Mother Jones
A global history of struggle and remembrance, from Cork, Ireland to Illinois

By Rosemary Feurer

On December 8, 1930, tens of thousands of people travelled to Mt. Olive, Illinois, to join the funeral cortege of Mary Harris Jones, who was known as “Mother Jones.” Father John Maguire of Bourbonnais gave the eulogy, suggesting that Jones’ death caused “strong men and toil worn women” to cry “tears of bitter grief.” Meanwhile, in “mahogany furnished and carefully guarded offices in distant capitals wealthy mine owners and capitalists are breathing sighs of relief” at Jones’ death, he said.

Jones had won many hearts through her fiery agitation for workers rights and had stirred their imagination that ordinary workers could bring about “a higher and grander civilization” to “replace this moneyed civilization.” For others, she was reviled as someone who acted as an outside agitator and un-American radical. Between 1930 and 1936, in the midst of struggle for survival and dire poverty during the Great Depression, thousands of miners and others donated, sometimes by the penny, to erect a tremendous granite monument at Union Miners’ Cemetery in Mt. Olive to honor Jones and their own struggles.

Who was Mother Jones, and how did she come to be buried in Mt. Olive? That story connects to a global history of struggle and remembrance, one that is reflected in recent increased interest in her life in her birthplace of Cork, Ireland. In August 2012, the first Mother Jones Festival was held in Cork, to commemorate her as a daughter of that city, born 175 years before. A plaque in her honor was mounted in the area near where she was born and baptized. I attended this event, showing the film I produced, Mother Jones, America’s Most Dangerous Woman (2007).

Many in Cork expressed a special attachment to the discovery of Mother Jones’ origins in the Shandon area of Cork, on the north side of the River Lee. Several people told me they could hear a definite “Norrie” lilt to Mother Jones’ accent in the only live footage of her from 1930 featured in the film. Others found that certain of Mother Jones’ characteristics relate to the North Side and Cork’s reputation as the “rebel city” of Ireland. Cork is one of Ireland’s oldest cities, and the Shandon area has a distinct identity going back to the twelfth century. Cork was a major point of dissent in the Irish rebellion against the British empire, the center of “Irish rights” independence fighters for years. Some residents told me that even today this area’s residents are known for their resolute approach to issues, qualities that served Mother Jones in her fight against injustice. Ger O’Mahony, an organizer of the commemoration, commented, “Mother Jones is a daughter of rebel Cork, but her unique characteristics and determination resonate particularly with those from the North Side. Many people can identify with the tragedy and suffering that she endured, and her indomitable spirit.”

Mary Harris’ early life was shaped by famine, fever and fire. Certainly the seminal event in young Mary’s life was the Great Hunger, which gripped Ireland and cast her sensibilities about class power. For Mary, witnessing the famine from Cork, a market city, was a crucial political awakening. While the immediate cause of the starvation was the potato blight, Mary would have witnessed starved corpses carted off while food that would have prevented starvation was taken to the ports of the Cork Harbour to be exported. She would have lived in fear of being sent to the workhouse. Survival seemed to some to depend on escape, and for the Harris family it was to Toronto, Canada. Mary’s father and brother left in 1847, and Mary and her mother and two other siblings joined them in 1851. There she was embedded in an Irish community and was educated as a teacher. She left Canada for the U.S., earning a living as a teacher and seamstress. In Memphis, Tennessee, she

Jones was one of the Americans featured in artist Robert Shetterly’s Americans Who Tell the Truth art exhibit. The full portrait also includes an extensive quotation which reads: “Goodbye, boys; I’m under arrest. I may have to go to jail. I may not see you for a long time. Keep up this fight! Don’t surrender! Pay no attention to the injunction machine at Parkersburg. The Federal judge is a scab anyhow. While you starve he plays golf. While you serve humanity, he serves injunctions for the money powers.” The quote comes from the time Jones was arrested in 1902 in West Virginia.

Mother Jones portrait by Robert Shetterly © Robert Shetterly and americanswhotellthetruth.org.
married George Jones, a union iron molder, and started a family. But when yellow fever struck the city, “the rich and the well-to-do fled the city.” While workers like her husband perished from it, and then “one by one my four little children sickened and died … I sat alone through nights of grief. No one came to me. No one could.” Jones then moved to Chicago, where she sewed for the wealthy until the Great Fire of 1871 made her homeless.

Jones emerged from these tragedies as a survivor of class injustice who imagined a new order with workers’ power, as one of a cohort of working class people who responded with a collective “no!” against the premises of the new Gilded Age order. This was a transnational movement in which workers across the globe learned from each other. And Mary Harris Jones was a leading transmitter of this new philosophy, honed as she engaged in a series of protest movements in the late nineteenth century. In 1894, she joined the unemployed movement as one of the activists from the labor movement involved in the “industrial armies,” which were the Occupy Wall Street movement of their day. They launched more than 40 “armies” of marchers across the country, creating occupying encampments to publicize the injustices of Wall Street and to demand action from Washington, D.C. to create jobs for the unemployed. This movement became connected to the new industrial union of the era, the American Railway Union (ARU), organized by Eugene Debs, and the United Mine Workers Union, which argued that all workers were entitled to the fruits of their labor, and launched major strikes in mid-1894. While the armies and the strikes were bitterly crushed and ridiculed, they helped to shape Jones and others to create a labor movement that mobilized communities of struggle.

Jones became “Mother Jones” when she sought to save the life of a young California ARU activist, S. D. Worden, who was falsely accused of derailing a troop train during the Pullman strike, and was sentenced to be hanged. She found her voice and became known as the “Mother of the ARU,” travelling 15,000 miles to speak to workers and collect signatures petitioning the governor for a pardon. She took the petitions to the White House and boldly refused to leave until finally granted access to the president. The activist’s life was saved. The repression exacted on the trade union movement further radicalized both Debs and Jones, who became advocates of socialism and militant trade unionism.

It was in the midst of this campaign that Jones landed in the heart of the 1897 great coal miners’ strike in Pennsylvania, and implemented strategies of family and community organizing. Because of her campaign to save Worden’s life, she was well known in the coal fields. The strike included union encampments styled on the unemployed movement, calls for a general nationwide strike, and defiance of court injunctions against marching and picketing by putting women and children on the front lines. Massive marches and rallies, without precedent in Pennsylvania, Illinois, and West Virginia, threw down the gauntlet for this new style of unionism. She reminded workers that they were part of a longer history of struggle, one that had to have broad goals: “I long to see the day when labor will be in the White House and in the halls of Congress,” and “we’ll take the mines and run them for ourselves, rather than starve.” Her key message was for the women. She advised them to organize independently of the men, to defy their husbands and fathers if necessary, to

In 2012 the Cork Mother Jones Festival erected a plaque in honor of Mother Jones on John Redmond Street in the Shandon area of Cork, Ireland, near where Mother Jones lived for the first 14 years of her life. Many of those attending were activists who argued that they were connected across time and space to this great Irish-American labor agitator. 

Courtesy of Rosemary Feurer.

Baptismal Font where Mary Frances Harris was baptized on August 1, 1837. It is pictured here in the North Cathedral, Shandon. While Mary was baptized in the faith, many Irish at the time were highly critical of the Church’s alliance with the wealthy. Mary later became an outspoken opponent of clergy who refused to stand for workers rights.

Photo by Jim Fitzpatrick.
deny miners access to the home if they weakened, and to “shorten their skirts and march.” They did and became part of the organized theater of battle.

The strike was won and established the miners’ union in key areas of the country, and also established Illinois as a major stronghold of the union. But brutal repression and injunctions left other areas such as West Virginia and Colorado unorganized. Jones devoted much of the rest of her life to remedying this, facing down bayonets, defying injunctions, being arrested without charge, being deported from states on the authorization of governors, thereby gaining a reputation as the nation’s most fearless organizer. “Some day we will have the courage to rise up and strike back at these great ‘giants’ of industry, and then we will see they weren’t ‘giants’ after all—they only seemed to be because we were on our knees and they towered above us,” she said. This comment was a version of a sentiment made famous in the French Revolution. It was also revived in the Irish workers’ movement and is today associated with a statue to Irish activist James Larkin in Dublin.

The early twentieth century was known as the age of violence, and being witness to workers’ deaths—over a thousand workers were killed in the era by police and troops and mercenaries—steeled Jones’ determination to continue a tradition of struggle that made her a part of a collective and global movement for workers rights. In 1916, an 80-year-old man travelled from Murphysboro to Decatur, hoping to meet Jones on her speaking tour, and started to cry when he heard she had to cancel. His son had been a miner in Colorado, and when the “fighting was going on” for the union there, “a gun was raised to shoot at him and ‘Mother’ Jones, who was standing near, stepped in front of my son and saved his life. He was injured later and died but I wanted to shake hands with her and thank her for what she did.”

For most of her life, Jones launched marches and protests, advocated and organized for union rights, for freedom of speech and assembly, and was reviled by those in power as someone who behaved in an “unladylike” fashion. In 1907 she was called the best known “agitator in the world” by the press. When she was mocked as the “grandmother of all agitators” in the U.S. Senate, Jones replied that she would someday like to be called the “great-grandmother of all agitators.” Speaking to a group of New York women, she reminded them, “Never mind if you are not lady-like, you are woman-like. God Almighty made the woman and the Rockefeller gang of thieves made the ladies.” It was Rockefeller, she argued, who was responsible for the deaths of eleven children and two women who were killed when troops and hired mercenaries burned a tent colony occupied by strikers in Ludlow, Colorado.

One of Jones’ contributions to the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was enforcing the union commitment to bridging racial and ethnic divisions. She condemned white supremacists in the union, and argued that the black miners of West Virginia were the best trade unionists. When an African-American woman, impressed with Mother Jones commitment to their cause, suggested she would kiss Jones’ skirt hem in gratitude, Jones replied, “Not in the dust, sister, to me, but here on my breast, heart to heart.” A friend observed that Jones “is above and beyond all, one of the working class. . . Wherever she goes she enters into the lives of the toilers and becomes a part of them.”

Jones was also a transnational organizer who believed in a global labor movement. By 1910 she was the most well-known U.S. figure fighting for Mexican labor revolutionaries against the Diaz dictatorship and his U.S. corporate and political supporters. The Mexican rebels were part of the same cause as American unionists, she argued. When she traveled to Mexico...
when I swear I get things here.” Like many radicals of her era, Jones’ argued that Jesus was a revolutionary of his time and a model who should lead workers to see that they should fight back and take possession of the earth from the millionaire “parasites” who were no better than thieves. She sometimes called certain clergy “sky pilots” who deflected workers’ attention to heavenly rewards and promoted class harmony while workers died from avarice. It’s no surprise that William Harris never mentioned his connection with the famous female agitator. Nevertheless, she was on very friendly terms with a number of clergy who shared her values, like her eulogist Father Maguire, a priest who fought in the 1919 steel strike with her.

Jones believed in democratic unionism, and that brought her into conflict with United Mine Workers officials in the 1920s, especially John L. Lewis, who she felt was stifling the voice of the ordinary miner. As she neared death, she declared she was still “a radical” who “longed for the day when labor will have the destination of the nation in her own hands, and she will stand a united force, and show the world what the workers can do.” She asked to be buried at Mt. Olive, where rank-and-file immigrant unionists had died to build the union and where they were attempting to reform the union.

In 1898, Illinois became a battleground for labor rights when the Chicago Virden Coal Co. defied the union contract established in 1897 and sought to bring African-American strikebreakers to Virden and other areas to break the union contract. African-American union miners in Illinois had played a role in turning away the strikebreakers, initially foiling the company’s plans. In defiance, the coal company brought Chicago police officials with a reputation for brutality to Virden, and loaded trains with armed mercenaries. Miners from Mt. Olive joined others from across the state in a rank-and-file movement to “stand their ground” against the company.

In an ensuing battle, 13 people were killed, including 4 Mt. Olive miners. In 1899, the United Mine Workers built the Union Miners’ Cemetery in Mt. Olive, and miners began to commemorate October 12 as miners’ day in Illinois. Mother Jones considered it the birthplace of rank-and-file unionism.

When Lewis forced miners to accept lowered wages in their contracts in 1930, and then joined with police forces and the Peabody Coal Co. to enforce the contracts, miners in Illinois established a new union, the Progressive Miners of America (PMA). They argued that the union should fight for a 30-hour workweek and redistribution of profits to unionized miners.

The inset of Mary’s delegate badge (seen in the photograph above) indicates one of the seminal accomplishments of the 1897 marching strike movement, the achievement of the eight-hour day in unionized mines.

Courtesy University of Pittsburgh Archives of Industrial Society.
Jones' brother, William Harris, became a prominent clergyman by the early twentieth century. Jones had a radical interpretation of human potential that led her to support the Mexican revolution, while her brother suggested that Mexicans were incapable of self-government.

From Days and Nights in the Tropics by Dean William Richard Harris, (1905).

Mother Jones speaking to workers in the state of Washington, a month after troops and mercenaries burned to death eleven children and two women in tent colonies in Ludlow, Colorado, in April 1914. Jones was on a speaking tour about that and the events in Calumet, Michigan, where miners were on strike. Jones argued that mercenaries had yelled “fire” during a Christmas party for striking miners children, leading to 74 deaths. For Jones, the memory of the tragedies called for workers to defy mine owners in honor of labor’s martyred dead.

From University of Washington Special Collections.

Mother Jones brings shoes for children of strikers in a West Virginia coal strike, as workers are forced to live in tent colonies after being evicted from company owned homes. One observer noted that Jones “would croon old Irish songs at a miner’s sick baby and then lead a charge up a bleak hillside against guns, bludgeons or anything else that might lie ahead.” She “insisted that fighting miners’ wives should wear bonnets, as shawls were to her a symbol of inferiority,” and she utilized her seamstress skills to bring them bonnets. While some biographers have described Jones as seeking to wear black clothes in order to look older and dour and thus gain authority in a male world, those who knew her said she loved to dress in purple. One reporter noted that he had to wait to see her until she finished curling her hair.

Photo courtesy United Mine Workers of America, AFL-CIO.
the miners instead of reducing their wages. Their defiance would lead to the deaths of over 22 workers in what became known as the mine war of the 1930s. The PMA led the effort to establish the huge monument to Mother Jones at Mt. Olive, and thus began the regular sojourn to the monument as both a reflection of the origins of industrial unionism in the U.S. and an argument that, following in Mother Jones footsteps, ordinary workers should play a role in the nation’s economic destiny.

That dream was not fully realized, and today, the resurgence of a second Gilded Age of economic inequality has caused a renewed interest in Mother Jones in the U.S. and elsewhere. Almost a hundred years later, people in Cork, Ireland honored Jones in 2012, not only for her contribution to the past, but as someone whose views are as relevant today as in the past.

Rosemary Feurer grew up in a small mining town in southern Illinois. She teaches history at Northern Illinois University. She is also the producer and co-director for Mother Jones, America’s Most Dangerous Woman (2007), a 24-minute film introduction to Mother Jones. She manages the website and blog www.motherjonesmuseum.org and the largest collection of labor history web resources www.laborhistorylinks.niu.edu.

The Andrew Gynes Women’s Auxiliary of the Tovey Progressive Miners Union of America local marches alongside a large number of delegations to the Mother Jones Monument/Union Miners Cemetery in 1936. Following in Mother Jones path, the Women’s Auxiliary sought to memorialize the long struggles to build unionism in the nation’s coal fields, and argued that women should have a broad role in the economic destiny of the nation. Gynes was the first casualty of the mine wars of the 1930s, shot down by a National Guard soldier as he was talking to a strikebreaker. His wife, Julie, vowed to march in the picket line the night he was killed. These dramatic events were as much a part of why Mother Jones was remembered as was her own activism. Illinois members felt a tie to the drama of her life of agitation.

These and many other photos of events in the 1930s at the Union Miners Cemetery are in the possession of Nelson Grman, Staunton, Illinois.