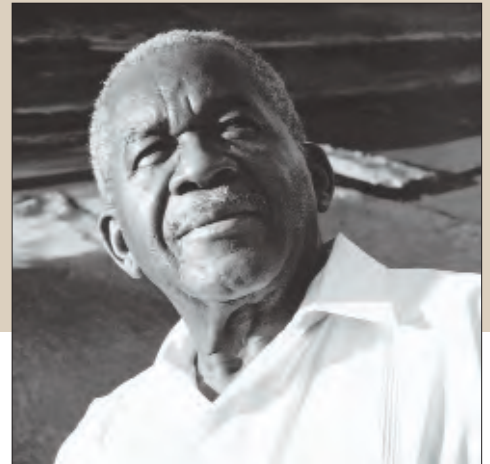


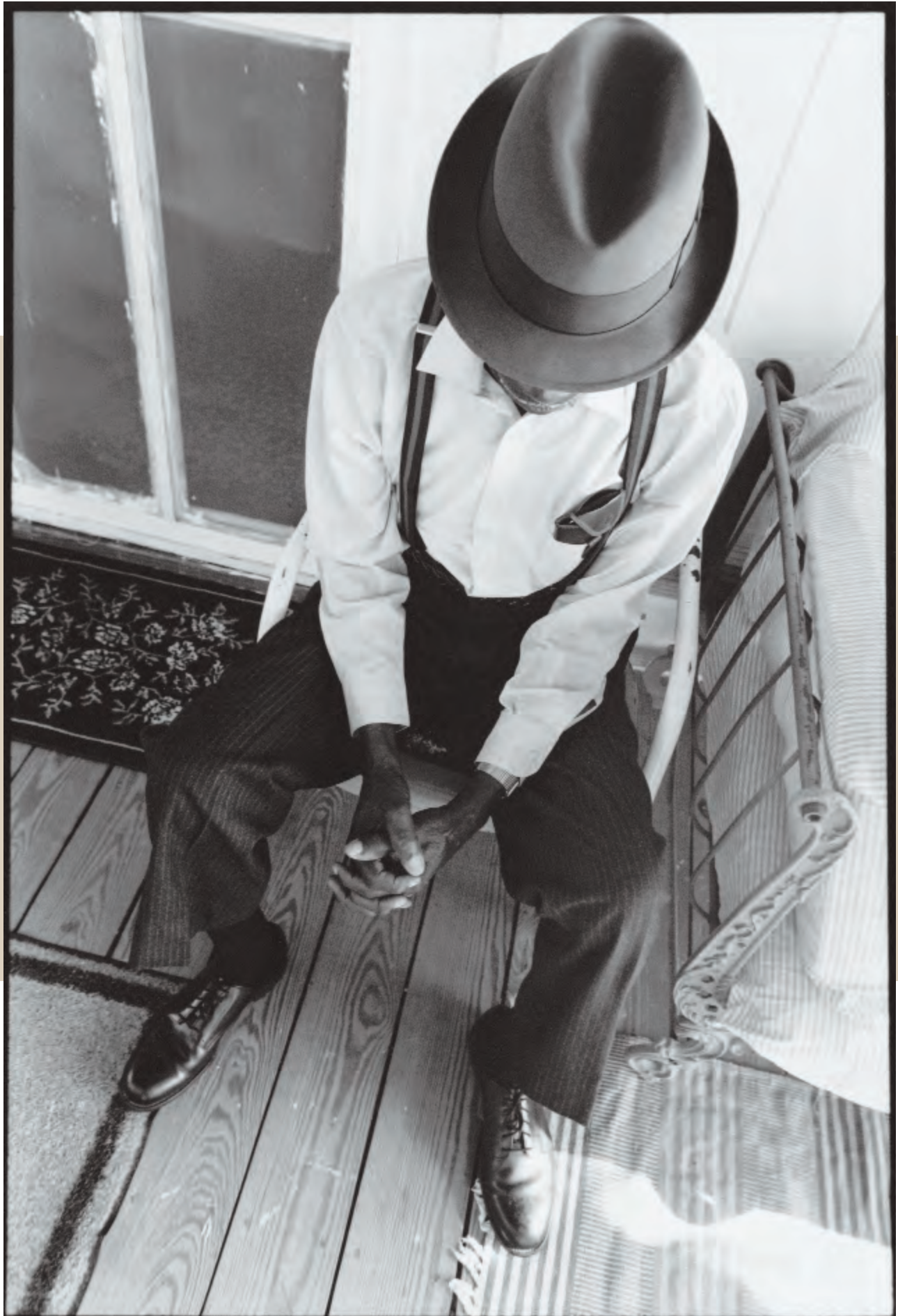
Corapeake

On a visit to a friend's hometown, photographer Kendall Messick discovered not only faces and images he felt compelled to preserve on film, but also a community with which he identified deeply.

by Lydia Lyle Gibson



Kendall Messick's documentary film, *Corapeake*, combines recorded voices with still images of the town's current and former residents in works titled (left to right) *Miss Virginia*, *Effie Testifying*, *Sidney Parker*, and *Sunboy*.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF KENDALL MESSICK



Like many of the aging Corapeake residents in Messick's documentary that have passed on, aspects of the landscape have also changed or disappeared. The sign (above) that served for many years as the primary indication that you had entered the town of Corapeake has been replaced with a newer, modern equivalent.

Aunt Sarah was the first person in Corapeake to take a shine to Kendall Messick — the first to open up her home, spread a blanket on the couch, and feed him corncakes and pancakes and buttermilk biscuits, fried chicken and watermelon-rind pickles. “All these things she would labor over,” he says. “She was just warmth and love and tenderness.”

A telecommunications up-and-comer living in Long Island, New York, with a corporate-ladder life, Messick first came to Corapeake — a blink-and-you'll-miss-it crossroads town sprouting cornfields and cotton rows and clapboard houses on the western edge of the Great Dismal Swamp — as a favor to a friend. Brenda Parker Hunt had a family tree full of aging relatives in Corapeake and very few photographs to remember them by; an aspirant

photographer, Messick had been taking night classes at New York's International Center of Photography and School of Visual Arts. “One day Brenda asked me to come down to Corapeake with her for a visit,” Messick recalls. “And she told me to bring my cameras.”

He did, and on a Friday night in October 1995, he and Hunt arrived on the Corapeake doorstep of her mother's older sister, Sarah Eure.

A homecoming

Messick and Hunt had become inseparable friends at Wake Forest University nine years earlier when, as a 38-year-old sophomore, Hunt realized she would need a Spanish tutor.

“They gave me a whole list of names and numbers, and I called them all,” she says. Messick was the only one who called back. “It was just one of those natural friendships, and we bonded immediately.”



One of the seminal figures in the documentary project who epitomized the Corapeake community, Sarah Eure opened her home to Hunt and Messick during their many visits to Corapeake. She died in 2002 at the age of 84.

They were an odd pair of friends: a 21-year-old white kid and a black woman 17 years his senior. “We got a few looks,” Messick says. “It didn’t bother us.”

He graduated in 1987 and moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and then to Brooklyn, New York; Hunt stayed at WFU to get a master’s degree in counseling. By 1995, Hunt had moved north, too, working as a counselor and

white — scratch a living from corn, cotton, tobacco, peanuts, and timber, while young people grow up and look elsewhere for jobs — to Norfolk’s naval yards, Suffolk’s peanut factory, and beyond. “It’s the kind of place that has one sign and a post office and a general store,” Hunt says. “When somebody had a baby, people came and cooked and cleaned and did the washing, so the mother didn’t have to do anything

when I felt afraid or unsafe,” Hunt recalls. “There was always somebody’s lap I could crawl into and go to sleep, or somebody who would feed me, take care of me — or discipline me. When I got off the school bus every morning, one of my cousins or brothers would take me by the hand and lead me to my class.”

To Messick, Hunt’s stories sounded “strangely familiar.” They reminded him of his grandfather, Willie Gray Davis, a R.J. Reynolds Tobacco traveling salesman born and raised in western North Carolina. “Granddaddy came from a big family — nine brothers and sisters who survived to adulthood,” Messick says. “He told stories about being pulled out of school to go to the fields to work and about making sure you got to the dinner table on time because there were so many mouths to feed.” Each year, Messick’s grandfather, who died in 1990, would drive the family from Delaware — where he had settled and where Messick was raised — to reunions in North Carolina. “And at the first sign of red clay, he’d say, ‘I’m home.’”

A similar feeling took hold of Messick when he and Hunt stepped out of her car in Corapeake. “All of a sudden, everything clicked,” Messick says. Right away, he started taking pictures: of the setting sun, clothes on the line, a little boy standing absently on a porch. He met dozens of Hunt’s aunts and uncles and cousins and began photographing them, too. “I probably shot 20 or 30 rolls of film in those first four days.”

Photos and fragments

In the seven years that followed, he shot thousands of photos of Corapeake’s African-American elders (many of them Hunt’s relatives) and spent countless hours recording their memories. During regular visits to the town, he collected artifacts — a church fan, a funeral program, a lady’s hat, a peanut sack, three tattered jackets, a scrap of wood — eventually incorporating them into a multimedia exhibit. Also included were two scrapbooks Messick had assembled year by year, pasting pictures next to miscellaneous documents and transcribing stories by hand. Framing



One of several small community churches attended by the African-American residents of Corapeake, Zion Tabernacle Baptist Church has an active youth choir. The older generation, determined to instill in its youth a foundation built on faith and worship, encourages participation.

assistant professor at the Community College of Philadelphia.

A Corapeake native, Hunt had moved away at age eight when her parents, a domestic worker and a longshoreman, found better work in Philadelphia. Afterward, Hunt spent summers at Aunt Sarah’s house, helping tend the garden and playing with her cousins and her brothers.

“I still say the happiest time of my life was when I was seven years old,” she says. “I thought Corapeake was the whole world.”

A collection of small farms and smaller houses laid out among the swampland and piney forests just south of the Virginia border, Corapeake proceeds at much the same pace it did when the first European settlers arrived in 1650. Farmers — both black and

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but be a mother.” Everybody knew everybody, and children knew they could get supper at a neighbor’s house as easily as at their own.

“There was never a time growing up



Messick's grandfather, Willie Gray Davis (fourth from right), was one of 10 children who lived into adulthood. They gathered for this photo (circa 1940s) with their respective spouses and their father, Richard Thomas Davis of Winston-Salem (far right), Messick's great-grandfather.

the whole exhibit were collages made from newspaper fragments he'd peeled off the walls of a collapsed house. "People used to use newspaper as wallpaper," Messick says. "I wanted to re-create that." The exhibit was most recently shown at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Together, Messick and Hunt also produced an hour-long documentary, splicing his still photos of Corapeake old-timers with recordings of their stories and songs: Virginia Gomes recalling that, as a child, she used to bite the heads off butterflies; Hollis Creecy offering a proud account of Blackjack Gun Club exploits; James Lee Knight telling how he sometimes skipped school with his friends to spend the day in a pile of pine needles. Doris Wilson remembered seeing her little brother die of diphtheria in her father's arms. Glendale Boone described crouching beneath the local juke joint's slatted floor, collecting coins that had dropped from dancers' pockets. Others recalled slaughtered hogs, tobacco worms, and long days spent harvesting 150 pounds of cotton.

"I always gravitated toward the older people," Messick says. "Our elderly are so many times tossed aside. At family gatherings, everybody comes and kisses them hello and goodbye, but how often does the younger generation engage them in conversation?"

Messick's headlong immersion into Corapeake culture made him



As a natural evolution of the documentary project, Messick began to chronicle the funerals of individuals who had shared their stories with him, capturing images like *Grace*, in which an armed forces representative has just presented a folded American flag to the family of World War II veteran Charles Goodman.

something of a celebrity among its African-American residents.

“Everybody fell in love with Kendall,” Hunt says — although at first they didn’t know what to make of a white man so eager to take their photograph and listen to them talk. “After awhile they would see him coming and just start cooking.”

They saw him often. For years, he and Hunt drove down to Corapeake every few months, packing long weekends full of interviews, photo shoots, family

dinners, family funerals, house-to-house visits, and Sunday services at the Zion Tabernacle Baptist Church. One Christmas they shared Aunt Sarah’s house with 15 other relatives. “On every trip, as we drove past places, I would tell him stories,” Hunt says: a close call with a snake in a fruit tree, the cold floor of her childhood bedroom, the cobblers her mother used to make from blackberries Hunt gathered by the side of the road. “All these wonderful stories that I had somehow tucked away in my mind,

and then all of a sudden they were there again.”

For Messick, the project took on a sense of urgency as soon as he snapped his first photos. Long before he knew precisely what he was making, he understood why he was making it. This wasn’t just art; it was preservation. As his attachment to Corapeake deepened, it was that work that drove him. “Every time someone I knew there would pass away — and some were completely unexpected — it just emphasized the criticality of getting to the next person,” he says. “All this, all of Corapeake, is leaving us, and sooner rather than later.”

Struck by similarities


Corapeake’s funerals also spurred Messick to embark on a parallel exhibit of his own family history, centered on Winston-Salem. Tentatively titled “Piedmont,” it will bring together his portraits from family reunions and recorded interviews with uncles and cousins and elderly relatives. He’s already begun collecting artifacts: newspaper clippings of baptisms, weddings, and funerals; a great-aunt’s scrapbook dating back to 1935; and another great-aunt’s 1970s genealogy, complete with transcribed stories from long-dead relatives. His cousin, Tom Davis, founded Piedmont Airlines with one puddle-jumper in 1948, and “before he died, I recorded him talking about building model airplanes as an asthmatic child who couldn’t go outside,” he says. “That’s where his love of flying began.” Messick’s great-grandfather Richard Davis, a farmer,



Messick’s grandfather worked as a traveling salesman for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in the 1920s, taking his pushcart filled with tobacco products for sale to his territory in the Chesapeake Bay area of Virginia.

built Winston-Salem's Crystal Lake public swimming pool in the 1920s, and Messick's grandfather spent adolescent summers working as a lifeguard there. "I have his knit wool bathing suit," Messick notes. He also has his grandfather's photographic slides and eight-millimeter film, a treasury of 1950s family snapshots and movies of North Carolina landscape shot from the open window of a moving car.

The differences between his and Hunt's family histories, he says, are clear — white and black, privilege and poverty — but he's more struck by the similarities. "We're talking about the same state, similar geography, people who were strong Baptists, farmers, close families. The stories they tell about day-to-day life, what was important — church, friends, work, juke joints, and holidays — these are the same. The values are just the same."

Back in Corapeake, most of the two-dozen residents appearing in Messick and Hunt's documentary have died since it first aired in 2002. Aunt Sarah's funeral was four years ago. She was 85. "It was hard to go back for that," Hunt says. Since then, Hunt has mostly stayed away from Corapeake. But Aunt Sarah's children — 10 in all — return often. "They open up her house and have a lot of folks over. They're just not ready to let go." The documentary, she says, keeps them from having to. "I can't think of a better testimony to the place where I lived and the people I knew." 

Lydia Lyle Gibson spent many childhood days on her grandparents' farm in Sampson County.

to know more

For more information on the Corapeake exhibition and film, visit www.corapeake.com.

Messick's new film and exhibition, *The Projectionist*, will be exhibited at Wake Forest University's Charlotte and Philip Hanes Art Gallery from February 8 to March 18, 2007. The exhibit tells the story of a man enraptured by old-fashioned movie palaces. Visit www.theprojectionist.net for details.