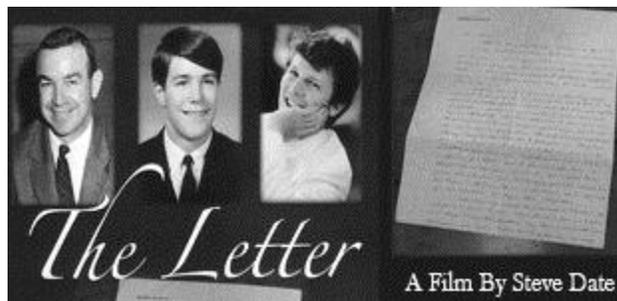


the letter ~ the film by: steve date

Introduction

A year after the arrival of [the letter from my father](#), my wife, Hilary, and I went to Coalwood to meet up with the woman, Emily Sue Buckberry, who had so suddenly reappeared in my life, and to attend the [2009 October Sky Festival](#), an annual event to celebrate the town's fame thanks to [Homer Hickam](#), his book *Rocket Boys* and the 1999 movie *October Sky*. The coal mines were shut down years ago and the town's new owner, a natural gas company, couldn't care less about the place or its history.



Coalwood is sadly falling in on itself and slowly being sucked down into the deep shafts that once led to the black gold. The Clubhouse where I stayed is still standing and, although it's now too dangerous to go inside, I could see the windows of my corner room on the second floor.



The Clubhouse, Coalwood, WV, ~ August 1968

Back Row: Zachary Fleming, James "Muss" Alger, Marty Valeri, Pete Burnette

Front Row : Charles "Tafon" Hylton, Herbert "Hub" Alger, Casey "Long Ass" Gauntt, Gene "Ringo" Kirk

My mind was flooded with memories, most of them good. There were over four hundred people at the festival and Emily, who grew up next door in War, introduced us to practically everyone of them. Some of the folks said they remembered me, uniformly asked "What are you doing here?" and were less than satisfied with my reply "I worked here in 1968." They already knew that.

I had no intention of talking about the real reason I was there, [The Letter](#), until Emily introduced us to Noni Mauck.



(L to R) Noni Mauck, Casey Gauntt, Emily Sue Buckberry, 2009 October Sky Festival, Coalwood, WV

Her dad ran the town for Olga Coal Company around the time I was there and she, too, was incredulous as to why I had come all the way from San Diego. Emily nudged me in the arm and said "Oh, go ahead Casey, tell her about the letter." And so I did. It was surreal talking about that summer, my dad and our son while standing only a few yards away from the very place where Emily had found the letter forty one years earlier, and we were all crying by the time I finished the story. Noni said "There is a man you have to meet! Wait right here—please—I'm going to go get him and bring him over." And that's how I met Steve Date.

Steve is a 5th grade elementary school teacher from Minneapolis who first came to Coalwood in 2005 with a group of teachers who had been reading Homer's *Rocket Boys* in their classrooms and became enraptured with the idea of Coalwood. This was his fifth [October Sky Festival](#). Steve is a couple of years younger than me and I was instantly impressed with his depth, humbleness and unequivocal sincerity. He told me that after his first visit to Coalwood, he decided to make a film about the town—only problem was he didn't have a movie camera and had never made a film before. But he didn't let that deter him. Four years later he had completed [Welcome To Coalwood](#), a wonderful, insightful, one hour documentary about the town, its rich culture and resilient people who toiled in the mines and the spotlight that was cast upon on this tiny town thanks to Homer's books and the movie *October Sky*. [Steve Date Films](#) Steve was handing out copies of his recently completed film at the festival.

Noni had given Steve a thumbnail summary of the story of the letter, and he asked if I would mind telling the story while he filmed it. He found a quiet spot behind the old apartments a couple of blocks down Main Street from the Clubhouse and I told him the story. No rehearsal—one take.



Steve Date filming Casey Gauntt in back of the Apartments in Coalwood, 2009 October Sky Festival

Steve came to Solana Beach nine months later and spent 4th of July weekend with us. He filmed me reading from the original letter from my dad and Hilary talking about going with Jimmy to see the movie *October Sky*. We had a lot of time to talk about a lot of things and during the course of that long weekend we became good friends.

Steve showed a rough cut of the film to one of his friends, Anthony Titus, an accomplished classical guitarist and professor of music in Minneapolis. Anthony asked if he could write some music for the film and the songs you hear, *Coalwood Theme* and *Father and Son*, are his original compositions.



Anthony Titus: classical guitarist and professor of music in Minneapolis



Anthony Titus - January, 2004

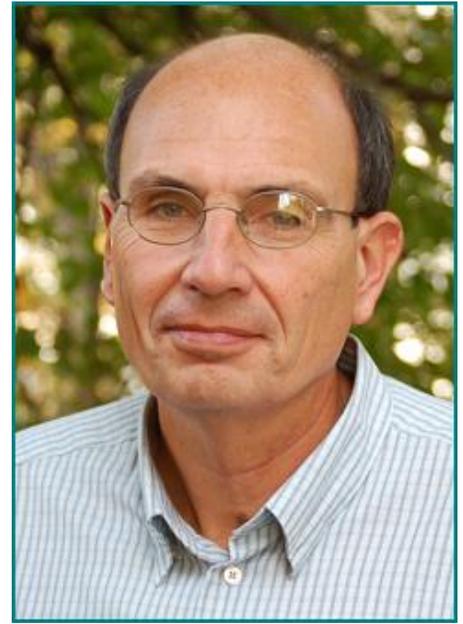
Hundreds of hours of editing later, Steve presented our family with this incredible gift: his film *The Letter*. I really can't believe he did it. This isn't the easiest of subject matters—understatement—and this wasn't simply a brief brush—in and out— with our family and our pain. Steve took the leap from the high-dive and became completely submerged with us in our new reality for over eighteen months. Steve tells me he's a better man for the experience. I can't speak to that, not knowing him before, but I know this: I don't know a better man than Steve Date.

Our gratitude to Steve and Anthony is only exceeded by our deep admiration for these men. It is a privilege and an honor to share with you their work and, we are sure will agree, it is [beautiful](#).

"The Letter – THE FILM"



Visit our website: WriteMeSomethingBeautiful.com to watch this film.



Steve Date is an elementary teacher in the Minneapolis Public Schools. While making [Welcome To Coalwood](#) from 2006 to 2009, Steve also began doing freelance videos and written pieces for [MinnPost](#), an online news website in Minnesota, and has produced over 50 video reports over the past four years. Steve has produced several short films for the Minnesota Historical Society's Greatest Generation Project and 1968 Project film festivals as well as The Filmanthropist Project. He has also produced several promotional films for various organizations in the Twin Cities including the Minnesota Zoo, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and the Minnesota Council of Churches. To view an archive of Steve's work, please visit [See To Sea Productions](#). He also has a blog called [Trying To Pay Attention](#). Steve and his wife, Sandy, live in Minneapolis. They have two daughters: Emily, lives in Rochester, Minnesota and Lauren in Chicago.

Anthony Titus earned his B.A. from North Carolina School of the Arts and his M.A. from San Diego State University studying under members of the Los Romero's guitar quartet. Among the recitals and concertos Mr. Titus has performed throughout the United States and Europe, highlights include: a performance for Miguel de la Madrid Huratado (former President of Mexico), and for Patricio Silva Echenique (Chilean Ambassador to the United States) and premiering the Variations on the theme by the Doors by Hiram Titus for guitar and string quartet. Teaching distinctions include several student winners in both the Schubert Club and Thursday Musical competitions since 1988. As a natural extension to his development in audio/video design Titus has also adapted a college guitar curriculum for the blind with M.T.A.T. (Multi-Tracking Audio Transcription) a procedure of his own design that translates musical notation.

Mr. Titus is presently faculty in music at Inver-Hills Community College where he has recently co-developed a curriculum for a new A.F.A degree in Music Industry. He also serves as music faculty at Metro State University and at The University of St. Thomas.

