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3-4-03

(Date)

AN ORAL INTERVIEW

WITH: LARRY GIBSON

**SUBJECT: MOUNTAIN TOP
REMOVAL
IN WEST VIRGINIA**

**CONDUCTED BY: CHAD ROUSH
MARSHALL UNIVERSITY**

**DATE OF INTERVIEW: MARCH 4,
2003**

...West Virginia. One take time [inaudible] ...of course, it's no longer there. I've been actively involved against mountain top removal since the age of six. I was ...one of five people that was against mountain top removal, but I didn't know 'em until the mid-...mid-nineties. It was Ken Hechler, who was secretary of state then, and Cindy Rank, who was a citizen up northern panhandle near Elkins, Dora Cockley, who was up in Webster County, and Bob Gates, who's an independent film maker in Charleston. These were the only people involved in, against mountain top removal when I got involved. Of course, I didn't know 'em. Bob Gates, independent film maker, said they had got burnt out on mountain top removal, they didn't know what else to do. And all of a sudden they had heard about somebody said it in a different way, and it was me. They had not dealt with anybody in particular that owned land that was getting distraught about it, until I came along. Other than that....

What was the major events in your life that sparked your interest in social movement?

Well, let's put it this way. I left here when I was eleven years old, in '57. What sparked my interest and got me going, was when I came back here and seen the things had not changed for my people. It was still hardships and hard-pressed people here, and it was destroying things. And they would widen the roads up my hollow and spending money that they didn't want it. People had already left. We lost 30, 35,000 people up my hollow, we lost twelve schools up my hollow. So we didn't want them to be spending the money to widen the roads and stuff like that. They weren't doing it for the people, they were doing it for the coal trucks. But of course, then, too, I didn't know it. In December-, in July of '86, I didn't know about mountain top removal. They started dynamiting in

'87, and then I started learning about what mountain top removal was. Of course, I could see them blowing it up.

Oh, sure. Practically on top of one another. So real close to you they were....

Say this table is four foot across the middle, and it's a big table. They blew boulders bigger than this table on my property. They blew boulders bigger than this table in my cemetery. They blew boulders than coal trucks that you see on the road today, they had to break the coal truck-, the boulders up in order to load them up in the coal trucks. And they blew these boulders on a public road, you know. What most people don't know, we lose on an average, four people a year from dynamite blasting that didn't even work for the mines. You know? So you might say, get me involved in this, you see people....

So you didn't really make a connection until the mid-80s, you said?

No, no...the late '80s. See, I was like most people, most people in fact, did not know anything about mountain top removal until the mid-90s.

Right.

And there's still people that live in West Virginia that don't know anything about mountain top removal. I didn't know anything about mountain top removal until I got personally affected by it. And of course, most people were like that, you know.

So how are you involved actually in social movements against mountain top removal?

Well...

How do you stay active?

I'll give you an example how active I am. President Bush came to Ripley last year, you remember.

Right.

I got arrested five times while he was there. And the only thing I was doing was carrying this sign that says "Stop Mountain Top Removal".

Just for carrying signs?

Just for carrying a sign that said "Stop Mountain Top Removal". And when his secret service arrested me, they told me that I was not allowed to have a political sign. But Shelly Moore-Capito, who's congressman, and all the other people, political hopefuls, was carrying signs. But they didn't want the national media to see my sign. In the mid-90s, from the mid-90s up, they had interviewed me on Nightline, from the World Around the World Australia, France, BBC. BBC interviewed me three times. I've been in all the major newspapers from the New York Times, the Washington Post, LA Times, St. Louis Dispatch, St. Louis Post,

all the major newspapers. I've had people from all over the world come and see me. Just this past fall I had representatives from nine different countries to come and see me. Just last year I had representatives from the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service come from fifteen different states to see me, to try to get me to help them to convince our president that he had the wrong energy program in place. The Federal Fish and Wildlife people.... Well, in '93, Massey Coal, a fellow by the name of Eugene Kitts, who was at that time vice-president of coal field productions for Massey, told me my land was worth a million dollars an acre to them. Turned right around and offered me a grand total of \$140,000 for my land, my fifty acres. And I looked at this guy across the table, and I had a committee with me of seven people. I looked at this man across the table and I told them, I said, "You can have my right arm, but you'll never get my land." He looked at me and says, and this is the God's truth, he looked at me and said, "We ain't seen nothing that we can't buy! Nothing or no one!" [chuckles] I looked at this man and I said, "Boy, I sure hate to blow your bubble out, buddy," I said, "because this man sitting here, you ain't buying me, you ain't getting my land." He said, "Well, you know, you're surrounded."

So they had bought all the way around you?

Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. He said, "You're surrounded. You're in the middle of an ocean, and we own the ocean! You're just an island, he said. I said, "You must understand this, my island is a

habitated island, it's not abandoned. We're here, we're not going anywhere. And he looked at me and my people and told us, this is his word now, he said, "We're about profit, we're about coal, we ain't about people". So this is....

You won't hear that in the newspapers today, will you?

Oh, no, no. When you hear about the coal company now, they're the best friends of the people.

Yeah, they build everything....

Well, the thing about this, the coal company, the coal industry has lost over two hundred and ten thousand men from Black Lung and cave-in alike. Okay? From Black Lung and cave-in alike. Last year we lost eighteen men in West Virginia alone. For coal, man, think about it. [inaudible] How can it be satisfactory or accepted to any politician to lose one life? Don't they know what a life is? Don't they know how precious life is? You okay? [talking to someone in the room] Another thing about why I'm so involved in this.... Most of the young people, kids, three, four, five, six year olds, have asthma, so its been said. But I can fill an auditorium, where people are standing upright, that never worked in the mines, that got Black Lung, died from Black Lung; never worked in the mines. So what if some brave doctor came forth and said, "These kids don't have Black Lung, or they don't have asthma rather, they have Black Lung." You think that might be powerful enough to put the coal business out of business? Hey, look, Shelly Moore-Capito, the congress lady up there of our state, last year, I had a meeting with her. And she looked at me and she says, "Surely you can't...you [inaudible] that we do away with coal? I said, "You can't say what I'm planning. And sure I am. If you're going to get doing it, mining the coal like you're doing it now,

mining it like you're doing now," I said, "you're doing it as a favor, this is not a job issue here. If there's a job issue here, they wouldn't be doing mountain top removal.

Right.

They'd be doing it [inaudible] I told you, we lost...well, the state of West Virginia, we lost 147,000 miners jobs since 1961 in the state of West Virginia. In the national union, for instance, they were two, three, two hundred sixty thousand men in 1960. There are less than thirty thousand now. Okay. And they're less than twelve thousand in West Virginia, and over four thousand of them are surface miners. But, in other words, too, here's Cecil Roberts, United Mine Workers president. He's from my holler. In 1999, he sat on the capitol steps [inaudible] executives and told people that I, me, Larry Gibson, was an extremist from out of state. When my dad worked in the mine with him! So what he did there was he endorsed violence against me. Okay? My place has been shot up. In the year 2000, they run my truck off the road into a creek, did seventy-three hundred dollars damage to my truck. I had a hundred ninety-eight break-ins, as of last week, in my structures up on my mountain.

You still live on your mountain?

Yeah, yeah, you know. And the whole thing is, you know, they got these people so scared. Okay, in November, 2001, November 5th, 2001, they showed a film of me to a mining crew on Samples Mine, up there right beside my mountain. November the 6th, two men appeared in front of my cabin and they didn't know I was home. I noticed the gas cans in the back of their truck. But I just thought they were one of the people that, that owned one of the cabins there. But when they came up my hill and I walked out on the porch and saw who they was, they stopped, like they were shocked. And then they turned and left, went off the hill, went around the ridge from where my cabin was, and burned a brand new cabin down. Brand new, it hadn't even got the furniture in it yet. And it was November. So at 6:30 I laid down. Because no electricity or nothing, so I laid down. Twenty after eight

the fire department woke me up. The fire had come across the ridge from over there where they burnt that new cabin down, and it was almost at my cabin. They almost got me anyhow. The thing is, when they can show a film on me the day before and encourage someone to commit an act of violence toward me, without even saying anything, you see.....

Right. Well, you said you also did some speeches around?

I have spoke at Notre Dame, I have spoke at Yale University, I have spoke at William & Mary, I have spoke at Antioch College in Pennsylvania, in Ohio, I have spoke at Western College, I have spoke at Virginia, Blacksburg, Virginia Tech, I have spoke at....

Was Kayford Mountain southern West Virginia?

Kayford Mountain is in, my land sits in three counties. Kanawha, Boone and Raleigh. My land's right on the border. You can come up there and I can show you, you can put one foot in three counties. And so, the way my land sits, every time I used to call the law, I couldn't get nobody. "You got the wrong...you gotta call somebody else." You can't get nobody. I couldn't get no assistance up there with someone down...until I became friends with a feller by the name of Ken Hechler, who was secretary of state at one time for seventeen years, and a congressman prior to that. Until I became friends with him, and he is now my speaking partner when we speak at different universities and places, I couldn't get no attention on what was happening up there, you see. So you must understand, the intimidation and violence is stronger today in the coal fields than it ever was. And the reason for it is, is the people that are in place to protect the citizens are the people the citizens are afraid of. I mean, you know...it's simple enough to abide the law [inaudible]...

Get in with local officials?

Oh, sure, sure.

Yeah, I think that's a recent trend with corporations of any sort. What are the major sources of power that you have challenged in West Virginia? For example...Massey Coal, the local government, city government, state government?

All these things you just mentioned, if you had 'em in a room together, you wouldn't be able to tell which is which. In other words, I just as soon deal with Massey Coal head on as I would the government. Because they are the government.

Interconnected?

Well, sure, yeah. You might say they're in one big bed together.

Have there been any other social movements that you've been involved in outside of West Virginia?

Uh, prior to coming here in 1986, I was like most people. Life was...you know, there weren't nothing that was affecting me because, you know, I was kind of like the monkey, See No Evil, Hear No Evil and do nothing, you know. And I came back here and actually what got me involved was like I said, seeing the same old same old happening to my people, after twenty-nine years of being gone and seeing the system had not changed a day. Actually, it cost worse. They had more people in place and they could do more harm to the people and they were doing it. Yes.

I guess you've been involved a little bit in mountain top removal throughout the United States, I mean. By talking about West Virginia, you kind of, like you said, other universities have invited you out there to talk about how bad mountain top removal is, so that's a positive thing.

Yes, I spoke at Eugene, Oregon about it. I go anywhere I can, people want to bring me to, I talk. Like I said, I had spoke to maybe twenty or more universities and colleges, high schools. But the one place where I can't talk is the schools in the coal fields. They won't let me there.

Oh, yeah, I understand that. What future plans do you have for your involvement in social movements?

To stop mountain top removal, and to stop the pollution of the waters. It's not just about mountain top removal, it's about the issue that affects the people and their lives. You know.... It can't be a one-way issue thing for people. You have to be [inaudible], you have to be involved in the issues of what happens to people. If you stop mountain top removal, so what, so what if they stop mountain top removal. But they're doing something else. This is damaging to people.

Right, like the coal sludge.

Sure, or poisoning the water, you know? So....

West Virginians have been called fatalistic sometimes. Can you tell me if and how you have changed that idea in your life?

Fatalistic.... Well, it's kind of hard to imagine why they would call West Virginians fatalistic, because we have the most...we have the most honest government you've ever seen! In place. I mean, why would people even say that about people in West Virginia? Why wouldn't they say that about people in West Virginia?! Look at what we've got, look at our leadership. We...the state...I don't know about other states. But West Virginia's corrupt as far as politicians, and they don't care to let you know it! That's how brass and bold they are. Like Governor Underwood, when he was a governor, he said, "I don't give a..." I can't tell you exactly what he said. But he said, he don't care if people knows he's crooked or not, what are they gonna do? "They can't get me out." You know? And this governor we got now? A reporter asked me the other day, what's the difference between Underwood and Bob Wise. I said, "Well, that's easy, Bob Wise is just a sober, young Underwood." You know, that's all. He's still got this state up for sale, you know.

To the highest bidder.

To the highest bidder, yes. Right now I'm, I'm writing a letter to Robert Redford, I finally got through to him. And I'm appealing to him to come in here, to take a look at this issue. I told him, "My state is up for grabs,

my mountains are up for grabs.” Twenty-five percent of the mountains in the southern coal fields are slated to be destroyed. If somebody don’t come here and help, a big famous name that will draw [inaudible]. . maybe they won’t even stop it anyhow. But the thing is, we have to keep trying, you see. Anyways....

Well, I want to thank you for the interview.

Yes, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW