

Men and Dust

By Adrienne Finelli

"There are mean things happenin' in this land"—the refrain from the first minute of "Men and Dust" is a timeless thesis. This perplexing and unforgettable short documentary was independently produced in 1940 by husband and wife team, Sheldon and Lee Dick. Their film is a poetic essay based on the findings of "The Tri-State Survey Committee" report that was funded by Leftist political group the National Committee for People's Rights chaired by artist, Rockwell Kent. Kent and members of the Committee first saw Sheldon's documentary photography of the mining communities of Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri at a 1939 exhibition on view at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City, and requested to feature thirty photographs in the survey to illustrate the conditions of the region.



*A frame enlargement shows two of the "hidden" victims of silicosis.
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

In a statement about these images, Rockwell Kent wrote, "Regardless of what photography can be, the photographs by Sheldon Dick of the Tri-State mining area and its people are not art: they are stark and vivid records of unvarnished facts. Therein lies their value." The same striking qualities of Sheldon's cinematography in "Men and Dust" are part of what makes this New Deal film so stirring, and its artistic merits are manifold. Sheldon and Lee Dick pushed the notions of the convergence of art and politics even among the most progressive circles. This film stood out in the 1940s and its unique and creative approach to documentary filmmaking is still evident today.

Sheldon was the son of Albert Blake Dick the founder of the successful A.B. Dick Company, then the world's largest mimeograph manufacturer. Sheldon absolved himself of his Chicago family business in exchange for an assured annuity that allowed him to pursue his passions of poetry, photography and travel. In addition, his affluence also permitted him to work for the Farm Security Administration as a photographer at a salary of one dollar per year. Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA photography program, reluctantly hired Sheldon and gave him assignments throughout the East Coast and Midwest.

In 1938, after Sheldon photographed the mining towns of Pennsylvania for the FSA, Stryker assigned him to cover zinc and lead mining in the Tri-State

area. Sheldon was so struck by the ruins of the landscape and emotionally affected by the plight of the workers that he wanted to return and produce a film for the FSA. Stryker did not approve his idea, and so Sheldon and Lee decided to finance their motion picture themselves.

"Men and Dust" is a difficult film to categorize—it is in part a poem, a public service announcement concerning the dangers of silicosis, an ecological polemic against mining practices, a plea for the triumph of humanity over industry, and part agitprop for the American Left. The film is an artistic type of protest, a document of conditions that are hidden from view of middle-class consumers as they buy the fresh coat of paint for their home or new toys for their children. The formal construction of "Men and Dust" presents the viewer with a multitude visual and aural perspectives, constantly shifting between sincere and cynical. It is this diffusion and duality that gives the film its remarkable power. Sheldon Dick's writing veers from poetry to journalism to ironic pastiche of the boilerplate lip service of big business and government agencies.

Lee's career in theater and film, and the experience of her directorial debut, "School" (1939) aided in her brilliant direction of the delivery and pacing of the

script and brought added power to Sheldon's spirited language. In the style of free verse, narration actors Will Geer, Storrs Haynes, Robert Porterfield and Eric Walz emphasize the contrasting tones of the oscillating stanzas. Short phrases create a mixture of poetic and practical, connection and detachment, idealism and skepticism. Fred Stewart's music and sound arrangement follows the shifting dynamics, in which the humming, sounds and song feel at times hopeful and at others haunting. The entirety of the film's soundscape echoes the content, as if to turn the findings of the "The Tri-State Survey Committee" into a regional ballad.

Other short films and newsreels spotlighted the silicosis epidemic of the American work place, but the Dicks' film expanded the focus to include not only the workers but also the children who played near the chat piles and the women who endured their labors in the midst of silica dust. Perhaps this is what caught the attention of first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and why the film made its official premiere in Joplin, Missouri as part of the "Tri-State Silicosis Conference" by invitation of Frances Perkins, U.S. Secretary of Labor. "Men and Dust" was also endorsed by unions and was screened outside traditional theater spaces — in private residences as political salons and in community halls. The film left its viewers demanding new legislation.

Sheldon and Lee Dick's film is filled with a bitterness and angst born of genuine concern for the appalling treatment of the laborers, and the conditions that stretched far beyond the mine and into the community. The mission of "Men and Dust" was to show the rest of the country, especially those with political power, the conditions of the region and to seek more justice and safety for all.

"Men and Dust" is a prophetic film with a tragic outcome. Decades before the region became EPA Tar Creek Superfund Site, Sheldon and Lee Dick witnessed the environmental impacts on soil, groundwater and air and showed how that squandered the quality of life for all that called this place home. Their film is a document of a particular place in a particular time, but it also transcends region and era to look deeper into issues of social and environmental justice and the struggles of the working class. As of 2015, Picher, Oklahoma is a ghost town and it is now even more important to preserve "Men and Dust" as a record of this place that is no more.

Serious concern and passionate anger fueled the making of this short independent film, Sheldon and Lee Dick reacted to dreadful conditions by turning journalism into a poetic act that affected real change in their day. "Men and Dust" is a powerful and complex love song to fight for revolution beyond our own backyards.

With deep gratitude to my friend—scholar, writer and activist William "Buzz" Alexander for his writings and teachings. Additional thanks to Dan F. Friedlaender for his research contributions and to Bryan Boyce for lending a keen eye.

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The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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