

ON COAL RIVER

Directed by Francine Cavanaugh and Adams Wood

81 minutes, USA 2010

Stills and audio clips at www.oncoalriver.com/downloads/index.html



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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Coal River Valley is a community surrounded by lush mountains and a looming toxic threat. ON COAL RIVER follows a former coal miner and his neighbors in a David-and-Goliath struggle for the future of their valley, their children, and life as they know it.

MEDIUM SYNOPSIS

Coal River Valley, West Virginia is a community surrounded by lush mountains and a looming toxic threat. ON COAL RIVER follows a former miner and his neighbors in a David-and-Goliath struggle for the future of their valley, their children, and life as they know it.

Ed Wiley once worked at the same coal waste facility that now threatens his granddaughter's elementary school. When his local government refuses to act, Ed embarks on a quest to have the school relocated to safer ground. With insider knowledge and a sharp sense of right and wrong, Ed confronts his local school board, the state government, and a notorious coal company — Massey Energy — for putting his granddaughter and his community at risk.

Along the way, Ed is supported by his neighbors Bo and Judy, who have their own problems with the coal company. Ex-marine Bo Webb retired to his childhood home only to discover that this once-idyllic valley is being transformed by the practice of “mountaintop removal” - blowing up mountains to extract coal. Bo's neighbor Judy Bonds was forced to leave her ancestral home when the same company opened a mine next door - sending dangerous black water down the creek where her grandson played. Together, Bo and Judy help Ed bring attention to the dangers at Marsh Fork Elementary, hoping that if they save the school, they can save the valley.

Across the river, Maria Lambert recognizes a pattern in the unusual health problems plaguing her community. Following intuition, and what she describes as a mission from above, Maria gathers evidence suggesting that nearby coal companies have contaminated her neighborhood's water supply.

Shot over a five-year period, ON COAL RIVER follows the transformation of these four remarkable individuals as they fight for the valley they love — and for future generations.

BACKGROUND

The Coal River Valley of southern West Virginia is an area of steep terrain and diverse biology, comprising some of the oldest mountains in the world. It is also an area containing vast amounts of coal – the fossil fuel that currently powers just under 50 percent of domestic electricity. Commercial mining began here in the 1850s and has continued through repeated cycles of boom and bust, mine wars and strikes, and the relentless march of mechanization.

Today, new mining and processing methods are taking a heavy toll on the valley's environment and its residents. Coal companies are practicing 'mountaintop removal' and other forms of steep-slope strip mining, using huge machines and explosives to extract thin seams of coal. Some estimate that these practices have already destroyed over 500,000 acres of land and buried 1500 miles of streams. After extraction, the mine plants crush and chemically "wash" the coal to remove toxins then pumping the waste into large manmade lakes or underground into old abandoned mine shafts.

Coal River Valley's population continues to decline due to increase in mechanized mining and loss of jobs —both of its high schools have closed since 1991. Those who remain love their community and want to stay, but they are split in their opinions about how to continue to live here. Many believe without coal mining, there is no economic future for their community. Others believe that if left unchecked, mining impacts on the land and water will make their valley unlivable for themselves and for future generations.

Coal River Valley was tragically thrust into the national spotlight on April 5th, 2010, when 29 miners died in the Upper Big Branch disaster, three miles from Marsh Fork Elementary School.

DIRECTOR Q&A

Why this project? What was it about the idea that resonated and made you feel compelled to spend this time with this story?

This project -- like our last film -- is about a community under threat. Coal River Valley is home to people who have been sacrificing for a long time so that America can benefit from cheap electricity, and it's still a very beautiful place. But people like Bo Webb are seeing their mountains blown up all around them and people like Maria Lambert are living with contaminated water coming out of their kitchen sinks. And they are organizing and confronting the problem in very courageous and creative ways. It's an environmental story, but it's also a very inspiring human story.

What did you do that you consider to be unique and original for/to this project?

We knew that this could easily be a very dark story, so it was really important for us to also find the moments of light and humor that we experienced while we were in Coal River Valley. We tried to accomplish that through our musical choices, the way the story is structured, and also by showing as many nuances to each character as we could, within the confines of the story. Even though most of our characters' screen time is devoted to dealing with coal issues, we also tried to understand what was going on for them on a personal level, and find ways to let that come through.

We had great access with our characters over a period of five years, and we wanted to explore the story through their eyes and words, as opposed to outside experts. This was different from our last project, where we focused more on the politics at large.

What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

Francine:

There were a lot of extreme ups and downs along the way in terms of the story, funding, etc. We relied a lot on smaller donations from individuals. The film has been made possible by regular people who generously gave because they wanted to see this film happen. There's a big upside to that though, because these donations add up, and they also help people become invested and involved in the project.

Adams:

We really had no idea that this film would be a six-year project -- all along the way, we felt this huge amount of pressure to finish the film and get it out to the world. People kept telling us - now is the time, it'll never be more relevant than it is now. We kept holding out for clear endings that seemed to be perpetually just

around the corner, and Bo used to joke that the title should be "The never-ending story." We finally edited together an ending that we were happy with, and we had two really dramatic developments -- the first being the Upper Big Branch mine tragedy that happened in Coal River Valley. That was really awful to see, and it underscored the sacrifice so many people in Coal River make - regardless of what side they are on of a particular issue. The other development was an ending we had been waiting and hoping for since the early days of the project, and it was amazing to see it happen literally weeks before our premiere date.

What did you learn from the process of making this film?

Francine:

We learned that sometimes it's better to take your time and let things simmer and other times you have to grab the opportunity when it presents itself. We have more faith in the documentary process now, and we're better able to live with uncertainty. We are also learning how to know when to keep on your vision and at the same time know when to let up and allow life to take you in unexpected directions.

Adams:

We learned what a big impact a committed group of individuals can have. When we started the film, very few people outside of Appalachia were talking about mountaintop removal. Since then, Judy, Ed, Maria, and Bo, and others have situated mountaintop removal in the national debate on energy issues, exemplifying the true cost of coal and it's direct connection to climate change.

FILMMAKER BIOS

FRANCINE CAVANAUGH (Director/Producer/Editor) and **ADAMS WOOD** (Director/Producer/DP) previously co-directed and produced *BOOM - THE SOUND OF EVICTION* (2002), a feature-length documentary about the social repercussions of San Francisco's dot-com boom and bust, which *Variety* called "a powerful cautionary statement." Their second feature, *ON COAL RIVER* (2010), premiered at AFI/Silverdocs, screened at numerous other festivals and on Capitol Hill, and was nominated for an IFP/Gotham Award. **Adams** began making documentaries in the Idaho wilderness in 1996, and **Francine** found her way to film through theater and dance in 1999. They currently live in Asheville, NC with their 6-year old son.

JILLIAN ELIZABETH'S (Producer) work as Co-producer and Director of Photography of "Whatever It Takes" (airing on PBS Independent Lens, 2010) brought her to the South Bronx to film the changing landscape of urban education in NYC. "Whatever it Takes" received support from the Sundance

Documentary Fund and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and won the audience award at the International Asian American Film Festival. Jillian worked as Director of Photography and Editor of FARM GIRL IN NEW YORK, a narrative feature directed by actor J. Robert Spencer (Jersey Boys), as a Director for Roulette TV, as a camerawoman and field producer at Democracy Now!, and as a Director of Photography for Academy Award winning filmmaker, Alex Gibney, in collaboration with Human Rights Watch.

MARY LAMPSON (Consulting Editor) was co-editor of Barbara Kopple's Academy Award winning film Harlan County, USA. She was the co-producer and editor with Emile de Antonio and Haskell Wexler of Underground and edited several more de Antonio films. She recently edited Anne Makepeace's Rain in a Dry Land and Julia Reichart's Emmy nominated film A Lion in the House. She also served as additional editor for Trouble the Water, (Special Jury Prize Winner, Sundance 2008.) Mary began her editing career with Ricky Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker as an associate editor on Monterey Pop and One P.M., a film by Jean-Luc Godard.

ADAM PARRISH KING (Sound Editor / Mixer) received his Bachelor's Degree at the University of Pennsylvania in Fine Arts and Art History and received an M.F.A. in Film Production from the University of Southern California. He was sound designer for the Labyrinth Project, a group that creates interactive installations for galleries and museums. Through the Labyrinth Project, Adam worked with Hungarian filmmaker, Peter Forgac's installation at the Getty Center, "The Danube Exodus," and with Los Angeles-based artist, Pat O'Neil. In addition, Adam was the sound mixer on the award-winning feature documentary, "Cockfight," and was the sound designer on the 2006 Sundance feature premiere, "Special." In 2006 Adam directed and edited sound an academy-award nominated animated short, "The Wraith of Cobble Hill," (Jury Prize Sundance Film Festival 2006.)

STEVEN GUTHEINZ (Composer) is a graduate of Rice University, the University of Southern California, Aspen Music School, and the ASCAP Film Scoring Workshop, where he studied with such legendary film composers as David Raksin, Elmer Bernstein, Leonard Rosenman, Buddy Baker, and Christopher Young. Steven been hailed by critics as "one of the most promising young film composers on the scene today" and "at the forefront of a new generation of film composers." His credits include "The Pursuit of Happiness," (New Orleans, Big Bear Film Festival) "Trekkies," (Hamptons, AFI Los Angeles) and "The Wraith of Cobble Hill." (Sundance, SXSW).

DEANN BORSHAY LIEM (Executive Producer) has over twenty years experience working in development, production and distribution of independent documentaries. She was Producer/Director/Writer for the Emmy Award-nominated documentary, *First Person Plural* (Sundance, 2000), and Executive Producer for Spencer Nakasako's *Kelly Loves Tony* (PBS, 1998) and *AKA Don Bonus* (PBS, 1996, Emmy Award). She served as Co-Producer for *Special Circumstances* (PBS, 2009) which follows Chilean exile, Hector Salgado, as he attempts to reconcile with former interrogators and torturers in Chile. She was the former director of the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) where she supervised the development, distribution and broadcast of new films for public television and worked with Congress to support minority representation in public media. A Sundance Institute Fellow and a recipient of a Rockefeller Film/Video Fellowship, Deann is the Director, Producer and Writer of the new feature-length documentary, *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee*. She is currently Executive Director of Katahdin Productions, a non-profit documentary production company based in Berkeley and Los Angeles.

J. ROBERT SPENCER (Executive Producer) is a Tony Award Nominated Actor, Independent Film Director, Producer, and Writer. J. Robert has been seen nationally and internationally with such theatrical shows as *SIDE SHOW*, *FINIAN'S RAINBOW*, *HEARTLAND*, *TOMMY*, *CATS*, and *LUCKY DUCK*. In 2004, he was cast and originated the role of Nick Massi in the Tony and Grammy Award Winning Musical *JERSEY BOYS*. He was nominated for the Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Lead Actor and nominated for a 2008 - 2009 Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical.

In 2005 J. Robert began his Independent Film Company *7 SPENCER PRODUCTIONS*. He Produced/Wrote/Starred/Directed his first Independent Feature Comedy titled *FARM GIRL IN NEW YORK*. The film was featured on *The Today Show* and was nominated for Best Comedy and Best Actress at the Sacramento International Film Festival. He is currently in postproduction as Executive Producer/Producer for his second Independent Feature titled *HETEROSEXUAL'S*.

DAN FRISHWASSER (Executive Producer) Broadway: *The Miracle Worker*, *Come Fly Away*, *Memphis* (Tony Award), *All About Me*, *A Little Night Music*, *Burn the Floor*, *The Norman Conquests* (Tony Award). Upcoming: *Ballroom*, *Garfield*. Off Broadway: *39 Steps*, *Inventing Avi*. National: *Burn the Floor*, *The 39 Steps*, *Little House on the Prairie*. UK: London: *Hair*, *All My Sons*, *Sweet Charity*. Tour: *Hairspray*.

ERIC FALKENSTEIN (Executive Producer) Eric Falkenstein is a former film production executive and a current Broadway theater producer. On Coal River is his first effort as an Executive Producer. 2009-2010 Broadway productions: Come Fly Away; A Little Night Music; The Miracle Worker; Ragtime. On London's West End: All My Sons. Among the Broadway plays which garnered Eric three Tony© Awards: The Norman Conquests; Desire Under the Elms; All My Sons, Impressionism; The Seagull; Thurgood; The Country Girl; The Seafarer, Coram Boy; Butley; The History Boys; Bridge & Tunnel; Democracy; Whoopi; Long Day's Journey Into Night; Frankie & Johnny in the Clair de Lune; The Crucible. Eric's company, Spark Productions, is at work on projects in theater, film, the environment, human and civil rights.

SELECTED ADVISORS

LAURA POITRAS was nominated for an Academy Award and Independent Spirit Award for *My Country, My Country*, which was released in the U.S. by Zeitgeist Films, and broadcast on PBS's P.O.V. Both *My Country, My Country* and *The Oath* are part of a trilogy titled "The New American Century," about post-9/11 America. Poitras is currently working on *The Guantanamo Project*, a multimedia project to collect documents and artifacts from Guantanamo Bay Prison. Poitras is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and Peabody Award. Before making documentaries, she worked as a professional chef. Poitras lives in New York City and teaches documentary filmmaking at Yale University.

BARBARA KOPPLE Two-time Academy Award Winner for best feature documentary. Harlan County USA, winner of the 1977 Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary. In 1991, "Harlan County, USA" was named to the National Film Registry by Congress and designated an American Film Classic.

JACK SHOLDER Professor & Director of Motion Picture & Television Production at Western Carolina University. Director of "The Hidden," "Nightmare on Elm Street 2," "Renegades" and HBO's "By Dawn's Early Light," Sholder was an editor on 1970's "King – From Montgomery to Memphis," nominated for an Academy Award for best documentary.

PARTIAL CREDITS

Downriver Media in association with
Katahdin Productions
Soma Productions
Spark Productions/Convergence
Pictures
7 Spencer Productions

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