

Coal miners' mother

Mother Jones returns to central Illinois coal fields

On Monday, December 11, a host of union workers, labor historians and activists, academics, and the Illinois State Historical Society gathered at the Waggoner Rest Stop on Interstate 55 to pay tribute to a grand old lady: Mary “Mother” Jones, the “Miners’ Angel.” The occasion was the dedication of a new historical marker and an interpretive signboard to highlight the history of the coalfields in central Illinois and the role Mother Jones played in organizing “her boys.”

Northern Illinois University labor history professor and documentarian Rosemary Feurer was the master of ceremonies for the event, which included a caravan pilgrimage to Mother Jones’ gravestone in Mt. Olive to lay a wreath, followed by stop at the Coal Fields rest stop for the unveiling of the marker and wayside interpretive sign.

The national Mother Jones Heritage Project is the organization behind the unveiling, which was timed to coincide with the inauguration of the year-long Illinois Bicentennial celebration.

The marker highlights the impor-



Dr. Rosemary Feurer, filmmaker and professor of history at Northern Illinois University, at the unveiling of a “Mother Jones and the Illinois Coal Fields” historical marker and wayside road sign at an I-55 rest stop outside of Waggoner, Illinois.

Photographs by William Furry.

tance of union coalminers in Illinois’ and the nation’s history, as well as the remarkable historical figure Mother Jones. The large marker was placed in cooperation with the Illinois Department of Transportation, at the Southbound Coalfield Rest Area (Waggoner exit mile marker 65) receives over a million visitors each year. The colorful interpretive sign is on an interior wall of the rest stop.

Attending the ribbon-cutting honors were Brian O’Brien, Ireland’s



The historical marker dedicated to the miners of central Illinois at the unveiling on December 11.

Consul General to Chicago and the Midwest USA, as well as representatives of the Illinois AFL-CIO, the Illinois State Historical Society, Illinois Labor History Society, United Mine Workers of America, Mother Jones Foundation, City of Mt. Olive, Senator Dick Durbin, Irish American Heritage Center, Union Miners’ Cemetery, Route 66 Association, and Illinois Humanities. Dennis Surgalski, a marker sponsor whose father was a breaker boy in the mines and met Mother Jones, was also present.

The marker is located 20 miles north of the Mother Jones Monument, in Mt. Olive, a National Historic Place.



Labor leaders, historians, and union workers gathered outside the I-55 rest stop to remember Mother Jones and her efforts on behalf of Illinois coal miners, whom she called “her boys.”