

The Mother of All Strikes

Noel: In the summer of 2020, hundreds of women in yellow t-shirts took to the streets of Portland, Oregon after unidentified agents from the Federal Government started taking protestors away in unmarked cars and vans.

Tyler: The women formed what the group's informal leader Bev Barnum called a "Wall of Moms" to protect the protestors.

Noel: Here's Barnum talking to *Vice News* in 2020:

Bev Barnum: "Ok, so we have federal officers here, apprehending people, shooting people in the head, tear gassing them, like things that you read about happening in war-torn countries, are happening here, journalists being stripped of their rights, my primal mom rage come on, and I went on a Portland working mom's group and I asked them if they would come out with me, even though didn't know what that would mean, or what that would look like, and within an hour, seventy moms said "Yes, I've been waiting for someone to organize something."

Tyler: The act of women and mothers stepping in and using their symbolic status as nurturers, caretakers, and creators of life as a tactic to highlight the brutality of state sponsored violence has a long history.

Noel: During what was known as the "Dirty War" in Argentina in the 1970s and 80s, a group of mothers and grandmothers known as *Las Madres* and *Las Abuelas de la Plaza De Mayo*

brought attention to the *desaparecidos*, mostly students who were kidnapped, tortured, and often killed.

[[Las Madres protesting](#): “milicos asesinos por las calles argentinas”]

Tyler: Identified by their white head scarves, the mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared took to the streets frequently with pictures of their missing loved ones.

Noel: The grief and pain they demonstrated became a deeply unflattering mirror for the military Junta that governed Argentina at the time, which would’ve looked desperate and weak if it had tried to silence them.

Tyler: And in South Africa, in the 1950s, a group of white mothers wore black sashes to protest apartheid. They organized and marched regularly against the South African National Party’s racist policies and laws.

Noel: ‘The Black Sash,’ as they came to be known, were well aware of the subversive power of their motherhood and their white skin in their segregated society.

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdlD-Q9wmfY>: “I think that we are very privileged women, in that we are not tied to the kitchen sink, as so many women are in other parts of the world, and I think that is all the more the reason for women to play their full part in the duties of an individual in a democracy.”

Tyler: When mothers stand up in the political arena, and use the role and the name that’s often used to keep them on the sidelines, they can become incredibly threatening to those in power.

Noel: And in the early 20th Century, few mothers were as threatening to the existing political and economic order in the United States than a 5 foot-tall widow in her 70s named Mary G. Harris Jones, better known as Mother Jones.

[Theme post]

Tyler: From History Colorado Studios, this is *Lost Highways, Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On this episode, we travel back to Trinidad in southern Colorado to meet Mother Jones during the Colorado Coalfield Wars of 1913 and '14, and the Ludlow Massacre that brought it to a head.

Tyler: Known for her ferocious speeches as an organizer for the United Mine Workers of America and the growing union movement of the Progressive Era, Jones was once called "the most dangerous woman in America."

Noel: With her ability to unite immigrant workers across ethnic and racial divisions, she made herself into a lightning rod for the growing labor movement in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

Tyler: She also mobilized miner's entire families in the fight, empowering women to see the value of their labor and raise their voices.

Noel: People all over the world knew her name, and what she stood for –especially mine owners like John D. Rockefeller, who despised everything that she and unions represented. Just over a hundred years later, the Rockefeller name is still synonymous with wealth, power, and philanthropy.

Tyler: But Mother Jones, the history of the Colorado Coalfield Wars, and the 13 women and children who died in the Ludlow Massacre, remain relatively obscure.

Noel: We set out to understand why, and to learn more about the often overlooked roles that Jones and many other women played in the union movement of the late-19th and early 20th

Centuries that led to many of the labor laws we take for granted today.

[Crossfade to car sounds at beginning of Bob Butero interview] then footsteps and introductions with Bob Butero.]

Noel: It's a crisp, windy afternoon in November, 2021 at the Ludlow Memorial just west of I-25, and north of Trinidad, Colorado. There's not much around here but sage, rabbit brush, a few farm houses, and the railroad tracks. Somewhere not far off to the southeast of here where the mountains and mesas start to flatten out into the plains is where the Drop City commune and its colorful geodesic domes used to be in the 1960s and 70s. I'm here to meet Bob Butero, Regional Director of the United Mine Workers of America. And when I find him, he's inside the chain link fence surrounding the Ludlow memorial site, standing in front of a giant hole.

Bob Butero: That's somewhere around 12 to 14 foot deep, you know, and I'm guesstimating probably about 20, 25 feet wide and about 40 feet across, you know. So that's a pretty good sized hole, you know?

Noel: But this isn't the mouth of a mine. It's a pit. And at the bottom, there's a crumbling concrete cube about the size of a small storage container.... This is the Death Pit, as it's known, the cellar where 2 women and 11 children suffocated and died when the Ludlow Tent Colony burned on April 20, 1914.

Noel: In 1918, it was preserved in concrete as a memorial to those 13 lives.

Bob Butero: At the time when they, when they put the cement and stuff in, they wanted to, to preserve the cellar, you know, not only have the monument, but also, you know, preserve the cellar.

Noel: Two workers have covered the whole thing in a kind of rebar cage. And tomorrow, they'll encase the old cube in a pool of new concrete. Maybe it'll last another hundred years, if not more. But as long as he's alive, Bob Butero plans to make sure he does everything he can to protect what's left of the memory of this place and what happened here.

Bob Butero: So these were the pioneers of the middle class, and that's why we feel that this is so important to preserve for memory so that people can have the right to come out here and just kind of get the feel of what it would be like, I mean, can you imagine there? You know, eleven children and four women, actually. Two women were able to crawl out of the cellar alive, but there was, you know, so there's 15 people in that box, you know... ..and, and you got gunfire going over their heads and then all of a sudden you're smelling smoke and fire and, and probably people screaming and hollering. And you know, so.

[Wind sounds]

Noel: The landscape all along the edge of these mountains is quiet now, and so empty that it IS hard to imagine this was once the site where the deadliest labor conflict in the history of the United States began.

[Music]

[Fade to Thomas Andrews entry ambi]

Noel: Ok, if you would, introduce yourself.

Thomas Andrews: My name is Thomas Andrews, and I'm a historian at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Noel: When we spoke at his home in Denver last fall, he said something that almost every Ludlow scholar I spoke with said:

Thomas Andrews: I was born and raised in Colorado and was a history major in college, and I never heard of the Ludlow massacre until I was a graduate student in U.S. history. And so, you know, and I was born in 1972. So to me, this kind of speaks to the kind of invisibility of Ludlow for most Coloradans through the, through the 80s and the 90s.

Tyler: And like most of the other scholars who studied Ludlow, the fact that he hadn't heard about it made him even more curious. In 2008, six years before the hundredth anniversary of the massacre, he published a history of the Colorado Coalfield Wars called *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*.

Noel: Coal, which is formed from layers and layers of prehistoric plant matter compressed beneath the weight of millions of years of sediment and rock, has been a source of fuel as long as humans have built fires. There's evidence of coal mines in China more than 3,000 years before the common era. Ancient Romans used it to heat bath houses and forge armor and weapons. And Britain began using it widely as a source of heat as early as the 12th Century.

Andrews: There's no question that coal production and coal consumption skyrockets, really as a consequence of what we usually refer to as the Industrial Revolution, you know, so this is really like late 1700s, 1800s, early 1900s that global coal production just skyrockets.

[Music]

Tyler: And coal was of particular importance in the United States in the mid-19th Century. It fueled the fires in the blast furnaces that made the steel that made the railroad tracks and the steam locomotives that puffed the Transcontinental Railroad from coast to coast between 1863 and 1869. And there was plenty of it.

Thomas Andrews: ...Coal is petty, it's not incredibly valuable. And so it wasn't worth transporting over very large distances. And so, you know, there tended to be local coal mining industries anywhere where there was enough coal to really sustain it.

Tyler: For the Transcontinental Railroad, this meant coal mining operations had to move west with it, as branch lines began to grow north and south from the main tracks.

Thomas Andrews: So railroad development in Colorado kind of takes a different course than it does in a lot of the rest of the West. So rather than these big, huge East-West trunk lines that generally didn't do very much development along the routes, in Colorado, the railroads tended to be much more local. And so, you know, the best example of that, and the most important one for understanding the development of Carter's coal industry would be the Denver & Rio Grande.

Tyler: The Denver and Rio Grande was the first railroad in the United States to use narrow gauge track, which was pioneered in Wales.

Noel: Narrow gauge tracks were less than half the width of most tracks at that time.

Tyler: Not only did the narrow gauge save money on construction in the long stretch from Denver south along the front range, it also made it easier to build new lines in the narrow canyons and valleys of the Rocky Mountains to transport miners and ore.

Thomas Andrews: This is the brainchild of a sort of fascinating figure named William Jackson Palmer, who was this man full of contradictions. I think maybe his sort of uber contradiction was that he was a devout pacifist who was also incredibly eager to sign up for the Civil War because he was such an abolitionist, was so committed to the idea that slavery was wrong. And so Palmer had this, you know, this vision for the Denver and Rio Grande that it could develop Colorado rather than just exploit it. And so his idea then was to build a railroad that would link Denver and Mexico City.

Noel: There was coal to fuel his ventures practically spilling out of seams in the hills and mountains west of Trinidad. And Palmer began developing mines and town sites along his rail line.

Thomas Andrews: So he's really sort of the leading figure in the economic development and in the environmental transformation of southern Colorado.

[Music]

Tyler: His ambition to reach Mexico City was quickly thwarted by other railroads expanding west. But before long, Palmer and his business partner William Abraham Bell saw dollar signs

everywhere along Colorado's front range. They formed the Colorado Coal and Iron Mill, which later became CF&I, in Pueblo to make the rails for the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad with the coal and iron ore coming from southern Colorado.

Noel: And tourism took off in the 1870s as the monied classes in the East rode in luxury sleeper cars west to visit the Rocky Mountains they'd only seen in paintings or read about in magazine articles.

Tyler: Palmer and Bell became land speculators and developers. They laid claim to Ute, Cheyenne and Arapaho territory at the base of Pikes Peak in 1871, and created Fountain Colony, which would later become Colorado Springs. The DNRG conveniently stopped there along the way as well.

Noel: But coal was behind all of it. It fueled the factories that made the steel that built the railroads that brought the tourists, who bought the land and the miners who extracted the coal, and the miners who extracted the copper and silver and gold ore throughout the Rockies as far north as Montana.

[Fade music out before the end of this track]

Tyler: And it fueled the trains that took the ore to the smelters that extracted the metals from the ore. And it all went along without much of a hiccup until the late 1800s and early 1900s when coal production throughout the United States got so big that the mine owners had a nearly insatiable need for cheap labor.

Fawn Amber Montoya: You start seeing immigration from all over the world, you see migration from all over the United States.

Noel: This is Fawn Amber Montoya.

Fawn Amber Montoya: I am the associate dean of the Honors College at James Madison University. I'm also a historian, a professor of history, and I am a fifth generation Coloradoan.

Tyler: Montoya grew up in Hoehne, Colorado just a few miles northwest of Trinidad. Her great, great grandparents were among the Mexican immigrants who came to Colorado in the late 1800s.

Fawn Amber Montoya: They initially come more as sheepherders, but then become coal miners and they stay in that region. But you see populations from Sicily, from Greece, again all over the world.

Noel: New immigrants were usually the cheapest labor available. They could pass easily through Ellis Island and other ports, but it took at least five years to become naturalized citizens. So they had few real rights, and could be easily exploited.

Noel: Elliot Gorn is a professor of history at Loyola University, and the author of the 2002 book *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America*. He says that the American economy was so dependent on coal at the turn of the century that there were nearly three quarters of a million miners. Two thirds of them were Greek, Italian, or Slavic immigrants.

Elliot Gorn: Masses of immigrants don't just happen to come to America. Polish, Italian, Slavic, Chinese — in the late 19th Century, they're recruited very often. There are companies that recruit them with, with promises of jobs in America, and facilitating bringing people over. It's always better for business not to have too little labor but to have too much labor. That's one of the ways to keep the cost of laborers down. Literally, tens of millions of people come between 1880 and the time when the door is closed in the middle of the 1920s.

Tyler: The language differences, cultural animosities, and surplus of workers all played into the mine owner's hands. The working conditions at most mines were horrible at best, and having a constant supply of fresh workers who couldn't, or wouldn't, talk to each other, meant they were less likely to organize.

Elliot Gorn: Mining is a very hard, very hard job. It has a tremendous casualty rate, a tremendous accident rate. It's cold way down there. It's damp. The shafts sometimes fill with gas. The old expression, 'canary in a coal mine.' Canaries literally would die. They would be able to detect toxic gasses, before you even knew that's what you were in. There were explosions. There were collapses. There were cave-ins. It was a terribly, terribly dangerous job.

Tyler: Then there was the pay system.

Noel: First of all, they were often paid in scrip —company money that wasn't legal tender, and could only be spent in company stores, where everything was priced to keep the workers poor.

Tyler: Even before miners started working, they often had to take out their equipment on credit from the company store, and were never paid enough to pay off the debt or be able to leave.

And there were all sorts of other company rules on top of that meant to keep them from ever getting ahead.

Fawn Amber Montoya: They're not paid for dead work, so if they are setting up timbers sort of as scaffolding within the coal mines, they don't get paid for that. They're getting paid based on how much they actually pull out of the mine. And then you might have a foreman that says, "Well, some of the coal is mixed with rock", right? "So when you weigh it, we're going to take off some of this weight." So they're not getting paid for everything and the weighmen they're not represented by the worker, they're representing the company.

[Fade in some music]

Noel: It's a testament to how bad conditions in the mines actually were, that a variety of unions began to emerge in early 19th Century England without any deliberate organization.

Elliot Gorn: It is the industrialization of, and the rise of capitalism in England that sparks the development of unions there. One of the things that happens is that spontaneous, sense of injustice, often leads to sort of more organized ideas among workers to want to, to form unions and the development of people who are very, very interested in doing that, and begin to specialize.

Tyler: The first union in the United States didn't have much success.

Elliot Gorn: The first really national union across different kinds of lines of organization are the Knights of Labor, in the second half of the 19th century. The AF of L was founded at the end of the 19 century, National Union, National Industrial Union, just one industry, United Mine

Workers, was founded in 1890. So the idea of labor organizing, that business is becoming centralized and workers have to unite in unions, it's not a brand new idea in Colorado in the 20th century, far from it. And the efforts to organize workers, they succeed, they fail, more often they fail. It's difficult to organize thousands and thousands of individuals. But the idea had been there for a long, long time in England and America and elsewhere.

[Music out]

Noel: By the early-20th Century, the United Mine Workers of America, or UMWA, had significant success organizing miners in the biggest coalfields in America at that time. Here's Thomas Andrews:

Thomas Andrews: The United Mine Workers was the largest union in the United States, you know, the largest membership. It was really sort of on the up and up, and its model kind of ironically, given its reputation for militancy, its model was actually a fairly conservative one. What the union really sought to do was to negotiate collective bargaining agreements with mine owners. And you know, those agreements would cover wages, hours, conditions. They would provide representation, fair weight, and a grievance procedure.

Noel: There were far more radical unions like the anarcho-syndicalist Western Federation of Miners, which wanted the total overthrow of capitalism. But it was also comprised of mostly Northern European miners, who were deeply racist toward most other ethnicities, says Thomas Andrews.

Thomas Andrews: There were certainly socialists among the miners, but the socialists were a minority, and most mineworkers really simply wanted to sit down at the bargaining table, and

they wanted to be able to negotiate agreements that recognized their collective strength rather than having to submit to the wages that you know, much more powerful coal corporations could impose on workers when they had to negotiate the terms of their employment individually.

[Music]

Tyler: At a time when nationality, race, ethnicity, and language had been used to divide miners and keep them from organizing, the United Mine Workers of America offered a big tent.

Andrews: So they had African-American membership. They had, they'd even organized Japanese-American miners in Wyoming, with a lot of success. And so the UMWA was, you know, they were they were practiced in kind of inter-ethnic organizing.

Noel: And they had a secret weapon: Mother Jones.

[Fade music out]

PROMO: If you're enjoying this episode of *Lost Highways*, you may want to explore Trinidad's past and its place in the American West at the Trinidad History Museum. Featured exhibits, such as *Borderlands of Southern Colorado* and *The Santa Fe Trail museum* showcase the region's diverse cultural and ethnic heritage. The property features the historic Bloom Mansion and Baca House, two residences built in the late 19th century, as well as heritage gardens, all on one block in Trinidad's acclaimed historic district. If you want to learn more about our eight museums throughout the state, go to historycolorado.org.

[Music]

Ginny Ayers: Mother Jones' life, well before she was known as Mother Jones, she was actually born in 1837, in Cork, Ireland. And she was a product of the conflicts and struggles going on there, with the famine and labor struggles. Her grandfather was hung by the English, as he was something of a revolutionary. So she came from an upbringing of activism. And her father moved the family when she was very young. They moved over to North America.

Noel: This is Ginny Savage Ayers. Her father, Lon Kelly Savage wrote the book *Thunder in the Mountains*, about the 1920 Coal Mine Wars in West Virginia that inspired director John Sayles to make the movie [Matewan](#).

Tyler: When he died in 2004, Savage left behind an unfinished manuscript about Mother Jones and her involvement in the 1912 and 1913 Paint Creek and Cabin Creek Mine Wars in West Virginia. Ayers, who's trained as a microbiologist, decided to pick it up, and finished it.

Noel: *Never Justice, Never Peace* was published in 2018 and offers a prelude of the Ludlow Massacre that would follow, and a portrait of Mother Jones and how she came to be one of the fiercest labor organizers in the U.S.

[Fade in music]

Tyler: Mary Harris grew up in Canada, where her father was a worker on the railroads.

Noel: She became a teacher, but she didn't like it. Here's Rosemary Feuer:

Rosemary Feurer: She didn't like bossing little children, you know, that was not her style, and that was what was expected of being a teacher.

Tyler: She moved to Chicago for a time where she worked as seamstress. Then she moved to Memphis, which had a large Irish immigrant population at the time.

Noel: As much as she identified with the working classes as a worker, she felt called to something within the worker's rights movement, and started going to meetings of The Knights of Labor.

Tyler: And that was where she met her husband, George Jones, a union iron molder.

Rosemary Feurer: And she said she learned from him, how to really look at statistics and really understand how power was situated in the country. But she looked like she was going to be a wife and mother. She quickly had four children. And from 1860 to 1867, she had four children. And by all accounts, she enjoyed that.

Noel: In 1867, there was a major outbreak of yellow fever that reached Memphis.

[Music]

Rosemary Feurer: The rich and the well-to-do left the city, while the poor were stuck in the muck. They lived between two forks that came from the river, and it made for kind of a cesspool conditions. Her four little children sickened and died, then her husband caught the fever and died. And then she was left a widow.

Ginny Ayers: -So that was, of course, a very traumatic blow for her life. You know, she nursed them, watched them die, she watched, you know, many members of her community die and was not able to save them. I mean, having a history like that in her short life, would have been enough to destroy most people, destroy the spirit of, and the desire to live, probably, for most people. But this is what really makes Mother Jones unique, and that is her ability to not give up.

[Fade music out]

Tyler: Jones left Memphis and returned to Chicago.

Rosemary Feurer: And she again established a dress business, and she worked for the wealthy along Lakeshore Avenue in Chicago. But then, the famous 1871 Chicago Fire burned out her business, made her homeless. She went to the lake to escape the fire and went to a church, which was a refuge. If you look at it, she's a refugee from Ireland. She's a refugee from an epidemic. A pandemic. In at least, in a limited area, she comes back to Chicago and becomes a refugee from the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Noel: A newspaper reporter for the Chicago Republican named Michael Ahern invented the story that the fire had started in Catherine O'Leary's barn, when her cow kicked over a lantern.

Tyler: Though Ahern later admitted he made the story up, it was a reflection of the pervasive anti-Irish sentiment in Chicago at the time. The popular minstrel song "Hot Time in the Old Town" quickly got parodied and became "Mrs. O'Leary's Cow," which children still learn in schools today.

Rosemary Feurer: She was at that moment, awakened. It wasn't that she didn't have class feelings before that. She certainly did. But when she saw how the money, the relief money was distributed unfairly in Chicago, there was a lot of agitation around that, and there were a lot of people who started to build a movement, right there in the embers of the fire, so to speak. And that became the basis for a powerful labor movement, probably one of the most powerful labor movements in the country.

Noel: There are few details about Mother Jones's life during this period after the Great Chicago Fire.

Elliot Gorn: It's almost like years in the wilderness where we know very little about her.

[Music]

Tyler: Whatever she did during that time, business and industry in the City of Chicago boomed in the years following the fire. What's now known as the Gold Coast—one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the United States—rose from the ashes along Lake Avenue.

Noel: Captains of industry in Chicago, like the Swifts and Armours became the first monopolists in the meatpacking industry. And Marshall Field opened his first department stores. Around the country, industrialists like J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller Sr., Cornelius Vanderbilt, and Andrew Mellon accumulated so much wealth in vertically integrated industries like coal, steel, and railroads, that they became known as "Robber Barons."

Tyler: The disparity in wealth between the industrialists and their workers created growing civil unrest and increasing calls for unionization. And Chicago was at the center of a lot of it.

[Dark music]

Noel: There were riots, and many turned deadly. Police and military were often called in to settle matters.

Tyler: But trying to figure out whose side the authorities stood on soon became one of the defining questions of labor conflicts in the late 19th Century, when Mary Harris Jones began to emerge as Mother Jones for the first time.

[Fade out music]

Rosemary Feurer: The moment that she did become a famous agitator is in the 1894 unemployed movement of, you know, it's usually called Coxey's Army, where unemployed took up encampments. It was sort of like, if people remember the 2011, I believe, Occupy movement. It's very similar to that. Where people are protesting, and it's just, you know, launched across the country. It's not just one march, it's really dozens of marches that take place that go to Washington, D.C. And she's determined to become part of that. And she makes a name for herself as the Mother of the march.

Noel: At that same time, American Railway Union workers went on strike at the Pullman factory in Chicago.

Tyler: George Pullman had created one of the early versions of "the company town" where employees had no rights, were forced to rent their homes, and to buy all their services and necessities from Pullman himself.

Noel: It was a major turning point in the larger American labor movement. Though the strike itself came unravelled, the boycott of Pullman cars that followed, and protests along the railways brought rail traffic west of Chicago to a near standstill for months.

Tyler: Both the mayor of Chicago and the Illinois governor sided with the workers. But when even the US mail couldn't get through, President Grover Cleveland, who was largely pro-business, sent the National Guard to break the boycott.

Rosemary Feurer: The whole strike and boycott of Pullman was very peaceful, but troops being sent in really made it confrontational. And they end up, you know, 30 workers in Chicago were killed.

Noel: Mother Jones' involvement as an agitator in the Pullman strike and boycott further solidified her reputation as a labor leader.

Rosemary Feurer: After that, she's called 'The Mother of the American Railway Union'

[Music and Pause]

Elliot Gorn: And then she just sort of emerges around 1900s, this character that workers themselves start to call her 'Mother Jones' rather than Mary Jones, and she inhabits that character. The old woman, the defender of her flock, the defender of American workers, that's, that's who she becomes.

Tyler: In the years that followed the Pullman Strike, Mother Jones perfected her speeches, her look, her myth, and her stagecraft to rile workers and crawl beneath the skin of the industrialists dead set on crushing the union movement.

Elliot Gorn: There is a script to protest movements, I think, in the kind of, you know, kind of roles that people can play: aggrieved, victim, you know, determined, fighting. How Mother Jones learned that sort of thing? I don't know other than just being out and, you know, doing it, becoming an organizer.

Noel: Biographer Elliot Gorn believes she channeled all the pain and grief from the loss of family in her own life into this character.

Elliot Gorn: I know that sounds a little strange, but I think it's true. She was very aware, she said at one point, actually just before the Colorado Coal War, she said, "I don't believe in violence, I believe in drama." And she understood perfectly well that that's what she was doing. It was a kind of performance art.

Tyler: To become the larger-than-life embodiment of this role, Jones exaggerated everything about herself.

Elliot Gorn: She claimed to be older than she was. She was born in 1837. So when she really, really starts coming into national prominence, she's in, she's in her early 60s, but pretty soon she starts to claim that she's about seven years older. She exaggerates her age, because to exaggerate her age is to exaggerate how remarkable her story is.

Noel: To externalize her grief, she wore the same black dress and veil every day.


Elliot Gorn: She's old. She's poor. She's a widow. They're all these things that make her, you know, as close to dispossessed as you can be in America.

Tyler: And this image of outward weakness she cultivated made it difficult for anyone to attack her without seeming even weaker themselves.

Noel: But when she spoke, Mother Jones, at barely 5-feet tall, seemed to find within her the full fury of hell.

Elliot Gorn: So here is this woman, as Upton Sinclair described her, an old woman coming to the stage. And then he says, but when she starts speaking, he describes, he calls her 'the walking wrath of God' – that her anger, her intensity about the exploitation of workers is palpable, and completely understandable, understandable from workers' point of view. She was a Hellraiser. Her speeches are electric.

Tyler: In the only known recording of her speaking in 1930, the year she died, you can still hear the fire in her voice.

Mother Jones' Voice:  [Mother Jones Speaks](#) "...and I long to see the day when labor will have the destiny of the nation in her own hands, and she will stand a united force and show the world what the workers can do..."

Noel: And when she was on stage, or in front of a group of striking workers in the field, she swore profusely, says Elliot Gorn.

Elliot Gorn: She would communicate with many, many people who didn't understand much English, but it was her excitement, and her enthusiasm and her drama, and what back in the day were called 'French classics,' meaning swearing, she swore like a sailor. And those words the immigrants understood, she tapped into their anger at the owners and their situation.

Tyler: On top of her considerable powers of stagecraft and oratory, Mother Jones understood every trick in the anti-union playbook and the ideology behind it.

Noel: Rosemary Feurer.

Rosemary Feurer: The system is designed to allow corporations to have their power. That corporations are busy, constantly cooperating with each other, not competing with each other, but working together socially to get what they need. But that the laws are preventing workers from joining together collectively, cooperatively to get what they need. And she sees, and this is the most important thing about her, as far as I'm concerned, she sees an ideology that's been built up to support that. An ideology that divides people along race and elements of division that corporations just implant and reinforce, in the doctrine of Social Darwinism.

Tyler: Social Darwinism took Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the idea of the survival of the fittest, and applied it to human social interaction.

Rosemary Feurer: Social Darwinism is the ideology that hierarchy is natural, that social hierarchy is natural, some people deserve to be on top, no matter how they got there, because it mimics the idea of the survival of the fittest in nature.

Noel: Wealthy people, says Feuer, quickly warmed to the idea.

Rosemary Feurer: Social Darwinism was a gift to the elite in this country who justified terrible conditions for immigrants. Rockefeller's managers fully believed that immigrants, you know, just didn't desire anything of a higher civilization, that it was the industrialists that were going to provide a higher civilization and that they deserved to be ruled. So if it really is, what is the foundations of social Darwinism and the foundations of what happens at Ludlow.

Tyler: Andrew Carnegie was one of the leading proponents.

Rosemary Feurer: He said 'if we don't have inequality, we won't get nice things, that you have to give us the power to create the civilization that you will benefit from. But it does require you to give up some of your democracy.

Noel: This Faustian bargain was the perfect way for owners to justify their horrible working conditions and labor practices, says Foyer.

Rosemary Feurer: Mother Jones, of course, thought that was just a bunch of rot.

[Music/Break]

Tyler: Mother Jones arrived in Trinidad, Colorado in September of 1913 after leading the United Mine Workers' close, but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to organize the workers at the Paint and Cabin Creek mines in West Virginia.

Noel: In the years since she'd first emerged in the Pullman Strike of 1894, strikes across almost every industry in the United States had a now familiar playbook that began with worker demands for better wages, better working conditions, shorter hours, and the right to join a union.

Tyler: There were a handful of successful unionization campaigns during those decades, but more often than not, they ended in violence, if not death.

Noel: The precedent of Governors declaring martial law and calling in the National Guard to settle matters by force had become a standard part of the script.

Tyler: And in addition to the National Guard, the use of heavily armed private security companies became standard in the anti-union playbook. Here's Thomas Andrews.

Thomas Andrews Home: The companies, from the beginning, even from before the strike, they have, they have all these thugs, you know, I mean, the Colorado Fuel and Iron had its own detective branch. So they have a sort of in-house force. They have mine guards at all of the company towns.

Noel: The working environment was made to be as uncomfortable as possible while keeping workers from talking or sharing any of their discontent.

Tyler: And many felt they'd been forced into wage slavery.

Linda Linville: There were mine guards at the gate of the company town that would screen your guests because they wanted to make sure that there were no union organizers coming in.

Noel: This is Linda Linville.

Linda Linville: I'm the grand niece of Charlie Costa. My grandfather, Nikola, was the older brother of Charlie. And Charlie Costa was killed at Ludlow, as was his wife, Cedilena, who was at full term pregnancy at the time of her death and their children, Onofrio, who was six, was killed at Ludlow, and Lucy, who was four, was also killed.

Tyler: Linville grew up hearing stories about her family members who moved to southern Colorado from Italy to work in the mines. They believed, as so many immigrants did, that when they came to the United States, that if they worked hard enough, they and their children could have economic freedom.

Noel: She says the company town system that the mine owners forced them to live in and accept was more like "Industrial Feudalism".

Tyler: John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had taken over Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, and most of the mines in southern Colorado by this time in 1913. Not only was he a staunch believer in the ideology of social Darwinism, but he learned from other mines and other owners just how far he could go to keep unions from organizing.

Linda Linville: The company owned the land, they owned the company town, they owned the houses, what else? They owned a company store, the school. The mayor was even the company superintendent. The school board was composed of company officials. They actually acted as if they owned the miners themselves.

Tyler: Even the churches in company towns were run by the company. And management told the preachers what to teach.

Noel: Rockefeller had the workers over a barrel.

Linda Linville: They were paid in scrip, which could only be used at a company store, and the company store charged higher prices than the stores did, you know, in town.

Andrews: Colorado Fuel and Iron and Victor-American, they were intent on suppressing unionization. They were adamant that they would never recognize the United Mine Workers or collectively bargain with them, and then they recognize that to keep the union out, they had to engage in, you know, really thorough measures, everything from creating guarded perimeters around company towns to spying on miners, you know, kicking out anyone suspected of union sympathies, you know, they're the sort of far reaching set of strategies, controlling local judiciary, controlling local politics.

Tyler: Thomas Andrews says most of what the workers wanted was for the mine operators simply to follow existing Colorado labor laws concerning mine safety and pay, along with a few other demands that included getting paid for all the work they did, an eight hour workday, and the right to live and spend their wages where they wanted.

Andrews: Items five, six and seven on the list, mostly centered on what I would consider economic rights, civil rights, and were, you know, attempts to roll back the company town system.

[Music]

Noel: When the mine workers gathered in Trinidad in September of 1913 to vote on the strike, everyone knew their odds were long, including Mother Jones.

Tyler: She'd spent months under house arrest during the Paint and Cabin Creek strikes in West Virginia, and there'd been massive bloodshed. As many as 50 people, on both sides, died in the violence, and an unknown number had died of starvation and malnutrition in the tent colonies.

Noel: A previous effort to organize Colorado miners in 1903 and 1904 had also failed, when the UMWA pulled out after funds ran short.

Tyler: But Mother Jones believed in the fight itself. And she believed that all workers, no matter where they were from, which language they spoke, or their ethnicities, had common cause in the fight for basic rights and protections against mine owners who saw them as nothing but cheap and exploitable labor.

Noel: Here's Rosemary Feurer.

Rosemary Feurer: They bring her in there to pump up people, to go out on strike. And she goes, you know, in this very dramatic speech, basically says, you know, it's now or never. You will never have an opportunity again to bring unionism. And, you know, you have to get rid of all your prejudices, and teach these Rockefellers and their minions that you're going to demand your rights.

[Music]

Tyler: On September 17, 1913 as many as 15,000 workers, some of whom were veterans of the Paint and Cabin Creek strikes in West Virginia, went on strike under the banner of the United Mine Workers.

Noel: Like the many strikes before it, it wasn't just the men who were walking out, but their entire families.

Tyler: But unlike the strikes before it, the strike at Ludlow brought national attention to the effects of labor conditions on families, and ended with the violent deaths of women and children.

Noel: To get a sense of what life was like for the miners and their families for the eight months of the strike at Ludlow in 1913 and 14, I went to meet Dr. Karin Larkin at the Museum of Mining and Industry in Colorado Springs.

[Larkin greeting outside MOMI and sounds of going in under next track]

Noel: Larkin teaches archaeology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, she was part of an excavation of the Death Pit and surrounding areas at the Ludlow Tent Colony site. The objects curated by her students here are just some of the items unearthed from the Ludlow site.

Karin Larkin: So one of the things that the students really wanted to emphasize is that what makes Ludlow so powerful, the story so powerful and unique, was the women and children's involvement in both the strike as well as in the massacre.

Tyler: Many of the items in this small exhibit are things you'd expect to find in just about any home with children.

Karin Larkin: We found things like thermometers, that you would find in any household, but we also found things like pieces of children's doll set. We found marbles. So lots of children's toys. We found a child's shoe, as well as a woman's shoe that were down in the cellar, which you can see here.

Noel: There are parts of furniture like a metal headboard from a bedframe and the legs of a coal-burning stove and lamps. There are sets of dishware, clothing, and trash. And then there are more personal items.

Karin Larkin: Pocket watches, or fraternal pins that indicate that they were part of a union or part of some other fraternal club. You know, things like this picture frame that you see here where the picture has been burnt out, but the frame remains. You can only sort of imagine, you know, sort of the feeling of loss and losing something like that.

Tyler: Larkin says items like these would only have been left behind because of how quickly people had to flee when fighting broke out between strikers and The National Guard on Greek Orthodox Easter – April 20, 1914.

[Music]

Noel: Shortly after the general strike was declared in September 1913, the miners and their families were forced to vacate the company homes and towns.

Tyler: The UMWA had bought empty land near the train station at Ludlow just north of Trinidad, and set up canvas tents. Here's Thomas Andrews.

Andrews: Ludlow was really crucial for this because Ludlow was located right on a branch line that headed up into Berwind, Tabasco, Delawa. Several other large coal coal camps and coke making towns. And so Ludlow, you know, Ludlow was strategic. And so the union, you know, the union knew that that was going to be a crucial locale in a lot of ways. They thought that it might be the crux of the strike.

Noel: Just like in West Virginia, Rockefeller's people brought in Baldwin-Felts Security Guards to intimidate and harass the strikers.

Tyler: And, just as in previous labor conflicts, both the mine owners and the UMWA began to lobby the governor, Elias Ammons, to support their side of the conflict.

Andrews: Ammons was a Democrat. He had been elected with considerable support from organized labor. And so, at least at that point, early in the strike, the workers thought or hoped that he might actually be on their side.

Noel: Rosemary Feurer says Mother Jones went to Ammons early and reminded him of this.

Rosemary Feurer: And so she's telling the governor, this isn't going to be something where you're just going to be able to allow the Baldwin-Felts to intimidate these thousands of workers and that they are going to unite as a force, that we're going to continue to supply them with water, with food, with coal, they're going to be able to survive in this tent city. And are you willing to take the political repercussions of fighting against them? Or are you going to stand up

to the Rockefellers, to Osgood, to all of these management people? Are you going to represent your own citizens?

Tyler: Governor Ammons tried to remain neutral. But tensions were already high, and there had been outbreaks of violence between mine guards and strikers in and around Ludlow and the other camps near Trinidad. He knew local law enforcement wouldn't be able to keep the peace alone. So he sent in the National Guard.

Noel: Initially, says Thomas Andrews, they remained neutral.

Tyler: But winter came early. And Roddy Canahan, the state official in charge of paying the National Guard's expenses, was a union sympathizer. And he withheld funding, hoping it would keep them out of the fight.

Thomas Andrews: National Guard leaders then essentially went to like the largest financial interests. Bankers, railroad magnates, smelter owners, mine owners, get together and they decide what we'll pay the militia's bills. So that's really important, obviously, in sort of shifting the militias' loyalties.

Noel: That, and the typical National Guardsman's tour of duty at that time was 90 days.

Thomas Andrews: And so those farm boys and those clerks that had come down to Ludlow and to other tent colonies in October of 1913. You know, I mean, it was winter. It was nasty. It was violent down there. You know, most of them didn't really know who to trust. And not surprisingly, virtually all of them got out.

Tyler: Andrews says the unintended consequences of all these factors were grave.

Thomas Andrews: And so the coal companies began to encourage their mine guards – people who were already kind of hired thugs for the coal companies to become militiamen. And so that's really decisive. Then in kind of shifting the militia from a neutral force to one that is much more clearly an instrument of corporate power.

[Tense Music]

Noel: Just as in previous UMWA strikes, Mother Jones was quickly put under house arrest without charges in Trinidad. It was another important part of what she saw as the necessary drama of the strike, says Elliot Gorn.

Elliot Gorn: She spends three months either under house arrest or literally in a horrible prison. And she manages to exploit that, to get word out that, that she's under arrest. And, you know, guarded by armed, as she would say, thugs. And that is a, that is deeply stirring to the miners. They're doing what to Mother? And that's, that's a very important part of this, of this also. It's a whole dramatic unfolding story.

Tyler: At first, she was kept at the San Rafael Hospital in Trinidad by General John Chase of the Colorado National Guard.

Noel: Then, in January of 1914, the script changed. Instead of just men on the front lines of the strikes and protests, a group of at least a thousand women and children from nearby towns and tent colonies took to the streets of Trinidad to demand her release in what became known as “The Women’s March.”

[Music fades out]

Rosemary Feurer: They're carrying American flags and signs that say, 'We haven't done anything that Mother Jones would not do.'

Tyler: Zeese Papanikolas is a writer and former teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute. In the 1970s, he collected oral histories from a number of Ludlow survivors. He says the women's march was a turning point for the labor movement.

Zeese Papanikolas: First of all, the men who were on picket duty were often beaten up, arrested, thrown in jail. Women took their place on the picket lines, and they were just as noisy and as foul-mouthed as any of the men, and maybe more so, because the feeling was that the National Guard would not inflict the worst violence on women and kids standing up by the fence and giving the guardsmen what for.

Rosemary Feurer: And they're disobeying the rules, which say, you can't march because this is a war zone. And really, when you think about it, that is what he set up a war zone, a marshal, acting like it's martial law, and that he has complete control.

Noel: General Chase didn't understand the optics of the situation, and tried to disperse the marchers with force

[Music]

Rosemary Feurer: And so he confronts these women and his horse, you know, reacts to, he loses control, apparently of the horse and he falls off the horse and he, people start laughing at him, you know? And he gets back on the horse and he orders his troops to charge the marchers.

Tyler: Here's Karin Larkin.

Karin Larkin: And he basically ordered his deputies to quote, "Ride the women down." This really enraged the strikers and people who were sympathetic to the union, as well as just sort of people in town, right? I mean, these are women. They're not a threat. And you're ordering, you know, your soldiers to come and basically attack them, seemed completely inappropriate.

Noel: A photograph of Chase wielding his bayonet atop his horse in front of the marchers appeared in the papers the next day.

Tyler: Mother Jones knew that the battle was being fought in the press as much as in the streets and tent colonies, and it was a big win for the union.

Noel: For one thing, it brought more attention to the fact that the draconian policies and practices of the mine owners affected women and children just as much as they affected the miners themselves.

Tyler: And perhaps most importantly, says Thomas Andrews....

Thomas Andrews: One of things that the Women's March really demonstrated was, you know, it sort of belied one of the main characterizations that the companies constantly made, which was that the strike was the work of quote unquote outside agitators.

Noel: But for all its success in winning public sympathies for the strikers, it also raised tensions with the National Guard even further.

Tyler: Over the next 4 months, Mother Jones spent all but a few days in jail without charges before she was finally released on April 16.

Noel: After a long winter of skirmishes, protests, intimidation tactics, bitter cold weather, and dwindling supplies, tensions between the striking miners and the militia, which was now filled with Baldwin Felts mine guards, had come to a boiling point.

Tyler: A violent standoff seemed all but inevitable, and Mother Jones had given up on Governor Ammons. So she traveled to Washington D.C. to lobby congress for an intervention on behalf of the strikers.

Noel: But before she could rally support, camp leader Louis Tikas was arrested, and everything boiled over.

[Tense/high energy music in]

Thomas Andrews: It remains unclear to this day who shoots first. And you know, with these two sides who are in this situation of intense mutual antipathy and mutual distrust. I think it's just sort of a powder keg. It really took like one gunshot for everybody to just say 'It's go time.'

Tyler: Shooting broke out on both sides, and Tikas, and half a dozen other men, were killed.

Noel: Many of the strikers and their families fled and boarded the train for safety, but others stayed.

Thomas Andrews: They put women and children in the cellars that they had dug the previous fall. And then most male strikers then uncached the weapons that they had kept in defiance of the governor's disarmament order. And they headed to a nearby Arroyo to try to divert the militia's gunfire away from the tent colony. And you know, I think that this made sense in the context of the moment. It had an unfortunate consequence, which was that it essentially left the tent colony open for the militiamen to invade.

Tyler: No one knows for sure how the tents caught fire. But once they did, they burned hot and fast.

Thomas Andrews: You've got canvas tents. You've got coal, coal stoves all over the place, illuminating gas or, you know, all this, all this highly flammable stuff. And it's that fire that essentially draws oxygen out of one of the larger cellars where, you know, where quite a few women and children were huddling for safety. And you know, it's really that, it's that location and it's the deaths of those women and children that really, I think, kind of transmogrify Ludlow and turn it into something much more than it had been before.

[Music]

[Fade in ambi from Museum of Mining and Industry]

Noel: Would you describe what's down here in the corner? And to describe what it looks like, and then tell us what it is?

Karin Larkin: Sure. So what we see down here in the corner is basically a big, melted mass of glass, with some dirt and other things mixed in. And what we're actually looking at are canning jars that were filled with food that they were storing in the cellar, that when the fire above in the tent got so hot, it melted the glass and cooked the contents that were in those canning jars. So what we're seeing is the sort of canning jars all melted in on themselves with the materials that were inside sort of fused and cooked into the glass.

Noel: It's hard not to imagine the heat from the fire at Ludlow when Karin Larkin shows me this fused mound of melted canning jars, and other charred domestic artifacts excavated from the Ludlow Death Pit at the Museum of Mining and Industry.

Tyler: News of the fire and the deaths of the two women and 11 children spread quickly throughout all the tent colonies.

Noel: Despite Mother Jones' best efforts to stop it, a ten-day guerrilla war broke out between the strikers, the mine guards, and the National Guard in southern Colorado. Almost sixty people died before President Woodrow Wilson sent in Federal Troops.

Tyler: Sporadic fighting went on until the end of 1914.

Noel: All told, close to 80 people died in the massacre and the fighting that took place before and after the strike.

Tyler: And after all that, the striking miners won nothing. In fact, public opinion turned against unions.

Andrews: They don't achieve any of their strike demands. Colorado's coal mines would remain non-union into the 1930s, until the new deal and the Wagner Act essentially brought the way to the federal government behind the union.

Tyler: Linda Linville.

Linda Linville: All they got out of it was a company union, which is just a phony union. And I guess it wasn't until FDR, that they were able to, you know, be union people.

Noel: Not only did the strike fail, but mine owner and industrialist John D. Rockefeller Jr. walked away from it virtually unscathed. Elliot Gorn says that after a few slaps on the wrist in front of congress, he took a page from Mother Jones and used the press to clean up his image.

Elliot Gorn: And one of the things that Rockefeller does, he starts to hire public relations experts, a man named Ivy Lee, who really was the founder in many ways of public relations.

Tyler: Lee showed Rockefeller the power of giving the media the story you want them to tell.

Elliot Gorn: They make things a little better around the edges. Rockefeller goes to Colorado, meets with miners. He dances with their wives. This is really the beginning of public relations and business, putting a sunny face on, on business. It's the equivalent of Amazon after that

strike was broken in Alabama. We see ads now every so often for what a great employer Amazon is. That is a direct descendant of what Rockefeller, the Rockefeller did in Colorado.

[Music]

Noel: Mother Jones was devastated by the Ludlow Massacre and the failure of the strike. But she continued to organize and agitate until she died in 1930.

Tyler: Only five years after her death, passage of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, or The Wagner Act, guaranteed employees the right to organize trade unions, bargain collectively, and to strike.

Noel: It was a major victory that helped build the foundations of the middle-class in America.

Tyler: But the fact that Ludlow and the contributions of Mother Jones are still so little known is troubling for the historians we spoke with.

Elliot Gorn: It's not just that we don't know Mother Jones. It's that the history of workers trying to better their own conditions, we don't tell that story. We tell stories of the munificence of capitalism, or if we don't tell them that, we don't say anything. So just, it's just sort of a silence, just something we don't talk about. It's a shame. Her story and the story of labor is a great, important, dramatic story, to the extent that Americans have anything left like vacations, time off, sick leave, it's because of unions.

Noel: Despite Gorn's pessimism, in the past few weeks, as we've been finishing this episode, workers at a Staten Island warehouse officially became the first Amazon employees ever to vote in favor of unionizing.

Tyler: And a small group of service workers at Starbucks did the same.

Noel: They're two small wins for new unions in a post-industrial world of giant international corporations.

Tyler: But there's still a long way to go.

Noel: And Rosemary Feuer hopes that today's today's gig workers and service industry workers will remember Mother Jones, the many industrial workers and their families who fought for the middle class a century ago.

Rosemary Feurer: And that's what people don't recognize until they start to build a union. It's only when you try, you realize, Oh, I really don't have free speech, I don't have these rights, you know, and that's when they become more aware. But most people, our culture is designed to make people think that somehow you have to just get more education, work your way up the ladder. You know, all of those things that Mother Jones contested are still in our culture.

[Theme Post - Outro]

Noel: Before we get to the credits here Tyler, I'm really sad to say that after three seasons together, this is your last episode of *Lost Highways*. And I'm also really happy that you're moving on to what sounds like a great new gig in Los Angeles. It's been amazing to make this podcast with you, and I think we both learned a ton about Colorado along the way, our home state, where we both grew up. And I'm going to miss you.

Tyler: Yeah. Thanks so much. That means a ton. And I'm definitely going to miss you too. It's been great making the show with you. I've had a ton of fun and learned just so much about Colorado, about the West; learned that all roads lead back to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. And I'm gonna be sad leaving, but I know that you and Maria, our associate producer, are going to do a great job moving forward. I'm really proud of the work we've done here. And all the blood, sweat, and tears, I'm gonna miss it a ton, but I really look forward to listening in from the outside. And hearing the amazing work that you and the rest of the team continue to do in the future.

Noel: Yeah.

Tyler: Thanks so much for the opportunity, and yeah, I'm sure we'll be in touch.

Noel: Yeah. Take care, Tyler.

[OUTRO]

Noel: Special thanks to Craig Richardson, who produced this episode.

Tyler: *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios.

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Noel: If you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, please become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount. Plus you get all kinds of great benefits like free admission to our 8 museums around the state, where you can learn more about the stories we tell on *Lost Highways*, and a subscription to *The Colorado Magazine*, which includes access to insightful articles and compelling perspectives on Colorado's past.

Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: Special thanks to Susan Schulten, our History advisor on this episode, and to Managing Editor of Publications Natasha Gardner and Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our story editors.

Tyler: And to Ann Sneesby-Koch for newspaper and periodical research.

Noel: Our Assistant Producer is María José Maddox. And Luke Perkins is our intern.

Tyler: Special thanks to our transcribers for this season: Clint Carlson, Barry Levene, Ivy Martinez, and Angie Neslin. If you'd like to see a transcript of any of our episodes, either as a

matter of accessibility, or because you'd like to use Lost Highways in your classroom, you can find them at historycolorado.org/losthighways.

Noel: Tyler Hill, my co-host, composed the music for this episode. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

Jason Hanson

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Tyler: And to our Advisory Group, which includes:

Stephen Sturm

Emily Sturm

Jason Hanson

Thomas Andrews

Jonathan Futa

Charlie Woolley

Susan Schulten

Tom Romero

and Cara DeGette

Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black.

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.

Tyler: