

FIRST DRAFT

Labor activist busy in early 1900s

Few people traveled a great deal in the early years of the 20th century, but 66-year-old widow Mary Harris Jones was an exception.

In 1903 and early 1904, after arriving in Denver from Pennsylvania, she visited Trinidad, Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Crested Butte, Glenwood Springs and New Castle, as well as Wyoming and Utah.

Better known as "Mother Jones," Mary Jones was a labor activist. She was also one of the most despised women in the country.

In 1902, a West Virginia district attorney called her "the most dangerous woman in America."

In November 1903, a Fort Collins newspaper described her as "an irresponsible agitator with no interest in Colorado or sympathy with suffering thousands."

When it was reported in 1904 that she was on her way to help striking miners in Utah, The Daily Sentinel opined that if some Mormon elder decided to "add her to his seraglio, what a sigh of relief would go up from Colorado."

And famed Denver newswoman Leonel Ross Campbell, who used the pen name Polly Pry, claimed Jones had helped procure women and customers for brothels in Denver and Kansas City. She offered no evidence for the claim, and the story quickly died.

Mary Harris was born in Ireland in 1837. She emigrated with her family to Canada, and later moved to Michigan to teach school.

In 1861, she married George E. Jones in Memphis, Tennessee.

Tragedy struck in 1867 when her husband and four young children died in a yellow-fever epidemic.

Mary moved to Chicago and opened a dress-making business, but it was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Soon afterward, she joined the Knights of Labor and began helping to organize strikes.

Next, Mary joined the United Mine Workers and began assisting striking workers in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

By 1897, she was routinely called "Mother Jones," and she referred to striking miners as "my boys."

In early 1903, Jones was tasked by the United Mine Workers to assess conditions in the southern Colorado coal fields, where a strike seemed imminent.

Dressed as a shabby peddler, she learned that miners and their fami-



HARRIS AND EWING COLLECTION/Library of Congress
Mother Jones as she appeared in 1914.

lies lived in deplorable conditions, that they were paid in scrip by Colorado Fuel and Iron and could only spend that scrip at company stores.

"The state of Colorado belonged not to a republic but to the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company," Jones wrote in her 1925 autobiography. "The governor (James Peabody) was their agent. The militia under (Gen. Sherman) Bell did their bidding."

The strike against CF&I began on Nov. 9, 1903. Soon, workers in other mines around the state went on strike in sympathy.

"The miners in the Colorado coal fields have greater cause to strike than any other workers in the country," she declared in Colorado Springs in December, 1903.

Of course, the coal companies and their supporters had diametrically opposed views.

CF&I "might as well let the miners go back to their dugouts and filthy saloons," a Pueblo newspaper editorialized in November, 1903. "It seems that the effort made by the company to better the condition of its employees is time wasted."

The newspaper lamented the fact that the miners listened to the likes of John Mitchell, president of the United Mine Workers, and 'Old Mother Jones.'

However, Mitchell and Jones soon had a falling out over striking miners in northern Colorado.

Jones said she learned that the miners near Louisville, Colorado, had been ordered back to work by Mitchell.

"But they cannot go back until the operators settle with the southern miners," Jones said she told miners' representatives. "They will not desert their brothers until the strike is won!"

Mother Jones addressed a hastily called convention of the northern Colorado miners in late November.

"You are all miners, fighting a common cause, a common master," she

told them. "The iron heel feels the same to all flesh.

"The delegates rose en masse to cheer," she reported. "The vote was taken. The majority decided to stand by the southern miners, refusing to obey the national President."

Three times, Mitchell ordered the miners in the northern part of the state back to work, and three times they rejected his orders.

Finally, late in 1903, they returned to work when Mitchell withdrew UMW support for the strike.

About the same time, Jones said, "I was informed that Mitchell went to the governor and asked him to put me out of the state."

But, she remained into the new year to support the striking coal miners in the southern part and hard-rock miners in Cripple Creek, making brief trips to Denver and Wyoming.

In January of 1904, it was reported that she was suffering from pneumonia and was being treated at a hotel in Trinidad. Her condition was said to be critical.

But she recovered, and continued to work with the striking miners. On March 23, 1904, a trainload of Colorado National Guard soldiers rolled into Trinidad.

Las Animas County officials planned to arrest her for inciting miners to riot, an Aspen newspaper reported.

"But for some reason they were afraid to serve a warrant until the soldiers arrived."

Jones and three male strike leaders were escorted to La Junta and told they were free to go anywhere they liked, so long as they didn't return to Trinidad or Las Animas County.



BERTHA HOWELL, PHOTO, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
Mary Harris "Mother" Jones as she appeared in 1902.

Jones traveled first to Denver, then to Gunnison and Crested Butte, planning to work with miners there.

"From Denver I went down to the Western Slope, holding meetings, cheering and encouraging those toiling and disinherited miners who were fighting against such monstrous odds," she wrote in her autobiography.

On April 6, she was in Glenwood Springs, working to organize the wives of miners there and around New Castle into women's auxiliaries for the union.

But by April 18, she had arrived in Helper, Utah, to assist some 700 striking miners of the Utah Coal Co.

Two days later, she was placed in quarantine by state authorities because she had allegedly been in contact with a miner who had smallpox.

Mother Jones at first agreed to abide by the quarantine. But she was "rescued" by sympathetic miners, then placed back under lock and key by state health officials.

"The Jones woman has a large following, but she is not greater than the law," a Salt Lake City newspaper declared.

"I was held twenty-six days and nights in that bare room, isolated for smallpox," Jones said. "Finally with no redress I was turned loose and went to Salt Lake."

By summer 1904, the strikes in Colorado and Utah had ended, and Mother Jones moved on to other labor issues.

She would return to Colorado in 1913 and 1914 to support striking CF&I miners at Ludlow.

But she was not in the state when scores of workers and their families were massacred by Colorado National Guard and private soldiers in April, 1914.

She continued to be active in labor struggles until her death in 1930 in Maryland.

Sources: Historic newspapers at www.newspapers.com and www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org; "The Autobiography of Mother Jones," by Mary Harris Jones; "And She Became Mother Jones," by Ellen Terrell, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov.

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"AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MOTHER JONES," IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

Mother Jones (between flag bearers) leading procession of miners in Denver. The photograph is believed to have been taken in 1903.

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