



A 1902 portrait of Mother Jones, around the time her two decades of involvement with West Virginia labor was just beginning. Library of Congress

TELLING OUR OWN STORIES

by Eric Waggoner,
Executive Director

The Jefferds Memorial Library isn't as popularly known as some of the Council's other holdings, but visitors to our headquarters always seem to gravitate towards it.

Tucked away in a small, cozy nook on the first floor, the Jefferds Library houses an eclectic little collection centered on West Virginia history and culture, as well as books written by our guest speakers and lecturers throughout the years; poetry and fiction by West Virginia writers famous and otherwise; and historic and contemporary biographies of the Mountain State's prominent public figures from the earliest years of statehood until today.

Many of the Jefferds Library's most distinctive holdings are gifts from the Council's friends and supporters. Just a few weeks ago, for example, former Board member Ray Smock of Martinsburg gifted us a real gem: a very fine first edition copy of *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*. I was especially thrilled when Ray offered us this volume from his private collection. Even outside her direct connection to West Virginia labor history, Mother Jones' *Autobiography*, considered only on its publication merits, has a fascinating story of its own.

Famed labor organizer and self-proclaimed "hell-raiser" Mary Harris Jones began work on her autobiography in 1923, after years of encouragement and offers to collaborate from several professional writers. Jones had finally consented to produce her life story with the help of editor Mary Field Parton, a journalist and former social worker whose husband Lemuel was a prominent newspaperman and publisher. Arriving in Chicago early in the year, Jones took up residence at the home of Ed Nockles, secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor, where she would produce the greater portion of her book in collaboration with Parton.

Two years later, in August 1925, *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* appeared under the imprint of Charles H. Kerr and Company, the Chicago-based publisher of the *International Socialist Review*. The introduction to that edition, written by famed defense attorney Clarence Darrow, placed Mother Jones in the moral company of abolitionists John Brown and Wendell Phillips, citing her fierce rhetoric in support of labor rights. Despite such weighty credentials and by-lines, though, the book didn't sell as well as might have been anticipated, especially considering Mother Jones's fame not only as a labor organizer, but as a popular figure in American life.

By the time of its publication, Jones was an omnipresent figure in the lives of industrial-wage earners, and an important touchstone in all public discussions of matters regarding labor. Sketches of her appeared in the memoirs of several prominent individuals, and upon her death she was even made the subject of a folk song ("The

Death of Mother Jones," written by John Greenway and recorded by no less a figure than Gene Autry in 1931).

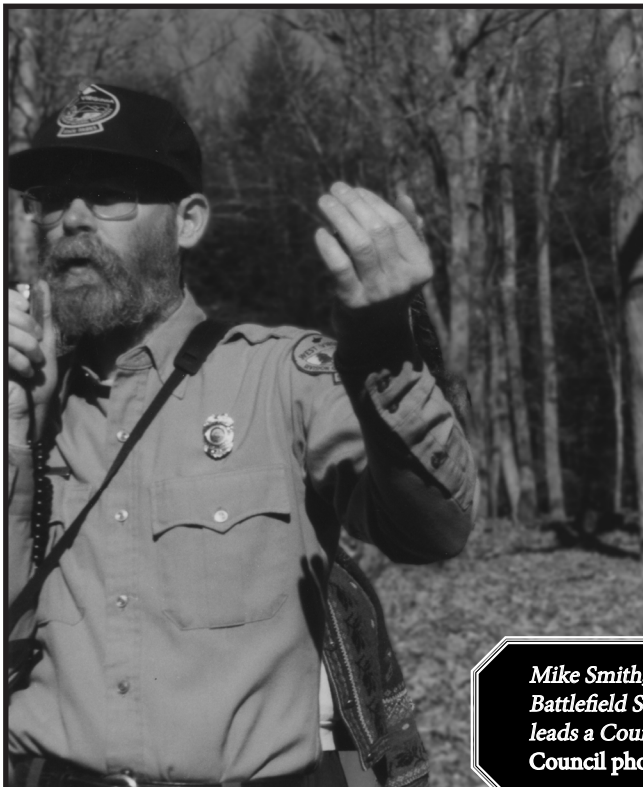
Yet the full run of Jones' book upon its initial publication numbered only 4500 copies, of which, a year later, less than half had been sold. Even in the years following its publication the book wasn't much in demand among general readers, though it made its way into numerous public and private libraries. Kerr and Company's financial troubles, brought on by the decline of the American Socialist Party in the years before World War II, further compromised the preservation of Jones' memoir, and the *Autobiography* soon went quietly out of print.

For many years thereafter Jones' book, and her substantial contributions to the labor movement, languished under a kind of cultural amnesia. Labor historians relegated her to footnote status where they remembered her at all, and it wasn't until more than three decades after her death that a serious popular rediscovery of Jones began to take place, concurrent with the civil and women's rights movements in the United States.

In 1969 the *Autobiography* was reprinted for the first time, by Arno Press in New York. Reprints in 1972 and 1974 followed. In 1990 the "Pittston Strike Commemorative Edition" of *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* was brought out under the imprint of Charles H. Kerr Labor Classics, as part of that publishing house's First Person Series. This edition—now itself, ironically, out of print—noted and amended the numerous textual and typographical errors that dogged earlier versions. It also included new introductory and afterword material, an index of proper names, a timeline, additional contemporary writings by and about Mother Jones, and new information on the *Autobiography's* publication history.

Since the details of Jones' and Parton's collaborative process are lost to history, for the interested reader, Kerr Labor Classics' edition remains the most useful version of Jones' book. Still, "classic" seems a lofty descriptor for a book that's been out of print more often than not, and is rarely read by anyone other than primary researchers even today. Then there's the question of the book's historical accuracy, which is, to use the strict academic terminology, a whole 'nother matter.

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Mike Smith, who served as Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park superintendent for 32 years, leads a Council bus tour of the battlefield in 2001. Council photo

IN THE SERVICE OF OTHERS

by Kyle Warmack,
Program Officer

Growing up in California isn't easy for a young kid who develops a passion for the American Civil War.

You gradually discover that there aren't any battlefields in your state. Precious few California troops participated in the conflict. You start latching onto small things, like how William Tecumseh Sherman served a miserable garrison stint in San Francisco before he quit the U.S. Army in 1853. But eventually the truth sinks in: If you really want your Civil War fix, you've got to hit the road.

My parents always talked about taking a trip back east for this purpose, but with a big, busy family it never quite materialized. Not until well into adulthood, on my second work trip to West Virginia, did I set foot on my first Civil War battlefield: Droop Mountain.

As the Chief Lighting Technician on a small indie feature film called *Little Accidents* that was shooting in Beckley for about six weeks, on the weekends I could borrow the rented pickup with which we towed the production's generator. Learning that the battlefields of Carnifex Ferry, White Sulphur Springs, and Droop Mountain were easy day trips from our Mictrotel on Eisenhower Drive—and not having heard of any of these battles before—I set out in search of history. Droop was first on the list, more or less by accident, for which I will be forever grateful.

I arrived mid-morning on a gray, rainy Saturday. No other cars were in the parking lot of that misty, tree-fringed Pocahontas County elevation. Shrugging into a jacket and clutching some kind of internet printout, I began trying to orient myself.

My feet had hardly reached the edge of the parking lot when a lanky, bearded man in a park ranger uniform appeared, seemingly from nowhere. He introduced himself as Mike Smith, the Droop Mountain superintendent.

After hearing of my intent to survey the battlefield, he asked, without preamble, "Do you want a tour?" I looked up at the glowering sky, but that didn't seem to affect his offer. And so we began.

For the next hour, Smith guided me tirelessly around the premises, pointing out key terrain and explaining the battle's development. We paused at trees so he could describe the bullets he had dug out of their bark. The light drizzle never diverted Smith from giving me—a lone visitor of no particular note—his undivided attention.

It was my first Civil War battlefield tour, and there will never be another like it.

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**TELLING OUR OWN STORIES:
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MOTHER JONES**

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The *Autobiography's* slippery relation to the historical record was noted as early as its first reviews. The book tells us nothing at all of Mary Harris Jones' youth. Her first 30 years are glossed over in its opening two paragraphs, implying that her life began, for all dramatic purposes, in 1871, with her attendance at a Chicago Knights of Labor meeting and her subsequent allegiance to the labor movement. The *Autobiography* is in fact completely silent on the subject of Jones' life outside her work with the labor movement, and occasionally more than a little cagey regarding some aspects of her life within it.

Dates and sequences are often inexplicably misplaced or out of order, sometimes by as much as a decade. The political and economic theories behind her activist work, frequently articulated in her interviews with the national media, are nowhere present. Further, Jones' book tells us nothing at all of her involvement in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)—and she was directly involved, as the sole female delegate to the constitutional convention of the IWW in Chicago in 1905, along with prominent socialists Eugene Debs and "Big Bill" Haywood.

Perhaps most significantly, her account of her involvement in the United Mine Workers is decidedly sanitized. Her frequent and public disagreements with John Mitchell, the union's president of many years, are nowhere to be found. The *Autobiography* thus offers us markedly incomplete information regarding Jones' role in the organization with which she was most closely associated throughout her life.

For these reasons, contemporary critics and biographers have largely tended to dismiss Jones' autobiography as too seriously flawed to claim any merit as an historical document. But contemporary readers may agree with the book's early supporters that, despite its errors and omissions, the value of the *Autobiography* lies in such a famous public figure as Mother Jones offering "inside testimony" regarding specific incidents—strikes, secret union meetings, and other landmark events—in labor's history.

In other words, Jones' *Autobiography*, far from being hobbled by its inaccuracies, was received by contemporary boosters as an important document even in spite of them, due to the fact that Jones herself had produced it over her own "signature," so to speak. Practically speaking, it wasn't even the story of "a life" at all, but an act of testimony and protest, as much as any of her infamously fiery speeches.

As we've noted in these pages before, these days information lives in many places other than books. Anyone who wants to read Mother Jones' speeches, or learn about her life, has a lot of options, both hard copy and digital. But there's something about an artifact like this—one copy of 4500 of a famous troublemaker's life story, or the public side of it she felt was worth preserving—that puts a little piece of history into the hands of a contemporary reader in a real and non-replicable way.

Next year the Council will be 50 years old. The year after that, this copy of *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* will turn 100. It's lucky to be a little part of a big history. Every one of us is, after all.



Speaking of legacies, veteran Chautauqua performer Karen Vuranch rejoined the Council's History Alive! roster last year with her portrayals of Mother Jones (pictured above) and Pearl S. Buck.

Vuranch was a member of the very first cohort of History Alive! presenters when the program—then called West Virginia Chautauqua—was created by the Council in 1990. This ranks Mother Jones among the founding characters of the program, and the labor organizer has been one of Vuranch's mainstay presentations ever since. Photo courtesy of Karen Vuranch

**IN THE SERVICE
OF OTHERS**

(continued from front)

As the Council prepares to celebrate its fiftieth year of serving West Virginia in 2024, I've been thinking a lot about people like Mike Smith (who retired in 2016). The Council staff, assisted by two AmeriCorps members, has been combing through and organizing our institutional archives to better understand the Council's methods and impact over five decades, especially the formative years long before any of the current staff arrived.

Then, as now, we had to report that impact in numerical terms. Grant dollars given, audiences reached. Yet the humanities are fundamentally a qualitative rather than a quantitative group of disciplines. The core lessons of the humanities speak to the shared diversity, commonality, and individuality within human experience, not dollar signs and raw crowd numbers. And those patterns emerge from thousands of individual, meaningful interactions between us all.

The longer I examine the Council's history, the more I realize that the organization's impact has always been driven by individuals who care deeply about their slice of West Virginia, like Mike Smith did for Droop Mountain. People with that kind of care tend to pass it on to friends—and often to perfect strangers, too.

Time and again looking through the Council's archives, I'm struck by the dedication of the ordinary citizens who have given so much of their time. People like former Board member Bob Maslowski, who remains one of the most active scholars of West Virginia archaeology; or former Board President Ancella Bickley, among whose papers at WVU I recently found myself, dumbfounded that someone could contribute so much knowledge and wisdom in a single lifetime. Both Bob and Ancella are still with us, thankfully, but there are many other volunteers—like founding Board member Betsy McCreight—whom we must thank in our hearts and deeds alone.

The older I get, the more I set aside the holidays for reflections of this sort. The short, cold days are a time to be grateful for the people who have bettered and enriched our lives. After fifty years of statewide work, the Council has hundreds, if not thousands, of such people for which to be thankful. We'll be thinking of you often this season, in the coming year, and for many years to come.

Happy holidays.

EVENTS

DECEMBER 2023
-JANUARY 2024

The Council advises contacting the venue if you have questions about an event, as dates or details may change without the Council's prior knowledge.

- Dec 6** **Born of Rebellion - Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit opens at Ohio County Public Library, Wheeling. Open until January 13, 2024, during library's public hours.**
- Dec 6** **Pearl Buck - History Alive!, Woman's Club of Charleston. 12:00pm**
- Dec 8** **Holiday Open House - Join us for refreshments at the Council's headquarters. The historic MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 4-6pm**

- Jan 8** **Hatfields & McCoys - Council traveling exhibit on the famous feud opens at the Harrison County Recreation Complex, Clarksburg. Open during the facility's public hours.**
- Jan 15** **Born of Rebellion - Civil War and statehood traveling exhibit opens at Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library, Clarksburg. Open until February 10, 2024, during library's public hours.**

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia. The Broad Side is ©2021 by the West Virginia Humanities Council. All rights reserved. Copyright of individual articles is retained by their respective authors. Images used with permission. Additional graphics and linear obtained from Vecteezy.com.

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