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### Oral History Interview: John Small

John Small

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ORAL HISTORY OF APPALACHIA  
 400 Hal Greer Boulevard  
 Huntington, West Virginia 25755-2667  
 304/696-6799

SUBJECT: The Martin Courtian  
 ORAL HISTORY NUMBER: KyN-11  
 MORROW ACCESSION NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

ORAL HISTORY

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DATE: 1/19/94

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DATE: 1/19/94

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KYN.11

KENTUCKY NEWSPAPERS

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AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: JOHN SMALL

CONDUCTED BY: LINDA MCGINNIS

DATE OF INTERVIEW: OCTOBER 10, 1983

Linda: The following is an interview with John Small, General Mine Foreman at Pontiki's #1 mine in Martin County. The discussion is about Homer Marcum, editor of the Martin Countian, his impact on this county, and his leadership qualities. The conversation was recorded at Mr. Small's home in Inez, Kentucky, on October 30, 1983, by Linda McGinnis. It is approximately 30 minutes long, and the tape is open for public use, study or reproduction. John, have you always lived in Martin County?

John: Yes. Since I was just 5 years old.

Linda: Can you tell me a little bit about your educational background?

John: Uh...12 years of regular school, graduated from Sheldon Clark in Martin County, went about 8 months at the vocational school...that's it.

Linda: What do you do for a living?

John: General mine foreman at Pontiki Coal Corporation.

Linda: And what does a general mine foreman do?

John: Well, I'm in charge of the general day-to-day operation of the mine uh, safety, production, ventilation, just uh, general work duties. In charge of all three shifts.

Linda: Pontiki's a uh, is it a subdivision of MAPCO, Inc., or uh, (yes, out of Tulsa, Oklahoma) Okay. John, you know Homer Marcum, the editor of the Martin Countian? (yes) How long have you known him?

John: Most of my life. I guess I...he was in high school when I started grade school, so I've known him pretty much all my life.

Linda: Did you know him when he was a teacher at Sheldon Clark?

John: Yes. Mmm-hmm. I never had him, I never had a class with him, but I knew him. [inaudible] I was a senior in high school.

Linda: Did you have an casual acquaintance with him or...?

John: Yeah, several conversations. Nothing you know, about...he wasn't into journalism then like he is now.

Linda: [inaudible]

John: [inaudible]

Linda: His paper, the Martin Countian, do you think it's had a substantial impact on this area?

John: Absolutely. Uh, Homer's paper I feel has really made a lot

of politicians honest for one thing. And uh, he's had a lot of respect. And politicians kind of hold back now because they know that they're, if they get into anything dishonest, they'll get exposed. And before, I mean, we're talking prior to any newspaper in the county, board meetings, special court meetings, nobody knew what was going on. They would have 'em, do the business, the people in power [inaudible]...majority of the county the people didn't even know what was going on. And money was spent, vote protecting, when it was over with, they'd just [inaudible].... And growing up in our home, our parents, they never got involved in the board messes, or what was going on in the county schools. Because they [inaudible]...know what was going on. Because there wasn't any publicity to it. It was all cut and dried.

Linda: Is there any other impact you think it's had besides the difference in the board's behavior, the difference in the courthouse behavior?

John: Oh, absolutely. Uh...well, it's like our bridge in particular. (your bridge?) Our bridge that leads to our residence. Our residence is in Martin County, our bridge that leads to our residence is across the county line in Lawrence County. Uh, the taxes on the whole farm, the farm that the bridge leads to, is all located in Martin County. The majority of the farm lays in Martin County, so that taxes is always from there. So when our bridge was getting in bad shape, and we needed to floor it, we looked to the county for a hand. The first response we got was from the county judge, there's no way, Homer had me on tape [inaudible]...across the county line. And that's how it...it shows that everybody...that the politicians of this county, when they're approaching a decision, they take Homer into consideration (oh) before they make it.

Linda: Oh, I see the point. Well, then you think the impact that it's had is not, or is because of Homer, more than just the idea that there's a paper.

John: Absolutely. Before Homer's Martin Countian we had John Kirk's Martin County Times, (I don't know what it was), we've had several since. The first paper, the Mercury, (Mercury), that's issues like Homer does. I didn't feel that he did. He uh, well, he, John's Mercury just covered community activities, and social events. And he didn't really dip into politics the way Homer has, to cover issues. And you know, that stands, that speaks for itself, because Homer has been threatened, in court, and he's had to fight his way through. But The Mercury never stepped on anybody's toes, so therefore, they didn't have no trouble.

Linda: Homer's been accused of being very biased in his political writings, his editorials. Uh, how do you feel about that?

John: I don't see it. I think he's done well, as far as any...any...he's opinionated, but that's his opinion. Somebody else gives their's it's black and white. He don't...he don't

publish anything except that, and what it can do. He can't, you know, you can't satisfy everybody with your editorials. An editorial is just Homer's way of thinking, that's what he's saying. (mmm-hmm) And that's his opinion. And he'll run anybody else that disagrees with him. He'll put it there in black and white. And that's all you can do.

Linda: That's...you know, I can agree with. Homer doesn't uh, I don't uh, personally don't agree with Homer's views on the county. Or uh, his series on what will we do when the coal's gone. Uh, it's inevitable what will happen. (what, the coal?) When the coal's gone, the county is gonna fall off. But as far as putting the responsibility of the coal company, puttin' it on the coal company to take care of the county on down the road after they're finished with their...their industry is gone, I can't agree with. And I'm referring to the un-mined minerals tax.

Linda: Well, as long as we're on that, tell me what is an un-mined minerals tax?

John: An un-mined minerals tax is uh, a company moves into the area, they have to secure the coal; lease, buy, whatever form they can get it. They have to secure enough coal in the form of lease or buy, to [inaudible].... They're not gonna come in here with an acre or two of coal, and then put up a preparation plant, start a mine, and not knowing whether there's enough coal in reserve to make it work, to mine. And you're talking ...it's really a kind of investment, substantial amount, you'll lease or buy 10-12 years down the road. And you get that much coal and you sit on it, 'til you get started mining. Then you don't mine it all at once. The coal's sitting there. Then un-mined mineral tax is paying tax on the coal that's leased. And after you've got it leased, [inaudible]...burden on the county. Homer talked even on the Bill Moyers Show about the sewer systems, everything. It's going nowhere. [inaudible] And I disagree with him totally on that. You would burden the companies with an un-mined minerals tax, especially a company like Pocohontas Land Corporation that bought this coal years ago, and has been sittin' on it for years, and not paying any taxes on it, that's what Homer was gettin' to. Uh, which he's got a point. But you take...you got to make the area attractive to investors, to corporations...and you don't do it by puttin' taxes on minerals they mine years down the road. You don't say come in here and pay us taxes on these minerals and when you get through with the mine, you pay us again. You just don't do it. And...

Linda: If so, if a property owner had a seam of coal under their land, that they own the mineral rights to, they have to pay tax?

John: They would have to pay un-mined minerals tax. They sure would.

Linda: Homer told me because coal is our only industry, he said he's not out against the coal companies, he said I'm for taxing

whatever we can tax. He said, "Because we've got to have the money."

John: But the money, the responsibility in my opinion, is on the leaders, the politicians, the elected officials, to attract industry into this county, it's not on the coal companies. The coal companies can put all money that they can possibly put into the county, and if you put sewer systems, and railroads, you might make an [inaudible].... When coal's gone, people's gone. There's no way to use the sewer system. There's nobody using it. You've got to have leaders in your community that'd bring in a factory, something than can you know, generate jobs. We can spend all the money that they can pay in un-mined minerals tax, severance tax, on roads or sewer systems. But when the coal's gone, the people's gone, too. And you'll have the people with no jobs, but fine sewer systems.

Linda: Does Pontiki have a special way of dealing with the press or dealing with Homer, that you're aware of? Do they do anything different because of him?

John: Mmmh. Uh...Pontiki, MAPCO on a whole, when you're talking about coal in this area, you talk to our vice-president, Mike Less, which he uh, he's the PR. When a statement's due the press, he gives it. And him only. And as far...

Linda: Are you allowed to say anything on Pontiki's behalf to the paper?

John: I have never been officially told not to. But I've never been approached, either, as far as...(so Mr. Less handles it all?) He handles it, and we're never approached. This is more or less the way it is. We've never been told not to make statements, or hush-hush anything. You know, they pound into us the management/labor relations to be open door, up front with everything. And of course, I may be prejudice because I work for 'em, but I feel they have been all through these hard times, the layoffs...[inaudible]...bad press from the Bill Moyers Show. [inaudible]...against the way Homer handled it.

Linda: Do you think Homer does it...expose a lot of the negative aspects of the county?

John: John...(I mean, is this alright, or is, how do you feel about that?) I have never for instance, Pontiki, under the management of Michael Edison and MAPCO, they're teamed up with Morehead's agricultural department down there. They've got a hog farm. There's about 4500 head of hogs. They've got gardens. They're raising just any kind of vegetable that you'd want. And they're active in proving that you can strip mine coal and put the land back better than what it was originally. They're taking [inaudible]...and the flatlands that they're puttin' back are producing vegetables, and growing. They're using the land for growing. They've got cows and they've got pigs. That's never been

mentioned in Martin County, to my knowledge. It may have been that I missed it. But I, read it to \_\_\_\_\_ and I've never sent Homer a key on that. The key's on Blackwater (no bullfrogs), no bullfrogs on Wolfe Creek. We fight it continuously. Our sludge right now, we're paying a tremendous trucking fee, that Pontiki had a truck at Martiki covered up, which is a big expense on them. To put enough top soil over the sludge until you can grow on top of it. And you know, the company is conscious of the pollution. And does everything they can to uh, avoid it. But now when uh, we got belts, belt lines, we carry those over the land. [inaudible]...an open belt line, when it rains, it's gonna wash black into the creek. It's just unavoidable. Unless 15 or 20 minutes the creek clears back up. And the minute it happens, Homer photos it for the paper. [laughs] The actual expense of hauling it away and trying to take care of it is never mentioned. It's just when...but that's news. Watch your NBC or one of your network stations and you never see, there's no good news. It's all bad. (that's what sells) That's what sells. That's the bottom line. You know, you can't fault Homer with it. He's uh, (he's in the business just like the companies are), just as the companies are...just his attitude toward the un-mined mineral tax, stuff like that, is gonna, it's gonna be \_\_\_\_\_ industry, if it ever comes to a vote, and when. And I don't feel it will. I figure it's too much obligation, too much power from the other side. There you go. The severance tax we relied on so heavily, you know, was kept down state. Which was a raw deal. That's a part of it. That's politics.

Linda: You mentioned that Homer's been sued, and he's been threatened, he's been physically attacked, punched in the face is what he told me (mmm-hmm), uh, he's in...been involved in about six libel suits. My question is, why do you think people here react so strongly and sometimes violently towards what's written in his paper?

John: It goes back to \_\_\_\_\_ for years they got by with it. (what?) The politicians got by with anything they ever wanted to. When Homer first moved in and started exposing, that's when they [inaudible].... Now they avoid tangling with Homer. So they, I feel they do the right thing to start with, rather than going through the hassle of getting exposed. So that's what I figure his value to this county is. He's got 'em aware that he's there, and (somebody's watchin'), somebody's watchin'. So they try harder and keep everything honest on top of that. Uh...

Linda: Now the people that he were sued by, well, of course Johnny Kirk who was the past editor of the Martin Mercury, and he and Homer had a parting of the ways. But now the people that, one person in particular that physically attacked him was not into politics. Why do you think something like that would happen? Just an outside case or do you think the people in Martin County tend to react violently when they see their name in print?

John: Well, that uh, that's...the answer to that would step on a lot of toes. It goes back to education, intelligence, backwoods



speaking. (that is my next...)

Linda: Homer said that the people in Martin County seem...how can I say this, they appear to be intimidated by education. And that we will relinquish our authority much too easily. It's easier for us to say, go ahead, you take the lead. And these are my words now, not his, I tend to believe that a few people, because we're independent, and we're just not interested in what's going on, in other places, and we'll say we'll stay home and take care of our own. But uh, do you think we're intimidated by education? Slick talking lawyers?

John: Intimidated, I guess is how you'd put it, fear.

Linda: Why is that?

John: Lack of...(not that we don't have any respect of it, just fear). That's ...a hard one to answer. Uh, change, any change, any new idea that starts out on the wrong foot, you know. I say nobody, a few people can change or are willing to change. Uh, backwards hill ideas that go way back, you carry through families. You take families, big families of 10 and 12, their daddy feels this way about certain issues, they go through life holding up those issues. It's born and bred in people. [inaudible] It may be that way throughout the United States. I'm just sticking for what I'm familiar with. Everybody sticks to their own. They stick to their own family. People in this area are very family-oriented in what they're forefathers and immediate fathers, the family's were. It's just the way the people are in the county. And Homer's you know, he just steps on a lot of toes when he starts. He brings up a lot of issues that people are willing to face. Like when the little town, Blackwater, the little mining town that was a ghost town, that's reality. Martin County [inaudible]...unless we get some elected officials that can pull enough strings and be sharp enough to get us some industry, other than coal. Which agriculture wise, Martiki's trying to do. And not getting credit for. [inaudible] That's important to me. (mmm-hmm) Of course, you can't, you know, put MAPCO on [inaudible]...let Morehead come in. But it's you know, it's a step in the right direction. There's a lot of other tax breaks that could be taken. And uh, without the headaches. [inaudible]

Linda: Do you think Homer's a good editor?

John: Yeah. Yeah, I...I think he does a good job. Uh, plus he creates too different points of view. That's what an editor and a paper's all about. It's what the press is all about. Exposing the issues and letting people decide for themselves which one they want to go with.

Linda: When he could do something else, with a lot less headache, I mean he was a school teacher, and now with the national attention he's received, he could probably go somewhere else and write for a magazine or a newspaper, why do you think he stays here and

continues doing what he does?

John: Challenge. You know...Martin County... For doing what Homer's trying to do. He's trying to educate within this county through the newspaper. And he's trying to educate people that's sorta behind the national average, as far as Martin County people are. It'd have to be a challenge. And there's have to be a reward for him personally when he succeeds. And [inaudible]...for instance, an un-mined minerals tax, if he can get that approved, just self-gain, you know. Uh....

Linda: Do you see a change coming? Go ahead, go ahead. I'm sorry.

John: Homer has just a lot of determination. When you put an article for a whole newspaper out that's controversial out on the county, and you walk in the town cafe the next morning, and you sit at the bar and give you heck! [laughs] You've got guts, I mean, that's what it's all about. What Homer's...what I give him credit for is his honesty. He's just as strong-willed. It's just guts. He's got persistence. And the system was so smooth in this county before he come in with his paper. That's what you got to give the man credit for. I mean, it takes guts [inaudible]...and not just in the newspaper but in the day-to-day life. When [inaudible]....

Linda: Do you see a change coming in the county?

John: I see hard times coming for the county. In the way the coal industry looks down the road. It doesn't look good for Martin County. In my opinion. Now, I'm no expert. There's a lot of communications [inaudible]...Martin County's solely depending on coal. The surrounding counties around Martin County are dependent on coal. It goes back to our leadership of the county. [inaudible]...and Martin County Industry. And uh, shopping centers, restaurants, they've built their counties up where Martin County's kind of at a stand still. Just over no leadership. We've got a swimming pool in the last three years. You don't see no substantial improvement in the county. The money made, most of the money that the individuals make is carried out of the county to spend it. And it shows. It's showing already. And that's just poor management of the county. And you know, that's...that's...that's something Homer hits on. He's trying to get across to the people. He's...[inaudible]...responsibility's to the management of the county, the funds they are gettin'.

Linda: Can you describe Homer?

John: (your opinion of him) My opinion of him. Uh...(would it be easier if I ask you...), I feel like I've answered that once. (you have, you have)

Linda: Are you impressed by him? And which you obviously said you are, in what way? What impresses you about him? What characteristics does he have that stand out in your mind?

John: The nerve he's got to break the system. His, I believe his honesty, too. I say honesty because I feel he's totally honest in what he's doing. Homer is convinced that he can, he can bend this county. And uh, if you can, pour it on it, more power to it. I may not agree with the way he goes about it or something, but the man's trying. And you have to give him credit for it. And there's very few people, like I said before, I've said it over and over, that will openly buck the system. You buck it...

END OF INTERVIEW