



Photograph by Margaret Killjoy

“Boogie, Chilluns”: On Saving Mountains and Crossing the Imaginary Line

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To protest the destructive practice of Mountaintop Removal coal mining, a man steps across an imaginary line in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience, while his granddaughter waits in the crowd.

I am a mountain girl, born and raised in the mountains of Appalachia. Specifically, I spent my childhood on a farm in Mercer County, West Virginia. My family has never had a lot of money, though always enough to get by. I grew up playing outside instead of playing video games, and as such developed a deep sense of wonder for the trees and hills my family lived amongst. I could write page after page about all the good things that nature has done for me, but what I want to write about now is how people can give back to nature for a change.

My grandfather, or Poppy as I call him, is a remarkable man. To him, I think, there is nothing as precious as the environment in which he lives. He lived in a coal camp as a child and

then struggled to make a living on his own from a very young age at various jobs, such as a printer or a newspaper deliveryman. The mountains of Appalachia are an integral part of who he is. When I was little, I would stay with him and my Nana on their farm, and Poppy taught me how to plant a garden and took me on hikes. My Poppy is the one who told me about wild Lady Slipper Orchids and Trilliums, beautiful wildflowers native to the Appalachian Mountains. He and I share a mutual love for the mountains.

My whole family is outraged by the practice of Mountaintop Removal coal mining in Appalachia. As the name implies, this form of mining is incredibly destructive. Hundreds of mountains in Appalachia have been destroyed over the years, and more are being gradually leveled out as we speak. For me, it is a horrific thought that a mountain can be taken away completely like that. For my Poppy, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Years of working hard and doing what he thought was right have brought him to an age where the rich can casually destroy his home as though it means nothing. At the age of 64, in the year 2009, Poppy was looking forward to retiring the next year. However, the peace of retirement on his valley farm faced a threat he had not previously considered; a coal company had recently requested a permit to begin mining a nearby mountain for coal. The mine site was to be a Mountaintop Removal mine, and would not only destroy one of the mountains guarding the small town of Matoaka, West Virginia, but would also cause a great disturbance and would have many environmentally unfriendly consequences. The issue could not be closer for him, and by association, it is close to me. So it is not surprising that he and I both felt, and still feel, that we must do our part to fight the good fight.

My mother, Wendy, had become involved in a group known as Mountain Justice, and had met a man by the name of Larry Gibson, who lives on Kayford Mountain, right beside a

huge Mountaintop Removal site. When she met him, at a Mountain Justice Summer Camp, Larry encouraged my mother to really get involved in fighting against the coal industry. Mom found out about a protest being held in Whitesville, West Virginia, in the county of Raleigh. Raleigh County neighbors our own county, Mercer, and Whitesville is only about an hour and a half from my mother's home in Athens, West Virginia. My mom wanted to go to the protest, but had other commitments on that date and couldn't attend. My Poppy wanted to go, but he didn't want to go alone, so I said I would go with him.

The date was May 23rd, 2009, and I was 18 years old. This was to be the first protest I had ever been to. I will admit that I have no clue if it was the first one my Poppy had been to, but I suspect that he was more involved in such things when he was young. Now, he was very nervous, because he'd volunteered to be one of the people to cross the "imaginary line."

The event was intended to protest a nearby Mountaintop Removal site and, specifically, the "slurry pond" that Massey Energy Coal Company had built directly above a local school, Marsh Fork Elementary. A slurry pond, for those who don't know, is a large impoundment where the waste water from washing coal is stored. The Brushy Fork impoundment above Marsh Fork Elementary is the largest slurry impoundment in the western hemisphere, rising to about 954 feet at the top of its dam. At max, the Brushy Fork impoundment can hold 9 billion gallons of coal waste. Though it hasn't reached maximum capacity yet and no one is sure exactly how much is currently held within it, if that impoundment were to break, the school would be covered in toxic waste immediately and then the rest of the inhabitants of the valley, upwards of a thousand people, would be covered in a matter of minutes.

The protest was to be held in Pettus, West Virginia, and was organized by Mountain Justice. The plan was for a small group of protestors to purposefully step onto the coal

company's nearby property, thereby trespassing to make a statement of nonviolent civil disobedience in protest of the Brushy Fork impoundment. The Whitesville Detachment of the West Virginia State Police had been notified of the event, and would be present during the rally, so as to arrest the individuals who crossed the line onto the company's property. A larger group of us would remain behind, holding signs and preparing to pay our comrades' fines when all was said and done. We expected fairly reasonable fines and a slap on the wrist for being bad. After all, it was only a minor trespassing charge.

My Poppy and I donned our red bandanas in homage to the mining wars of the 1920s between the coal companies and miners who wanted to unionize, and headed down to Pettus from my mother's home in Athens. We parked Poppy's van at Mountain Justice's headquarters in Whitesville, and then rode the rest of the way to Pettus with some other protestors to minimize the number of cars present at the protest. I was to remain behind when my Poppy crossed the imaginary line, and I was armed with my digital camera in case things didn't go according to plan. There was a very minor risk that something would go wrong, else my Poppy wouldn't have let me go with him, but I wanted to be prepared.

I was given one of the signs the group had made, which proudly declared "Save the children!" I stood with it as the people who would cross the line convened before the group with a megaphone. Each of them took the megaphone in turn and spoke a little of why they were going to do this, why it was important to them. My Poppy was the last to get the megaphone, and I wondered what he would say. He had a lot to say, I knew, as much as anyone else had to say, but when they handed him the megaphone, his statement was brief.

"In the words of Mother Jones," he spoke confidently, "Boogie, chilluns!" He handed the megaphone back and everyone clapped.

Mother Jones was a woman involved in the mining wars, on the side of the union. Most people present had heard of her. According to my Poppy, she would alert her comrades to approaching thugs hired by the coal companies to terrorize the organizing miners. She would do this by calling out, “The boogies are coming, chilluns!” As to the accuracy of this information, I cannot say for sure that Mother Jones used those exact words, but it was familiar enough to the protestors present. For me, it was a phrase I’d heard my Poppy use for years and I thought it was just the right thing to say.

My Poppy and the others in the small group all joined hands, and they walked calmly together down the road and across the imaginary line, while I stood watching with everyone else. Nothing violent happened. It was calm and peaceful throughout. The police arrested Poppy and 16 others, as planned. Some of those arrested had crossed the imaginary line – others were arrested for chaining themselves to machinery on a nearby mine site on Kayford Mountain, and two more were arrested for taking a kayak out onto the Brushy Fork slurry pond to float a sign in the waste that protested Mountaintop Removal. All of those protesters who had crossed the line were taken into the nearby police station to be processed. While we waited for their release outside, the rest of us shared lunch on the grass.

About two hours later we saw police cars leaving the station. We quickly realized that the people who had crossed the line were inside those cars and we weren’t sure what was happening. We had not anticipated that our comrades would be taken elsewhere. Upon further investigation, we discovered that they were being taken to Beckley, about 20 miles away – to prison, for a minor trespassing charge. This was highly unwarranted, considering that nothing had been done to the coal company’s property. A few people had just stepped onto that property and had *requested* that they be arrested for it.

At 18, I was not really capable of driving a car, because I hated cars and had avoided them like the plague up until then. It quickly became apparent to me that I was a good way from home, surrounded by people I didn't know, and had no real way of getting either back home to my parents or to Beckley to try and help my Poppy. In Pettus, my cellphone did not have any service. I was completely freaked out, being a reclusive and less than social individual to start with, but I was quickly rescued from the chaos by a few good people who knew me as "Sid's granddaughter" and were willing to help me in any way they could. One girl held my hand on the ride back to Whitesville, and another directed me to the telephone. I called my mother to frantically explain the situation. "Poppy is in jail," I exclaimed into the receiver when she answered the phone. My mother calmed me down and said that my stepdad would meet me in Beckley if I could get a ride. The girl who had directed me to the phone offered to drive me to Beckley, because she and some others were going to the prison to see what they could do to help. The group was frantically trying to pull all the funds they could to bail everyone out of jail, but there wasn't likely to be enough.

I was nervous and stressed on the ride to Beckley, maybe more so than I needed to be. The other people in the car were fairly relaxed, it seemed, but that was probably because they had more experience with this sort of thing than I did. It didn't bother them too much when their GPS got us lost because it couldn't calculate the correct route to the prison, though being lost while my grandfather was in jail had me on pins and needles. They chatted with each other about the funny names of the local restaurants and occasionally asked me if I was doing alright. My answer was always a terse, "Yes, I'm okay, thanks." I'm sure I was an entirely unpleasant companion. To be honest, I don't even really remember their names or whether there were two or three other people in the car with me. I lost track of time around that point, since my cellphone

had no service and I didn't own a watch. I think I was in the car with them for over an hour – it might have been closer to two hours. By the time we reached the jail, it was 6 pm.

When we reached the jail, my stepfather had arrived and was waiting for me. I was out of the car and over to him like lightning, desperate for the reassurance of a close family member. I had absolute confidence that my stepfather would be able to sort things out. Surely, I thought, this would be over with soon.

I was wrong about that. My stepfather and I drove around Beckley for several hours, trying to figure out how to get my Poppy out of jail. We discovered that Poppy was being held at \$2000 cash bond, which seemed to us to be an atrocious sum of money for trespassing. Of course we didn't have all of it then and there, but we needed it before 12 a.m. or Poppy would have to spend the whole night in prison, and nightfall was fast approaching. We scraped together every penny we had available at the time and we paid that \$2000 dollars to get him out. Almost two years later the cash bond still has not been returned; a lawyer is still looking into the matter for us.

But the money is hardly the point. Things didn't go as planned, and the experience was incredibly nerve-racking and uncomfortable, but I don't regret for a minute that we went through with it. We made a statement – we turned a few heads. And we've been fighting Mountaintop Removal ever since. Thanks to efforts made by protestors, the Marsh Fork kids are getting a brand new school away from that slurry pond. 2 million dollars was given by the Anenburg Foundation from Colorado to help provide Marsh Fork's youth with a clean and safe environment in which to learn and grow. Massey Energy, owner of the Brushy Fork impoundment and the Mountaintop Removal mine on Coal River Mountain, has also recently agreed to pay an additional 1 million dollars – far less than they owe the community. It's really a

small step forward, but it is a step forward. Eventually, I have faith that the practice of destroying mountains for coal company greed will be completely abolished. Only when this happens will I feel that I had repaid my own debt to the mountains of Appalachia.