



PROJECTS

PICTURES AND THEIR THOUSAND WORDS

"Corapeake:" A documentary film in photographs by Dana Rouse

www.kmessick.com
www.corapeake.com

Still images accompanied by a narrative voice-over are an effective device in documentary films in bridging distances in time and familiarizing persons long gone. *Corapeake* is just such a film, an evocative portrait of a tiny rural North Carolina village, rich in local flavor, custom and folklore.

Corapeake is the work of filmmaker Kendall Messick who, through his stunning black-and-white still portraits, imbues the village inhabitants with poignancy, humor and the texture of lives lived. The exclusive use of still images to portray the subjects might appear a stylistic choice, but, in fact, Messick had the idea to make a film long after taking the portraits.

In 1995, asked by his best friend, Brenda Parker Hunt, to join her on a trip home to photograph her aging relatives, Messick gladly packed his cameras and went to Corapeake, a dot on the map surrounded by farmland and the Great Dismal Swamp. From the moment he set foot in the home of his friend's Aunt Sarah, whose warm welcome and buttermilk biscuits won him over, he was infatuated with Corapeake. "The people were the most generous and gracious I had ever met," he

says, "and I shot countless pictures of them."

The film itself is made up primarily of black-and-white still images of the documentary subjects, digitally rendered with zooming and panning. It also includes as a narrative thread some color moving footage. And, of course, there is audio throughout, the narrator, the subjects telling their stories and a soundtrack.

Each trip added more pictures and more stories to a growing collection. Like innumerable small American towns, Corapeake and its old-fashioned way of life is dying along with each old person, making its stories all the more precious. Since taking the portraits and recording the tales, a few of the people portrayed in the film have already passed on. "I did not set out to do a film documentary," Messick says. "But as I amassed more and more photographs and digital recordings, it made sense to combine them into a documentary format. Only I wasn't quite sure how to go about it."

With the technical savvy and steadfast support of co-producer and editor Lida Burris Gibson, the documentary film version of *Corapeake* became a reality. To give the film a linking device, Messick had cinematographer Don Warren shoot Super 16mm color footage of fields, farms and old houses falling to ruin, as well as moving footage of his friend driving her car through Corapeake. He recorded Hunt's voice as well—her thoughts about her hometown, its losses, its people and all its subtle wonders—weaving a solid narrative thread throughout the documentary, which

Below: The black-and -white portraits give the village and its inhabitants a timeless appeal. Far right: The site combines photography and digital recordings into a documentary format.



Messick finally sat down to piece together with Gibson, from hundreds of hours of tape and mountains of photographs.

"The process of juxtaposing the still images with audio recordings to tell the stories of Corapeake was a painstaking task," Messick says, "which could have been achieved much easier with film. However, I believe that this characteristic of the documentary is one of the qualities which makes it stand out."

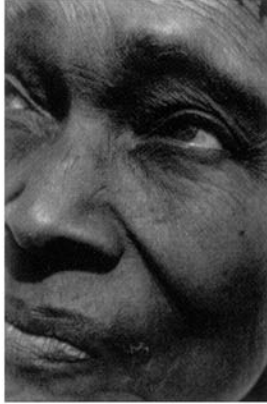
The Nikon F5 and Hasselblad 503CW are Messick's tools of the trade, using Kodak T-Max and Tri-X film. For the audio he used a Sony DAT recorder,

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Left and far left: The photographs are historical documents tinged with poignancy of a disappearing way of life.

with a copy stand and an actual print. These digital alternatives proved not only cheaper but also very efficient in the creation of the film.

The project, which was born of friendship and a desire to preserve the history of a place almost certain to become a ghost town, has been met with acclaim, shown in the Cannes Film Market and festivals in Jackson, Mississippi, and Carbondale, Illinois. The *Chicago Tribune* calls it "one of the best portraits of American small-town life in years."

Somehow, *Corapeake* speaks to everyone who sees it in a personal way. "I love the fact that many people have commented that with each viewing, *Corapeake* gets better and better," Messick says. "It provokes people to reflect and consider their own histories and to recognize the importance of preserving the stories of their aging relatives before it's too late."

Multimedia exhibitions with stills, audio and looped showings of Corapeake are slated for this fall at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and fall 2003 at the Univ. of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture in Oxford.

and for the moving footage an Aaton LPR7. A Nikon film scanner and Epson flatbed were used to cull the photographs for the edit, which was done with an Avid Media Composer 1000. The still photographs were scanned directly from the negatives and imported into the Avid editing system, and all camera movement on the still images was digitally rendered to simulate the moves a traditional movie camera would have achieved