

THE Sun

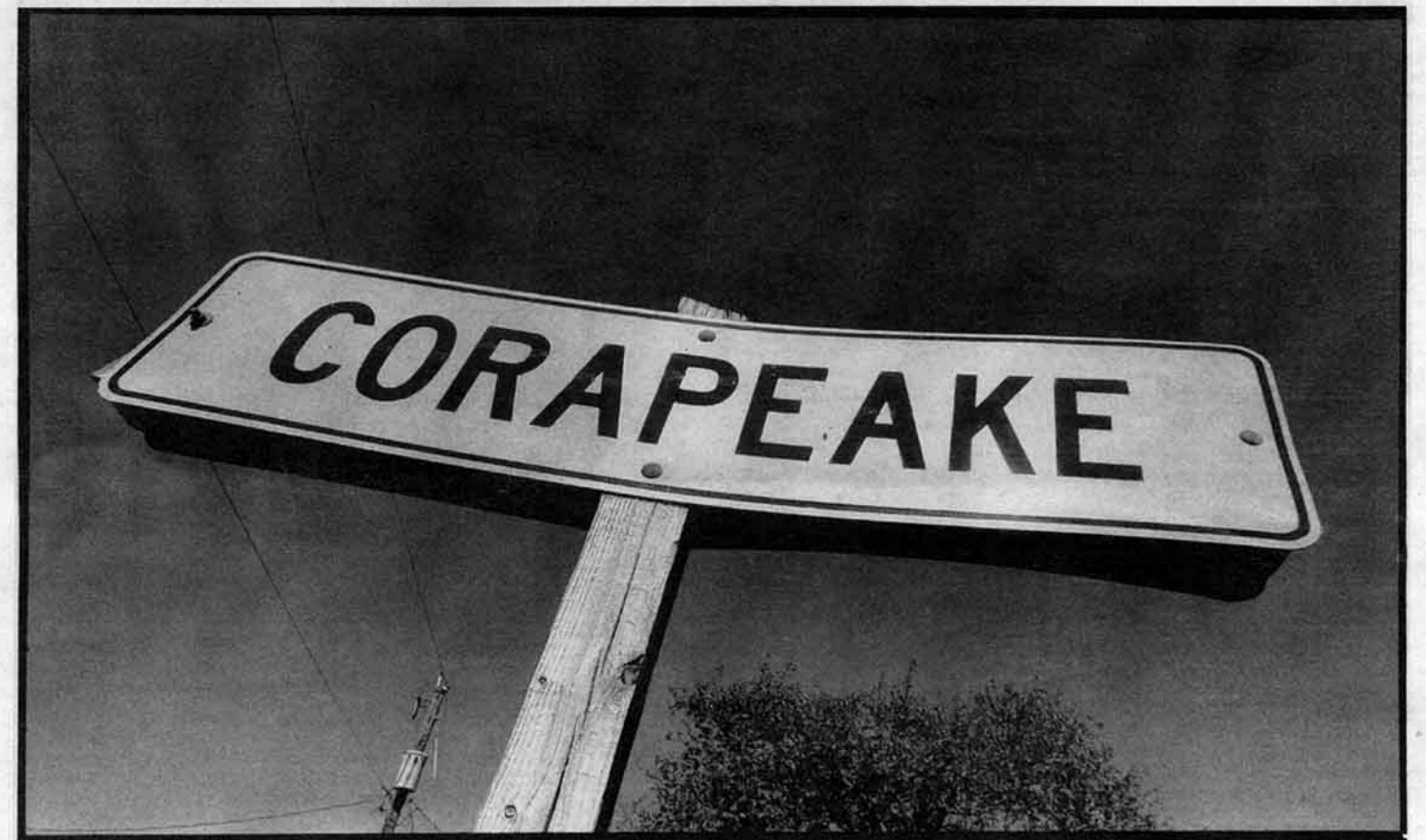
OUR TOWN

Filmmaker Kendall Messick chronicles the people and history of Corapeake, N.C., in his award-winning documentary film, "Corapeake." PAGE 12.



PHOTOS BY KENDALL MESSICK

Black and white photographs, above and below, from Kendall Messick's film, "Corapeake." The above image is in the section of the documentary on childhood stories as remembered by residents. Pictured is Keith Bond of Corapeake.



COVER STORY

ONE SMALL AND UNFORGETTABLE PLACE

To passers-through, Corapeake isn't much to look at — but pause awhile and look around...

BY FRANK ROBERTS
CORRESPONDENT

Kendall Messick took a peek at Corapeake, N.C., and fell in love. "Corapeake," the critically acclaimed documentary that took top honors at the Cinevue International Film Festival in Florida, is the offspring of that affection.

The film was given the Best Documentary Award, and Best Use of Still Photography in a Documentary Award. Add to that the praise of critics such as Michael Wilmington of the Chicago Tribune, who described it as "one of the best portraits of American small-town life — photographed and edited with effortless artistry."

It was a labor of love for the New Jersey photographer, a Wake Forest University graduate, and Brenda Parker Hunt, the woman he calls "my best friend."

A Gates County, N.C., native, Hunt lives in Philadelphia, but often visits family and friends in Corapeake. On the Winston-Salem campus of Wake Forest, she talked to Messick about Corapeake, piquing his curiosity to such a point that he had to see it for himself.

Hunt asked him to take photographs of her family because none had been made before.

When Messick arrived, he realized that his mind's-eye picture did not match the real thing. "The town was not what I expected," he said.

"There's no main street, no strip of stores, no town square. Other than a little post office, there was little evidence of the town's existence."

Messick wondered why his friend was so entranced with



This black and white image of William Overton, from Kendall Messick's documentary film, "Corapeake," about Corapeake, N.C., was taken during one of the many church services at Zion Tabernacle Baptist Church.



MESSICK

her hometown. Soon, he realized. She was thinking about Aunt Bertha's house, laundry drying on the clothesline, meals with homemade butter-milk biscuits and fried chicken.

The clincher: the friendliness Messick found in the community of 200 men and women who, he said, always talked about "Corapeake's warmth and lack of pretension."

"I was so determined to capture the beauty I was witnessing, I shot 25 or 30 rolls in two days," he said.

More trips, more pictures and more stories followed. "I didn't set out to do a film documentary, but as I amassed more and more photographs and recordings, it made sense to combine them into a documentary format," said Messick, an old hand at documentaries.

He was the still photographer for the acclaimed documentary video "There Is No Such Word As Can't," and worked in eastern Europe as associate produc-



One of the more colorful characters in the Corapeake film is Virginia Gomes. She recalled as a child biting the heads off of butterflies to get new dresses as her mother told her would happen. She continued until she found out they came from caterpillars.

er and photographer for "Here And Now," a documentary about Bulgarian gypsies.

"Corapeake" is a tribute to the community's older residents, many of whom are seen in the film.

They talk fondly about the old days, when times were hard,

when family and friends were close-knit. They talk about traveling by mule or on foot, and they remember kerosene lamps, chamber pots, crops tended by hand. For many, education was minimal, and life centered around home, and night spots on Saturday, church on Sunday.

Messick listened, recorded and filmed. "Most of my subjects were elderly and some were in poor health," he said. "I felt the need to capture as much as possible as quickly as possible."

A few people he talked to have since died, and they receive special recognition as the end credits roll.

Eighty-two-year old Vernice "Sissy" Patterson credits Messick with creating, "a wonderful film."

But, she said, she didn't know she would be in it. "He didn't tell us it was going to be a movie until two or three weeks before it came out," said Patterson, a lifelong Corapeake resident. "He talked and we answered his questions."

"Father left us a home and a small grocery store," she said.

"Later, we had a jukebox." Her stories are part of Messick's exploration of the art of remembering and capturing that art with a combination of black and white still photographs and color video.

The result of the six-year project was telecast last month on WHRO-TV, and will soon be seen on PBS stations in Philadelphia and as part of several East Coast exhibits.

"The response I get from the viewers is that it takes them back to their roots," said Messick.

"That positive response comes from all over."

The memories of Corapeake's 67-year-old James Knight are fairly typical.

"I worked on a farm, plowed with mules, walked to school more'n two miles, even in the cold winter," he said.

"Corapeake is where everybody knows everybody."

Virginia Gomes, 79, often walked to Corapeake from her Whaleyville home, about five miles away.

"I went to church in Corapeake, played in Corapeake, and went grocery shopping in Corapeake," she said.

She liked seeing herself in the movie, and enjoyed the opportunity it gave her to wear a fancy hat.

"I don't wear them much," she said, "but I did for the film."

Like many in "Corapeake," 85-year-old Hollis F. Creecy led a hard-knock life, but it did not prevent him from becoming successful.

The retired Buckland High School and T. S. Cooper High School principal was raised in Rich Square, but came to Gates County in 1951.

But unlike most of the others involved, Creecy has yet to see himself on screen.

"I stay busy," he said, "so I haven't seen the show."

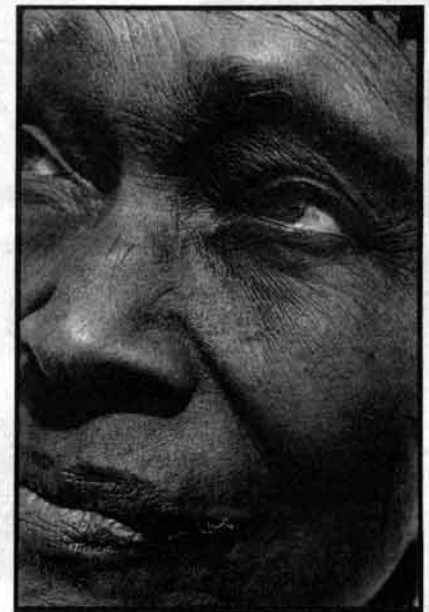
Many critics have, however. Observed Tom Rankin, director of the Center of Documentary Studies at Duke University:

"Kendall Messick provides viewers a close and compelling view of one small and unforgettable place."

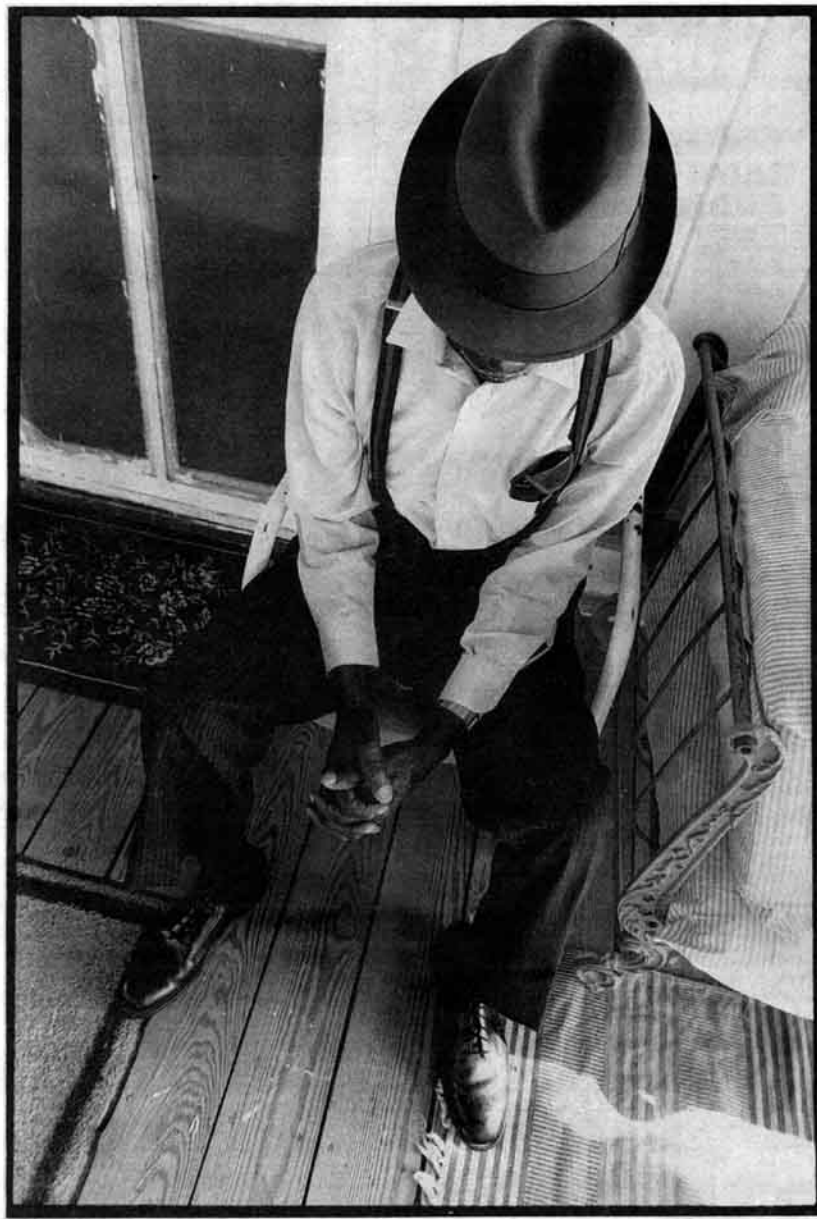
To purchase a VHS copy of the film, call (877) 290-5820.



This image featured in "Corapeake" of the Great Dismal Swamp was taken at Merchant's Millpond in Gates County, N.C.



Eley Otella Demiel, 106, who lives in Suffolk, is the oldest person in the film, "Corapeake." She was 101 when this photo was taken. She is just one of the many people who speak about Corapeake's history in this documentary hailed by critics as "a close and compelling view of one small and unforgettable place."



Sunboy Harrell, a lifelong Corapeake, N.C., farmer and resident, shows how men used to dress up when going to church or out on the town in the documentary film, "Corapeake."

ABOUT THE FILM

"Corapeake" will be shown on South Carolina ETV (PBS) Nov. 7, as part of the series, "Southern Lens."

An exhibition of photographs from the film will be displayed Oct. 11 to Nov. 13 in the Charlotte and Phillip Hanes Gallery, by host Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. Screenings of the film will

be presented. The exhibition will then be taken to the Center for the Study of Culture at the University of Mississippi in Oxford.

The film and photographs will be shown at Old Dominion University at a date to be announced.

"Corapeake" was shown twice on WHRO-TV in July and plans call for repeat showings.

Previous screenings and airings: The Cannes FilmMarket in Cannes, France; Big Muddy Film Festival in Illinois; Crossroads Film Festival in Mississippi; Reel to Reel Film Festival in Kings Mountain.

Earned the Best Documentary Feature Award and Best Use of Still Photographs in a Documentary Award at the Cinevue International Film Festival in Bostwick, Fla.