

Destined to Hear, Lead to Write, Chosen to Celebrate

by Betty Dotson-Lewis

“Finally, I have given myself over to the fact that I may not have control of my destiny, nor deciding my purpose in life. Someone higher up may be pulling those strings.”

~~ Betty Dotson-Lewis

I am Appalachian. Born and raised in West Virginia, my home is on a mountaintop in a small, rural, one-stop-light coal-mining town near Summersville. I attend the Baptist church as often as I can, and work as an executive secretary for the local board of education.

Outside my regular job, I am busy these days preserving the history of life in the Southern Appalachian coalfields. Doing this came about as a result of events which made me realize it was about time someone from the region, and still living here, should get down to work, documenting and sharing with others the unique mountain culture and traditions. I knew that the best way to do this would be through celebrating the life and times of the working class of people of the Southern Appalachian coalfields. I could do this by helping the voices of the Appalachian people to be heard.

My first work was a special collection of veterans' oral histories recorded and compiled for a veterans' high school graduation ceremony. I found these poignant stories to be filled with honest emotion and sincere optimism, and I knew then that I was uncovering nothing less than treasure. Once people heard about what I was doing, the stories streamed in. I found them to be wonderful, exciting, hopeful, and sad.

I developed a website, www.Appalachiacoal.com, utilizing the newest technology to tell the world about some of the oldest history in the United States. I had no training for website development, but that seemed immaterial

considering the importance of this project. But even though the technology was wonderful, it fell short of permanent documentation and accessibility. A book was in order, so, overnight, I became an author. Again, this was without benefit of professional training but I couldn't worry about insignificant details. I was about to record the history of one of the most important labor movements in the country – the struggle for unionization, UMWA murder and corruption unveiled, black lung legislation, federal strip mining laws, and more. I was transcending more than 100 years of Appalachian history, and recording it in the form of stories, all in first-person, in original dialect.

Black lung disease was a common thread in the stories from coal miners. An oral history interview with one of my heroes, Dr. Donald Rasmussen, a doctor who has spent his life defeating black lung, validated what I had already collected.

My book was ready but I was having difficulties getting published. I even contemplated the possibility of taking out a second mortgage on my home to obtain funds for publication. Just at this time, I received an email from Jane M. Martin, requesting permission to use a couple of my stories about black lung. Jane is a respiratory therapist and author who also believes in the importance of preserving stories. We met in West Virginia and in addition to introducing her to the beautiful work of West Virginia artisans, visiting some black lung clinics and showing her a coal camp, I introduced her to Dr. Donald Rasmussen.

Through Jane's encouragement, I was able to publish my book, *Appalachia: Spirit Triumphant*, through her publisher. In doing so, I kept my commitment to myself; but moreover, I kept a promise to my people by sharing with the world the triumphant spirit of Appalachia.

Betty Dotson-Lewis is the author of Appalachia: Spirit Triumphant <http://www.Infinitypublishing.com>
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