The Uprising of '34 : Filmmaking as Community Engagement

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The Uprising of '34: Filmmaking as Community Engagement

by Barbara Abrash and David Whiteman

"It was rumored there was a union, somewhere back in the '30s. But nobody will talk about it. Only to say: 'I will not be part of this union. Because of what happened a long time ago.' But nobody tells you what happened a long time ago."

—Flora Mays Caldwell,
textile worker, Kannapolis, North Carolina

The Uprising of '34 film project began in 1988, when sociologist Vera Rony asked George Stoney to make a film about the General Textile Strike of 1934, in which 400,000 workers in the South demanded improved working conditions and better wages, believing they were protected by New Deal labor legislation. Rony had organized a group of thirty scholars into the Consortium of the South-Wide Textile Strike of 1934 to study this tragic episode, which ended in defeat and humiliation for the strikers (and death for some), and set back the union cause in the South for decades. Those who lived through the event, and paid a high price for their participation, found little reason to remember or recount their experiences. The story had disappeared both from public memory and official histories.

In 1990, Stoney invited Judith Helfand to join the project, and they set out in search of archival materials and living witnesses. They intended to bring to

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Fig. 1. Production still from *The Uprising of '34*. George Stoney with James Storey on camera. 1991. (GSPC)

light the suppressed history of the strike and to tell the story in the voices of those who had lived though it. In the process, they would generate a few controversies as well as considerable media attention and create venues and platforms for discussion, education, and coalition building.

The production and circulation of *The Uprising of '34* encapsulates George Stoney's vision of how films should be made and shown. For Stoney, each step of the process provides an opportunity to engage community interest, shape the story, change one's perspective, and act for social betterment. It is about making sense of your world and participating in it.

The Uprising of '34 was nationally broadcast on June 17, 1995, a presentation of the Independent Television Service (ITVS) in the PBS documentary series, P.O.V. The film was the culmination of a significant process of historical reclamation in which eyewitnesses, historians, community activists, newspaper reporters, and others had been intrinsically involved. At the same time, the broadcast was part of a carefully strategized program of community screenings, designed to spark discussion and stimulate action.

The filmmakers had elaborated a "coalition model" of screenings and workshops that placed production and circulation within a larger framework of community organizing and social change. By 1996, the project had spun many webs of connection: between past and present; between generations; and among educational, faith-based, and advocacy groups. In addition to being a prize-winning film, *Uprising* is a model for grassroots organizing. This essay traces the web of social connections spun by *Uprising*, from the initial search for oral histories to the meeting at the Highlander Center that resulted in two ongoing projects, Link the Classroom to the Community (LCC) and Working Films.[1] We will consider both the process and its impact.

Reclaiming Memory

> *"I took a man's hat off his head and fanned him 'til he died, 'til the breath left him. But I ain't got no more to say into it. I've been trying to forget about all of that, and this is just bringing it all back up."*
>
> —*Mrs. Atkins, elderly millworker*

For a film that was to be based on personal testimony, Helfand and Stoney faced a basic problem: the determined silence of people to whom remembering seemed painful and perhaps dangerous. It was, says Stoney, a kind of "forced amnesia." How, with full respect, to break the silence? Helfand and Stoney got their first opportunity in 1990, when they visited the Charlotte (N.C.) *Observer*, a newspaper that had won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of brown lung disease, an ailment of cotton textile workers. Two visiting filmmakers searching for "hidden labor history" made good copy, and the paper ran an article that included an 800 number, asking "people with a story to tell" to call. There was a flood of responses.

Fig. 2. George Stoney interviewing two retired workers, Richard Allen (left) and Cleveland Walton, Alabama, 1991. Production still from *The Uprising of '34.* (GSPC)

Stoney, born and raised in the South, and Helfand, a young Jewish woman from Long Island, proved to be an effective oral history team. "They could say things to her that they couldn't have said to me," says Stoney. Helfand was researching *Uprising* in the South just three months after undergoing a radical hysterectomy. Earlier that year, she had discovered that she was suffering from cancer caused by a drug that had been prescribed to her mother during pregnancy, to prevent miscarriage. It was later shown that the manufacturer had known that DES was both carcinogenic and ineffective in preventing miscarriage. While working on *Uprising*, Helfand had begun her own film, *A Healthy Baby Girl*, which linked her personal experience with larger political and economic issues of toxic exposure and corporate responsibility. As she interviewed a retired textile worker in Gastonia, North Carolina who was stricken with byssinosis (brown lung disease), she shared her story with him. Helfand says,

> He knew I had lost something. He knew that I had no control over a big company, and they got inside my house, as they clearly had gotten inside his house and inside his body. I felt a little more worthy about listening to him tell his story. I realized that his damage with byssinosis on some level connected to my damage as a DES daughter. It set me on a very new way of thinking about workers' health and safety, and family health and safety, and workers' rights and consumer rights.[2]

This was among the first of approximately eighty interviews that Helfand and Stoney filmed. Other interviews came from names found on blacklists and on letters found in the National Archives that striking workers had sent to Washington, D.C., asking for support.

In their search for witnesses, the filmmakers, armed with videotape of Fox Movietone newsreel footage of the strike, visited sites of the strike, hoping to refresh memories and generate publicity for the project. Helfand describes their travels:

> As documentary filmmakers, we found ourselves in the position of interlocutors—bringing the physical evidence of unionism into the Piedmont towns where it had been forged and then forgotten. The trunk of our rental car was weighed down with proof: cardboard file cabinets, organized by mill and by state, filled with copies of letters from mill workers to the Roosevelt administration demanding that

> their rights as workers and citizens be protected. We also brought a file full of the only comprehensive collection of photos of the 1934 strike… For many strike veterans, our visit was the first time that they had seen these pictures and letters.[3]

One person who responded to the *Observer* article was Kathy Lamb, a textile worker from Honea Path, South Carolina, where seven striking workers had been shot and killed. Lamb, who knew nothing of this episode, discovered that her father, Ernest Moore, had witnessed this terrible scene as a boy, but had never spoken of it. She plunged into research, speaking with neighbors whose relatives had died, resurrecting a past that had been a silent presence in the town for more than fifty years. With the moral support of the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE), Lamb decided to build a memorial to the fallen workers, with a bench where people might sit and meditate.

A few months before the national television broadcast, Lamb appeared in a fine-cut of *Uprising* that was screened by the Southern Regional Council in Atlanta. This was one of four screenings (the others were in Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina), held especially for people who had been involved with the film. Speaking in public about unions, class, and power was risky, and Stoney wanted those who had taken that risk to see the film first with a diverse and supportive audience: union and anti-union, black and white, workers, activists, teachers, and journalists. The Atlanta screening was followed by a workshop, "Taking the Film Back Home," which explored ways to highlight the broadcast and use the film in local communities.

Fig. 3 Caldwell Reagan, son of the mill owner, backed by a portrait of his father. (GSPC)

An especially dramatic connection was made. A journalist in the audience in Atlanta remembered that a colleague, Frank Beacham, had grown up in Honea

Path. According to the film, it was Beacham's grandfather who gave the order to "shoot to kill." Immediately after the screening, the journalist phoned Beacham, now a media producer in New York City, to tell him about the incident. Beacham, stunned by this revelation, traveled to Honea Path to apologize to the members of the families of those who had died. While visiting, he appeared as a guest on a local talk radio show, where the story was argued for weeks. With Beacham's assistance, Lamb got the approval of the Honea Path city council, raised funds, and completed her monument. It was dedicated on Memorial Day, 1995, a few weeks before the national broadcast of *Uprising*. The dedication, which was attended by 400 people, was covered by CNN and network television, and received widespread newspaper coverage. The *Wall Street Journal* used the occasion for a piece on the current state of union organizing in the South.

Broadcast and Circulation

> *"Whatever you do, don't just watch* The Uprising of '34*."*
> —*Tom Terrill, historian*

Over the many years of production, Stoney and Helfand had screened rough-cuts of the film to labor groups, teachers, and grassroots organizers, as well to people who were in the film. Their feedback was incorporated into the editing. In one case, for example, comments on the troubling absence of black workers in the film led to the inclusion of a section on African-American service workers in the mill villages. The filmmakers encouraged a coalition-building model of screenings, which brought together individuals and organizations—from peace and justice groups, to churches, unions, and media—who might never have otherwise met (and who didn't always agree with the film or each other).

National television broadcast was essential, says Helfand, not only for introducing a suppressed history into public memory, but in giving the film the legitimacy to "do its continuing work in a slow, calm, long-term way." Even the broadcast, she felt, wouldn't have its full effect "when people see it alone, late at night, on television." To counter the problem of passive viewing, Stoney and Helfand organized a "Labor to Neighbor" program, to link the national

broadcast on June 17, 1995 with local community groups. Union members were encouraged to invite neighbors into their homes to watch the broadcast and, supplied with a discussion guide, lead conversation before and after the broadcast. On the next day, participating union locals could sponsor brown-bag discussions about the members' experience of sharing labor history with their neighbors. Working with the National Organizers Association, Stoney and Helfand organized twenty-five such events in Massachusetts, Montana, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Maine. In September, they announced a "Nation-Wide Labor Day Initiative" on the theme "Link the Classroom to the Community," designed to bring together social studies teachers, students, and working people.

Uprising was carried on public broadcasting stations across the country, with two notable exceptions: the public television stations in South Carolina (SC ETV), and the Charlotte, North Carolina station, both of which were influenced by perceived objections of textile interests in their regions. They treated the film, says historian Tom Terrill, "as an unwanted family member at a reunion."[4] The ensuing outcry over the television blackout in those cities became a golden publicity opportunity for the producers, when the press took up the story.

Fig. 4. Claire Haywood, former textile worker who began working in the mills as a child, in front of Louis Hine's picture of two dollar boys—one of which was her father. Picture taken in the Columbus, Georgia Museum. (GSPC)

Thanks to the relationships that Helfand and Stoney nurtured with local and regional newspapers through the years of production, as well as to the artistry and even-handed approach of the film, the broadcast received extensive and balanced media coverage. There were hundreds of articles and editorials which, along with radio call-in shows, triggered lively debates about unions, history, and the politics of memory. When labor groups in South Carolina raised $4,500 to buy broadcast time at 11:30 p.m. on a

Sunday night on the Spartanburg -Greenville, South Carolina NBC affiliate, local newspapers and radio shows carried the news.[5]

On June 2, 1998, after a change in leadership, SC ETV finally broadcast *The Uprising of '34.* In keeping with Helfand and Stoney's commitment to bringing film into communities, it was accompanied by a panel discussion and a 24-page viewers' guide based on a handbook designed for social studies teachers and grassroots organizers.

Afterwards

> *"The object is to get divided communities to come together and talk."*
>
> —*George Stoney*

During the course of production, Helfand had shown the film at more than thirty local and regional social studies conferences, asking teachers how to bring *Uprising* into classrooms. Here and in their many screenings for community and labor groups, the filmmakers were struck by the apparent lack of connection between labor history and labor activism and the fact that classroom learning was rarely linked with what was happening in the community.

These concerns were brought to a meeting held in 1996 at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee. After six years of production, community and school screenings, outreach programs, and television broadcast, the filmmakers believed it was time to evaluate what had been achieved and to think about next steps. They invited thirty people who represented the coalition of organizations that had worked with the projectóprogrammers, funders, trade unionists, teachers, journalists, and media activists to join them. The group decided to develop a labor history curriculum that would connect social studies teachers, labor organizations, and local communities in interactive projects.

Two projects emerged. The first, "Linking the Classroom to the Community" (LCC), a project led by Judith Helfand, uses *Uprising* as a text and the Honea

Path experience as a model. It was launched with a highly successful pilot project in Lodi, New Jersey, where a 1995 chemical explosion killed five workers. There, students uncovered "hidden labor history" through primary research and interviews and produced a mural commemorating the event. Plans are underway to refine and adapt this pilot project in other parts of the U.S.

The second project is "Working Films," a community-based organization that works with filmmakers, grassroots community organizers, and educators to use media effectively in community education, classrooms, and grassroots campaigns. It was founded in 2000 by Helfand and Robert West, who is executive director. West, then a media curator and festival director based at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina who had hosted screenings of *Uprising*, was present at the Highlander meeting. His innovative film programming, which drew unusually diverse audiences, catalyzed lively community discussion around social issues. Says West, "It was powerful to watch what these great films can do, capture an audience in a way that became a collective force, but then afterwards that force would dissipate."[6]

The curriculum project proposed at Highlander seemed to him an excellent opportunity to expand and build on the energy that independent film screenings can generate. Funding from the North Carolina Humanities Council resulted in the development of a curriculum, "From Farm to Fast Food: On the Job in North Carolina." This statewide classroom project, which became a core project for Working Films, incorporates several independent films on contemporary economic and social issues in a set of lesson plans focused on the history and culture of work in North Carolina, with an emphasis on economic literacy, media literacy, and issues absent from traditional histories.[7]

Fig. 5. Reed Roach, president and official of his textile union local in Rock Hill, S.C., from 1932 until his retirement in the seventies. (GSPC)

Conclusion

For George Stoney and Judith Helfand, filmmaking is a process of community organizing and the finished film is best understood as a tool for social change. From the first interviews in North Carolina to participatory rough-cut screenings, the filmmakers were awakening memories and bringing to light personal and community histories that gave people a new sense of themselves and the political and social realities which shape their lives. By creating connections between past and present, and filling in gaps and silences, there was new understanding of workers' rights and why unionization had come to be regarded so negatively.

These local and personal experiences had resonance in the wider world, where coalition-building screenings and grassroots workshops introduced people to a history that has some counterpart in every community. The search for "hidden histories" of working people's lives and stories of resistance to unfair conditions illuminates the social landscape, highlighting issues of class, race, and gender, as well as contemporary economic issues.

Fig. 6. Former textile worker Walter Rossiner. His voice in the introduction of *The Uprising of '34,* says "Keep a man hungry and he'll work. That's the truth!" (GSPC)

This project is a model of how the making and circulation of an independent film can create venues and platforms for the discussion of vital and controversial social issues, in environments that link personal and community experience and foster action. Media plays a necessary role, by giving legitimacy and language to events and ideas that have been rendered silent and invisible.

The network of organizations, especially labor unions and teachers' groups, which sponsored workshops and otherwise utilized the film as an organizing and educational tool, formed an alternative pathway for political and social expression. The filmmakers, with great ingenuity and care, used every access to media that might strengthen such pathways. The press, from the Honea Path community paper to The *Wall Street Journal*, was given the materials and the "hooks" by which to report matters of labor history fairly. The PBS broadcast, which was a vital element in bringing this history into public memory, is an all-too-rare example of issue-friendly television. Here again, the filmmakers pushed the possibilities. When television broadcast was blocked in the South, they used it as a media opportunity, and found a niche in commercial television at

Fig. 7. Marian Miller, curator of the Erskine Caldwell Museum, Moroland, Georgia —located in an abandoned cotton mill. (GSPC)

Fig. 8. George Stoney and Annie Leer Washington, at 92, who sings "Hard Times in this Old Mill." She started work in the mill at ten years of age. (GSPC)

their own expense. The Honea Path memorial dedication became a small-town Memorial Day story for CNN. George Stoney talked about the film on the PBS Charlie Rose show, which more usually hosts film stars and members of the power elite. Local talk radio triggered virtual town meetings.

These emerging discussions, which might have drifted into evanescence, were given structure in a series of more organized opportunities for education and social action. This not only enabled communities to develop active projects, but the materials and linkages provided by the filmmakers strengthened grass-roots organizations that are often shoestring operations. The formation of LCC and Working Films institutionalizes the lessons, materials, and methods of *The Uprising of '34* and opens them to further innovations that will keep alive George Stoney's long-standing vision of filmmaking as an act of engagement in the community.

Notes

See David Whiteman, "Exploring the Impact of 'The Uprising of '34:' A Coalition Model of Production and Distribution," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (forthcoming).

1. See http://www.workingfilms.org.
2. Judith Helfand, interview by Adina Back and Penne Bender, *Radical History Review*, (forthcoming, 2001).
3. Judith Helfand, "*The Uprising of '34*," *Point* (September 1994), 12, 18.
4. Tom Terrill, "Watching *The Uprising of '34*," *Three Years Later:* "*The Uprising of '34*" (New York: Hard Times Productions, 1998), 3-4.
5. Eric Bates, "Making the news," T*hree Years Later,* 5-8.
6. Nicole Betancourt, "Working Films Profiles: Judith Helfand and Robert West," *The Independent Film and Video Monthly* (May 2001), 14.
7. Films include *Fast Food Women*, *Troublesome Creek*, *Going to Chicago*, *Tobacco Blues*, and *The Uprising of '34*.