

# Harlan County, USA

By Randy Haberkamp

Oscar's Docs, 1964–85: *The Front Lines at Home and Abroad* program notes, 2011

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"I'm a politician first, a filmmaker second," said Barbara Kopple during the release of her first documentary feature film, "Harlan County, U.S.A."

Though her film doesn't pretend to take an objective stance, it immediately adopts a direct and sympathetic, though unflinching, approach to its subject, the striking mineworkers' families. Kopple's personal involvement with her film's subject isn't surprising given her very personal path to filmmaking. As a child, her social sensitivity was instilled by the values reflected in a cooperative vegetable farm near Scarsdale, New York. Her college studies at Northeastern in Boston began in clinical psychology, but the peace movement there also fueled her interest in politics. During a work-study project at Medfield State Hospital, where she had begun to experiment with 8mm film as a means of communicating with mental patients, the film evolved into a thesis project made by and about the patients. Moving to New York, she apprenticed with various documentary filmmakers, including the Maysles brothers. In the process of pitching in and learning by doing, she was offered a job as sound recordist, and despite her technical inexperience, she took the job and consulted with a sound engineer friend throughout production to avoid discovery.

"Harlan County, U.S.A." began in 1972 with a modest \$9,000 loan Kopple received toward a film project about the campaign of the Miners for Democracy to gain control of the United Mine Workers. For years, the UMW had been controlled by Tony Boyle, whose sympathies aligned suspiciously with the mine owners and who was eventually convicted of the triple murder of his challenger, Jock Yablonski, and Yablonski's wife and daughter. The UMW filming eventually led Kopple to Harlan County, where Duke Power had refused to allow its coal miners to join the UMW.

Locals had indelible memories of the 1930s, when Harlan County had been known as Bloody Harlan and as home to some of the fiercest battles in labor



*Wives of striking coal miners working the picket line arm themselves with baseball bats in response to threats of violence. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

union history. Kopple and her crew arrived in Harlan confronted by an active picket line, which they immediately began filming. The wives of the miners were initially suspicious of Kopple and gave false names like Betsy Ross and Florence Nightingale, but they realized the presence of cameras might keep the violence down. After gaining their trust, Kopple and her crew ended up living in the houses of the strikers of Harlan for nearly a year. Her crew consisted primarily of two people: first Kevin Keating and then, for the most part, Hart Perry on camera; Ann Lewis as assistant camera. Kopple recorded sound.

"The Duke Power people didn't take me seriously. I was free to talk to anyone. They just thought I was a funny little girl who carried a tape recorder and a camera."

As the conflict intensified, however, the crew was knocked down with the camera rolling and four thugs tried to work them over, but they were rescued by the miners. "Without their support we literally wouldn't be alive today."

Between filming sessions, Kopple returned to New York to raise money from foundations, individuals and other groups, eventually spending \$350,000 on the film and finding herself \$60,000 in debt upon the film's completion. "I used to go to banks and ask for money, and if they wouldn't give me any, then I'd try to persuade them to let me use their Xerox machines or something. I used a Master Charge for two months. I don't know why they ever issued me one." Kopple wrote dozens of proposals, earned money working on other people's films, and edited together pieces of her footage to attract potential sponsors while working during off-hours in donated editing

space and lugging cans of film around in a suitcase. During the strike's 13 months, Kopple and her rotating crew had accumulated 50 hours of 16mm film footage as well as stock footage from the previous strike and other events to illustrate the backstory of the struggle. Over a period of nine months, Kopple, chief editor Nancy Baker, and a team of assistants assembled the film.

Some locals had been filmed in Harlan singing their homegrown protest songs, and Kopple asked Hazel Dickens, a coalminer's daughter with a professional folk-singing career, to record other songs to supplement the soundtrack. When Kopple brought the film into Harlan the week after it was finished, the Ku Klux Klan had hung a goat with KKK carved in its belly next to the place where the film was to be screened, so it was presented under armed guard. But the strikers responded positively to the film. "One miner who was dying of 'black lung' insisted on being wheeled in on his hospital bed to see it." In 1990 Kopple won another Best Documentary Feature Oscar for "American Dream," which depicted a strike in response to wage rollbacks at a Hormel meat-packing plant in Austin, Minnesota.

The Forty-Ninth Academy Awards® presentation, for films released between January 1, 1976 and December 31, 1976, was held on March 28, 1977 at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The nominees for Best Documentary Feature of 1976 were "Harlan County, U.S.A." (Cabin Creek Films), "Hollywood on Trial" (October Films/Cinema Associates Prod.), "Off the Edge" (Pentacle Films), "People of the Wind" (Elizabeth E. Rogers Productions), and "Volcano: An Inquiry into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry" (National Film Board of Canada Prod.). The Oscar® was awarded to "Harlan County, U.S.A."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*As Managing Director of Preservation and Foundation Programs for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Randy Haberkamp directly oversees its Library, Archive, Nicholl Screenwriting Fellowship, Student Academy Awards, and Visual History Project. He received his Master's in Motion Picture Production from UCLA and worked for the CBS as Director of Specials and Feature Films. He founded The Silent Society that has presented and preserved silent films in Los Angeles for over 25 years.*