
A House
Divided
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STORY

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After 2016 Appalachia was pronounced a one-dimensional, backward, bigoted, conservative bastion of "dangerous idiots" voting against their self-interest. Trump's election gave birth to a myth of a divided nation where people of divergent political views can no longer sit across the table from each other and have a conversation.

But, it is precisely in a place like Appalachia, so maligned for its perceived intolerance, that this conversation happens every single day. Whitesburg, in the heart of coal-country, is the home to Appalshop, an arts organization committed to representing a complex, more genuine vision of the region. This position means fighting against stereotypes of Appalachia and its people. Yet, as an ultimately progressive organization, it struggles to push ideas that can often be perceived as disruptive. Its opposition to the coal industry has been a source of friction for decades.

Today, however, there seems to be momentum for the need for a vision of Appalachia beyond coal. This impetus has opened the door to innovative discussions between a diverse coalition of organizations. But again, this hasn't come without conflict. The first big proposal is for a massive prison atop an old mine near Whitesburg. It is touted as a source of employment and development for the region, but Appalshop opposes the project. The community of Letcher County is divided on the issue. This is now the conversation that needs to happen in Appalachia. And it is a big one, touching on climate change and the industrial prison complex. But most importantly, it exemplifies that conversation we are not supposed to be able to have anymore. We want to learn what's been said, to understand the lives and views of everyone at the table, and discover where is the line that divides us.

SYNOPSIS

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During the 2016 presidential election, the main-stream press branded Appalachia ground zero for America's "forgotten tribe" of white working-class voters. When Trump took the presidency, Appalachians became a symbol of political self-harm. Even long after the 2016 election, the national press was bent on discovering how these white folks tucked away in some remote, coal-country town swung an election.

This media paradigm created the tale of a divided America – "red" v "blue". And over the next four years, this discourse has only grown, with pages upon pages lamenting that Americans with diverging political views can no longer sit across the table from one another and have a conversation.

From a place deep in Appalachia, "A House Divided" aims to disrupt this vision, and show us a place where this conversation we supposedly can no longer have with each other happens every day. Whitesburg, KY lies in the heart of coal-country and is also the home to Appalshop— an arts institution that for the past 50 years has sought to explore Appalachian identity through film, radio, and theater in a way that's authentic to the people that live here.

That means often combating monolithic stereotypes about the region and its residents, but also battling to push initiatives and ideas that are often perceived as disruptive. After all, Appalshop brings a vibrancy to the town-- a youthful, artistic element— but also a rebellious side to eastern Kentucky. The latter has meant working through conflict and tough conversations.

Appalshop understands Appalachia less as a specific place and more as a condition brought about by economics. It recognizes Appalachias in other places, Appalachias in Mexico and Appalachias in Thailand. And even as progressives mock these "dangerous idiots" for voting against themselves because of their bigotry and backwardness, Appalshop continues to produce films that highlight coal miners who have worked hard and lost hard, and whose motivations overwhelmingly start with economics and end with economics. Their anger is greatly "pointed up, not down"; it is pointed at those who forgot them when global trade deals are negotiated, not necessarily at minority groups. Therefore Appalshop believes there is common ground from which to rebuild the region from within.

And today, even as Trump promises to rescue the coal mines, a growing number of residents are starting to see the end of coal as inevitable, and Whitesburg is at the epicenter of imagining a post-coal Appalachia. There is talk and even some initial ventures into agriculture and technology.

Tired of solutions coming from Washington, Representative Harold Rogers, a Republican who has been eastern Kentucky's congressman for 35 years, and Steve Beshear, a former Democratic governor, founded SOAR (Shaping Our Appalachian Region), an initiative intended to promote innovation in the region. For SOAR's first Innovation Summit, a surprising 1,700 people showed up representing very diverse organizations. There is momentum for realizing new ways to move Appalachia beyond coal. As Roger puts it: "Cats and dogs are sleeping together in the mountains now."

Still, it hasn't all been smooth sailing. Roger's and Beshear's first big proposal is the construction of a $444 million prison on the land of an abandoned mine near Whitesburg (Letcher County). During the 3rd Innovation Summit, Ada Smith, the daughter of Appalshop's founder, helped unfurl a banner opposing the construction. Appalshop believes it's "the wrong answer to the region's economic problems."

The Letcher County Prison project has become a new area of dispute with members of the community finding each other at opposite sides of the table. So now, this is the conversation. And the people of Letcher County are ready to have it.

Letcher County regularly ranks among the most economically distressed counties in the nation. Politicians like Rogers are selling the prison as a path to sorely needed economic renewal for the long haul. "This prison will not be bothered by a recession. It will be there through thick and thin."

In the most sanguine version of this story, prisons would permanently replace extraction as the central axis of a new mono-economy in the mountains. "We don't want to exchange bad jobs for worse," says Ada Smith. As she sees it, the state built prisons as a way of recruiting the rural white working-class into the economy of racist mass incarceration. "The people who have run roughshod over this place are the same people who get to make the decisions about how to rectify the problems they created," coal and prisons, "are bargains with the same devil."

Over the last three decades, 29 prisons were built in Appalachia, many of them atop or nearby former mines. Kentucky, one of the states hardest hit by the decline of coal, has also seen a 39 percent increase in the number of state prisoners held in its jails.
Ada says that before it was: "Coal keeps the lights on." Now it is more like: "state prisoners keep the lights on."

But to some members of the community, the opposition from Appalshop is, once again, an obstacle in the way of job creation. Appalshop has historically spoken out against the coal industry—a challenging position in this region—and for a long time, people living in Whitesburg felt that they had to choose between coal and Appalshop. Marti, a former miner, believes, "this attitude of getting a great gift and then saying it's not good enough is hogwash."

The dispute over the Letcher prison has split the community. This is the conversation being had, and it is a big one. It not only touches on critical issues like climate change, and the industrial prison complex, but it clearly represents the debate about Appalachia's future that is taking place from within. And it exemplifies precisely the type of conversation that we are not supposed to be able to have any more across the country. A House Divided wants to document this conversation, to understand the lives and views of everyone at the table and discover where is the line that truly divides us.

VISION

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A House Divided wants to lay open the conversation being had in Letcher County, KY about the future of the region, its economic development plan, and its vision to reinvent itself after coal. This conversation in the middle of Appalachia is a microcosm of the one we are forced to have as a nation— the one framing the upcoming 2020 election: what nation do we want to be?

To do so, we want to understand the lives and views of those at the table and discover where the line is that divides us. In order to understand the current debate about whether to pursue a massive prison project, we will follow some of the key players leading the conversation. We will document the current conflict through these characters, but also juxtapose archival footage from past documentaries, fiction films, and radio programs produced by Appalshop and others for the past 50 years. This juxtaposition helps us see how economic development has been enforced in Appalachia, who has historically benefitted from extractive models, and if that would be different moving on.

Our documentary approach is non-traditional, and it will have a more narrative feel— emotional, cinematic, and rooted in character. The photography is exceptionally cinematic and driven by mood and atmosphere, and our verité coverage will have its own style— shot intentionally and poetically. We will not use a traditional narrator or "voice of god," and we will keep talking heads to a minimum. Our film's more poetic and verité style suits an organic and dynamic portrayal of the conversation being had and the lives being lived in Letcher County.

CHARACTERS

ADA SMITH

Daughter of Herbe Smith (Appalshop Founder). Ada represents the progressive voice in Letcher County. She is a member of STAY, or Stay Together Appalachian Youth. STAY is part social network, part professional-skills group, in which young, mostly college-educated people from Appalachia meet and talk about ways to better the local community. Their topics are as diverse as supporting local food systems and nurturing the LGBTQ community in Appalachia. It's helped young people in the region meet others who are committed to living in Appalachia.

Member of the Letcher Governance Project (LGP). A group of Letcher County activists and opponents of the prison project. "We exchanged bad jobs for worse," said Ada Smith, whose cousin works at U.S. Penitentiary Big Sandy in Martin County.

Ada and Herb Smith helped unfurl a banner opposing the construction of the $444 million prison. It read "Prisons are Not Innovation". Ada Smith calls it "the wrong answer to the region's economic problems."

HAL ROGERS

(aka the Prince of Pork); Republican Representative of Kentucky's 5th district (Kentucky's congressman for 35 years).

Big proponent of the Letcher Prison Project. Supported by Letcher County Planning Commission, a private enterprise composed of business and civic leaders in the area. Its co-chair and most public face was Elwood Cornett, a retired educator and practicing preacher. The other co-chair was Don Childers, an influential oil and gas magnate who made his fortune supplying regional mining and trucking interests.

For Rogers, the prison would be the crowning achievement of a career defined by his ability to bring huge sums of federal money to his home district.

As Rogers bragged of the Letcher project in April 2016, "This prison will not be bothered by a recession. It will be there through thick and thin."

PRISON GUARD

Former coal miner that now works as a prison guard.

This character embodies the evolution of the economy in Appalachia and also the conflict devising the community. This grants him a crucial and unique p.o.v.

STUDENT

Young person attending Appalshop as a student. She is learning filmmaking at Appalshop but also about Appalshop's political and economic analysis of Appalachia.

She comes from a working class, more conservative family. Her work at Appalshop and some of her newfound beliefs—specifically her opposition to the prison project — set up a clash with her family. This student will be partaking in exercises (through Appalshop) that include documenting her family and conversations/interviews with her family members. This footage will allow us a much more intimate view into her family dynamic and conflict.

Video Sample

vimeo.com/395717183/17892021d4