

War Against the Mountains



NOWHERE IN AMERICA was the absurdity of the coal industry’s “clean coal” PR campaign more blatantly obvious than in Appalachia, where mountaintop removal mining had turned large parts of the most beautiful forested areas in the country into a wasteland. Word of the destructive practices was getting out. Not that many years earlier, when anti-coal groups in different parts of the country had worked more or less in isolation, citizens in Appalachia who attempted to oppose mining companies did so with little outside support. But increasingly the various strands of the movement were discovering one another, and mountaintop removal had emerged as a cause célèbre.

In 2003 tenth-generation Appalachian and self-proclaimed “endangered hillbilly” Judy Bonds won the Goldman Award, the environmental movement’s equivalent of the Nobel Prize, for her work with Coal River Mountain Watch. Shows like *Frontline* were beginning to air documentaries about mountaintop removal, and people across the United States were finally seeing firsthand the dirty war being waged against the mountains and the people of Appalachia.

Although coal is mined and consumed in many parts of the United States, Appalachia's long tradition of coal mining has deeply formed the character of the region, and the struggles surrounding coal have always burned with particular intensity and even violence. I knew this from my own family history, since my mother was born in Dundon, a company-owned town in Clay County, West Virginia. In those days Dundon was not accessible by road; the only way in or out was to ride the train or walk along the tracks. According to family lore, my grandfather, a Presbyterian preacher, had been run out of town by the coal company for preaching pro-union sermons. He may have gotten off relatively easy. According to historical accounts of the period, union organizers in many parts of West Virginia were not only prohibited from holding meetings or entering miners' homes, many were also arrested, beaten, and even killed.

On a Delta Airlines flight into the TriCities Airport near Blountville, Tennessee, I looked out the window into the geographical nexus where five states—Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and West Virginia—come together. Extending along a southwest/northeast axis, these same mountains stretched like rumpled corduroy from Alabama to New York. Even from twenty thousand feet, you could see how the landscape had historically fragmented the region, and why solidarity has meant so much to generations of union and environmental organizers. On top of the physical topography, a spiderweb of towns, roads, and rails traced the strands of civilization.

I was on my way to a strategy session in Abingdon, Virginia, hosted by the Alliance for Appalachia, that aimed to build tighter working relationships between Appalachian groups and activists from outside the region. Driving along Interstate 81 out of Blountville, I marveled at the contrast between the

peaceful landscape, its colors still muted by winter, and the brutal history of these mountain states, where at times labor conflicts had blossomed into full-scale rebellion.

In 1921, four years before my mother was born, approximately thirteen thousand West Virginia coal miners participated in a series of gun battles against a private force of two thousand hired guns underwritten by the Logan County Coal Operators Association. The trigger for the uprising was the murder of Sid Hatfield, the union-friendly police chief in the hamlet of Matewan, by agents of the Baldwin-Felts detective agency. Some miners commandeered a Chesapeake & Ohio freight train. After initial skirmishes, President Warren Harding ordered federal troops into the conflict, and Army Martin MB-1 airplanes dropped bombs on the miners. By the time the federal troops arrived, as many as thirty detectives and one hundred miners had lost their lives. Following the battle, 985 miners were indicted for “murder, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, and treason against the State of West Virginia.” Short term, the outcome seemed to be an overwhelming victory for management. Federal judges backed up the owners with blanket injunctions barring union organizing throughout several counties. United Mine Workers (UMW) membership in the state plummeted from more than fifty thousand miners to approximately ten thousand. Not until 1935, after the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, did the UMW regroup and fully organize in southern West Virginia.

As William Faulkner wrote in reference to his native Mississippi, “The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.” Today, company-sponsored violence continues in Appalachia, though the target has shifted. There’s harassment and targeting of anti-mining activists. There’s also the violence of mining itself,

carried out with massive machinery and three million pounds of explosives each day.

Strip mining in Appalachia dates to the 1950s, and some of today's grassroots groups, such as Save Our Cumberland Mountains, date to the early 1970s. Early efforts focused on enacting legislation that would abolish strip mining altogether, but the comprehensive federal law that was finally enacted in 1977, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, lacked teeth, and the teeth that it did have were repeatedly blunted by weak enforcement. Passage of the act dissipated the energy of the movement while not solving the problem. In the wake of that legislative fiasco, much of the movement collapsed, only to begin reviving again in response to an even more devastating form of mining known as mountaintop removal.

Measured against the long history of mining in the Appalachia, this new way of getting at coal is a recent innovation. The first such operation began in 1970 when Cannelton Industries began blasting the top off Bullpush Mountain in Fayette County, West Virginia, pushing the rubble into adjacent valleys to expose the underlying coal. Cannelton said it wanted to build a new town on the site, including churches, schools, stores, and a hospital. No town was ever actually built, and the site remains desolate.

Once the topography itself is destroyed, all other aspects of a natural area follow into oblivion, from streams and underground aquifers to biotic communities. The effects are especially profound considering that the Appalachian region hosts one of the most diverse temperate forests in the world. Having escaped the six-mile-thick glaciers that once covered most of the Northeast, the trees of Appalachia provided the initial seeds for the plant species that recolonized the hundreds of thousands of square

miles of terrain to the north. The irony is that mountaintop removal mining is a process as destructive as glaciation, yet the seeds used to replant the spoil piles are *Lespedeza cuneata*, an invasive species of legume introduced from Asia. The result, like a shadow of stubble appearing on the face of a recently deceased body, is a parody of an ecosystem.

During the 1980s the extent of mountaintop removal remained relatively modest, affecting fifteen square miles during the course of the entire decade. The pace increased during the 1990s and then accelerated after a fateful meeting in 1999. That year, an 88-year-old West Virginia mine operator named James “Buck” Harless flew to Austin, Texas, for lunch with then-governor George W. Bush. The goal of the luncheon was to sign Harless up as a Bush Ranger, one of hundreds of wealthy backers who each committed to raising \$100,000 from smaller donors. But Harless had an agenda of his own. Although West Virginia had a long history as a Democratic stronghold and had backed Clinton in the previous presidential election, he believed he could deliver the state to Bush, thereby winning his industry a front-row seat in the coming administration. Toward that end, he poured himself into fundraising and campaigning, reaching out to mine workers with the message that the election of Gore would mean disaster for West Virginia coal. In the end those efforts proved successful, and West Virginia moved into the Republican column. At the close of the 2000 campaign, all eyes were on the disputed results in Florida, which the Supreme Court finally resolved in favor of Bush. But Florida would have been irrelevant if West Virginia’s five electoral votes had stayed Democratic.

After the election, William Raney, the head of the West Virginia Coal Association, told the association’s members that they

could now expect a “payback” from the new administration. Within months, that reward had arrived in the form of a small but fateful change in the definition of mountaintop removal debris, secured by Deputy Interior Secretary Stephen Griles. Instead of calling the debris “waste,” which would be prohibited from entering fresh waterways under the Clean Water Act, Griles directed that mine debris be regarded as “fill,” an acceptable category. The result was a green light to mountaintop removal, which immediately accelerated. In 2002 alone, permits were issued covering twenty square miles.

The explosion of mountaintop removal mining under the Bush administration did not go unchallenged. Throughout Appalachia, citizen groups fought back with lobbying efforts, grassroots organizing and education, media outreach, litigation, regulatory input, marches, and direct action protests. They also sought to expand their connections beyond the region through projects like Dave Cooper’s Mountaintop Removal Road Show and events like the one I was attending in Abingdon. Here, in a large lecture hall at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, activists from half a dozen Appalachian states were gathering with California-based organizers from Rainforest Action Network (RAN) to discuss the adoption of a “market campaign” strategy to stop mountaintop removal.

RAN had previously used market campaign tactics to protect old-growth forests, winning concessions on paper and lumber purchasing policies from Burger King, McDonald’s, Mitsubishi, Home Depot, and other corporations. As RAN’s Jennifer Krill explained to the attendees at the Abingdon meeting, the leverage developed in each such campaign grew directly out of the value that companies cultivate through their brands and corporate image building. By drawing public attention to destructive

practices like old-growth logging or mountaintop removal mining, market campaigns threaten to undermine the value of a company's image. Krill reported on the "Carbon Principles" that three leading Wall Street banks—Citibank, JPMorgan Chase, and Morgan Stanley—had established the previous month. In a vaguely worded statement, the banks had promised to "pursue cost-effective energy efficiency, renewable energy and other low carbon alternatives to conventional generation." Anti-coal groups had seen the statement as inadequate, but it showed they had won the attention of the banks and provided a platform for exerting further pressure.

A key step toward building national awareness of mountaintop removal was the creation of Mountain Justice Summer, an effort modeled after the Freedom Summer campaign to register Black voters in the Deep South in 1964 and the Redwood Summer campaign to block old-growth logging in California in 1990. In the first Mountain Justice Summer, in 2005, Judy Bonds and other members of Coal River Mountain Watch invited about fifty young activists to West Virginia to reinforce protests against a coal silo and a 2.8-billion-gallon coal-slurry reservoir operated in Sundial, West Virginia, by a subsidiary of Massey Energy. The coal silo, which emitted dangerous coal dust on a regular basis, was situated adjacent to the Marsh Fork Elementary School, and the coal-slurry reservoir was less than a quarter mile uphill from the school. The failure in 1972 of a similar impoundment, the Buffalo Creek Dam near Charleston, had resulted in the death of 120 people when a river of sludge crashed through several mountain hamlets. Residents of Sundial feared that a repeat of the Buffalo Creek disaster could destroy the school and the community.

Throughout the summer of 2005, the Coal River Mountain

Watch and Mountain Justice Summer activists staged a series of rallies, marches, sit-ins, and other protests at Sundial, at Massey's headquarters in Virginia, and at the capitol building and the governor's office in Charleston. The following summer, the protests resumed.

Coal River Valley resident Ed Wiley, whose granddaughter Kayla Taylor attended Marsh Fork, knew the 385-foot-tall impoundment dam better than most, having been part of the construction crew. Wiley happened to have a knack for publicity. Around the community, he passed the hat for the Pennies of Promise campaign, an effort to raise money to move the school to a safer location. By offering the collected pennies as a symbolic down payment, Wiley hoped to shame officials into allocating the necessary funds. Just to ensure that the gesture was noticed, he decided to personally deliver the pennies to Senator Robert Byrd's office in Washington, D.C.—on foot. On August 2, 2006, Wiley began his forty-day walk, trekking along the side of the highway and gradually attracting a widening circle of attention from the press.

Across the region, other Appalachian leaders were also mastering the art of media, and a key part of that mastery had to do with weaving protest together with celebration of mountain heritage. To filmmakers like Michael O'Connell, the underdogs-versus-overlords storyline was compelling. In O'Connell's film *Mountaintop Removal*, a tired but determined Ed Wiley makes his way inexorably toward the U.S. Capitol, carrying a heavy flagpole on his shoulder cushioned by a folded towel. It is an iconic image of grassroots pride and resistance.

In a similar vein, groups like Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) made the slogan "I Love Mountains" synonymous with opposition to King Coal. At KFTC's annual Valentine's

Day rally on the capitol steps in Frankfurt, mountain music by Clack Mountain String Band, Public Outcry, and Randy Wilson kept the crowd in high spirits as speakers prepped the attendees to lobby state legislators.

Not surprisingly, given the ubiquity of religion in Appalachian culture, activists were working at every level from local church discussion groups to interdenominational organizations formed to educate fellow Christians about mountaintop removal. At the Abingdon conference, activist Maria Gunnoe handed me a DVD entitled *Mountain Mourning*, which juxtaposed images of beautiful mountain scenery and biblical verses pertaining to the sanctity of nature with horrific photos of mining destruction. The DVD had been created by the group Christians for the Mountains, organized in Charleston, West Virginia, in 2005.

Of all the creative outreach that Appalachian activists were developing, one of the most effective was the volunteer pilot association Southwings, which took journalists, politicians, celebrities, and benefactors on tours over mountaintop removal sites. The flights and the films posted online by pilots provided a far more revealing view of the devastation than could readily be seen from roads and other locations accessible to the public. Again and again, the flights had succeeded in transforming lukewarm opponents—and at times even some mining supporters—into advocates for banning the practice.

At the Abingdon conference a plan circulated among activists both in the general session and in breakout brainstorming. Since the necessity to provide jobs in an economically troubled area was consistently used as the rationale for continued exploitation of coal, why not turn the issue to advantage by showing how an alternative use of the same land could provide a greater amount of more durable employment? By the end of 2008, a

small group spearheaded by Coal River Mountain Watch and two young activists, Rory McIlmoil and Lorelei Scarbro, had developed a comprehensive proposal to build a wind farm rather than a mine on Coal River Mountain. The gist of the proposal rested on the fact that high-elevation areas experience the strongest winds, a resource that would be destroyed if mining flattened the mountain. A study by the environmental consulting firm Downstream Strategies fleshed out the details of the wind alternative. While coal mining would provide roughly a hundred jobs versus fifty jobs for a wind farm, the coal jobs would disappear after fourteen years, whereas the wind jobs would continue indefinitely.

Lenny Kohm, campaign director of Appalachian Voices, was quarterbacking yet another initiative, the Clean Water Protection Act. The proposed act, consisting of a single succinct paragraph, would amend the Federal Water Pollution Control Act to clarify that toxic rubble created by mountaintop removal mining cannot be defined as “fill material” and dumped into the headwater streams of Appalachia. The strategy was to build a list of congressional cosponsors. In 2002 thirty-six congresspeople signed on as cosponsors; in 2003 the number climbed to sixty-four. By 2008 there were 152 cosponsors. Each year, Mountaintop Removal Week provided a focal point for grassroots activists to converge on D.C. and promote the legislation. In 2007 over one hundred citizen lobbyists arrived from nineteen states. In addition to Appalachian Voices, the groups pushing the Clean Water Protection Act included the Appalachian Citizens Law Center, Appalshop, Coal River Mountain Watch, Heartwood, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Mountain Association for Community Economic Development, Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, Save Our Cumberland Mountains, Sierra Club Environmental

Justice Program, Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, Southwings, and West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.

Meanwhile, awareness of mountaintop removal mining was growing in urban areas. An early tool in developing this awareness was the “Are You Connected?” campaign, a Web-based tool that allowed residents of cities far removed from Appalachia to find out whether their local power company was using coal mined by mountaintop removal simply by entering their zip code into a computer. Ingeniously designed, the campaign provided activists with “widgets” that could be embedded into blog pages. In July 2008 two Manhattanites organized the first annual New York Loves Mountains festival, including presentations by activists and legislators, music by New York and Appalachian bands at the Jalopy Theater, and a new play written by Sarah Moon. The event led to the formation of an ongoing group of New Yorkers linked up with Appalachian activists.

Further evidence that mountaintop removal had become a top priority not just for regional activists but for the nationwide environmental movement came in April 2009, when Maria Gunnoe became the second West Virginia anti-coal activist to win the Goldman Award.

Throughout the spring of 2009, hopes repeatedly rose and fell that the Obama administration would take strong action to outlaw mountaintop removal once and for all. In a public letter to Obama, Bo Webb of Coal River Mountain Watch expressed the desperation of the movement. Webb wrote:

As I write this letter, I brace myself for another round of nerve-wracking explosives being detonated above my home in the mountains of West Virginia. My family and I, like many American citizens in Appalachia, are living in a state of terror. Like sitting ducks waiting to be buried in an avalanche of mountain waste or crushed by a falling boulder, we are trapped in a war zone within our own country.

In 1968, I served my country in Vietnam, as part of the 1st Battalion 12th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. As you know, Appalachians have never failed to serve our country; our mountain riflemen stood with George Washington at the surrender of the British in Yorktown. West Virginia provided more per capita soldiers for the Union during the Civil War than any other state; we have given our blood for every war since.

We have also given our blood for the burden of coal in these mountains. My uncle died in the underground mines at the age of 17; another uncle was paralyzed from an accident. My Dad worked in an underground mine. Many in my family have suffered from black lung disease.

These mountains are our home. My family roots are deep in these mountains. We homesteaded this area in the 1820s. This is where I was born. This is where I will die.

Mr. President, when I heard you talk during your campaign stops it made me feel like there was hope for Peachtree and the Coal River Valley of West Virginia. Hope for me and my family.

I beg you to relight our flame of hope and honor, and immediately stop the coal companies from blasting so near our homes and endangering our lives. As you have said, we must find another way than blowing off the tops of our mountains. We must end mountaintop removal.

Despite the hopes that Obama would take action on mountaintop removal, those versed in the history of the region, remained cautious, recalling how earlier dreams of ending destructive mining had been thwarted. But time was running short. By some estimates, only ten to twenty years of economically minable coal remained in Appalachia. Eventually, mountaintop removal mining would surely end, but when it did, what would be left?

