

They called her Mother Jones: A life spent dignifying work

By Peter Gibbon

Mary Harris Jones had lost her four children and husband to a yellow fever epidemic that swept through Memphis, Tenn., just after the Civil War. Alone, she moved to Chicago and sewed clothes for families living along Lake Shore Drive. Then, made temporarily homeless by the great Chicago fire of 1871, she moved into a church, where she was educated in oratory by overhearing the "splendid speeches" of the Knights of Labor, who held meetings in a nearby building. In time, Jones would become known all over America as Mother Jones, a hero to laborers, especially miners and children.

In the mines, Jones saw men "bent like gnomes" working 14-hour days in the dark, returning home to "company-owned shacks ... not fit for their pigs." She saw miners asphyxiated by gas and strangled by coal dust; she talked to widows who had lost husbands to explosions, saw "breaker boys" who had lost fingernails splitting coal. To learn about child labor, she took jobs incognito in textile mills, where children with crushed hands operated spindles and fell asleep in front of dangerous machines.

Then she marched from Independence Park in Philadelphia to Oyster Bay, N.Y., a distance of 125 miles, to see President Theodore Roosevelt. She was 73 years old. With her was an army of 400 child laborers.

By now a powerful orator Jones stopped along the way speaking to students and professors on the edge of the Princeton campus, using living examples from her army to illustrate the evils of child labor. She talked her way into New York City over the objections of the chief of police and the mayor, gave a theatrical speech on Coney Island, and went on to Sagamore Hill, Theodore Roosevelt's summer home. The President refused to see her. "He had a lot of Secret Service men," she commented, "watching an old woman and an army of children."

Labor Day is our forgotten holiday. We have the luxury of forgetting its meaning because we have replaced violent strikes with widespread unemployment, and 16-hour workdays with collective bargaining and legislation such as the minimum wage and health and safety regulations.

At the end of a summer when Americans celebrated the bravery of coal miners in Somerset County, we might remember the large meaning of this forgotten holiday: the dignity of manual labor, the importance of workers' rights and the achievements of trade unions. And, as our children return to school instead of factories we might recall with gratitude the audacity of Mary Harris Jones.

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