

Troublemakers with a Printing Press: Appalachian Movement Press in the 1970s

Shaun Slifer

The following is compiled from the author's forthcoming book on West Virginia University Press, available in early 2021. The book is a detailed history of Appalachian Movement Press, based on original research and interviews, and includes reproductions of five rare AMP publications.

Early in 1969, after battling years of public resistance and organized conservative red-baiting, a small group of students at Marshall University, in the small southern West Virginia city of Huntington, finally gained official college recognition for their chapter of the national activist network Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The Marshall SDS group's activism sparked a full-blown Red Scare: as opposition to the US war in Vietnam grew nationally, even the suggestion of student organizing at Marshall sparked local fears of violent street protests, and anti-war sentiment came to a Cabell County citizenry that may have seen itself as immune to the New Left. [1] Appalachian Movement Press (AMP), an activist printshop which ran for nearly a decade out of Huntington, was born in this time.

Student activists Tom Woodruff and Danie Stewart originally started AMP to continue publishing *Free Forum*, the newspaper of the Huntington SDS chapter, and their second-hand offset presses were up and running in their first printshop by early 1970. In naming their operation Appalachian Movement Press, the young printers planted a regional flag in the national trend of activist printshops which were run by, and for, the movements in which they were founded. AMP began developing a radical, independent, regional press which produced literature with the overall mission of uplifting Appalachian people to self-determination.

From the beginning, Appalachian Movement Press sought to foster, in their largely working-class readership, a collective understanding of their history of workplace struggles for basic rights and unionization. Essential literature about the Mine War in Harlan, Kentucky, the West Virginia Mine Wars, and other key union-related events were part of their effort to make this history available to the people whose ancestors had lived it, in an environment where much of Appalachian working class history was difficult for people outside of an academic context to access.

Just as they were interested in keeping history alive, Appalachian Movement Press placed a high value on journalists working to expose industry and government corruption to the public. As they looked back for inspirational stories to tell from earlier generations, they also looked to their current day for those writers who were working tirelessly to keep history from repeating itself. In reprinting this modern journalism as inexpensive pamphlets, they continued to highlight the disastrous and, as they defined it, colonialist relationship between

Appalachian working class people, the coal industry, and the government officials with whom that industry colluded. Many of these activists were also exploring a newly expressed “Appalachian identity,” resisting mainstream stereotypes of the region as backward and challenging industrial capitalism for its responsibility in creating and maintaining systemic poverty in the region.

Appalachian Movement Press operated as part of what activist and librarian Yvonne Farley remembers as “an Appalachian intifada”: a growing network of leftist groups in Central Appalachia in the 1970s who were organizing around (or splintering from) federal War on Poverty initiatives, involved in actions against strip mining, battling corruption in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) union, and fighting for recognition and treatment of black lung disease (coal workers’ pneumoconiosis), among myriad other struggles. In order to function as these organizations invested in changing the region, they needed to be able to print their materials, and AMP consistently ran print jobs at cut-rate pricing for allies and associated organizations. [2]

Various for ten years, AMP workers would also print an impressive array of regionally-focused publications in-house, at rates which kept their shop, and these publications, viable on their shoestring budgets:

- *MAW: Magazine of Appalachian Women*, the first (and maybe only) feminist magazine of its kind in the region during the 1970s.
- *Mountain Call*, an upstart bi-monthly from Mingo County, WV which blended environmentalism and rural lifestyle concerns with working-class, unionist politics.
- *Green Revolution*, the national monthly magazine of the rural cooperative living organization, School of Living.
- *Peoples Appalachia*, the quarterly independent journal of the Peoples Appalachian Research Collective out of Morgantown, WV.
- *Mountain Life & Work*, the quarterly magazine of the Council of the Southern Mountains.

Generationally, Appalachian Movement Press stood apart from other movement presses across the US with their mutualistic relationship as a New Left printshop with Don West, an “Old Left” activist. Born in northern Georgia, West was a civil rights activist, an ordained Congregationalist minister who preached Social Gospel, a militant labor organizer with the Communist Party, an educator who was, by 1970, the forgotten co-founder of the Highlander Folk School, and an accomplished and published poet. AMP operated as West’s primary, independent publishing platform throughout the 1970s - already a revered figure regionally, and in his sixties by the time the young activists met him, he was often seen as the central figure guiding Appalachian Movement Press. Although their work in the region was widespread and they published many other authors, West’s philosophies and influence loomed so large that some joked that the Huntington printshop should have instead been called the “Don West Press.” [2]

“Going through those (AMP) publications and reading them,” writer Jim Branscome (*Annihilating the Hillbilly, The Case for Appalachian Studies*) told me during a phone interview at the beginning of 2019, “you would think that the mountains were on the edge of a revolution.” [3]

Where many of the better-documented movement presses in the US during this era operated out of large urban cities, Appalachian Movement Press was specific to its rural context in central Appalachia. As a printing outfit serving the Appalachian Left, they were indispensable in the region during a critical, revolutionary time in the struggle for human rights and environmental justice. Internationalist in their politics, AMP defined a specific regional and class-conscious audience and focus. For a decade and with very little sustaining income, AMP became an outlet for mountaineers to access investigative articles on regional corruption and previously suppressed working-class history, and served as the steadfast platform for the later work of Don West.

Their small activist printshop in Huntington, West Virginia may have never sparked a full-blown Appalachian Revolution, but Appalachian Movement Press succeeded in its mission of fostering the resistant culture at the heart of modern Appalachia.

-
1. John Hennen, “Struggle for Recognition: The Marshall University Students for a Democratic Society and the Red Scare in Huntington, 1965–1969”, *West Virginia History* 52 (1993): 127–47.
 2. Quoted in James J. Lorence, *A Hard Journey: The Life of Don West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
 3. James Branscome, interview by author via telephone, February 12, 2019. AMP republished Branscome’s firecracker essay *Annihilating the Hillbilly* in 1971, and kept it available in print consistently for several years.