BAS 138 Mother Jones Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte seems to attract the most dangerous women in the world – apparently meaning smart, articulate, progressive women fighting for causes they believed in.

Carrie Nation, Emma Goldman, and Mother Jones were all called “the most dangerous woman in America” or the world at various times, and Butte saw them all.

Mary Harris Jones, born in County Cork, Ireland, was in her late 60s when she visited Butte in June 1905, just three weeks before she participated in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World in Chicago. The “Stormy Petrel of Labor,” “a she-devil,” “the miners’ angel," and denounced on the floor of the U.S. Senate as the "grandmother of all agitators," Mother Jones was well known in the labor movement internationally. Her response to the Senate condemnation was “I hope to live long enough to be the great-grandmother of all agitators.”

In Butte that June, “she roasted everything in sight and many things that were not in sight,” according to the Anaconda Standard. She vilified the President and congress for expressing condolences for a Russian officer killed by a bomb, but ignoring the deaths of 170 miners in an Alabama coal mine.

Seven years later, in March and April 1912, Mother Jones’ trip to Butte was part of a western tour designed to organize support for striking Illinois Central and Harriman Railway workers. Members of Butte’s Silver Bow Trades and Labor Assembly believed the 80-year-old Jones was “the best labor orator ever heard in Butte.” She was probably only 75 or 76, but she was beginning to use her age as part of her charismatic presentations.

On her second 1912 visit to Butte, in May, Jones was in top form with a speech that echoes today: “We are producing more wealth today than ever before,” she said. “There is something wrong with the people when they let this wealth get in the hands of a few. The power is not in the government, but in Wall Street. We betray ourselves for the dollar, as well as for a smile from the boss.” That was in 1912.

She also expressed pride in the accomplishments of the labor movement, reducing child labor and establishing the eight-hour work day, while embracing the IWW’s “one big union” concept and calling on unions to eliminate “craft jealousies and petty differences.”

Her western tour was cut short in June 1912 when she was called to Paint Creek, West Virginia, where a bloody coal miners’ strike was in progress. Jones was arrested there for inciting riot, allegedly for reading the Declaration of Independence, just as Frank Little had done in Spokane in 1909. She was released after 85 days, but about 50 miners had died in that strike.

Mother Jones died in 1930, probably at 93 but she proclaimed her age to be 100. Union leaders today still invoke one of her most famous lines: "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living."

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.