

THE MOST DANGEROUS WOMAN IN AMERICA

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Mary Harris was born to a Roman Catholic tenant farmer and his wife in Cork city on May 1, 1830 according to her Autobiography published in 1925. Her family emigrated to Canada when she was 14 or 15 escaping the Great Hunger. After a Catholic education in Toronto, she became a teacher in a convent in Monroe, Michigan. She later moved to Chicago and then to Memphis, where in 1861 she married George Jones – no relation to the famous country singer; he was a member of the Iron Workers' Union and Mary learned about the need for organized labor. She opened a dress shop in Memphis and had four children. Tragedy struck in 1867 when her husband and their four children (all under the age of five) died during a yellow fever epidemic. After the loss of her family, she returned to Chicago and began another dressmaking business. Tragedy again struck as she lost her home, shop and possessions in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

After her second tragic loss, she sought to keep herself active and turned to the emerging labor union movement. She joined the Knights of Labor which faded after the Haymarket Riot of 1886 over worker's demands for an 8-hour work day. She then became affiliated with the United Mine Workers and often led picketing strikers, encouraging them to stay on strike when employers, backed by state and federal government police forces, brought in strike-breakers. Author Elliott Gorn maintains that her concern for the downtrodden stemmed from her Roman Catholic background and her brother, Father William Harris, who was *among the best-known clerics in Ontario*. Her militancy was also shaped by the exploitation of workers so rampant in nineteenth century America and the employers' violent opposition to workers needs. Active as an organizer and educator in strikes throughout the country, she also organized the wives and children of strikers to demonstrate on their behalf. In 1902 she was arrested for ignoring an injunction on meetings by striking miners. At her trial the DA pointed at her and said *There sits the most dangerous woman in America, she crooks her finger and twenty thousand men lay down*.

She became known as Mother Jones and referred to the men she supported as 'her boys'. She also became an advocate against the exploitation of children and fought child labor. After seeing that many working children had missing fingers and other disabilities and she attempted to get newspaper coverage about the abuses in child labor. However, mill and mine owners held stock in essentially all of the newspapers and the editors informed her that they could not publish such a disclosure because of that. Her response was, *Well, I've got stock in these little children and I'll arrange a little publicity*. In 1903 she organized children to participate in the 'Children's Crusade' – a march from Philadelphia, PA to the Oyster Bay, Long Island, NY home of President Theodore Roosevelt. They carried banners demanding **We want to go to School and not the mines!** However, permission to see President Roosevelt was denied by his secretary. Although Roosevelt refused to meet with the marchers, the incident brought the issue of child labor to the public. After organizing another children's march, the United States Senate ordered an investigation into the conditions in the coal mines. Her Children's Crusade was described in detail in the 2003 book, **Kids on Strike!**

In 1913, during the West Virginia Coal Mine Wars, Mother Jones was charged with inciting to riot. Despite the fact she was over 80-years old and suffering from pneumonia, she was held under house arrest for more than two months. After her release she headed for Colorado to help organize the coal miners there. Once again she was arrested, imprisoned, and escorted from the state. However, after the subsequent Ludlow Massacre, in which the Colorado National Guard attack on striking miners and their families resulted in the deaths of 5 men, 2 women and 12 children, Mother Jones was invited to meet with mine owner John D. Rockefeller, Jr. That meeting prompted Rockefeller to visit the Colorado mines and introduce long-sought reforms.

Mother Jones remained a union organizer for the UMW into the 1920s and continued to speak on union affairs until her death. In her later years, she lived in Adelphi, Maryland where she celebrated her 100th birthday with a filmed interview on May 1, 1930. She died six month later on November 30. By her own request, she was buried in the Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, Illinois, beside the coal miners who died in the Virden, Illinois Coal War of



1898 that saw 13 killed and 35 wounded. Significantly, that action marked the beginning of the end of the mine owners feudal system.

Amid the violence directed at early trade unionists, Mother Jones motto was, *pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living* – words still invoked by union supporters more than a century later. She was called **mother** and **the miners' angel** by her boys, but on the floor of the United States Senate she was called **grandmother of all agitators**, to which she replied, *I hope to live long enough to be the great-grandmother of all agitators*. And her legacy still lives on.

In 1990, during the Pittston Coal Strike in Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky, the wives and daughters of striking coal miners called themselves the **Daughters of Mother Jones** and played a crucial role on the picket lines and in presenting the miners' case to the press and public. Today, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones Elementary School, in Adelphi, Maryland, is named in her honor and students at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia can reside in Mother Jones House, an off-campus facility whose residents must perform at least ten hours of community service each week. To coincide with International Women's Day on 8 March 2010 a proposal was made for a plaque to be erected in Mother Jones' native city of Cork and was accepted by Cork City Council. In more familiar recognition, Carl Sandburg noted that the folk song **She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain** was a reference to Mother Jones and her travels to Appalachian mountain coal mining camps unionizing the miners. In 1931, Gene Autry's first recorded song was **The Death of Mother Jones** and Woody Guthrie's song **Union Maid**, called for women to emulate Mother Jones by fighting for women's and workers' rights. Perhaps the most fitting tribute to this 'most dangerous lady' is the newest song: **The Spirit of Mother Jones** on the 2010 album **Abocurragh** by the great Irish musician/singer/songwriter Andy Irvine.

Thus, have time and principle made the most dangerous woman in America into one of the most beloved women in American history.