

SUPERIOR HISTORIAN

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 3

WINTER 2005

DECEMBER, 2005

JOSEPHINE ROCHE, A "GRAND OLD GAL" "It Is Better To Have a Wide Awake Woman Than a Drowsy Man"

—*Julesburg News*,
September, 1937



The remarkable and eventful existence of Josephine Roche began in the unremarkable village of Neligh, Nebraska in 1886. Her life path then ran a course that would take her to Vassar College, Denver, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and would project her into unusual stops along the way, such as law enforcement officer, industrial manager, presidential cabinet member, and labor union official.

Hers was an unusual route given her background: born in privilege and recipient of an exclusive education, she evolved into the classic progressive reformer, advocating an end to special privilege and championing equality and fair treatment for industrial workers. And it is these subjects that make her important to the history of Superior. In 1928, Josephine Roche assumed the presidency of the Rocky Mountain Fuel

Company, the parent company of Superior's Industrial Mine as well as other mines in the northern Colorado coal fields.

How did this proper young lady born on the Nebraska prairie become Denver's first policewoman, run an industrial corporation, join Franklin Roosevelt's cabinet, develop a friendship with luminaries such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, and John L. Lewis, and direct the coal miner's pension fund?

It appears that in spite of her family background, Josephine's ideals were forged in the crucible of America's Progressive Movement, epitomized by Theodore Roosevelt's zeal to effect reform from the presidency. After Josephine earned her Bachelor's degree from Vassar and Master's degree from Columbia University, she joined her parents in Denver, where her father directed the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, second only to John D. Rockefeller's industrial empire in Colorado which included the Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation steel mill in Pueblo and countless coal mines throughout the state.

COAL That will return full value for your money. The additional heat is in the coal.

INDUSTRIAL AND GORHAM	PREPARED LUMP \$8.00 TON
MITCHELL AND GRANT	PREPARED LUMP \$7.00 TON

Save money by using our Rockvale Canon or Pinnacle Nut Coals—exactly the right size for heaters and range—they cost less. ANTHRACITE IN ALL SIZES.

PHONE MAIN 5000
THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN FUEL COMPANY
1010 SIXTEENTH ST.

A *Denver Times* advertisement from 1922 for coal from Superior's Industrial Mine and the Gorham, near Marshall. Image courtesy Marjorie Kupfner.



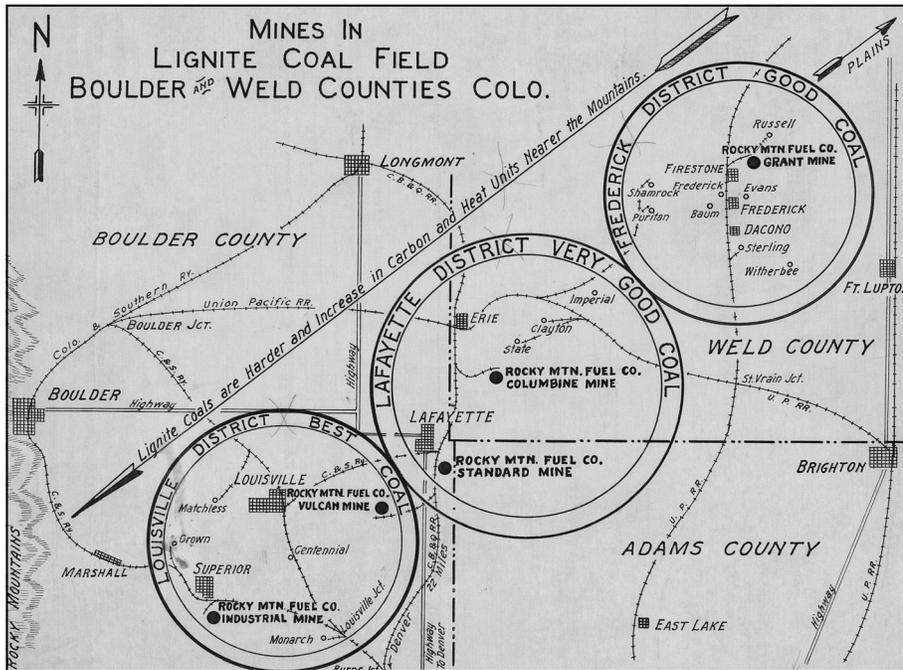
A pensive Josephine Roche, circa 1915, once declared, "I have only one hobby and that is humanity."

Armed with her Master's in social work, Josephine was appointed Denver's first "lady cop" in 1913 and was charged with supervising dance halls, dealing with gamblers, prostitutes, hustlers, and wayward children. She worked closely with Denver's famous Progressive judge, Ben Lindsey, to steer women and children away from the steamy life on Denver's wild side. Lindsey said that Roche could "break up a dance hall row or riot in front of a saloon better than any experienced policeman."

In addition to Progressive zest, Josephine no doubt had a precocious nature which showed up in a discussion with her father, John Roche, during her youth. She asked to go into a coal mine and John denied her request, saying "it would be too dangerous." Josephine responded with youthful logic, asking "How is it safe for the miners?" It was this attitude that motivated her to make the mines of the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company safe places to work and for the miners to be treated more fairly.

However, the tragic incident in 1927

"I haven't had a vacation for more than twenty years, but I've had fun."—Roche on the 1934 campaign



This Rocky Mountain Fuel Company map of the Northern Coal Fields highlights their mines and illustrates just a few of the nearly 200 mines that once existed in the area. Note the Town of Superior and the Industrial Mine in the lower left of the map and the quality of the coal for this area. Map courtesy of Denver Public Library.

at the Columbine Mine near Lafayette got in the way of her goals. Her father had controlling interest in the corporation and was stridently anti-union. When ninety-five percent of the workers at the mine walked off the job as a part of a dispute over union representation, John Roche responded with force and the national guard. Josephine, now on the board of directors for the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, did not agree with her father's actions, especially, when the mine superintendent invited the strikers inside the now fenced-in mine to his office for coffee and doughnuts. The miners, who had checked in their weapons and were carrying American flags, were fired upon by guards using machine guns and gas bombs. The casualties were six killed and 20 wounded.

Outraged and embarrassed by the Columbine massacre, Josephine was stymied about doing anything until 1928 when her father died and

controlling interest of Rocky Mountain Fuel devolved to her. Once that happened, she was able to attempt reforms from the top down. Roche actually initiated negotiations with the miners in order to bring about the reforms she felt were necessary to end "industrial slavery."

The resulting contract with the miners included not only allowing but encouraging collective bargaining, limiting the work day to eight hour shifts and requiring only a six day week. The contract also included wages of \$7 per day, making her employees, including those in Superior, the highest paid coal miners in the state. It also allowed for two paydays per month and permitted miners' grievance committees.

In reaction, John D. Rockefeller referred to Josephine Roche as a "dangerous industrial radical" and set upon a plan to actually lower wages of workers in his Colorado realm. In 1931, the Rockefeller plan was to set

wages at \$5.22 per day (although he did also lower the price of coal) in an attempt to subvert Roche's strategy. In a dramatically unusual display of their regard for Roche, Rocky Mountain Fuel miners proposed to accept only half of their earnings, thereby in effect, loaning her \$80,000.

Her competitors suggested that this "loan" was her way of trying to sneak in a pay cut. However, her deeds were so appreciated by the miners that it was once said, "The miners who love her contend she is the only woman who can stop production at a mine only by her presence. Miners stand in respectful homage – hats in hands – as long as she is in sight." Miners throughout Colorado encouraged customers to "Buy With Josephine."

"She was one of the best mine owners that dealt with the union workers. When she went broke, the UMW hired her to help the miners in Washington."
-Ted Asti, former Superior mayor

Roche turned down the miner's generous offer and responded with plans of her own. Despite her actions, Rocky Mountain Fuel mines, including the Industrial, limped along through the Great Depression. In 1934, Josephine tried her hand at politics. Disturbed that Governor Edwin "Big Ed" Johnson, a successful Democrat in a largely Republican state and giant in Colorado politics, was too conservative for solutions to Depression problems, Roche decided to challenge him in the primary elections. She campaigned on the slogan "Roosevelt, Roche, and Recovery." Johnson, who was jokingly cited as "the most discussed and cursed Colorado politician of the time," had too much experience and too many connections for Josephine, who lost in