



HOLLOW

AN INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY

Created in a cutting-edge documentary form, Hollow tells the story of the history and people of McDowell County, West Virginia.

By Sheila McEntee
Hollow screenshots courtesy of
Elaine McMillion Sheldon

The opening statement on the hollowdocumentary.com website is startling: “One in three counties in the United States are dying. More people leave than stay. Hollow is the story of one such place.”

After this introductory message, viewers are instructed to scroll down the website. As you scroll, a map of West Virginia appears with McDowell County, deep in the southern part of the state, highlighted. Continue scrolling slowly and you activate a sequence of historical data about McDowell, beginning in the 1940s, when its population was more than 90,000 and rising. Vintage photographs portray the bustling city of Welch, with people crowding the sidewalks and cars packing the streets. You hear factory whistles, car horns, and other city sounds. Keep scrolling and McDowell’s population rises to a peak of 100,000 in the 1950s, when President Harry S. Truman rode in Welch’s 38th annual Veteran’s Day Parade.

With film clips, photographs, drawings, and soundscapes, the historical sequence brings viewers through decades of

McDowell County history, from the heyday of the Rocket Boys in the 1960s, to the closing of the U.S. Steel plant in Gary in the 1980s, to the devastating floods in 2000 and 2001.

With each decade after the 1950s, the county’s population descends precipitously, until in the 2010s, it reaches 22,113. As you scroll to the bottom of the screen, the sequence ends with the faces of McDowell today— people working, children in school, families and friends gathered together.

Requiring viewers to scroll through the Hollow website is a design element integral to the documentary’s purpose, says producer and director Elaine McMillion Sheldon. “You have to be an active participant,” she explains. “We didn’t want the experience to be a passive one. We wanted people to be actively engaged in getting that story and getting that narrative, and with that you’re sort of exploring, you’re not consuming.

“This is the way the whole site functions,” she adds. “A lot of people have said that just scrolling through the site, it feels like they’re traveling. In a sense it’s like you’re actually visiting this place and seeing more of it than you would in just one self-contained video.”

Hollow, which includes four hours of video content, is



Hollow opens with a historical timeline in McDowell County, featuring photos, films, and soundscapes that take viewers from the 1940s to the present.

composed of six chapters, which explore different issues and aspects of life in McDowell County. The chapters feature intimate and engaging film interviews with residents, myriad photographs, graphically presented data about the county’s population and its industries, and opportunities for viewers to add their own personal histories.

Viewers Add Stories

“Another part of the Hollow experience online is to add your story to the collection,” Sheldon says. “We’re collecting data on young people’s migration patterns all across the country ... A lot of our users were born and raised in West Virginia, and you can just see them scatter.”

Viewing Hollow, you meet a number of McDowell County residents. In the chapter titled “These Roots,” you drive with Alan Johnston, a gifted musician and McDowell native with a mission to photograph special aspects of his home place before they disappear. You work alongside Shawn Penwarden who, with his wife, Stephanie, moved to McDowell from out of state to renovate an abandoned building and start up the Half Pint Café, as well as a retail

store and repair shop for ATV products. You also meet Nessie Hunt, a young mother and talented musician, and hear her playing banjo.

In the chapter “For Each Other,” you join exercise classes taught by Mary Lewis, who says the county needs an adequate fitness center. You hear about the workings of the Five Loaves and Two Fishes food bank in Kimball from its dedicated codirector, Linda McKinney, who dreams of a community garden. And in “When Coal Was King,” you watch coal miners assemble for work, pray together, and go to work in an underground mine. You also hear about the rise in black lung illness among young miners from Anita Wolfe, who screens miners for the illness.

Hollow shares the stories of teens, young parents, teachers, retired miners, health workers, environmental activists, and many others. Sometimes, after you have heard a resident’s story, you gain access to a previously “locked” area that holds an even deeper story: a family photo album or movie clips, for example.

“A lot of [video] games do the unlocking thing,” Sheldon explains. “We were trying to give an incentive for a viewer



Every summer, Nikki Cavalier Rabel teaches McDowell County children in a four-week literacy and reading camp held at the Big Creek People in Action Community Center in Caretta. West Virginia Public Broadcasting hosts the camp.

to sit back and watch something. But also, if that resident was willing to share a really personal story of their family, we thought you shouldn't have access to [more personal information] unless you earned their trust and got to know them, just like I did on the ground."

In addition to the films shot by Sheldon, Hollow features a number of videos taken by McDowell residents. With monies raised through Kickstarter, an online funding platform for creative projects, Sheldon purchased five cameras and trained more than 15 residents to shoot content for the project. The cameras are still "circulating around McDowell," she says, and some residents intend to continue to update their stories on the site.

A Living, Breathing Project

"We really wanted Hollow to be a living, breathing project, so every time you came to it, there could be an update from the residents," Sheldon says. "And that goes back to putting the storytelling in their hands and them being able to represent themselves the way they want to represent themselves."

Alan Johnston, who traveled with Sheldon to Charleston to speak to groups and introduce Hollow, has continued to upload his photographs to the Hollow website. Of the web

documentary he says, "I've tried to be very supportive of it, and as long as it's rolling, I'm going to roll with it."

Hollow offers an unmasked look at life in McDowell County. Residents do not shy away from discussing unemployment, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, poor health, and other struggles. Nonetheless, the films and narratives are filled with hope and pride. There are scenes of rich community life: among them swim meets, high school football games, an outdoor variety show, and lively music performances.

Though McDowell sometimes feels like a ghost town, "it doesn't make me love this place any less," says Johnston. "It's my home and I love these mountains. I would never be satisfied anywhere else."

Nessie Hunt adds, "Most people who live simple live happy. And that's what I like about McDowell County. Not everyone in McDowell County has a lot of money, but we live comfortably and we live happy."

"There are such good people in McDowell County," says Linda McKinney. "I guess that's why we've never left."

Sheldon says that while the interactive documentary is not the best medium for every story, it's a good fit for Hollow. "I didn't like the idea of a film that left you wondering, what can I do? What's happening now?" she says. "Interactive



▲ Musician and photographer Alan Johnston shares his love for his native McDowell County in Hollow.



Ellis Ray Williams, who has lived in Gary since 1927, believes McDowell County should have diversified its economy sooner, but he also believes the county should be proud of the opportunities it gave to people like his father, who was a coal miner.
© Elaine McMillion Sheldon

documentary is a brand new, very emerging genre. It encourages change and it encourages people to be involved. [It encourages] a more engaged participant and more engaged resident community.”

With Hollow garnering more and more attention and awards, Sheldon is quick to credit the skills of her eight-person creative team. The names of her co-creators are listed on the website. Fellow West Virginians on the team include Tricia Fulks, associate producer; Megan Bowers,

cinematography; Kerrin Sheldon (Elaine’s husband), story editor; Michelle Miller, community manager; and Eric Lovell, participatory cartographer.

Hollow has attracted viewers from across the country and around the world, including Nicaragua, Thailand, France, and Spain. Sheldon has presented Hollow in regions across the country, from Orange County, California, to Tacoma, Washington, to Boston and New York. She has also screened the documentary at universities, libraries, and high schools

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Fred Rice is one of a number of resident filmmakers in McDowell County whose work is included in Hollow.

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throughout the Appalachian region. Her Spring 2014 schedule includes presentations at the Appalachian Studies Conference at Marshall University (March 28-30) and at Davis and Elkins College and Shepherd University.

Hollow was funded through Kickstarter and with support from Documentary Educational Resources, the Tribeca Film Institute, the West Virginia Humanities Council, and the West Virginia Filmmakers Guild. It can be viewed with two browsers, Google Chrome or Apple's Safari, both free down-

loads. It is not yet available on Internet Explorer. A DVD of Hollow's film content is also available. For more information about the Hollow DVD, e-mail contact@hollowthefilm.com.

Note: Subscribers to our iPad version can link to some of the films featured in Hollow. To subscribe, visit our website at wonderfulwv.com or call 800.225.5982.

Sheila McEntee is editor of Wonderful West Virginia.

visiting this place and seeing more of it than you would in just one self-contained video.”

Elaine McMillion Sheldon, Hollow Producer and Director

Shawn and Stephanie Penwarden share their experiences as transplants to McDowell County, business owners, and parents of a baby daughter.

