THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF LABOR IN ILLINOIS
Dr. Laura Davis (Anthropology)

Laura is collaborating with coal mining communities in rural Macoupin County, IL, to develop a multi-sited Labor Heritage Trail that will make public the little known but fascinating labor history of the state and its legacies today.

There once were more than 4,500 coal mines and 100,000 miners in Illinois. In the late 19th century to mid-20th century collective action in this region crossed ethnic lines and was pivotal in bringing about progressive changes in U.S. government policies such as the eight-hour day, child labor laws and recognition of labor unions. Mother Jones, a tireless advocate for workers’ rights, requested to be buried in Macoupin County because Illinois was the best organized labor state in America. Her grave and monument are in the Union Miners Cemetery (Mt. Olive), the first and only union-owned cemetery in the U.S.

Laura’s project to bring this complex history to life is comprised of a variety of educational tools across multiple sites along famous Route 66 in Central Illinois. Plans include creation of a Mother Jones History Museum and a Gillespie Coal Miners Heritage Museum as well as the rehab of the Union Miners Cemetery, creation of Google map apps, and elaboration of rest stop displays along Highway 55.

The Labor Heritage Trail highlights the place of miners and their families, thereby providing a new working class perspective on labor that deprivileges the elite narrative of industrialists and technology that arose at the turn of the last century. Rather than singular stories rooted in a safe, distanced past, the project seeks to entangle all facets of the story of coal. The exhibits being designed by Laura and her community collaborators are envisioned as forums to spur purposeful discussions on controversial issues such as radicalism, environmental health, and economic development. The various points of interest on the Labor Heritage Trail also will be centers for research and for building collaborative relationships among the small towns in this region of Illinois.

The project is making a significant contribution to museum exhibitions. It also offers important new possibilities for the re-conceptualization of working class heritage sites in the 21st century.

Laura in front of the "Mother Jones Monument" in the Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, IL. At one time, this cemetery was the only union-owned cemetery in the US. The Union Miners Cemetery is linked to a turning point in union history. The medallion above the entrance gate reads: Resting Place of Good Union People." Striking mineworkers who were killed in a shoot out with mine guards in 1898 were barred by the owners of town and religious-denomination cemeteries for being "murders." The local union purchased one acre of the present site, where the bodies were eventually moved in 1899.
Mary “Mother Jones,” was a fearless fighter for workers’ rights. Known as "The grandmother of agitators", she requested to be buried at the Union Miners Cemetery, a place filled with the spirit of good union men.

One of several annual events that commemorate coal miners’ heritage. On October 27, 2013, there was a pilgrimage to Mt Olive for a memorial ceremony at the Monument. Family and union members attending the event spontaneously shared moving stories of what unionism and Mother Jones meant to them — ending with a rousing singing of "Solidarity Forever."
Two long-time union members and residents of Gillespie, who are involved in the development of heritage sites and labor education in Macoupin County, examine artifacts that have meaning to them for future exhibits.

Both the lanterns and Rescue Team Banner (also an annual competition) signify the union's persistent battle to make the mines safer places to work.