

**Would
Mother Jones
Buy
“Mother Jones”?**

MICHAEL ANDREW SCULLY

MARY HARRIS JONES was a socialist and labor organizer (1830-1930) who traversed America for more than 40 years, leading strikes and lending the labor and socialist movements her awesome rhetorical skills. She railed against the 14-hour workday, subsistence wages, child labor, and the company store. So did her allies in the radical press, in flimsy pamphlets and magazines printed on butcher-block paper. All that has now changed. The magazines of the radical left have lost their beleaguered look, as have their readers: Affluent societies produce affluent critics.

Ramparts was the first magazine to wed political radicalism and glossy pages, to become, in fact, a magazine for unbeleaguered radicals. *Rolling Stone*, the chic newspaper tabloid, began in 1967. Yet it has been the 1970's which has seen the greatest number and variety of new magazines of the left: *New Times*, the short-lived *Politicks*, a biweekly called *Seven Days*, and a magazine named after that old-time radical, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones. To the would-be founders of a 70's descendant to *Ramparts*, the old woman must have seemed a godsend: a labor activist, socialist, female, with initials the same as marijuana's nickname, Mary-Jane.

Something for everyone who feels put out with American life is the formula which has made *Mother Jones* the largest selling radical magazine of the decade. Sporting an up-to-date, *New York*-style format, *Mother Jones* devotes five pages each month to a mix of light and serious illustrated news briefs. Each issue treats the themes of corporate corruption, political atrophy, small-is-beautiful, communal living, and feminism, in 10 or so columns and featured articles. From such regular columns as "Backstage," "Mother's Daughters," and "Mother's Healer," readers glean glimpses of the magazine's condition, radical feminism's, and sometimes their own. Feature stories treat such varied topics as Pennsylvania's efforts to lure a Volkswagen factory to the state ("The Rabbit That Ate Pennsylvania"), agribusiness ("The Saga of the Burpless Cuke"), and a lesbian commune ("Country Women"). Its features are often timely, such as its article on Ford Pinto gas tank explosions, which in April won *Mother Jones* a National Magazine Award for Public Service.

No magazine, and perhaps no person or group, has fused more successfully the disparate strands of 1960's radicalism than has *Mother Jones*. Then not quite two years old, it boasted a January 1978 press run of 130,000 copies—no small feat for any magazine even remotely concerned with political issues. Yet that is but a mark of its greater success.

In a recent article, *Mother Jones* contributing editor Ron Chernow discussed the condition of post-1960's radicalism:

There may be a finite fund of revolutionary energy in any society. As Marx and others realized, it can be expressed in political action or sublimated into other cultural forms. Since the spasms of the 60's, that energy has followed a more subterranean course. Many student radicals, weary of mass politics, have dedicated themselves to neighborhood groups, communes or fighting the local atomic power plant. For others, that rebellious adrenalin has been siphoned off by encounter groups, sexual experimentation and religious frenzy.

The real success of *Mother Jones* is that it has managed within its pages a tentative reunion of most of these divergent sects, which in fact have little more in common than the dissatisfaction of their members—some with technology, some with mixed-capitalism, some with the tedium of representative government, some with their parents or themselves. The reunion, even though tenuous, merits some attention, for it is the first since the end of the Vietnam War. It is a mark of the delicacy of this task that *Mother Jones* soft-pedals discussions of creed, and is content to advertise that it is "... for people who are getting ready for the Eighties. Who've broken with the old society, but are still looking for the new. . . . a catalogue of possibilities for yourself and the society. . . ."

Nothing in the history of the eponymous Mary Harris Jones suggests she ever went thumbing for what to do next. To the dismay of her opponents—and often her allies as well—the real "Mother" Jones was always up to something. A seasoned organizer and crusty firebrand, she managed to win such labels as "the miner's angel," "a criminally depraved woman," "a remarkable warrior," and "a blackmailer"—all this just from fellow socialists of various stripes. An intellectually erratic, independent-minded activist, the real "Mother" Jones, for all her socialist rhetoric, was not above thinking John D. Rockefeller Jr., a well-intentioned gentleman, or, remarkable as it seems, sending John D. Sr.—radicalism's perennial *bête noire*—a congratulatory telegram on his ninety-first birthday.

"I don't need the vote to raise hell," "Mother" Jones once said, but her namesake magazine neglects to mention her fierce opposition to women's suffrage, her belief that a woman's great calling was the rearing of children, or her hope that the successes of the labor movement would liberate women from the need to work outside the home. She was an old-time radical, a socialist who believed in distributing material wealth among a working class she believed had brains enough to use it. There is in her writings no

salve for new-time radicals who would limit economic growth and then prescribe behavior amid our new-found scarcity.

MARY HARRIS JONES was born in Cork City, Ireland, in 1830, to a family proud of its struggles against the English. Her grandfather was hung for his efforts, and her father fled with his family to Toronto in 1835. She taught school in Michigan for a time, but as she much later remembered, "preferred sewing to bossing little children," and opened a dress shop in Chicago. But not too long afterward she returned to teaching in Memphis, Tennessee, where she met her future husband and married in 1861. Her husband was "an iron moulder and a staunch member of the Iron Moulder's Union," according to her 1925 autobiography, and within six years they had four children. Then the yellow-fever epidemic struck Memphis. In a few weeks, she was alone. Her husband and her four children were dead.

Her autobiography covers her first 40 years in three pages. She had returned to Chicago and with a partner begun a dressmaking business by 1871, yet of the intervening decade we are given no details. In October of that year, the great Chicago fire destroyed along with all the rest "our establishment and everything we had." Aside from her husband's union membership, she appears to have had no connection with the labor movement or radicalism.

That changed, as she relates it, as an indirect result of the fire, which had forced her into temporary quarters in a church.

Nearby in an old, tumbled down, fire-scorched building the Knights of Labor held meetings. The Knights of Labor were the labor organization in those days. I used to spend my evenings at their meetings. Sundays we went to the woods and held meetings. . . . Those were the days when we had no halls, when there were no high salaried officers, nor feasting with the enemies of labor. Those were the days of the martyrs and the saints. . . .

These early years saw the beginning of America's industrial life. Hand and hand with the growth of factories and the expansion of railroads, with the accumulation of capital and the rise of banks, came anti-labor legislation. Came strikes. Came violence. Came the belief in the hearts and minds of the workers that legislatures but carry out the will of the industrialists.

In his book *Mother Jones: The Miner's Angel* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1974), Dale Fetherling notes, "Mother Jones apparently compressed the order of events since it is doubtful that the Knights had spread to Chicago by the time of the fire." This is typical of the mysterious renderings of her early life, by herself and her detractors, which included, from about 1904 on, charges that she had spent these years in various bordellos.

One of Mother Jones' first experiences as a strike organizer, and almost surely the first outside Chicago, was the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad employees strike of 1877:

One night a riot occurred. Hundreds of box cars standing on the tracks were soaked with oil and sent down the tracks to the roundhouse. Over one hundred locomotives, belonging to the Pennsylvania Railroad Company were destroyed [by fire]. It was a wild night.

Nevertheless, Mother Jones insisted that the strikers had taken no part in the destruction. Rather, "it was hoodlums backed by the businessmen of Pittsburgh who for a long time had felt that the Railroad Company discriminated against their city in the matter of rates." This seems an improbable act of revenge. After all, so serious a disruption of rail transportation would have hurt no group more than Pittsburgh's businessmen. But Mother Jones "knew the strikers personally. I knew it was they who tried to enforce orderly law. I knew they disciplined their members when they did violence. . . . Then and there I learned in the early part of my career that labor must bear the cross for others' sins."

In a rhetoric of accusation reminiscent of more recent times, Mother Jones' autobiography regularly deflects away from strikers any blame for violence, either directly by accusing others, or indirectly by mixing descriptions of working conditions and strikers' intentions with details of official overreaction, the practices of anti-strike hirelings, or charges of police brutality. Not to say that the abuses she mentions did not occur, but only that other things were happening as well.

After one of Mother Jones' speeches to miners in West Virginia in 1917, for example, they did exactly as she suggested: "You goddamned cowards are losing this strike because you haven't got the guts to go out and fight and win it. Why the hell don't you take your high-power rifles and blow the goddamned scabs out of the mines." The "goddamned scabs" appear to have been regular, although nonunion, miners and not persons hired to break the strike. At any rate, a few days later a number of strikers opened fire on nonunion miners being hoisted out of the mines. More than 300 shots were reported fired, but by quickly lowering the hoist back into the mine, the hoist operator prevented loss of life. Nevertheless, six strikers were indicted and convicted of attempted murder. And so Fetherling reminds us that "Mother Jones' preachments were not necessarily her principles in the field. She was consistently inconsistent in her views toward violence, and, most assuredly, toward politics."

THE introduction to Jones' autobiography was written by Clarence Darrow, and much of it is an explanation of her difficulties in maintaining ties with organizations and other labor-movement leaders.

Mother Jones is essentially an individualist. Her own emotions and ideas are so strong that she is sometimes in conflict with others, fighting for the same cause. . . . Mother Jones was always doubtful of the good of organized institutions. These require compromise. To her there

was but one side. Right and wrong were forever distinct. . . . She had but one love to which she was always true and that was her cause. People of this type are bound to have conflicts within and without the ranks.

From her disputes one gains some appreciation of the intensity of intraparty jousting and the conflict of passionately held opinions on dogma and strategy. When she disagreed with United Mine Workers' President John Mitchell over his agreement to accept the terms of northern Colorado's mine owners and end the 1904 strike there—thus jeopardizing the strike of southern Colorado miners represented by the radical and avowedly socialist Western Federation of Miners—Mother Jones reacted bitterly. She never forgave Mitchell, and in time left the UMW's employ. The miners in southern Colorado, she said, "received sixty-three cents a week strike benefit while John Mitchell went travelling through Europe, staying at fashionable hotels, studying the labor movement."

Mother Jones had helped found the Social Democratic Party in 1898, and here as elsewhere in her career she found coworkers betraying the cause. In 1910, she and two female cohorts accused the Socialist Party's National Treasurer, J. Mahlon Barnes, of "dishonesty, drunkenness, immoral conduct with party employees under his control . . . and neglect of official duty due to his drunken and immoral conduct in and about the national office." The charge of dishonesty stemmed from Mother Jones' contention that Barnes had not paid back a personal loan she had made him. Barnes responded to this by telling the Socialists' National Executive Committee's investigatory board (several of whose members Mother Jones' partisans accused of conflict of interest) that she "has made a large revenue out of the party as a free lance," and that she "pries into individual affairs, [and] enslaves national, state, and local party officials and editors with financial loans."

The investigating committee, to the outrage of a number in the party, concluded that Jones' charges were of little substance. A critique of the findings appeared first in *Miners' Magazine*, and was reprinted in an April 1911 issue of *The Provoker*—a Chicago-based factional pamphlet series, edited by a Jones supporter, Thomas J. Morgan:

If the membership fail to grapple with this situation that now disgraces the Socialist Party officially, then the party will be submerged in a cesspool whose stench of "free love" and moral rotteness will nauseate even the callous stomachs of the Brotherhood of Libertines . . . the committee on the evidence was forced to admit that "twelve empty bottles" were found in the office of the National Secretary; but the wise and brainy committee was unable to ascertain whether the empty bottles ever contained whiskey or that the bottles were "emptied by Comrade Barnes." But the Committee did find that an angelic creature named Mrs. Hudson found it necessary to secure an apartment at a hotel on more than one occasion in order to take *dictations* from

several members of the National Executive Committee and that these *dictations* were taken "until long after midnight" . . . when honest and moral people are "wrapped in the arms of Morpheus."

Yet the intensity of these in-house feuds is instructive for our present purposes, because it demonstrates the passionate attachment to principle—if you wish, "to the cause"—which characterized Mother Jones and some of her colleagues. Nothing could be more mistaken than to think passion enough, or even simplistic principle enough; the John Mitchells and John L. Lewises, from whom Mother Jones took such care to distance herself, in the end succeeded in easing the workingman's plight in a way she neither could nor did. But as an orator and strike leader she was very effective indeed. By that fervor which caused Clarence Darrow to compare her with John Brown and Peter the Hermit, she girded strikers and their families, and, as a local strike leader's trump card, surely encouraged managerial compromise by the threat of her presence. In short, Mother Jones was one of those persons every successful movement seems to require, and who, if they do not live to see the glorious day, become myths, and if they do see it, become the new order's pariahs. Fortunately for Mother Jones, she did not live to see the day, although she did live long enough to see many of her goals accomplished. Many more were on the way, as she foresaw:

. . . the cause of the worker continues onward. Slowly his hours are shortened, giving him leisure to read and to think. Slowly his standard of living rises to include some of the good and beautiful things of the world. Slowly the cause of his children becomes the cause of all. His boy is taken from the breaker, his girl from the mill. Slowly those who create the wealth of the world are permitted to share it. The future is in labor's strong, rough hands.

These are the closing words of Mother Jones' autobiography, and as prediction they are accurate enough to raise a serious question: Would Mother Jones buy *Mother Jones*? For unless we are to demean her by severing her efforts from her goals—by saying in effect that there are a given number of passionate cranks born to any generation and that they will make do with whatever cause seems inspiring at the time—the realization of her goals becomes the crucial issue. The successes of the labor movement in eliminating child labor, establishing an eight-hour workday for the highest levels of pay and thus the best general standard of living in the history of the world, ought not to be forgotten if we intend to take people such as Mother Jones at all seriously. At the turn of the century in this country one half of all citizens would have fallen beneath the government's present "poverty level"; today only one person in ten does. That is called progress, and should fail to impress only those who don't care a whit about others.

AND that returns us to *Mother Jones* magazine, and its readers, waiting, discontent, begging the greatest public question in the

half century since the Great Depression: "If we are not hungry, why are we not happy?" When a disgruntled subscriber writes that the real Mother Jones' "would-be successors . . . don't even know what words like 'liberation' and 'oppression' mean," maybe he is right. But for American politics that may make very little difference, for like perceptions of one's own relative poverty, the conviction that one suffers "enslavement" or "oppression" is not easily open to objective analysis. In fact, it is far less so than poverty, for which the senses provide at least something of a guide. Tomorrow at Elizabeth Arden's an attractive brunette will sit down for her second manicure of the week, and feel burdened. A girl from Grosse Point, studying for a Master's degree she doesn't really want, who lives off Daddy and unemployment checks, will bemoan the aimlessness of life—and feel, yes, oppressed.

In a recent issue, beneath a letter from a 10-year-old complaining about "junk food," and before the twentyish woman detesting sugar-coated cereal, there appeared a letter more suggestive in its lament than most *Mother Jones* correspondence, although not by any means unusual in its tone:

I have just finished reading your November 1977 issue front to back. This is unheard of. I have never found a totally interesting issue of *anything* before.

I am an unemployed and rather bitter R.N. living in Small Town, U.S.A.; I just moved here from Minneapolis. My salary there was \$6.20 per hour and here, when I can find work, I'm lucky to get \$4.20. The majority of women here are grossly underpaid. Good God, what a pain!

With considerable trepidation, I telephoned the author of that letter, who turned out to be an intelligent, pleasant woman in her late twenties, a bit embarrassed about what she had written. She wrote the letter, she explained, while she was suffering from the "culture shock" of moving to a town of 250. She had since found a steady job. So why did she move to a place she so disliked? Her husband got a job teaching at a nearby college. Self-description? We're young, a little freaky I suppose, not what you'd call Middle Americans, out of the 1960's political movement. What else do you read? *Mother Earth* and *Ms.* Did you ever read *Rolling Stone*? Used to all the time, but haven't in two or three years. They were still somewhat involved in politics, she said: She was in a local women's group, and she and her husband helped run the food coop in a neighboring city.

"Politics?" I said to myself; and to her, "Well, tell me, when you say politics what do you mean? I mean, why do you call a food coop politics, instead of, say, a social or economic thing—what do you think of as being politics?"

"I guess I mean the politics of living with other people," she said, and explained that to her politics was "synonymous with caring for other people." And so one of the *political* problems she mentioned

in her new town was how heavily the townsmen drink. Not, mind you, that they drink heavily and speed through town, or drink heavily and kidnap the mayor, but that they drink heavily. Now drinking heavily is neither healthy, nor pleasant, nor wise—and it surely can be a *social* problem—but is it wisely considered a *political* problem? And if so, at what point do the benefits of enforced sobriety outweigh the dangers inherent in empowering government intrusion into citizens' personal affairs? The original Mother Jones—who railed against a socialist leader for drinking on the job—despised Prohibition and considered it a reflection of class differences, for the pub was, as she put it, "the workingman's club."

What did this young woman really want? Maybe something like community, like that familial feeling we had before we knew our parents were young once too, were people, would die; a place where we could care for others and be cared for, because to care was self-protection, for in the individual one would see the many. A place like those of which the Irish songs all sing—places where, it is hoped, people still live happy, uncomplicated lives—Galway Bays and Innisfreees. Places sung about, and cherished, and seldom so much as visited, even when they are real.

Yet the irony of such modern-day longings for community is that they exhibit themselves most often in persons who also profess a desire for "individual self-fulfillment." Perhaps it is the frustration of attempting to reconcile this unlikely combination, or maybe it is no more than the commonplace desire to avoid recognizing ourselves as the principal causes of our own conditions that causes the chronic grumps. In any event, *Mother Jones* gives its readers plenty to grump about. One recent article comparing the salaries paid to Carter's White House staff before and after entering public service made *me* grump. Another on *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt, which insisted that his fundamental problem was that he was a capitalist, also made me grump, because it was so ridiculous. There is a spate of automobile-safety, nuclear-safety, pharmaceutical- and food-safety articles, all of which indulge a readership ready to bemoan the grump-worthiness of modern-technological society.

Democratic society, and especially American society, encourages grumping, and especially radical-political grumping. If there are persons temperamentally predisposed to political radicalism, there is surely less here than anywhere to restrain them. And if anything—who can know for sure?—perhaps it is some temperamental bond of this kind which links the real Mother Jones with her radical-slick namesake.

YET if she was like her namesake in this, she was unlike it in a more profound way. Mother Jones believed in modernity, in the elevation of humankind to material well-being, without which all other forms of human well-being are evanescent. She believed in decent living conditions, and decent working conditions, and cures for disease—perhaps as only a woman who had watched her children die could believe. She possessed what her would-be-suc-

cessors lack, an understanding of what can be obtained from modernity: relief from want and disease, leisure time, and not least of all, personal and political liberty. But she did not demand a citizenry virtuous or holy, or a guaranteed sense of community, or others of those spiritual satisfactions it is in the nature of human beings to desire, and outside the power of any political or economic system as such to provide.

Mother Jones magazine, in contrast, is unmistakably anti-modern, although, as does so much of what was once called the counterculture, it divides on the manner of its opposition to modernity. That is part of its appeal. And it is community, the longing for which shapes the counterculture's complaint against modernity, which illustrates the radical left's split personality.

On one side, there is the food coop, where people of like mind can join together in an enterprise they believe to be worthwhile, in their shared as well as individual interests. They will make new friends, share knowledge, perhaps of books, perhaps of crafts. They will live life in a way they believe more suitable, as they have every right to do, and they will not be the first in this country to do so. They will benefit from the affluence of modern society, which will provide hospitals and schools and teaching jobs. Many will do a very American thing—start small businesses.

The "cooperationists" may vary from pre-modernist Alaskan homesteaders to small entrepreneurs, but the counterculture has also brought us the new Prohibitionists and these are distinctly post-modernists. For while the former can flourish in a modern technological society which is free, the post-moderns require for the satisfaction of their conceptions of community a state power capable of putting us all on the wagon, and then keeping us there. Modern society offers us freedom from physical wants, and then leaves us on our own to find happiness in the way we choose. And one must admit, by giving us all that freedom to choose, it undermines what might otherwise have been the fervor of our choices—when the world is a grab bag, who can be certain of the best prizes? That is why in some ways the agony of a free society is freedom. But the post-modern alternative is much more gruesome—a secular orthodoxy sure enough of its dogma to attempt to force conformity. While some *Mother Jones* readers fantasize about Gypsy life—as in a recent article—others fantasize about political power. And it is they who are "waiting for the Eighties," for a moment when there is more agreement on the catechism, and a public mood conducive to pressing further their claim to an indisputable knowledge of what constitutes the public good.