



**ELINOR MYERS MCGINN as JOSEPHINE ROCHE**  
The Colorado historical characters in this series are researched and presented as interpretive characterizations by individuals from the Colorado Humanities Chautauqua Speakers Bureau.

**Map Activity:**  
Locate Ludlow and Walsenburg on the Colorado map. Find out about these areas today. Is there still coal mining today in these areas? **Standard:** Geography 1

**Passport Questions:**  
1. Why was the accident rate higher in Colorado mines than in Illinois mines? **Standards:** Rdg & Writing 1, 4, 5, History 3, Geography 6  
2. What were the reasons for Josephine Roche to work toward reform for better working conditions? **Standards:** Rdg & Writing 1, 4, 5, History 3, Geography 6

**Newspaper Connection**  
Study a letter to the editor. What is the topic and opinions of the writer? Write a letter to the editor as if you are Josephine Roche. What topic would you write about? What opinions do you have about the topic? What would you like people to do or not do as a result of your letter? **Standards:** Rdg & Writing 1, 2, 4, 5, History 3, Geography 6

The Colorado "Passport to the Past" series runs Tuesdays and Thursdays from March 8 through April 10. To receive sponsored newspapers for the classroom, passports, prize rules, and a teacher guide for biographical studies using newspapers, call 303-384-5338 or e-mail cpiller@times-call.com and provide your name, school, and contact information.

# Time travel with... Passport to the Past!

Learn about people who have affected Colorado History with this NIE series highlighting their contributions and significance to our times.

## BIOGRAPHY

### Josephine Roche 1886-1976

by Elinor Myers McGinn

When I was about 12 years old, I accompanied my father, a Nebraska banker, when he went to visit his investments at the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company coal mines in Boulder and Weld Counties. I was intrigued with the miners' lanterns on their caps and asked to go down into the mine. My father said, "No, it is too dangerous for you to go down." I asked him, "If it is too dangerous for me, then why could the miners go down?" He never answered, but my curiosity led me to spend most of my life seeking reforms for better working conditions and fairness for all.

During my summer vacations from Vassar College, I worked at Judge Linsey's Juvenile Court in Denver and saw how poverty often led to crime. One typical incident involved a boy who was arrested for stealing coal along the railroad tracks. Upon investigation, we found that he lived with his mother and other siblings in an unheated shack.

That inspired me to go to Columbia University in New York to study social work. There I witnessed a horrendous human disaster. I lived and worked among the poor and many immigrants who had fled to America from poverty and European wars. On Saturday, March 25, 1911, about 4 pm, a terrible fire broke out in the nearby Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Soon, we saw girls leaping from the blazing ninth floor. The few tarpaulins broke when several girls jumped at the same time. We spectators have never forgotten the dreadful thud of their bodies as they hit the concrete from one hundred feet above.

We soon learned that the probable

cause was a cigarette butt carelessly thrown into one of the bins holding the scraps of cotton brushed off the counters by the employees. Other facts revealed that 125 workers on the eighth floor had barely escaped with their lives, and a quick phone call had alerted the few workers on the tenth floor who made their way out of the burning building.

But in the chaos, nobody had notified the 250 workers on the ninth floor who, too late, found one exit door locked and the other blocked by the flames. The elevators could not run, and the fire escape had collapsed. Their choices were to jump out of the windows or to die in the fire. A total of 146, mostly young girls, died, 54 by jumping and the rest crouched in the ninth floor blaze.

Now you ask, "Where were the fire engines?" Engine companies #72 and #73 were the first on the scene, but their streams of water and ladders only reached to the seventh floor.

After the fire, the public and the government could not avoid instituting laws to protect workers. You must understand that very few laws regulated businesses those days.

My colleague, Frances Perkins, and I both worked to promote government protection and fair treatment of workers. Frances Perkins later became the first woman Secretary of Labor in President Franklin Roosevelt's cabinet and paved the way for the social security laws and recognition of labor unions.

Only a few years later, I watched another tragedy in southern Colorado caused by the lack of worker protection. Colorado coal mining has always been

a dangerous underground occupation. Also the accident rate in Colorado mines was much higher than it was in Illinois mines and elsewhere. Unlike Colorado mine owners, the Illinois operators had recognized unions and collective bargaining.

The United Mine Workers of America, while trying to organize the Colorado mines, called a state wide strike in 1913. The miners then had to move out of the company housing and were living in tent colonies. There the families suffered from the harsh winter and lack of food. The mine owners imported trainloads of strikebreakers, mostly immigrants looking for jobs. Violent fighting broke out between the miners and company guards. The largest tent colony at Ludlow, near Walsenburg, was burned to the ground. Two women and eleven children died while they huddled in a hole under a tent. This Ludlow Massacre drew national attention.

The miners lost the strike, but years later, I am proud to say that after I inherited the Northern Colorado Coal Company, I became the first operator to recognize the union and provide better working conditions for the miners. The struggle for fairness always presents a challenge to work for the betterment of humanity, even today.

Author and performer Dr. Elinor Myers McGinn of Lafayette, Colorado does a one-woman show enacting the life of Josephine Roche. For performance information contact the Colorado Humanities Speakers Bureau at [www.coloradohumanities.org](http://www.coloradohumanities.org).



**Words to Know:** investments, reform, collective bargaining, labor unions

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