KUED Senior Producer Ken Verdoia and Associate Producer Nancy Green discuss the challenges, rewards and memorable moments of Fire in the Hole. The Emmy Award-winning duo has teamed to produce six full length documentaries for public television, examining Utah, the West and the nation in different eras. Fire in the Hole is Verdoia's twenty-first documentary for public television.

What is the derivation of the program's title, *Fire in the Hole*?

Ken:
Anyone who has ever served in the military recognizes the call "Fire in the Hole!" as a warning that an explosive charge has been placed, and is ready to go off. But the military actually borrowed the use from miners who used dynamite to loosen ore underground. It was very dangerous business in the early days, and the "blasters" were well respected – if they were good at their job! Once the dynamite had been set and the blasting caps and fuses put in place, the call would shouted out down the mine shaft: "There is fire in the hole!" Namely, get to safety. . .a blast is coming.

Nancy:
And the title also reflects the emotional intensity captured in the program. This was a time of great conflict. There really was a sense that a blast was coming in the form of an industrial showdown. And that the passions and events playing out between mine owners and miners were set to explode.

How did you get started on this project? What gave you the first idea to pursue the concept of "mine wars in the West"?

Ken:
The deepest roots of the project reach back to when we were completing our documentary series on Utah gaining admission as a state, **Utah: The Struggle for Statehood**, back in 1995. Our research took us up to the year 1900, and we found ourselves coming across repeated references to labor conflicts and outright violence that was occurring in the region's mining centers. At the time we mentally "filed" the information, knowing it was a subject we would want to return to in detail. When we rejoined the research in 1998 we were immediately impressed with how dramatic the conflicts were. . .and how the people of the time were absolutely uncertain on how the conflicts would turn out.

Nancy:
At first, I wasn't sure if the storyline would be there. The topic was so broad and it played out in so many locations. But as Ken and I worked on the story together, the connections became apparent, and we realized we had quite the story filled with conflict and struggle.

In programs like Utah: The Struggle for Statehood, Brigham Young, and Joe Hill, you've used history as a means of exploring how we have emerged in a more contemporary setting...as a nation and as a state. Does *Fire in the Hole* explore the same connection?

Nancy:
Oh, definitely. It's obvious that we never just arrive in the present, newly born without any influence from the past. As a country, as a region, as individuals, we are shaped by the people and events that precede us. **Fire in the Hole** explores how the relationship between working men and women and their employers was forged in this country. It takes place during a time when no one was sure what that relationship was going to look like. As I sit here today, I am a direct beneficiary of that struggle. The things we take for granted today-- safety laws, a minimum working wage, the 40 hour work week--all these stem from earlier labor struggles. And the issues that people grappled with a hundred years ago are still relevant for us today, as we enter the 21st Century. How will new technology shape our jobs? How do I secure health benefits? What responsibilities do workers, owners, and the government have to each other? These are questions that are timeless.

Ken:
Absolutely. Too often we treat history like it is some "dead letter". . .that it is so apart from our contemporary setting that it has no relevance. If you look at the issues that form the core of the era in **Fire in the Hole**, you find

issues that are quite familiar to those of us moving into a new century.

How does a producing partnership like this work?

Ken:
We've likened the partnership to a marriage. There are times when you are certain that divorce is the best option!

But, in all honesty, over the years we have come to understand and appreciate each other's strengths on a project like this. Nancy has a much stronger visual sense. I am drawn to the storyline.

Nancy:
Divorce! How about just a trial separation? Actually, the last six years working with Ken have been great for me. I have learned so much from him about story telling and project management, and also about having great passion and heart. Our working relationship has also changed over the years. At first I would deal with visual and technical issues and Ken would focus on the overall vision and storyline, but now I think there's more of a blending of our roles. There's a great sense of collaboration.

Ken:
But the partnership is not just two people. **Fire in the Hole** is a rather extraordinary example of teamwork toward a common goal. From Bill Brussard's exceptional photography of the region, to the audio work of Kevin Sweet and Will Montoya, to the support of Elizabeth Southwell and Susan Doi — who literally guided our efforts through every corner of the region over a year-long production period. Great funding support from long-time allies of public television like USWest, the R. Harold Burton Foundation and the Lawrence T. and Janet T. Dee Foundation. And the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provided support as well. So. . .the partnerships run deep throughout the project.

The program is filled with near-mythic figures. Which ones made the strongest impressions?

Ken:
Big Bill Haywood, for one. "Mother" Jones for another.

Nancy:
Definitely Mother Jones. She was an amazing woman, and quite the character. Here was this woman who looked more like your grandmother than an union organizer, and she was a hell-raiser. When she came to the Southern Colorado Coal fields in 1913, she was 83, but she had more fire and spunk than anyone half her age. She rallied miners to strike, lead protest marches, and generally tried to be as much of a thorn in the side of the Governor and the military as she could. And the miners loved her. They adored her. But I think her greatest contribution was being a role model for women. This was a time when women didn't even have the vote. And most of the women Mother Jones spoke to were considered "poor, ignorant foreigners." But Mother Jones told them they had power, that they could make a difference. And they listened and they became transformed.

Ken: Haywood is memorable just for his absolutely blunt, uncompromising view of the world. A view that was so unpopular at the time that he was reviled from the White House to the local pulpit. (See our section on "Big" Bill Haywood).

How long did it take to produce the program?

Ken: From first idea? Five years. But midway through the process we decided to break out the story of Joe Hill for a more detailed, individual program. [That documentary will air nationally on PBS in the Fall of 2000. See the accompanying Joe Hill website for additional information.]

Nancy:
But actual pre-production, the fieldwork and research, started nearly two years ago. It's amazing how many books and archives you need to delve through to produce a show like this. We spent most of the spring and summer of 1999 on the road with our field crew, Bill Brussard, Kevin Sweet, and Erik Nielsen shooting in the different mining towns. And then the fun part began. Organizing, cataloging and logging all of the tape–shot by shot. This task fell in the capable hands of Elizabeth Southwell. Once the research and shooting are finished, writing begins. This is where we lock Ken in his office for months and don't feed him ‘till he has a script. Finally, there's the editing process. We start out creating a rough cut where we weave all of the elements of story, video, and audio together. It took about two months to get the rough cut together. And we spent about another two months polishing and tweaking the video and audio.

Ken:
A difficult story to write, because of all of the different components to the story. In effect, you are balancing fifteen different "chapters" of the story. And, unlike a book, you must be finished to a length that is timed to one-tenth of a second over two hours. It requires quite a bit of give and take between the competing story lines.

Any memorable aspects of the production?

Nancy:
I'll never forget descending into a mine in Cripple Creek and really getting the sense that this place was deep in the earth. The mine was damp, and water was running off the rock walls, and I was amazed that hundreds of men once worked down there..

Ken:
My favorite part of the process was the opportunity to go to corners of the Rocky Mountain region that are a decided step off the most familiar paths. The small towns of the West have a unique and wonderful sense of community and history. We found so many people who wanted to share their family stories of coming to the region for mining over one hundred years ago. And it was very rewarding to sit with people who had newly arrived in these same towns and did not understand the role of mining or the conflicts that had played out. We literally traveled from the Canadian border to the Mexican border. . .from the Rockies to the Sierras. . .and dozens of places in between. An extended opportunity to travel this region "close to the ground" is a blessing. It reminds you of the unparalleled beauty of our region. Whether it was a sunrise over Lake Couer D'Alene in Idaho or a sunset viewed through a saguaro cactus stand in Arizona. . .the beauty was breathtaking.

Of course, it wasn't always easy to enjoy the beauty! Like the night Director of Photography Bill Brussard had to run for his life in Nevada, carrying his video camera and tripod, as a steam engine locomotive barreled down on him. Bill was trying to get the "perfect" nighttime shot of a train heading straight down the tracks toward the camera. To get the shot, he stayed a little too long on the tracks. . .before finally bailing out with his gear. You'll recognize the shot in the program. What you won't hear or see is the mad scramble as the train raced passed!

There is quite a variety of music in this program. . .

Ken:
To say the least. We worked with a number of different musical contributors, and kept them stylistically and instrumentally apart from each other. We gave each of them a realm to work in, and then asked them to capture an emotional range that would support the storytelling in the documentary. Dan Waldis continues his long association with public television by composing and performing the original piano music for the program. Frank Jarvis and Carol Dalrymple, who made a wonderful contribution to the KUED documentary **Glen Canyon: A Dam, Water, and the West**, return with some delicate yet powerful work on guitar and violin. They were backed by Steve Wesson on bass. And we also benefitted from a marvelous duet by pianist Susanna Graff Karrington and cellist Steve Emerson on the moving Gabriel Faure composition, Elegie. Their various interpretations of this classic work appear throughout the program, reinforcing themes of conflict and loss. Each section of **Fire in the Hole** formed a unique story, so each needed a unique sound. At the same time, the stories needed to have a linking character. The music from these talented performers helps achieve that end.

Finally, our location audio engineer Kevin Sweet discovered some marvelous old "Edison" recordings while he was doing research in Butte, Montana. Not only do the recordings have an unmistakable sound from a bygone era, but the content of the songs contained pointed references to "troublemakers" who should "go back where you came from." A great find by Kevin, who always manages to discover unique sounds that make documentaries come alive.

What is next for you both?

Ken:
Separate vacations. . .

Nancy:
Perhaps Bermuda. Actually I'm heading out to Wells, Nevada to work with Hal Cannon and Taki Telenondis of the Western Folk Life Center. We're working on a short piece exploring why Cowboys are compelled to write poetry. I'm also developing a project on hospice care in Utah.

Ken:
I'll be focusing most of my work on our election coverage this year. We've got some very innovative programs in

mind, and an impressive new web site that will feature one-stop-shopping for voter information. In terms of historical programming, KUED is currently at work producing two fascinating programs looking at the Great Homes of Utah. Produced by Elizabeth Searles and Sally Shaum, the programs will feature the architecture, working life and human stories of some of the state's most notable homes. The first two are Brigham Young's Beehive House and the Thomas Kearns mansion. . .now doing service as the Governor's Executive Residence.