Philip Taft, "Mother Jones."

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Mother Jones

The purely personal observations on Mother Jones we can get over rather quickly. Her life is mostly intertwined with the coal miners. She was born in Cork, Ireland. Her maiden name was Harris and while she was a very vigorous and active exponant, not only of labor rights, and women's rights, she was able to take her husband's name. She said even in regard to voting when the suffragette movement was in its glory, she said, "You can raise hell without the vote."

There isn't much to say about Mother Jones except that she came over to the United States as a child. Her father left Ireland when she was about three years old and brought the family to the United States. She lived in Memphis and Chicago as a young woman. She went to school in Toronto, Canada, because her father, as so many of the men of that generation, was an Trish laborer. He worked and helped to construct the railroads and that brought him up to Canada. She, as her father, prized her United States citizenship very highly, and never forgot that they were from and belonged in the United States. She went to Normal school for a short time and she married, as a relatively young woman. She was thirty years old. Her husband died of yellow fever and this really ends anything you can say.

The only personal thing I can tell you is something my mother-in-law told me. She stopped by my mother-in-law's house and said she wanted to take a bath. The water was heated, the tub brought out, and a curtain drawn across, and Mother took a bath and left to carry on her good work.

I think, as you look over Mother Jones's career, it is really without personal incident. I've heard she had an affair after, you know she lived to be a very old woman, she lived to be 100. She was born in 1830. There is nothing you can find out about her. There are no personal allusions known outside Of the facts I have recited. In her autobiography she talks about individuals but they are all related to the labor movement. It is on that part of her life that we have to focus. here is no Mother Jones except Mother Jones, the woman of labor.

Now, what is it that she did? Why did she do it, and how did she do it? If we had to catagorize Mother Jones we would have to say that she was obviously a superb agitator. The two greatest presidents of the United Mine Workers, and I would say among the greatest leaders of the Labor Movement, would be John Mitchell, who was a son of Illinois, and John L. Lewis. There was another Lewis inbetween them. Tom L. Lewis, who wasn't such a nice man. He helped to make an antitrust case against these unions. Mother Jones was very fond of John L. Lewis. He was a very nice man externally. Evidently John Mitchell wasn't and Mother Jones speaks unfavorably of him.

Why did Nother Jones choose the miners? I find out explanation in her autobiography except that the miners were exploited, conditions in the mining towns very harsh. Miners were exposed to more risk than most workers. They suffered more injury and occupational deaths, and it may be that which attracted her. From the early '90's until the '20's, she was active within the miners organization. She did play some role in several other

episodes. That is, she went out and helped the metal miners in one of the bloodiest labor disputes in Colorado in 1904 and 1905.

She also participated in the organization of the steel workers in 1919. It was a great success. It was led by William Z. Foster, who all of you probably know became the head of the Communist Party. I always thought it was kind of accidental. That once he was trapped he couldn't get out. Foster was a brilliant organizer and very intelligent. In this organization you had to pay an initiation fee and once a month dues. While many of the unions reduced their fees and dues you still had to pay it. You didn't join by signing a card and authorizing someone to represent you. Moreover you had tremendous opposition, not so much in this area, Illinois, Indiana, etc., but in Pennsylvania the union men couldn't come in. Now this was true: You know the story probably of Francis Perkins and the man who became a staff man, Elmer Malloy. He was mayor of a suburb. Now this happened in 1934. There was trouble trying to organize a union and Miss Francis Perkins, probably the first woman to be a cabinet officer. She was appointed by President Roosevelt, and served a little over twelve years. Miss Perkins was a New England lady, and she came there because there was trouble, and she stopped to talk to a group of miners, people. And the Mayor came over and said to the group, "You can not speak or congregate in this way. You're blocking the sidewalk." So Miss Perkins said, "All right boys, let's go over to the park." Then the Mayor came and said, "You can't do this in the park." So Miss Perkins looked across and there was the U.S. Post Office. So she said., "Come on boys, let's go in; Mr. Farley (who was then the postmaster) won't mind . It

was under those conditions that they organized.

Now, let me get back to the coal miners. What was the reason that Mother Jones could engage in a series of heroic episodes? If there were a Mother Jones today she couldn't hang around the steel workers. There was a statement made of the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin that he was of inestimable value before the revolution and you would have to shoot him the day after. So when I say "hanging around," there really isn't any place in the steel workers for someone like Mother Jones. This really is not a criticism of the steel workers either. It is interesting to find out why.

The reason that Mother Jones could be active for a period of fifty years and be engaged in a set of real heroic episodes which required her to risk her life and her liberty is because of conditions in the mine. Her activity do the bicuminous coal area began in the early '90's. There were a series of strikes. In 194 there was a national strike. I may say in Illinois, and I've gone through the reports of the Illinois Department of Labor and you find that almost every year there is some bloody episode, going back to the '90's until they were organized. Now, here is what happened. The miners union was bankrupt. They didn't have a dime. It had lost its membership as a result of the strike of 1984. But, the men who came together to discuss what they were going to do with the union, decided that they would call a national strike. This, it appeared, was rather foolhardy. didn't have any money but the country was recovering from a depression in '97. The depression of the '90's was a very severe one and it affected peoples attitude towards labor. You may know that there were a lot of men foraging through the co&try without food or shelter. Small, but still something like the great depression. I know, and some of you remember vividly and experienced the effects of it. What happened was that a national strike was called. The miners of Illinois answered. As a matter of fact there was a very fine governor, I think Tetter by name, and he defended the strikers. He said that they were fighting for a just cause and the union started.

Now let me say first one more word about this riot. problem was West Virgina. Even then, in other words, the West Virginia miners only was out partially. There was an effort made to get the others out The plans, by the way, were laid in Pittsburgh and Michael Roxford, who was the head of the miners union, who later resigned to accept an appointment on the Industrial Commission, he he met with the heads of AF of L unions and they laid out the strategy, and they invaded West Virginia. These men, and Mother Jones was in that group, they called for organizers When you read that you get a slightly different picture of the way unions helped other unions. It never was as bad as the -people who had written about it indicated. The reason is this. The head of a union, even a powerful one, unless he's in a position like John L. Lewis, was towards the end of his life, somebody's going to get up and question his expenditures. This is one place where union members are likely to be sensitive. Now, how do you help without having some fellow get up and say, "What do we care about these Bohunks or what do we care about these Oakies down there? They never help us." So, what you do is send organizers

down there and you put them on the payroll. They go in there and you pick up the check. This is what happened in many of the unions. I know that in the last strike of the steel workers, U.S. Steel against Amalgamated, there were about 42 national. unions that sent organizers up there. This was a method of handling it. In any event they went in there, and Mother Jones was very likely. I know of no other women that participated in it. She was thrown in with these guys and she stayed there. Whatever happened there were a number of injunctions issued by a federal judge there. The union failed to organize West Virginia.

John Mitchell became president of the miners union. He was a relatively conservative man. He was very intelligent as I've already noted. Certainly at this particular time his position, he didn't stay in the union very long, he was rather a moody man, and for some reason he wouldn't stay in the union. He didn't like the politicing and the miners union at that time had a couple of factions. One faction around here, Mitchell was a member of it. He came from Illinois. The reason he became president, he was chosen, vice-president. Not many people wanted it at the time, but in any event he recognized the problem that the union faced, cause at this time; as a result of the strike, the central competitive field was organized.

Now, the central. competitive field was an arrangement whereby, around World War I, the mines of Illinois employed 90,000 miners. Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Central Pennsylvania. Now, they had to get West Virginia in. This was always a very serious matter. What they did was work out a program of differentials from the serious basic points that were set up. So that the mines would

be competitive. This was something that the miners' leaders in the '80's and early '90's and the union leaders both felt was necessary if the unions were to survive. But they had failed to bring West Virginia in. Now, West Virginia was then just a very small cloud on the horizon. But it gradually expanded. The West Virginia fields were newer fields the seams were thicker. I don't know if transportation costs were favorable or unfavorable. The argument that the West Virginian's leaders always had was that the rate structure was always against them and they needed some offset. But this thing miners contracts always considered relative freight rates. So what happened is that you had a growing, field that was unorganized where the operators could set the rate according the the number of workers you had at one time and didn't have to observe the union conditions with regard to overtime or other union rules, which might increase their costs. So, every once in. awhile Mother Jones was sent down. In 1904 she got herself in a jail, obviously she didn't mind it, it didn't affect her character or her disposition. In 1913 Mother Jones was involved in two of the bloodiest episodes of American history.

One was in West Virginia, and she was in jail, where the miners fought the national guardsmen and the private detectives over a period of several months. But you had a Senatorial committee going down there seeking to ascertain the reasons for the trouble. They came out with the explanation that, while the operators were brutal, inhuman, the northern organizers were in a conspiracy in order to raise the wages and reduce their competitive advantage. So, Mother Jones played a role in this particular instance.

Now, I suspect that Mother Jones' anger at John Mitchell was over his refusal to allow her to play her normal role. in the coal strike. One of the great feats that took place in the first two decades of the century was the organization of the anthracite fields, which had been non-union since the early '70 's. This required a great deal of generalship and also appealing to public sentiment. One of the great men of Illinois, Henry S. Lloyd, played a role, not in the strike, but the arbitration hearings that were held as a result of the pressure of President Theodore Roosevelt for a strike settlement.

Now Mitchell may have thought this was a bloody strike.

I may say it wasn't a very peaceful one because the operators tried to reopen the mines and the miners simply reacted. It wasn't that but whatever it may have been, Mother Jones was there but she didn't play an important role. And of all of the mining leaders she is very critical of John Mitchell.

She describes that he had a conference with J.P. Morgan, which he did, but 'it was over the settling of the strike. It really wasn't any type of dereliction. After that, she got into jail, and then she went to Colorado where you had another attempt to organize. These were Rockefeller mines, controlled by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. It was that strike which led to greater violence then the metaliferous strike, which had taken-place in the early part of the century..

Now, everyone is aquainted with the terrible burning of 10 or 12 children in the tents of Ludlow, tents pulled down by some of the national guardsmen. The fact was that the miners armed

themselves and you had a civil war and President Wilson sent in federal. troops. That settled the problem though it never led to any organization. Mother Jones was arrested and she was kept in jail for about 90 days, and then again let go. I think that I could repeat a number of other times that she got into jail. The reason isn't necessarily that she courted jail. She wasn't afraid. She's a very motherly looking old lady. I understand that she had the vocabulary of a member of women's liberation, and she wasn't afraid to use it. She did look like a very nice old lady, and she was, except when she felt her rights were being denied or when she tried to convince people not to cross a picket line. She went from one strike to another because this is where she was most effective. She could rally the miners. The miners loved her and they listened to her. Her job was to keep them out on strike, to keep their spirits up, to try to defy an injunction. If the miners were enjoined from picketing she regarded it as a perfectly normal thing to do. Being a woman it was much vorse. People were more sentimental in those days and to keep a nice old lady in jail -- perhaps the miners felt stronger about that, then if one of their male leaders was put in jail. This is the only reason I have, for she was a very good person around a strike.

You see, there were two kinds of strikes that the miners ran that time. The strikes which would be something like the recent General Motors strike. The miners went out but they didn't do anything about it. They knew that the operators as a rule didn't try to work the mines. Where the company did not try to recognize the union, this is where she was effective. She could rally the miners, she wasn't afraid, she could defy the courts and the police.

And she did.

Now, beginning in 1919, the miners union faced an internal conflict of serious dimensions. Actually, the reason for it was that an Illinois man, John L. Lewis, who wasn't affiliated and wasn't part of the Illinois organization. Neither John L. Lewis or John Mitchell were directly elected as president the first time they served. In Lewis's case, of course, the union was a solid organization of 500,000 members. When Lewis took over the United Mine Workers was al: the peak of its power. He was an out sider. He had been on the staff as an agent for the United Mine Workers at Springfield. And then he had gone on the staff for the AF of L. He was an organizer for the AF of L.

When Lewis first said he had a lot of experience I didn't believe him, but then when you looked over his record you find he was one, and many of the AF of L men knew him. Even in 1919, and this is an interesting thing that I've seen, they said that he was able, and not often will the president of another union say that another man is able. That comes hard. The fact is that Lewis did not go up the escalator of the union. Usually, at that time, it was the district presidents who wer'e the important leaders. For example, in 1916 the man who was elected was John White who was rather a colorless man as I can see. John White was the district president of Iowa and I think he ran against another district president.

While we're talking about John White I must tell you, you know fate is a very important factor always. Now, John White was president of the union, and then he went to the common adviser

of the coal commission that the government set up during World War I. He resigned. Then the next person was a man by the name of Prank Hayes. He was from Illinois. He was the youngest man who ever was vice-president. He was socialist, where the president was a conservative man, but there was no trouble between them.

Now Hayes used the prerogative of his office and appointed John L, Lewis, Who was an auditor I believe, as vice-president. Hayes became ill. He drank too much and people say Lewis kept him drunk, which is impossible. Haves retired. Now, let me tell you why John White's behavior in a situation may have changed the whole history. When Johns Mitchell, who was a member of the executive council of the of the AF of L retired, the executive council decided to appoint another miner. When a position is open the council- temporarily chooses. He had to run for election at the next convention. Usually, when someone on the council is going to quit he will retire before his term is up so that the council can appoint a man, and give him that place. That is standard brocedure. The rule is that when you're appointed you. go to the. bottom of the list . At that time there were 8 vice-president so you would become the 8th. The number doesn't necessarily mean anything; Matt Wohl, for example, had a lot of influence when he was low down. The reason he had a lot of influence, he could do a lot of work on the council. He could write resolutions, he could draw up leaflets. That's the reason. He didn't have a large union, but he was a very bright man and could do different things. So the offer was made to White, and someone must have gotten to him. At that-time there was some bad feeling between the miners and the AF of L, endengered, I think, by Duncan McDonald, who made

a terrible accusation against Gompers. He said that he was a terrible drunkard. White said that it was an insult to the miners, Mitchell was first vice-president, why should he become the eighth, so he refused. It was explained to him in detail. Gompers went on as was customary, gave him a list of men who were appointed. He only made one exception throughout the history, and this was around 1915 or 1916, and that was, he asked the man who was first vice-president for a long time, James Duncan, asked him to give up his place to John Mitchell after the strike and he agreed. He said that's the only exception ever made. He said., "It's not a dishonor. There's no attempt to humiliate you." But to say on the good work -of John White, he wrote a letter and he said to Gompers, "I understand and I agree with what you've said when you explained it to me and I take back any criticism I have made, but I won 't take the job ," So they took the secretary-treesurer, and his name was Green.

In any event, to get back to Mother Jones, there was a fight within the miners union between two groups. One headed by Frank Farrington, who was the real power, though he never took the lead at the conventions. Farrington was almost the equal of John L. Lewis. He was a very intelligent man. I went up to see him. He lived in a small town and I can't think of its name, where the coal had been gone a long time ago. When I was a graduate student I went up to see him with another man who was writing on miners in this area. We spent the better part of half a day with him. I was very much impressed by him. He resigned after he took a fee of \$25,000 from the Peabody Coal Company. Whether John L.

Lewis arranged for that fee or not I don't know. In any event, he resigned. He was the power behind the opposition. The man who really publicly led it was Alexander Howard of District 14 in Kansas. He was a very fine and eloquent, a militant leader, but he was not by a hundred light years in the territory occupied by John L. Lewis. They were two different breeds of men. In this fight, which was a very bitter one, the miners did not choose violence against one another. They may have taken a poke at one There has never been, in the miners union, I $\mbox{\tt 'm}$ not talking another. of jurisdictional disputes between the Progressives and the other This is different Within the miners union there have been bitter controversies, but there have never been any charges, except one time. That was one time in the anthracite when some man by the name of Capalini hired some man to shoot a member of the United Mine Workers. He was a district president and was put in jail and it got him out of the union. There may have been some violence but no arms used as far as I can remember.

Mother Jones was already a very old. woman. When you get to be over 80, if you can get your bonnet on that's an achievement. Mr.Lewis always used to drag her out. She came to the conventions and when they got too noisy he'd grab her by the arm and say, "Now Mother will speak." And she'd say, "Now you fellows quiet down." By that time the business, would quiet down and things could be settled. Towards the end of her life, she may have made a great contribution to the American Labor Movement, and she may not have known it. That is by keeping John L. Lewis, and it was very close by the way at one of those conventions

by the way, at one of those conventions Lewis was able to hold on by 15 or 20 votes. Most of his votes came from the anthracite districts and nobody knew how many members they had. It was touch and go.

Now, Mother Jones, though-she may have not known altogether what the issues. were, she made a great contribution, because if Lewis had been defeated he would not have been at the head of the United Mine Workers. The entire history of American Labor might have been changed. Not altogether in the same direction but substantially changed. I am of the opinion that without the leadership and the funds of the miners there was nobody who could have done the things that Mr. Lewis did in the '30's. There is no one who cart make, as my good friend Lou Stark, who is an outstanding labor reporter said, "There is no one who can stand up to John Lewis . "And Mr. Lewis made the head of General Motors and the head of the Dupont Co. look worse than errand boys. They said they had never been treated that way, but Mr. Lewis beat them down. He was willing to take chances and you can never say how much the Labor Movement owes to him. He contributed in great, measure and I see no possible substitute at the time. "You can go over the men and give them all the credit you want, Sidney Hillman or David Dubinsky . You really run out. But John L. Lewis was saved-by Mot her Jones. Maybe it was an act of God, I don't know. So at least he could perform the great work of organizing the mass production union and building up the labor movement of the '60's and '70's.