

Has Controversial Coal Baron Don Blankenship Made a New Home in East Tennessee?

By Betty Bean

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It's usually unalloyed good news when Tennessee industrial recruiters sweet-talk a baron of industry into relocating to the Volunteer State, but it's tough to find any Tennessean who's ready to roll out the welcome mat for Don Blankenship.

In fact, it's tough to find anyone who is willing to speak on the record about the former CEO of Massey Energy who dropped out of sight after he was forced to retire a year ago, just days after he was dubbed the "dark lord of coal country" in an extensive *Rolling Stone* [expose](#). This month, reports have been circulating that he has relocated his home base to Johnson City, Tenn.

If his name sounds familiar, that's because it should. Massey Energy Company was the country's fourth-largest producer of coal by revenue and the largest coal producer in central Appalachia. Most importantly, it was on Blankenship's watch April 4, 2010, that 29 miners perished in a methane gas-triggered coal dust explosion 1,000 feet underground at the Upper Big Branch Mine in Raleigh County, W. Va.

On Nov. 30, 2011, the *Charleston* (West Virginia) *Gazette's* award-winning environmental reporter Ken Ward Jr. got the attention of Tennesseans with a post to his [Coal Tattoo blog](#):

"Without a doubt, one question I get asked more than any other is: 'What's Don Blankenship up to these days?'

"One thing I know for sure is that Blankenship testified under oath a few months ago that he now lives in Johnson City, Tenn. I haven't been able to confirm persistent rumors that he's back in the coal business in some capacity."

More interest was piqued on Dec. 8 when the Associated Press reported that Blankenship filed paperwork for McCoy Coal Group Inc. of Belfry, Ky., a tiny coal-country hamlet in Pike County on the Virginia line, a couple of counties north from the point where Tennessee, Virginia, and Kentucky meet and easy driving distance from Johnson City.

Knoxville lawyer Dawn Coppock, leader of an uphill, five-years-and-counting battle to ban mountaintop removal mining in Tennessee, is the only source on any side of the coal discussion whom this reporter has found willing talk about Blankenship on the record. She's heard that he's moved to Tennessee, and unsurprisingly, she's not calling the Welcome Wagon:

"I'm curious as to why he feels welcome here," she says. "He's worn out his welcome in the most pro-mining state in the country. I'm puzzled by it."

Saying he's worn out his welcome in West Virginia is probably an understatement. State and federal investigators there called the Upper Big Branch disaster entirely preventable, blaming a corporate culture that valued production over worker safety.

The United Mine Workers of America called it industrial homicide.

Blankenship, on the other hand, told ABC News, "There's 42,000 people a year killed on the highways. So there's dangers in everything, and we're trying to minimize that danger as best we can."

He eventually reversed his loose-lipped ways and opted for the 5th Amendment rather than repeat his claims under oath. Last Dec. 31, at the age of 60, he strapped on a golden parachute and exited the scene with his pockets crammed full of benefits like a \$2.7 million up-front cash payment, a secretary, an office, medical benefits, an \$18,241 monthly "salary continuation" good for 10 years, millions in deferred benefits, and an assortment of other goodies including one he has apparently abandoned—free housing for life in a company-owned mansion in Sprigg, W.Va. The following month, Alpha Natural Resources of Abingdon, Va., bought Massey Energy for \$8.5 billion.

Earlier this month, Alpha entered into a legal agreement to pay out \$210 million for Massey transgressions, including \$46 million in criminal restitution to the victims' families, and \$33 million in penalties for Massey's violations (\$11 million of which is specifically for Upper Big Branch violations). Reports suggest that individual criminal prosecutions will follow.

Coppock, who keeps a close watch on the coal industry, points out that in 2010, another prominent West Virginian, Ranger Energy Investments owner Jim Justice, bought National Coal of Knoxville, owner of Zeb Mountain, Tennessee's only mountaintop removal operation.

Justice, who also owns the Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia (an ultra-luxury hotel/national historic landmark equipped with an Eisenhower-era secret underground bunker meant for members of Congress in case of a nuclear attack), fired all 155 National Coal employees a month after he took control of the company.

"They're losing their jobs in Tennessee and it ain't because of me," Coppock says,

referring to her opponents' oft-repeated claims that her anti-mountaintop removal efforts will cost miners their jobs.

She has a question about Justice and Blankenship that may (or may not) be rhetorical: "The coal industry is like a bunch of termites. They've gotten most of the easy coal in West Virginia and Kentucky, the two least regulated states, and they're coming down the plateau. ... First Justice and now Blankenship—and you see this trend. Are they all gonna move down here?"

She also says she can't help but notice that Blankenship's alleged new hometown is in the district represented by her fiercest legislative opponent, Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey.

Earl Bandy is the director of the Knoxville Field Office of the Office of Surface Mining, which is responsible for permitting, inspecting, and enforcement actions in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia, and runs the Big Stone Gap Area Office in Virginia as well. He says he hasn't heard anything about Blankenship's whereabouts.

Neither has Dave Fortner, a manager with Iron Properties in Dayton, which is developing two deep mines and a coal-cleaning facility in Rhea County that should start producing coal in late 2013 and be in full operation in 2014, creating more than 200 jobs (which could nearly double the number of mine-related jobs in Tennessee).

Iron Properties, by all reports, is working hard to abide by the rules and is meeting with neighbors and even potential critics like environmental watchdog Save Our Cumberland Mountains.

"We've just gotta make sure they don't have any more bad experiences," Fortner says. "We'll just be good neighbors."

Addendum - Dawn Coppock's interview statements were incompletely presented; Ms. Coppock also said that she was not aware of any direct association between Lt. Gov. Ramsey and former Massey CEO, Don Blankenship, and that without direct information, a connection should not be inferred. Ms. Coppock further voiced praise for responsible TN mining companies, such as Iron Properties, who mine Tennessee coal by methods other than mountain top removal.



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