



Video Story Transcript

Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America

By: Storyteller Pippa White
www.pippawhite1co.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTOZIDNhEg0>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Pippa White and I'm a storyteller. And the story I have for you today goes back about 100 years, give or take. It's the story of a woman whom I consider to be a heroine and in her day, many people considered her a heroine. But in her day, many people also considered her a troublemaker. And that is a label she would have been completely happy with. What I have for you, is a little bit of her autobiography. So, I'm going to speak her words. But before I do that, I want to tell you a little bit about her. Because and I think that little bit from her autobiography will be richer for you.

She was born Mary Harris, in 1837, in Ireland. Her father, as was the case often back then, emigrated to the United States. And when he had enough money, and a job, and citizenship, he sent for his family. So, Mary Harris got to the United States when she was about 10. And she said of her American citizenship, she had always been proud. She grew up. She married a man named Mr. Jones. He was an iron molder and he worked in Tennessee. So, they moved to Tennessee. They started a family. All went well until, in the 1860s, a terrible epidemic of yellow fever swept through that part of Tennessee, and she lost them all. She lost her family of four children and her husband. She said she sat through nights of grief. No one could come to her, she said, because other families were stricken as she was.

She moved to Chicago and began a new life as a dressmaker. She was successful but, unfortunately, she was in Chicago for the Great Fire of 1871. That fire burned her establishment, her apartment, and again, she was left with nothing. She wandered the streets of the city as the fire burned and she came to St. Mary's Church, which was taking in refugees. And there she stayed because she had nowhere else to go. She was there for quite some time.

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She said, next door there was a rickety, old building where the Knights of Labor would hold their meetings. And she would go over there. Now the Knights of Labor were a fledgling union. Back then, 'round the turn of the last century, millions of immigrants were coming to the United States, literally, every year from all over the world, but mostly, at that time, from Central and Eastern Europe and Russia but also from all over the world. And employers took advantage of them. They worked for pennies. They worked long, long hours. And they worked in terrible conditions and sometimes dangerous conditions. So, they joined together to form unions so that they could have a voice. So, this rickety, old building, next to the church, was called the Hall of the Knights of Labor. And Mary Harris Jones would go there. And she said, she would listen to their inspiring speakers and her life took a completely new change. It went in a completely new direction. She became that troublemaker. She became a labor activist.

So, let me get my hat here and my glasses. And I'm going to become that lady. But while you listen to the words from her autobiography, keep this in mind. She was about five feet tall. She was no more than 100 pounds. She didn't even get into this line of work, a labor activist, until she was over 50. And she was not even well known until she was probably over 60. Yet the government of our country, the United States government, called Mary Harris Jones, for a good decade or so, the most dangerous woman in America. So, as you listen to her words, I want you to think about whether that title, The Most Dangerous Woman in America, is right for Mother Jones.

When the railway strike ended, I went down to Cottdale. I wanted to see if the gruesome stories I had heard of little children working in the mills were true. I applied for a job but the manager said he didn't have anything for me unless I had a family that could work also. "Oh," I said, "I have a family. There are six of us."

"You have children?" he said.

"Well, yeah. Yeah." Well, he was so happy he took me with him to find a house to let. The house he brought me to was a kind of two-story plank shanty. All the windows were broken. The door hung loose. The latch was broken. Inside there was one room, with a big, fireplace and a kind of open air aloft above. Holes in the roof had let the rainwater in, which had rotted the flooring in front of the fireplace. There were big holes, two big holes, big enough to drop a brick through. I said, "The wind and the cold is going to come in through those holes."

He said, "Oh, summer is coming. Where are you at, a hotel? What are you talking about?"

I said, "I'm not sure this is big enough for all of us, six of us."

He said, "It'll do." And so, I took the house with the understanding that my family would join me at the end of the month, when work was finished up on the farm.

And I started working in the factory. And there I saw them little children working. The most heartbreaking spectacle in all of life! There were times I couldn't look at those bodies, those little bodies. I wanted to be back in the Rocky Mountain camps or the grim coal fields where at least the labor fight was fought by grown men! Little children working. Running up and down the rows of spindles. Putting a little hand in to repair a snapped thread. Putting, um, crawling under the machinery to oil it.

Hands got crushed. Fingers got snapped off. Children of six with faces of 60 worked a 10-hour day, for ten cents a day. When they fell asleep on the job, cold water was splashed in their faces. Toddling chaps of four went along with Big Brother or Sister. Oh, but their work was not paid. Machines were built in the north. Built low for little hands.

Every morning at 5:30 these children came in from the gray dawn, into the factory, into the pounding noise and the lint filled rooms. They'd fall asleep over their lunches of fat pork and cornbread. Sleep to these children was what play was to a normal child. But the manager would shake them awake and it was back to the grind.

Well, my family, not joining me at the end of the month, a manager got suspicious and I left. I went up to Lexington, Pennsylvania where fully ten thousand workers, textile workers, were on strike and half of them were children. They'd come into our, our union office. They were stooped, round shouldered little things. Some of them had a thumb missing, others a finger off at the joint. Most of them were under 10, even though there was a law in Pennsylvania saying children couldn't work under the age of 12. I asked the newspaper boys, "Why don't you fellows write something about child labor in Pennsylvania?" Oooh. They said they couldn't. The mill owners had stock in the papers.

"Well," I said. "I've got stock in these children and I'll just make a little news!"

And that's how it began, my children's march on Washington. I asked the parents if I couldn't borrow their children as they were all striking, they agreed. A lot of adults came with us. A man named Sweeney, agreed to be our Army captain. Each child carried a knapsack with a plate, a cup, a fork, and a spoon. I had a big wash tub with me so that I could make food along the way. And we carried signs saying, "We want to play." "We want to go to school."

In every town, I got into the town square and I brought those children up onto the platform and I showed the people their mangled bodies. I said, "The mansions of Pennsylvania are built on the backs of these children!" Well, at this point, I decided we would not go to Washington, but rather to Oyster Bay where President Theodore Roosevelt was vacationing with his family. I thought, perhaps, he might like to compare these children to his own. I thought he might like to know who wove the carpets he walked on, the drapes that hung in his window.

Do you know that recently they passed a law in Georgia for the protection of songbirds? When Labor asked for protection for these children, they don't hear. I was in Washington D.C. recently and I saw our legislators passed three bills, in one hour, for relief of the railways. When Labor asks for relief for these children, they turn a deaf ear. I was in a prison recently. I asked a man how he came to be there. He said he had stolen a pair of shoes. I told him if he'd stolen a railway, he'd be a United States senator.

Well, we got to Oyster Bay. But President Roosevelt refused to see us nor would he answer my letters. But our march had done its work. Preachers were preaching about us. Teachers were teaching about us. Two newspapers got in a fight about us. And although the strikers lost the strike and had to return to work, one year later, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a law saying no child could work under the age of 14. Thousands were sent home from the mills and thousands more never had to go. Our march had done its work.

Mother Jones died in 1930 at about the age of 94. She is buried in the Union Miners' cemetery in Mount Olive, Missouri. She asked to be laid to rest there. There had been a riot that had left some protesting miners dead. The mining company had brought in detectives with rifles who shot them. And that was the beginning of the Union Miners' cemetery. And that is where Mother Jones wanted to be buried. There still is child labor on this planet, most especially, in countries like India, China, Bangladesh, and South American countries. In our country, still a little bit. Agriculture, sometimes meat packing, but, mostly, the trouble has been taken care of thanks to Mother Jones and many others like her.

Thank you for listening.

