and Germany.) Second, she began to discover her own skills as a speaker and debater. She began by asking questions of the speakers and found that she had a commanding presence and an ability to make people listen to what she said. Although the Knights of Labor did not yet admit women workers as full members, Mary Jones unofficially joined the Knights as a supporter and agitator and began recruiting for them.

She was sent out by the Chicago office to speak to workers and try to persuade them to join the Knights of Labor. She was persuasive, dynamic, personal, and she developed into a fiery speaker, able to inject energy and determination into a crowd. One reporter covering a labor rally described her as "an energetic, white-haired, bright-eyed little woman [whose] earnestness would carry conviction to a steel magnet itself." Tom Tippett, who worked with her in the United Mine Workers, said,

> In the union office she was out of place quarreling with officials, offering no constructive policy of her own and constantly violating union policy. It was in the field that she made her real contribution. With one speech she often threw a whole community on strike, and she could keep the strikers loyal month after month on empty stomachs and behind prison bars.

In her later days she could draw immense audiences from all segments of society—society women, factory girls, laborers, town fathers, business representatives, black and white, and all nationalities. She spoke out of total conviction, and she never said what she didn't believe. At a banquet of the National Woman's Suffrage Association in New York a woman asked her how women could help laborers when women didn't have the vote. She answered, "I have

never had a vote and I have raised hell all over this country. You don't need a vote to raise hell! You need convictions and a voice!"

She did not exactly charm the five hundred members of her audience, all of whom were dedicated to the woman's vote, but very few walked out on her. No one ever accused her of currying favor with an audience. Her job was to shake an audience out of its apathy, energize people, and get them acting instead of talking.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, known as the Rebel Girl of the IWW and one of its outstanding organizers, considered Mother Jones "the greatest woman agitator of her time." As a professional agitator herself she knew that the greatest enemy was public indifference and was a keen judge of what moved an apathetic audience to action. The first time Flynn saw Mother Jones was at a Bronx, New York, open-air meeting. "She was giving the 'city folks' hell. Why weren't we helping the miners of West Virginia? Why weren't we backing up the Mexican people against Diaz? We were 'white-livered rabbits who never put our feet on Mother earth,' she said."

The third important result of the Knights of Labor was Mother Jones's meeting with Terrence Powderly, the leader of the Knights and a man who would remain one of her close friends and confidants throughout her lifetime. They maintained a correspondence for years, and when Mother Jones was unable to travel any more she went to Powderly's home near Washington, D.C., and then spent her last years nearby at Mrs. Walter Burgess's in Silver Spring.

Powderly was a gentle, philosophical man who was thirty years old when he took over the Knights in 1878. He was greatly criticized later for the policies the Knights pursued and for his failure to use strikes as a prime tactic. Powderly was a laborer himself, who had worked his way up through the railroads, had quit to study law, had managed a grocery store, and had even served a term as mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He had been greatly influenced by William Sylvis, the founder of the Iron Moulders' Union and a hero of Mother Jones's husband. He detested strikes because he felt they cost the workers far more than they gained and that they rarely brought lasting benefits. At a time when labor agitators were branded as socialist traitors, and a major preoccupation of the Catholic Church was fighting socialism—the majority of the laboring classes, Irish, Polish, Italian, German, Slavic, were all Catholic—

Powderly deserved credit for making a union a "moral, godly" organization in the eyes of its Catholic membership. The local Catholic Church was the one stable element that immigrant workers had in their lives, and they would not support an organization that had a hint of what the parish priest called "the evils of socialism." Some priests even refused to bury the early organizers in Catholic cemeteries.

Realistically, socialism offered the only theoretical basis for labor unions. When Powderly was under severe attack for his failure to incorporate militant tactics and socialist ideas into unionism, Mother Jones wrote to him, "Though all the world may abuse you there will still be one who will defend you. . . . You were rocking the cradle of the movement. You made it possible for others to march on."

Some of Powderly's ideas were visionary. He refused to accept the idea that women or blacks should be barred from labor unions even though they worked for lower wages. A year after Powderly assumed leadership, the Knights admitted women as equal members, the first labor organization to do so. (It did not, however, admit blacks.) Powderly often shared a speaker's platform with Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Susan B. Anthony, and he spoke for the woman's vote while they spoke for the rights of women in the mills and factories. He made Susan B. Anthony a member of the Knights of Labor. He advocated joining the Communist International Workingmen's Association, an organization that Karl Marx had started in London in 1865. But in many ways he was not in touch with the tactics needed to deal with the raw struggles that were to take place between capitalist owners and the people who worked for them.

The profound friendship he developed with Mother Jones, which lasted over fifty-five years, reveals a great deal about both of them. Both were excellent judges of human nature. Both had had profound spiritual experiences connected with the miners. And in both of them there was an intermingling of religious sensibility with the impulse for radical action. In Powderly, however, the religious sensibility predominated, which may have been why he was so successful in negotiating with the Catholic Church. In Mother Jones the taste for battle dominated. Mother Jones's religion took a different form from Powderly's—a militant, defiant, unaccepting view of the application of Christian values.

Mother Jones, like Powderly, often referred to the "greatest agitator of all time"—Jesus Christ. She portrayed Christ as an organizer and worker for the industrious poor. She explained that Christ could have been honored by the rich of his day. Instead, he chose to die rather than betray the poor. Unlike Powderly's, her language was that of the people not the Church. "Christ walked among the poor and the despised and the lowly and he agitated against the powers of Rome. . . ."

She had a strong sense of religion but very little faith in the Catholic Church. Often in a mining town all public buildings were owned by the mine owners—even the churches. In one mining town she found the men meeting in the Catholic church, the candles lit, the priest collecting the union dues. She told the men, "This is a praying institution. You should not commercialize it." She told everyone to get up and go outside. When they were out in the open air she told the men: "Your organization is not a praying institution. It's a fighting institution. . . . Pray for the dead, but fight like hell for the living."

Unlike Dorothy Day who thirty years later would join radical action with Catholicism, Mother Jones did not believe that the Catholic Church was of much help to laborers. Nonetheless, she was aware of the limitations of labor experiments that did not contain religion. When she was asked to join a socialist colony in Ruskin, Tennessee—one of the worker communities that had become fashionable—she refused, saying, "Only religion can make a colony successful and labor doesn't have religion."

At heart she believed that there was no way for the lot of working people in America to improve until they faced the hard task of organizing. Her life was devoted to making that possible. She was out of place in the union office or around the negotiating table. Her real contribution was in the field.

From 1871 to 1900 it is hard to put together a clear chronological record of Mother Jones's activities. In many of her speeches she implied involvement with the Pittsburgh railroad strike in 1877, the Haymarket Riots of 1886, the founding of the United Mine Workers in 1890 (when it merged with another group of miners in the Knights of Labor), the Populist Army of 1892, the Pullman strikes organized by Eugene Debs in 1894, Coxey's poverty march of the

same year. She never said what she had done, but she spoke about them in such a way that her audience saw themselves as part of a great tradition of struggle, resistance, and the will to overcome.

Often her itinerary was not fixed by the union office but by a call for help from individual workers. Her personal correspondence contains more than one urgent call for help from an anonymous miner. Her reputation as a savior of hopeless situations brought her telegrams such as this one from Shamokin, Pennsylvania:

> MOTHER THERE IS A STRIKE AT THE SILK MILLS HERE WILL YOU COME AT ONCE I KNOW YOU CAN DO LOTS OF GOOD COME IF POSSIBLE
>
> FROM A MINER

Often immigrants were recruited to work in the mines by the promise of free land to farm. When they arrived, there was no land, and there was no way to express grievances. They lived in a company house, bought their food from a company store, saw a company doctor if they were sick, and sent their children to a company school. Often they were paid in company scrip instead of real money, so they couldn't leave town. If a worker expressed too much discontent, credit was cut off at the store, and he found an eviction notice at his house.

In 1897 Mother Jones began working with coal miners in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. It brought her to the attention of John Mitchell and other leaders of the struggling mine workers union, and she was hired as a field organizer. In 1900 they paid her $494.91 for work done, and by 1904 she was listed as one of sixty walking delegates receiving $4 a day. It was just about the same salary that the miners received. She stayed with workers, shared their food, and any money she raised she turned over to others.

Textile strikes, streetcar strikes, silk mill strikes, ironworker strikes, railroad strikes—nothing absorbed Mother Jones in quite the same way as the desperate struggles of the mine workers. When Clarence Darrow wrote the introduction to her autobiography he said it was

> the mountainous country, the deep mines, the black pit, the cheap homes, the danger, the everlasting conflict for wages and for life [that] appealed to her imagination and chivalry. . . . In all her career, Mother Jones never quailed or ran away. Her deep convictions and fearless soul always drew her to seek the spot where the fight was hottest and the danger greatest.

If there is a key to Mother Jones's life, it is to be found in her identification with the miners. There she saw in stark forms the human costs of America's progress. And it was there that she first became known as Mother. She tells of a terrible incident when she stayed up all night with a dying man whose head had been bashed in by one of the mine detectives. "We took him to the hotel and sent for a doctor who sewed up the great open cuts in his head. I sat up all night and nursed the poor fellow. He was out of his head and thought I was his mother." She was in a sense a mother for many people—children whose fathers had been lost in the mines, women who married young and had had too many babies and had little hope left in their lives. The struggle of the men and women who lived in isolated towns tucked away in mountains was in many ways the grimmest battle of the American labor movement. Mother Jones succeeded in bringing that story down from the hill towns into public notice. Many of the names are lost to American history—Bruceville, Arnot, Fairmont, Trinidad. She depicted the life of the miners and their families, and she did nothing to soften the reality. But as in Harriet Tubman's descriptions of the lives of slaves, there was a sense of the poetry of human experience in Jones's images of the men who

> crawl through dark, choking crevices with only a bit of lamp on their caps to light the silent way; whose backs are bent with toil, whose very bones ache, whose happiness is sleep, and whose peace is death.

She told of families that

> lived in company-owned shacks that were not fit for pigs. Children died by the hundreds due to the ignorance and the poverty of their parents. Often I have helped lay out for burial the babies of the miners, and the mothers could scarce conceal their relief at the little ones' deaths.

She understood the isolation of spirit of the miner's life:

> Mining at its best is wretched work, and the life and surroundings of the miner are hard and ugly. His work is down in the black depths of the earth. He works alone in a drift. There can

be little friendly companionship as there is in the factory; as there is among men who build bridges and houses, working together in groups. The work is dirty. Coal dust grinds itself into the skin, never to be removed. The miner must stoop as he works in the drift. He becomes bent like a gnome. His work is utterly fatiguing. Muscles and bones ache. His lungs breathe coal dust and the strange damp air of places that are never filled with sunlight. . . . Around his house is mud and slush. Great mounds of culm, black and sullen, surround him. His children are perpetually grimy from play on the culm mounds. The wife struggles with dirt, with inadequate water supply, with small wages, with overcrowded shacks.

She described sitting with a miner on a culm pile, while he ate lunch with grimy hands, or talking with his wife over the washtub, while she washed coal dust out of her white curtains.

"We came like missionaries," she wrote of her first experiences organizing among miners. "We held revival meetings at which we called on our congregations to seek salvation, not in the 'blood of the lamb' but in the United Mine Workers." About the success of these efforts she said:

> Our task was not safe or easy. . . . Men who joined the union were blacklisted. Their families were thrown out on the highways. Men were shot. They were beaten. Many disappeared without a trace. Storekeepers were ordered not to sell to union men or their families. . . .

It was painful, bitter, lonely work. Often it seemed hopeless. Joining a union became a death warrant in many mining towns. But in others it was a source of strength. One strike at the Dripmouth mine in Arnot, Pennsylvania, in 1900 revealed a lot about Mother Jones's persistence, her ingenuity, her judgment of people, and her infectious spirit.

A strike of the miners had been going on for five months without making headway. The mine owners had sent the doctors, the schoolteachers, the preachers to the homes of the miners to get them to sign a document saying they would return to work. Then they brought in substitute workers, called scabs, to keep the mines working. In those days there was no money with which to pay strike

benefits and many strikes were broken simply by the owner's ability to outwait the strikers.

Mother Jones told the demoralized men, "Stay home with the children for a change and let the women attend to the scabs." She organized the miners' wives into "an army" and armed them with tin washtubs, mops, brooms, and pails of water. She knew she would be arrested if she were seen at the head of the troops, and since nothing more effectively stopped rebellions than the arrest of a leader, she chose another woman to lead the army.

> I selected as leader an Irish woman who had a most picturesque appearance. . . . She wore a black stocking and a white one. She had tied a little red fringed shawl over her wild red hair. Her face was red and her eyes were mad. I looked at her and felt that she could raise a rumpus.

She told the woman to lead the woman's army up to the entrance of the mine and "hammer and howl and be ready to chase the scabs with your mops and brooms." Her final instructions were, "Don't be afraid of anyone."

The women weren't. They knocked down the first guard who tried to stop them. They ran after the workers who tried to enter the mines. The mules that pulled the coal cars out of the mines started bucking and kicking. What began as an ordinary workday became utter chaos. As miners started to leave their houses to go to work the women chased them back inside. One man was thrown over the fence to land at the feet of his mother. Thinking he was dead she ran for a bottle of holy water yelling, "For God's sake come back to life . . . and join the union." According to Mother Jones, "When he opened his eyes and saw all the women standing around him he said, 'Sure and I'll go to hell before I'll scab again.' "

The march of the miners' wives turned the strike around. The men resolved not to go back to work and to stay out until they gained some of their demands. For days and nights the women guarded the mines so the company would not bring in scabs. "They were heroic women," said Mother Jones. "In the long years to come the nation will pay them high tribute for they were fighting for the advancement of a great country."

That strike in Arnot was won. But there were many that weren't, many that were gruesome in their violence and brutality. At Stans-

ford Mountain Mother Jones said she went into a corner "and wept like I hadn't wept since the death of my husband and four children in 1867." She had seen a miner's shack soaked red with blood. The miner had had his head blown off and his wife and four children were riddled with bullets.

She accepted the decision of the community at Stanaford Mountain not to continue the strike. "No strike has ever been won that didn't have the support of the women," she used to say and she was right. It is a truism that has been strangely neglected by labor historians. Men did not stay out on strike when their wives were pushing them back to work. Her ability to work with the miners' wives was one of the reasons for her extraordinary success. She understood the totality of the miners' lives. She had good rapport with the women, and she understood their children.

There was nothing delicate about miners' wives. Most of them had spent their own childhoods working in the silk mills. They married young, had too many children too quickly, and aged before their time. As Mother Jones told it:

> Many a time I have been in a home where the poor wife was sick in bed, the children crawling over her, quarreling and playing in the room, often the only warm room in the house. I would tidy up the best I could, hush the little ones, get them ready for school in the morning, those that didn't go to the breakers or to the mills, pack the lunch in the dinner bucket, bathe the poor wife and brush her hair. I saw the daily heroism of those wives.

The breakers were chutes in which coal was separated from slate in the mines. Boys as young as six and seven were hired to do this work. The silk mills were small mills which grew up around mining towns where women and children were sent to work. Women and children were less trouble than men. They worked long hours for a pittance, and they didn't organize or strike for higher wages.

When Mother Jones went to Kensington, Pennsylvania, in 1903 to assist in a textile strike she learned that ten thousand of the seventy-five thousand strikers were children, many of them under ten years old. "Every day little children came into Union Headquarters, some with their hands off, some with the thumb missing, some

with their fingers off at the knuckle. They were stooped little things, round shouldered and skinny." When she asked the reporters why they didn't publish the facts about child labor in Pennsylvania, they answered they couldn't because the mill owners had stock in the newspapers. "Well," she said, "I've got stock in these little children. I'll arrange a little publicity."

She asked the parents if they would let her take their children for a week or ten days. They consented and Mother Jones began what became known as The March of the Mill Children, a procession from Kensington, Pennsylvania, to Oyster Bay, New York, where President Theodore Roosevelt was vacationing. She thought it would be beneficial if "President Roosevelt might see these mill children and compare them with his own little ones who were spending the summer on the seashore."

As they marched reporters began to cover their progress and the meetings that Mother Jones arranged in each town and city she went through. She was a member of the Socialist party, and Socialists in each of the towns helped with arrangements and organizing crowds. At a mass meeting in Philadelphia she introduced some of the children to the crowds. "Here's a textbook on economics," she said as she introduced James Ashworth, a little boy who was stooped over like an old man from carrying bundles of yarn that weighed seventy-five pounds. "He gets three dollars a week and his sister who is fourteen gets six dollars. They work in a carpet factory ten hours a day. . . ." To an immense crowd in New York City she showed little Eddie Dunphy, "a little fellow of twelve whose job it was to sit all day on a high stool handing the right thread to another worker . . . . eleven hours a day . . . for three dollars a week." Then she introduced Gussie Rangnew, "a little girl from whom all the childhood had gone. Her face was like an old woman's. Gussie packed stockings in a factory."

The *New York Times* covered every day of the march. Farmers brought out fresh food to the children. The marchers cooked in washtubs along the road. Trainmen gave them free rides. In Princeton, New Jersey, Grover Cleveland lent them his barn to sleep in. Senator Thomas Platt, one of the political bosses of New York, arranged to meet them in a fancy hotel in New York, but he went out the back door after he saw the "little army." When the manager of the hotel served them a sumptuous breakfast, Mother Jones in-

sisted it be charged to the good senator. She talked about how she wanted a federal law prohibiting the exploitation of children and enforcement of child labor laws already on the books. The newspapers gave enormous amounts of publicity to the issue of child labor, and within a year Pennsylvania had passed a law to keep children out of factories until they were fourteen. President Roosevelt, however, refused to see Mother Jones, and child labor legislation and enforcement was left to the state legislatures, many of which were under the control of the industrialists. Enforcing even the mildest child labor laws was difficult. Mothers lied about the ages of their children so that the children could work. It was a question of starvation or perjury, explained one group of mothers in Kensington. The fathers had been killed or maimed at the mines, and the children's wages were needed to pay for food.

Also, according to the ground rules of capitalism, human laborers, regardless of age or sex, were considered part of the machinery. "When my machines get old and useless," explained a New England mill owner, "I reject them. . . . These people are part of my machinery." If an owner paid more than the lowest wages, he was considered to be working against his stockholders. Children were the ideal laborers. They worked for pennies a day and were docile. Child labor legislation was defeated for years on the mindless charge that it was a Communist plot for the government to take over private enterprise. As far as capitalist owners were concerned, human rights did not matter.

There are a number of brutal strikes that have been immortalized in labor history, but nothing quite points out the greed at the heart of the American energy to industrialize than the mindless destruction of the lives of thousands of children. In 1904 Mother Jones went to the mills in the South, which were operated principally by women and children. She took a job as a laborer just to see what it was really like. The mill owner hired her only after she said she had six children that she would bring from the North.

What she saw in the mills made her feel that the mining towns were a haven of hope. Few descriptions surpass Mother Jones's account of the cotton mill where she worked in Cottondale, Alabama:

> Little girls and boys, barefooted, walked up and down between the endless rows of spindles, reaching thin little hands into the

> machinery to repair snapped threads. They crawled under machinery to oil it. They replaced spindles all day long, all day long, all night through. Tiny babies of six years old with faces of sixty did an eight-hour shift for ten cents a day. . . . The machines, built in the north, were built low for the hands of little children. At five-thirty in the morning, long lines of little gray children came out of the early dawn into the factory, into the maddening noise, into the lint filled rooms. Outside the birds sang and the blue sky shone. . . . At the lunch half hour, the children would fall to sleep over their lunch of cornbread and fat pork. They would lie on the bare floor and sleep. Sleep was their recreation, their release, as play is to the free child.

She saw children's fingers snapped off by machines. She saw the body of her landlady's eleven-year-old daughter carried back from the mill one evening, her scalp torn off when her hair had been caught in a machine.

Wages were so low no one could save enough money to escape. One woman had three children working in the mill. Her husband had died of tuberculosis, and the family had run up a debt of thirty dollars for the funeral, which they tried to pay back penny by penny to the mill owner. Mother Jones was determined to rescue them. Once again her knowledge of the inner workings of the railroad provided her the means of escape. Like the passengers of the Underground Railroad, they fled in the night.

> I arranged with the station agent of the through train to have his train stop for a second on a certain night. . . . In the darkness of night the little family and I drove to the station. We felt like escaping Negro slaves and expected any moment that bloodhounds would be on our trail.

The train made its unscheduled stop and, "away we sped, away from everlasting debt, away to a new town where they could start anew without the millstone about their necks."

But escape was possible only for very few. There seemed to be little real way to help the children except by working for a decent wage for their parents. When Mother Jones returned to New York she held several meetings and tried to publicize the conditions in the southern mills, most of which were owned by northerners. She

became depressed and engulfed in hopelessness. "I could scarcely eat," she said. "My food . . . at times seemd bought with the price of the toil of children."

As she had done before in her life she refused to give in to despair. She turned suffering into a source of strength and decided that she would concentrate on the miners and the mountain camps "where the labor fight is at least fought by grown men."

In 1905 the Western Federation of Miners sent her to Chicago to participate in the founding of a radical labor union. It was to be a union which would offset the conservative bread-and-butter approach of the American Federation of Labor. Eugene Debs and Daniel De Leon, both leading Socialists, were on the platform, along with Father Thomas J. Hagerty, a "labor" priest; William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, also of the Western Federation of Miners; and Mother Jones. The Industrial Workers of the World came out of the meeting as forceful and radical a labor group as America has ever seen. Whites, blacks, foreign-born, native, skilled and unskilled workers were all welcome in a union that was dedicated not only to revolutionary labor relations but to changing American society. Mother Jones was to have disagreements with the Wobblies, as they were popularly known, but she always respected the courage and integrity of the leaders and the idealism on which the organization was founded.

To break the unions, business leaders, in collusion with public officials, framed labor leaders for crimes they didn't commit. A highly publicized trial grew out of the outrageous framing of IWW leaders Bill Haywood, George Pettibone, and Charles Moyer for the murder of an Idaho governor in 1906. The three were kidnapped and brought across state lines so that they could be arrested and brought to trial in Idaho. Mother Jones became one of their chief fund raisers.

The three were arrested in February 1906, but their trial did not begin until May 1907. During those fifteen months, Mother Jones traveled the length and breadth of the country, speaking at meetings, rallies, dinners—wherever there was an audience. She wrote a stirring article on the frame-up for a Socialist paper, claiming, rightly, that the arrests and the trial were attempts to break the hold of the Western Federation of Miners in the western mining towns by depriving the miners' union of its best leaders. She brought national

publicity to Haywood and the IWW. There is no record of how much money she raised, but there is proof that she was able to raise five to six thousand dollars at one dinner. She was one of the biggest drawing cards of the Haywood-Pettibone-Moyer Defense Committee, and when it had enough money, it hired Clarence Darrow, the best defense attorney in the country. The ultimate acquittal of all three defendants was an important milestone in establishing the legitimacy of the union. Mother Jones never missed a session of the trial, and it was the beginning of Clarence Darrow's friendship with her. He wrote:

> Some of the fiercest combats in America have been fought by the miners. These fights brought thousands of men and their families close to starvation. They brought contests with police, militia, courts and soldiers. They involved prison sentences, massacres and hardships without end. Wherever the fight was the fiercest, Mother Jones was present to aid and cheer. In both the day and the night, in the poor villages and at the lonely cabin on the mountain side, Mother Jones always appeared in time of need.

The most ferocious conflict in the history of American labor and industry was fought by the miners in the coalfields of Colorado in 1913 and 1914. George McGovern and Leonard Guttridge have written in *The Great Coalfield War:* "The story's essentials are uncomplicated: intolerable work conditions fomenting labor insurgence, capitalist resistance followed by strike culminating in strife. . . . The United States had experienced no domestic bitterness of comparable intensity since the Civil War." Mother Jones was there.

Every battle skill she had was called upon—her ability to give solace and relief from suffering, her adroit defiance of police and military, her use of trains for slipping through guarded strike zones, her knack for making a remote struggle in the mountains real to city people, her talent as a fund raiser, and her name as a drawing card. The mine owners had purposely put together the most hostile ethnic groups in order to maximize internal hostilities among the workers. But conditions were so bad in the Trinidad coalfield that common interests prevailed over national hatreds.

The miners had gone on strike to obtain the following: an eight-hour day (a law already passed by the Colorado legislature but not

enforced), the right to choose their own doctors, wage increases, mine safety inspection, and recognition of collective bargaining through the miners' union. The Colorado mining interests, dominated by the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, refused to see the strike leaders or union officials to discuss the demands—because to do so implied recognition of the union. They hired scabs at twenty dollars a head in Mexico—company agents promised the Mexicans land—and hauled the men over the border in cattle cars. They brought in thugs, armed gunmen who traveled in a specially designed armored car known as the Death Special, and the Boss and Felts Detective Company to harass and force the miners back to work. But these techniques had been used too many times before. By 1913 the majority of the miners were former scabs, strikebreakers from previous strikes, and they knew the routine all too well. Many of them had high thresholds of intimidation.

The intransigence of the Colorado mine owners was rooted in the absentee ownership of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and a stubbornly held belief in the authority of ownership which violated common sense and humanity. The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company dominated all other mining companies, and was responsible for almost 40 percent of the mining in Colorado, a state which was the chief production area for coking coal west of the Mississippi.

Rockefeller, who lived in New York and had been to Colorado only twice, saw the struggle in Colorado as no simple, isolated strike; he saw it as one which could affect the entire course of industrial development in America. The cherished principle of the open shop—an owner had the right to hire and fire as he chose—was the bedrock of American capitalism, and Rockefeller later expanded on this theme when called before a congressional committee investigating the Colorado coal wars:

> We believe the issue is not a local one in Colorado. It is a national issue whether workers shall be allowed to work under conditions as they may choose. As part owners of the property, our interest in the laboring men in this country is so immense, so deep, so profound that we stand ready to lose every cent we put in that company rather than see the men we have employed thrown out of work and have imposed upon them conditions which are not of their seeking and which neither they nor we can see is in our interest.

Unfortunately, the principle Rockefeller felt he was upholding precluded a careful examination of the miners' grievances. Congressman Martin Foster asked Rockefeller, "You are willing to let these killings take place rather than to go there and do something to settle conditions?" Rockefeller answered:

> There is just one thing that can be done to settle this strike and that is to unionize the camps, and our interest in labor is so profound, and we believe so sincerely that that interest demands that the camps shall be open camps, that we expect to stand by the officers at any cost.

"And you would do that, if that costs all your property and kills all your employees?" Congressman Foster continued.

Rockefeller responded, "It is a great principle."

Yet it was a principle which shielded the owners from any understanding of the lives of the people who produced their great fortunes. Under further questioning Rockefeller admitted he knew nothing of the Colorado coal miners' wage scales; was unable to name the counties where Colorado Fuel and Iron Mines were located; knew nothing of miners' housing facilities and could not say if miners worked twelve hours a day or seven days a week.

The myth of outside agitators stirring up the satisfied natives is a ploy that has successfully been used in busting unions, discrediting political demonstrations, and interfering in foreign countries. In Colorado, this charge diverted attention from the real issues of the strike and the misery of the miners' working and living conditions.

Before the long Colorado coalfield war was over, sixty-five persons were killed, forty-three of them women and children. Mother Jones had been in the strike zone in January 1914.

> My eyes ached with the misery I witnessed. My brain sickened with the knowledge of man's inhumanity to man . . . I sat through the long nights with bereaved widows watching candles burn down to their empty sockets . . . I nursed men driven nearly mad with despair. I solicited clothes for children . . . I helped bury the dead. . . .

Detectives followed her every move. State militia guarded every railway station so that the strikers would be cut off from outside help. But her knowledge of the railroads helped her sneak through. Other union organizers also got in. Some were arrested. Some were

beaten up. Some were killed in ambush. Finally, Mother Jones was arrested. After refusing to leave the state, she was held for a month in a dank cellar underground. "I slept in my clothes by day and fought off rats with a broken beer bottle at night." The imprisonment of an old woman, supposedly in her eighties, caused a great public outcry, but the mine owners preferred the bad press to having Mother Jones loose in the field.

The strike dragged on for fourteen months. After the company evicted them from their homes, the miners moved into tents near Ludlow, where they lived through the mountain winter. Rockefeller claimed he had no idea of the violence perpetrated by the mine owners in Colorado, but subpoenaed correspondence later showed that he was in daily contact with his Colorado agents. In April 1914 the Colorado National Guard moved three machine guns into the hills surrounding the tent colony. The National Guard, paid by the mine owners, had deteriorated to the level of a band of mercenaries. A squad of soldiers went into the camp to ask a strike leader, a Greek man named Louis Tikas, to turn over two Italian workers for infraction of some newly invented military rules. Tikas asked for a warrant; the soldiers had none. Tikas refused to surrender the men. The soldiers retreated to the hills around the tent colony. Mother Jones described what followed:

> Immediately the machine guns began spraying the flimsy tent colony, the only home the wretched families of the miners had, spraying it with bullets. Like iron rain, bullets fell upon men, women and children. The women and children fled to the hills. . . . The men defended their homes with their guns. All day long the firing continued. . . . The little Snyder boy was shot through the head, trying to save his kitten. A child carrying water to his dying mother was killed. . . . Louis Tikas was riddled with shots while he tried to lead women and children to safety. They perished with him. Night came. A raw wind blew down the canyons where men, women and children shivered and wept. Then a blaze lighted the sky. The soldiers, drunk with blood and with the liquor they had looted from the saloon, set fire to the tents of Ludlow. The tents, all the poor furnishings, the clothes and bedding of the miners' families burned. . . . In a dugout under a burned tent, the charred bodies

> of eleven little children and two women were found—unrecognizable. Everything lay in ruins. The wires of bed springs writhed on the ground as if they too, had tried to flee the horror. . . .

For the first time public sentiment turned against the Rockefellers. Four men, three women and eleven children had been killed in this one tragic event, the worst of a long series of deaths throughout the strike. Mother Jones knew that with this violence the Ludlow strike would finally reach public attention. She had seen too much not to be cynical about the press: "Little children being roasted alive makes a front-page story. . . . Dying by inches of starvation and exposure does not."

At the time of the massacre Mother Jones was in Mexico—trying to convince the Mexican scabs that the company agents' promises of free land would not materialize if they went to work for the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. She immediately left Mexico and began a public tour describing what had happened in Ludlow. She knew that public opinion had to be enlisted in the aid of the strikers, and money had to be raised for the eight thousand homeless mountain refugees. Again she traveled the country—Kansas City, Chicago, Columbus, Cleveland, Washington, D.C.—describing the massacre.

President Wilson sent in the U.S. Cavalry to restore order and offered a truce that gave the miners some of their demands. Rockefeller hired a team of publicity men to explain the strike from a supposedly "neutral" point of view. A series of pamphlets on each major issue of the strike was sent to a carefully selected list of writers, editors, magazine publishers, public interest groups, political organizations.

One pamphlet was devoted to Mother Jones and portrayed her as a violent Anarchist with a criminal record, known for murder and violence. The bulletin quoted General Chase, who was in command of the Military District of Colorado during the strike:

> She is an eccentric and peculiar figure. I make no mention of her personal history, with which we are not concerned.
>
> She seems, however, to have in an exceptional degree the faculty of stirring up and inciting the more ignorant and criminally disposed to deeds of violence and crime.
>
> Prior to the advent of the state's troops she made a series of

speeches in the strike zone, of which I have authentic and verbatim reports.

These speeches are couched in coarse, vulgar and profane language, and address themselves to the lowest passions of mankind.

I CONFIDENTLY BELIEVE THAT MOST OF THE MURDERS AND OTHER ACTS OF VIOLENT CRIME COMMITTED IN THE STRIKE REGION HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY THIS WOMAN'S INCENDIARY UTTERANCES.

The allusion to her "personal history" referred the reader to the *Congressional Record* of June 13, 1914, where Congressman George Kindel of Colorado had inserted a number of newspaper reports about her. One alleged that she had once run a whorehouse in Denver "with the highest stake poker games and the best looking girls in town."

The attempt to blame the violence of the Ludlow Massacre on Mother Jones was not only a cheap tactic; it didn't work. At his first appearance before the Industrial Relations Commission, Rockefeller introduced himself to Mother Jones and invited her to meet with him to discuss the problems of the miners. She accepted. After the meeting he publicly intimated that Mother Jones would accompany him on a tour of the Colorado Mines. To the press he gave a long statement on how amiable and agreeable his meeting with Mother Jones had been.

If nothing else, Rockefeller's wooing of Mother Jones illustrated that she was a power to be reckoned with; her integrity and honesty were unquestioned by workers and she stood for the legitimate demands of the working class. The public relations people hired by Rockefeller failed to ruin her reputation; in a cynical turnabout they then tried to present her as being on their side.

For her part Mother Jones said Rockefeller was "a nice young man." But she went away from their meeting feeling "that he could not possibly understand the aspirations of the working class. He was as alien as is one species from another; as alien as is stone from wheat."

Mother Jones could not be bought off by luxurious dinners, introductions to private clubs, or a trip on a yacht. She never yearned to be a "respectable" labor leader. Her strongest impulse was to give

voice to the mute workers who had no other means of expression. She was able to travel from a miner's shack to the offices of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., without ever forgetting where she came from. A letter from Katherine Schmidt of the Office Employees Union reveals the essential integrity she represented for the rank and file. After lamenting the fact that other labor leaders had been corrupted by "big dinners, joy rides, sporting women," she told Mother Jones that "Smidie [her brother] says, and so do I, that we'd bet our last cent on Mother Jones . . . you cannot be touched with money, and you don't want a political job so they cannot reach you no how."

Having witnessed so much violence she did not believe that men and women should be defenseless. When the Industrial Relations Commission asked her if she had advocated that the West Virginia miners buy guns she had answered, "I not only advised the miners to buy rifles, but I personally raised the money which paid for them." She was conscious of the effect of public statements, and she said that no one should be helpless in the face of brute force.

But she also believed that nothing was ever won from violence and that personal resistance was the strongest weapon. In a letter to Tom Moony, a labor leader who was framed for a bomb explosion in San Francisco and who wrote asking for help, she said

> I am opposed to violence because violence produces violence and what is won today by violence will be lost tomorrow. We must ever and always appeal to reason, because society after all has made all the progress it has ever made by analyzing the situation carefully and bringing the matter before the public. . . . The taking of human life has never settled any question.

Mother Jones was a giant in the labor movement. She has been neglected largely because the history of the labor movement has neglected women, both as workers and as wives of workers. There is no framework in which to understand Mother Jones unless there is a perception of the total society of men and women who struggled for workers' rights to life and a living wage.

When twenty-four-year-old Mary Petrucci went to Washington to tell her story to President Wilson about the burning of her three children at Ludlow, Colorado, she went with the strength and consciousness of a woman who knew what her life was about and why she had suffered as much as she had. She was very much like Mary

Jones back in 1867. Mary Petrucci was able to explain to newspaper reporters:

> You're not to think that we could do any differently another time. We are working people—my husband and I—and we're stronger for the union than we were before the strike. . . . There's sadness in our hearts and there always will be, but there isn't . . . despair.

It was from such people that Mother Jones took and gave strength and it was in the conviction of the goodness and rightness of the working class, "her class," that she made her choices and cleared a path.

Mother Jones has been criticized for taking many contradictory positions in her life—opposing suffrage and temperance for example. She opposed suffrage because she was separated from the middle-class traditions that believed in the legitimate workings of law and political rights. "If the women of the country would only realize what they have in their hands there is no limit to what they could accomplish. The trouble is they let the capitalists make them believe they wouldn't be ladylike." She lived where the Constitution was meaningless and the ballot had no power to change economics. The women of Colorado had had the vote for two generations before the Ludlow massacre, and it was like a feather before the wind of company-owned judges, juries, congressmen. Temperance she saw as an effort to create a more sober, efficient working class—an effort of the capitalists to deprive men of their one escape in life. She called Prohibition "the worst affliction the country has." She was a Socialist yet she didn't campaign for her old friend Eugene Debs when he ran as the Socialist candidate for the Senate in Indiana. Senator Kern, the Democrat incumbent, had gotten her out of a West Virginia prison when she had been sentenced to twenty years. She never forgot a friend or a personal favor.

She aged, but she never mellowed. Tom Tippett covered the United Mine Workers annual convention in 1923 at which there was a terrible credentials fight over the Kansas delegation.

> As the delegates reached fever heat Mother Jones walked quietly to the front of the stage and held up her hand. "I never go to Washington without paying my respect to a monument erected along the way in memory of another man from Kansas who fought the chattel slavery of this country. That man, John Brown, is a national hero today . . . and the name of the judge who sentenced him has long been forgotten."

She then compared the leader of the unseated delegation to John Brown and read a speech from the women of Kansas, who appealed for justice for the ousted delegation. According to Tippett, "The crowd seemed to go mad as they cheered this wonderful old soldier of theirs that has been in the front lines of every battle in the miners' union." When she "was a hundred years old" a big birthday celebration was held for her in Silver Spring, Maryland, outside Washington, D.C. It was a "who's who" of the labor movement, and even John D. Rockefeller, Jr., sent a warm telegram.

But the most appropriate tribute was an army of poor, bedraggled workers, who marched out from their camp in Washington, where they were staying to illustrate the plight of the poor. The Great Depression had begun. With a black man, "King" Jeff Davis, leading the march, the demonstrators walked the eight miles out to Silver Spring to pay tribute to one of the original poverty marchers.

As Mother Jones said, "The militant, not the meek, shall inherit the earth."