

Margaret Tobin Brown
1867-1932

Margaret “Molly” Tobin was born on July 18, 1867, in Hannibal, Missouri. Her parents immigrated to America from Ireland. Margaret had five brothers and sisters. All eight people in her family lived in a two-room home. The house was only 16 feet wide by 30 feet long. That’s just a little bit bigger than the dining room in the Molly Brown House Museum!

When Margaret was young, education was not free like it is now. Children only went to school if their parents could pay for it. Boys had a better education than most girls. Most girls only went to school long enough to learn to read and write, because a girls’ education was not considered to be as important as a boy’s. Poor children might only go to school for a few weeks each year. The rest of the time they worked to help feed their family. Most kids only went to school through the fourth grade. Margaret’s family believed that education was really important, so she went to school through the eighth grade (which is the same as going all the way through high school now).

After she finished school she got a job in a tobacco factory, she was 13 years old. She worked at least six days every week, and twelve to fourteen hours every day. Margaret would only have earned about \$3 per week. She dreamed of marrying someone that would provide for her and her family. When Margaret was 18 years old she moved to Leadville, Colorado, where her brother was living and working in the mines. She got a job sewing carpets and drapes for Daniels, Fisher & Smith, a department store.

Margaret met James Joseph Brown shortly after moving to Leadville (he went by J.J.). J.J.’s parents had also emigrated from Ireland. They met at a picnic at the Catholic Church they both attended. He was thirteen years older and had worked in mines for a long time. When he met Margaret in 1886, he was a mine manager. J.J. was a hard worker and made enough money to support his family. Margaret and J.J. were married on September 1, 1886. By 1889 they had two children, Lawrence and Catherin Ellen (called Helen).

In 1893, J.J. helped discover the largest strike of copper and gold in the world at that time. After more than 20 years of hard work in the mines, J.J. and his fellow mine owners became millionaires. With their new wealth, the Browns decided to leave Leadville and buy a house in Denver. They moved to 1340 Pennsylvania Avenue in 1894. The Browns were the second owners of the house. The house, built in 1889 was quite modern for its time—it had electricity, indoor plumbing, centralized heating, and a telephone.

The children had a tutor then went off to school. Margaret too loved learning and always wanted to learn more. After she married, she had tutors who would come to her house and teach her many different things. She became fluent in four more languages: French, German, Italian, and Russian. She could also speak a bit of her parents’ native Gaelic. Her language skills would come in handy later in her life. Margaret also studied literature and drama, and she learned to play the guitar and the zither.

Margaret was always involved in helping those less fortunate than her, even before she and J.J. became wealthy. In Leadville, she helped at soup kitchens for the miners who were down on their luck. In Denver, she continued to give a lot of time and money to different charities. These included Leadville’s St. Vincent’s Orphanage, Denver’s St. Joseph Hospital, the Denver Dumb Friends League, and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. She even helped Judge Ben Lindsey create the juvenile court system that we still use today. She was also very active in the women’s suffrage movement to help get women the right to vote.

In 1912, an event occurred that would change Margaret’s life and legacy forever. She was traveling in Europe and Egypt with her daughter Helen when she heard that her first grandson back in the United States was sick.

She booked the ship that was going to get her back to America the quickest, the *Titanic*. Helen stayed behind in Europe with friends. Everything was going fine for the first few days until the ship struck an iceberg in the middle of the night. There was chaos as people were getting into lifeboats. Margaret was placed in a half-full lifeboat with other women.

After the ship sank, the survivors were eventually picked up by the rescue ship *Carpathia*. Margaret's ability to speak different languages helped her talk to the immigrant passengers on the rescue ship *Carpathia*, most who were second and third class passengers and had lost everything, often including their husbands who were the family's main financial support. Margaret started a fundraising effort while on board the *Carpathia*, raising funds for the 3rd class survivors who might need help once they reached America. Many of these people were immigrating and had lost everything they owned when the ship sank. She helped form the Titanic Survivor's Committee and raised more than \$10,000 before they even reached New York. Margaret served as the President of the Survivor's Committee until her death.

Margaret used her fame to draw attention to the causes she believed in most strongly. These included equality for women, child labor laws, and working conditions for miners. She ran for the Colorado State Senate twice and in 1914, she ran for the U.S. Senate (Margaret never won her senate races.) Even before the United States entered the war, Margaret headed overseas to France to work with the American Red Cross in 1914. She travelled to France to help treat wounded soldiers, bring along medical supplies, and even was a nurse and ambulance driver. For these activities, she was given the French Legion of Honor in 1931 by the French government.

After J.J. died in 1922, Margaret decided to move to New York and become an actress. She performed in Paris and New York. She was living in the Barbizon Hotel, a hotel famous for housing aspiring actresses, when Margaret died on October 26, 1932. She passed away in her sleep from a brain tumor. Her death made headlines. According to one Denver newspaper: "She was a ...fearless personality. She knew what she wanted and went after it, and seldom failed of her goal."

**Margaret Tobin Brown
Biography Worksheet**

1. An immigrant is someone who moves to a new country. How do you know that Margaret's parents were immigrants?

2. When Margaret was growing up in Hannibal, do you think her family was rich or poor? What details support your answer?

3. What details tell you that Margaret thought education was very important?

4. After the *Titanic* disaster made her famous, list four ways Margaret helped other people.

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

5. What honor did Margaret receive just before her death? What did she do to earn this award?
