

# Focus On the Kentucky Coalfields

By Diane Jacobs

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"They killed a goat in Harlan the night before I came. They put KKK on its belly and hung it," recalls Barbara Kopple, a slight, animated, 30-year-old filmmaker with a quick smile, large solemn eyes, and an almost syrupy voice that "doesn't reflect what I'm thinking."

Like just about everything that's befallen Kopple in the past four years, her return to the Kentucky coalfield—the site of "Harlan County, U.S.A.," a surprise success of the New York Film Festival and nominated this week for an Academy Award in documentaries—was not without drama. Casually dressed in jeans and turtle neck, her black, just-washed hair hanging well below her shoulders, Kopple looks more the hip college student than the seasoned film-maker that she is: a woman who's been shot at, beaten up, and has painstakingly compiled what she believes to be the definitive documentary on the American miner.

Thus far seen only by the miners themselves and at a few film festival screenings, "Harlan" opens Jan. 17 in New York and at the Outer Circle here in early February.

"The mines are just a microcosm of the universe," muses Kopple, who lived four years with the families of the Brookside Mine workers, chronicling, among other things, their ultimately successful 13-month strike against the Duke Power Co.

"I focused on the miners as an example of a really oppressed people who weren't afraid to take control of their lives and fight back," she continues, sipping coffee in a Greenwich Village tavern that looks a bit eerie at 11 a.m. Around the corner is Barbara's apartment, where she and

See KOPPLE, E6, Col. 2

Filmmaker Barbara Kopple, center, and "Harlan County, U.S.A." coal miners singing at a rally and discussing the strike, Top; a miner's wife and a picket line scene, below.



*'Harlan  
County,  
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Coal  
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KOPPLE, From E1

rotating crew spent nine months editing 50 hours of footage on the miners—their predicament, their unconventional struggle, and above all their resilience — down to a laconic 103 minutes.

"Harlan" was a "strictly independent" project—a labor of love, but it entailed a good deal of ingenuity along the way. For instance, when Kopple ran short of grant money, she pulled out her Master Charge card to fund two months' shooting. Today, \$60,000 in debt, she is busy divining ways to pay it back.

Raised in Shrub Oak, N.Y., Kopple did some fledgling filming in a college psychiatry course, where she got "hooked" on the medium, but her formal film training lasted precisely three days. "After college, I came to New York and enrolled in a cinema-verite course," she recalls. On the third day of the course, she learned that the Maysles Brothers ("Gimme Shelter") were looking for a go-fer (a glorified lackey); and from then on she did "anything just to keep on learning."

Initially, this was strictly editing, but when she heard that a production called "Living Off The Land" needed a "token" woman to work sound, she jumped at the opportunity. "I knew nothing about sound," Barbara admits, "so every day I'd ask the director what he'd planned for the following morning. Then I'd call up a friend who'd explain how to shoot it."

Of "Harlan County, U.S.A." (scheduled for March at one of the Circle theaters in Washington), Kopple says, "I'd been working on other people's films for so many years that I wanted to do a film I personally cared about." Having lived two years in West Virginia as a child, Kopple was sympathetic to the plight of the miner, and in 1972 she raised sufficient funds for a short film on the "Miners For Democracy Movement"—a drive to rid the United Mine Workers of corruption. While following the internal union struggles that eventually brought the reform movement to power, she learned that Brookside Mine in Harlan County, Ky., had just voted to join the UMW and was striking for the privilege. Perceiving the historical significance of the event (Harlan was also the site of some of the bloodiest union battles of the '30s), she determined to follow it through to the end.

Kopple's sex and unassuming manner not only facilitated shooting, but probably saved her life, she thinks on several occasions in Harlan. "I've always had a really high, horrible voice, which I hate," she giggles, but it was terrific when I was in Harlan because people weren't intimidated by me. I could talk to anybody—the gun thugs, the Duke Power people; and they'd just take it as a joke." Nevertheless, by the time she left she was carrying a gun and living with the miners for protection. Kopple said strikebreakers were stationed in the bushes, and

even a jaunt to the outhouse at night could prove hazardous.

Kopple drove 4,000 miles scrupulously examining old news cuts and other "stock footage" to supplement her own pungent material on the miners and their families: not-so-old miners dying of the occupational black lung disease; wives rallying at 5 a.m. to picket because their husbands were limited to three on a picket line; a fragile/obdurate old lady leading the song, still relevant today, that she wrote for the riots in the '30s. But the film has its lighter moments as well, as in the hilarious confrontation between a miner and a New York policeman comparing pensions and benefits (the policeman comes out way ahead).

Did four years in the mines stunt the personal growth of this young woman? Quite the opposite, it would seem. The miners became "family" to her, and her prodigious phone bills attest to the close relationship they've maintained.

"I was rarely lonely because Hart Perry was cameraman for much of the film. Working together under so much tension and in a literally life-or-death situation tightened our relationship." A well-known cameraman with whom Kopple has lived for several years, Perry has been supportive throughout the film and is only slightly peeved when people refer to him as "Barbara's cameraman."

The climax of the film is the ratification of the miners' demand for unionization, but "Harlan's" is not a

happy-ever-after ending. "After the strike a lot of the strikeworkers turned to the Ku Klux Klan," Kopple said, "and one high-school principal went so far as to instruct his students to sew KKK robes."

Neither admirer nor critic can fail to note "Harlan's" indifference to objectivity. Insinuating the union battle hymn "Which Side Are You On?" into the film as a kind of theme song, Kopple makes it clear from the start that she is wholeheartedly behind the pro-union miners. The plight of management and strikebreaker or the subtle nuances of negotiation are of no interest to her. Film is a "powerful manipulative medium," and while Kopple hopes some day to try her hand at fiction, she has no desire to work outside the sphere of political or social-change cinema. She is enthusiastic about the more convoluted documentary work of Marcel Ophüls ("The Sorrow And The Pity," "Memory Of Justice"), but quietly insistent that objectivity is either well-veiled bias or apathy.

Kopple is not the typical film cultist or movie buff. Her heroes are not "auteurs" of political cinema like Jean-Luc Godard or even Costa Gavras, and the only thing she and Lars Wertmüller have in common is their sex. "I really admire common people who have struggled in their lives to do something and who do it with passion," she says.

"These are the people that give me energy."