

Happy Birthday, Mother Jones!

Mary Harris—better known as Mother Jones and often called the “most dangerous woman in America”—was born in Cork, Ireland, August 1, 1837. Her fiery rhetoric and magnetic speaking style belied her modest traditional garb—usually a lace-fringed long black dress and matching bonnet—and her tiny figure, all of 100 pounds. Nevertheless, Mother Jones struck fear in the hearts of many a mine owner and factory manager from the 1890s until her death in 1930 at age 100.

A familiar presence on picket lines and at union rallies, Mother Jones would pepper her speeches with mild profanity and skewer the rich and comfortable with such lines as: “Pray for the dead but fight like hell for the living!”

Another favorite phrase: “Get it right, I’m no humanitarian. I am a hell raiser!”

The shocking abuses of child labor she saw as she investigated working conditions in southern cotton mills prompted Mother Jones to write: “The children [working in the mills] are half-fed, half-clothed and half-housed, but as they toil on, the poodle dogs of their masters are petted and coddled and sleep on pillows of down.”

During her long career as a union organizer, Mother Jones traveled throughout the U.S. to help workers in trouble—on the railroads, in mines and mills. She organized a caravan of children to march on the home of President Theodore Roosevelt and marshaled an army of wives and mothers armed with mops, brooms and pots to guard mine entrances against scabs.

Drawing strength from her struggle, Mary Harris Jones managed to keep



a cheerful, determined demeanor even though her own life was filled with tragedy from early childhood. Her father fled to the U.S. to escape British authorities. She left Ireland at age 8 with her mother and two siblings to reunite the family in America. Earlier, Mary’s grandfather had been hanged by the British.

As a young woman, Mary Harris worked as a seamstress in Chicago where she experienced first hand the wide disparities between the wealthy families that employed her and the city’s dispossessed that lived on the edge.

At age 31, while teaching in Memphis, Mary married an ironworker, George Jones. George and the couple’s four children died in a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis in 1867. Not long after, while living in Chicago, the Widow Jones was one of many victims of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871—losing her home and all her belongings.

While her organizing exploits gained her notoriety throughout the nation and earned her the undying affection of miners and factory workers, Mother Jones was reviled by the establishment and often jailed by authorities. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 1913 in West Virginia, but public outrage forced the governor to release her within the year.

Mother Jones died at age 100 in Silver Spring, Maryland. She is buried in the Union Miners’ Cemetery in Mt. Olive, Illinois, the only union cemetery in the nation.

For a more complete account of the life and times of Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, go to: <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/jones.cfm>