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## Recollections and Voices: An Appalachian Community Revisited

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## Recollections and Voices: An Appalachian Community Revisited

### Cover Page Footnote

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**Abstract.** Scott's Run has a rich history as a tight-knit, coal-built community in the heart of rural Appalachia. To learn more about the lives of the community members during the Depression Era, an interdisciplinary research team from five departments at a major university in the state conducted an oral history project focused on historical photos of the community. Individuals who grew up in the area reviewed photographs taken early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and provided information and shared stories related to the time and place of the images for context. The interviews uncovered key themes that told a much more positive story of the area than previously recorded in histories: progressive race relations, the remarkable sense of "family" among community members, and the importance of a social service organization, shared experiences of mining, and surviving many floods to the development of that sense of family among members of the Scott's Run community. Also, as a result of the interviews, more accurate descriptions or "tags" of the photos were provided. This project involved students from social work and other disciplines and also informed content throughout a macro HBSE course.

**Keywords:** Appalachia, the Depression, coal mining, rural community, rural social services, social work education

Rural communities have long offered their residents and professionals unique challenges and opportunities. Lack of adequate medical and social services and transportation are well-known to social workers and community leaders as critical issues facing these communities (Ginsberg, 2011; Hash, Damron-Rodriguez, & Thurman, 2015). Despite these challenges, rural residents often benefit from living in tight-knit communities, scaffolded by strong informal support networks (Hash, Wells, & Spencer, 2015), a rich history, and a strong culture. More deeply understanding and appreciating these factors or "historical treasures" can allow social workers to more fully identify and utilize a strengths-based approach in ways that work effectively with individuals and larger systems within rural environments (Carlton-LaNey & Burwell, 2011, p. 21). To support this important work and to respond to calls from those working in rural education and practice (Daley & Pierce, 2011; Hickman, 2014; Lohmann, 2005), our study helps explore the history of one community whose resilience as an interdependent collective has repeatedly come together around generational, racial, and economic differences that have been distancing for other communities.

This article considers the history and culture of a small Appalachian community by way of an interdisciplinary, oral history project (The West Virginia Memory Project) conducted with its elder residents. Specifically, it illuminates the themes of memories shared by these residents, addresses the impact of the community's history, showcases residents' resilience, and articulates

the role of a social service agency on the past and present-day community. It will also highlight how the outcomes of the project were used to exemplify content on groups, organizations, and communities in rural areas in an undergraduate social work course focused on macro human behavior in the social environment (HBSE).

### **Background of the Community**

Scott's Run consists of a five-mile stretch of small, rural communities in Monongalia County, adjacent to "X," West Virginia, including Osage, Pursglove, Jere, and Cassville (Arthurdale Heritage, Inc., n.d.). This area has a rich history formed in response to the growth and decline of West Virginia's coal mining-centered economy. Like many rural communities, during the early 1900s, the area saw a booming mine industry, particularly as World War I increased the demand for coal. This was a major shift from its agricultural roots, and land was sold from farmers to coal companies (Yeager, 1994). Scott's Run was well positioned for this industry given its coal resources, access to river ways and railroads, and proximity to Pittsburgh's coal needs and resources. It is thought that by the 1920s, over four million tons of coal were shipped out of Monongalia County, including 30-40 mines in this "hollow." Scott's Run's workforce expanded in response to this boom and was uncharacteristically racially diverse for this area, including African Americans (approximately 20%) as well as immigrants from at least twenty countries (at least 60%) (Lewis, 1994). Many residents were recruited to work in the mines by agents from the South and from eastern Europe. Local men also joined the coal labor force as agricultural work dried up (Yeager, 1994).

The Great Depression of the 1930s, however, saw a deflation of this industry, and its impact was felt deeply by this small, rural area. Because of this, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt was deeply saddened and moved when she visited the area in 1933, accompanied by her friend, Lorena Hickok, who noted that the community and its housing were the worst she had ever seen (Arthurdale Heritage, Inc., n.d.). In an effort to offer some relief to the residents, the First Lady came back several times. Historian Ronald Lewis notes that a writer for the *Atlantic Monthly* described the area during this time in words nearly identical to Hickok: "the damndest cesspool of human misery I have ever seen in America" (Lewis, 1994). The area and its plight also drew the attention of Walker Evans and other famous photographers. The Farm Security Administration (part of the USDA) sponsored the documentation of the conditions and lives of those residing in rural America, and consequently, Scott's Run became a face of economic misery in the coalfields.

After the state and local agencies had exhausted almost all of their resources, Federal relief efforts (such as those associated with the New Deal) began in the 30s (Lewis, 1994). Even during the coal boom, Scott's Run had suffered from problems like lack of access to health care and poor sanitation. Access issues were exacerbated by the relative geographical isolation of the area, as the nearest town ("X") had limited accessibility via trolley, ferry, and automobile (Barney, 1994). Compounding these challenges, the area experienced a series of mine disasters in the 1940s, and the growing development of machines to mine decreased work opportunities as the need for human labor was reduced. Further, other technologies, such as those used in locomotives, reduced the general need for coal (Lewis, 1994).

During the past century, churches and the social service organizations they sponsor have played a major role supporting the Scott's Run community. As an initiative of the Methodist Church, Scott's Run Settlement House was founded in 1922. Although it began as a Bible School, the settlement grew to provide classes geared toward immigrant families, such as naturalization classes designed to help them with citizenship efforts. Around the same time, the Presbyterian Church began similar efforts in the community, resulting in 1932 in the founding of an organization now well-known in the area as the Shack Neighborhood House (Lewis, 1994). The Shack (described herein) and the Scott's Run Settlement House remain an integral part of the community and continue to provide outreach to immigrants. St. Ursula's Food Pantry, which also provides critical services in this community, is operated by the Catholic Church. These organizations provide food assistance, childcare, baby clothes and other items, home repair, social programs, and other key services for persons of all ages in this community and the surrounding county.

Today, Scott's Run looks very different from historical images captured during the decades surrounding the coal boom. Declining since the coal bust the population has fallen to 255 in Osage and 1,111 in Cassville (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-2016). Environmentally, the area has taken several blows over the years. According to historian Phil Ross (1994),

The narrow Scott's Run valley today bears the common scars of the coal mining industry. The creek often runs orange with acid mine drainage, surface mine highwalls loom over the valley, and the surviving houses of several coal camps perch on the hillsides, facing bottomland filled and graded with sterile slate and mine waste. (p.21)

In spite of these struggles, the people and the social service organizations that serve the area remain proud and committed to preserving Scott's Run's rich history and building its future. The West Virginia Memory Project was launched to capture their history and stories.

### **The West Virginia Memory Project**

The West Virginia Memory Project is an oral history project that was designed to document the stories West Virginia residents shared about photographs archived by the West Virginia and Regional History Center. The archived 52,520 images portrayed a wide variety of people, places, and activities in West Virginia and the Appalachian region. In 2018-2019, an interdisciplinary team of West Virginia University faculty and staff from five University Departments of English, History, and Communication Studies; School of Social Work; and the West Virginia and Regional History Center came together to collect the stories and provide short word descriptions (tags) of 100 Depression-era photographs of the Scott's Run community, a small segment of the photographs in the West Virginia and Regional History Center's West Virginia History Onview collection (West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Center, n.d.a.). The group chose this community and its related historical photographs from the collection because it is an area rich in history and resilience, and one that just happens to be geographically close to the University campus.

Several students also participated in the project. Those in an undergraduate Multimedia Writing course in English used some of the photographs to design posters publicizing the Scott's

Run chapter of the West Virginia Memory Project. Their efforts were then employed to effectively market the project to both the local and larger community and the campus. An undergraduate honors student majoring in social work developed a video for the project that integrated photographs, audio interviews with Scott's Run community members, and some history of the area. Aspects of the project were also highlighted and used as examples in an undergraduate, macro human behavior in the social environment (HBSE) course in social work. A faculty member from the English working as a part of our team involved her multimedia writing class in using images to make posters for display in our campus library that highlighted aspects of the community our team's final exhibit would explore in more detail. Additionally, Family Communication (a Communications Studies course) students went to the exhibit and wrote about the various ways that the community demonstrated theory and research trends about family behavior and resilience.

Another purpose of the project was to tag historical photographs with identifying information supplied by community members so that such information could later be used to search the archive using specific terms and connect these photographs to the stories prompted by viewing them. With the approval of the University's Institutional Review Board, the interdisciplinary members of this team contributed their diverse disciplinary perspectives to make this project more robust and develop a model to help others interested in conducting similar oral history methodology that includes other selections of photographs from additional locations around the state.

### **Method**

The team of faculty and students reached out to the long-standing social service organizations in the Scott's Run community to identify participants to assist with tagging photos and providing interviews. Participants sought were those who lived/grew up in the community around the time the photographs were taken. In contacting these organizations, it became clear that there was a small group of current and former community residents who gathered each Saturday morning at the Scott's Run Museum to share stories and engage in fellowship. Our team was invited to the gathering so that we might recruit participants. From that meeting we identified 10 participants who were interested in talking with us about the photographs. Four were female and the mean age was 84.1. Participants ranged in age from 70 to 95 and there were two African Americans, seven Caucasians, and one participant who identified as Greek. All grew up in the area, but most now live in nearby communities.

Oral histories were used to collect the project data. As a method, it involves conducting qualitative interviews with individuals to gain in-depth knowledge and perspectives on historical events and cultures (Leavy, 2014). Photographs, in particular, support the validity and contribute to accurate recollections while using this method, as they provide cues for memory and allow for storytelling (Freund & Thomson, 2011). As Gourevitch notes in Freund & Thomson (2011), "photographs cannot tell stories" as they are "an invitation to look more closely, and to ask questions" (p.1).

To collect the oral histories, members of the team showed participants a segment of the photographs and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews--asking them to provide

identifying information they think of (used for tagging) and audio recording the told stories that were inspired by the photographs. The photographs and the interviews provided rich data that were qualitatively analyzed from a visual ethnography tradition (Lenette & Boddy, 2013). Using this method, additional narrative, theme, and context tags were added to the photos. The end products were a temporary exhibit in the WVU Downtown Library (since donated to the Scott's Run Museum) and a video publicly viewable as a part of the exhibit and also accessible online at <https://news.lib.wvu.edu/2019/04/29/the-scotts-run-memory-project/> (Hostuttler, 2019).

### **Photograph-Prompted Storytelling Themes**

During the interviews, several important themes emerged that add to the rich history of the community and the efforts of people and a social service organization during difficult times. The storytelling sparked by the photographs was instrumental in uncovering a much more positive picture of this small, rural community than previously recorded in histories: the remarkable sense of family among community members, progressive race relations, the importance of the Shack Neighborhood House, and shared experiences of mining and surviving many floods. Written histories have often portrayed the area as desolate and disparaging as the result of the coal bust, a view that persists in ideas of the area for those not from the community. The narratives offered by the participants, however, tell a different story of the community's past and its present. Their warm regard toward their upbringing in Scott's Run continues to bring many of them to the Scott's Run Museum on Saturdays to reminiscence and connect with others with whom they are still bonded...ever welcoming to new members, including our research team.

#### **Sense of Family**

Given the positive experiences of those we interviewed and their continued connection to the Scott's Run area and its residents, it is not surprising that they often spoke of the community there as family. And this sense of family transcended racial and other differences among community members. When viewing a photograph titled "Typical Scott's Run Family," for example, several participants noted that there really was no "typical" family in that community and that they all were one big family in the affective sense of connecting, looking out for, and actually providing familial needs like food, shelter, and other primary needs.



Originally labeled “Typical Family in Scott’s Run” this image shows a family posed for a photo in front of a house. That description was written on the back of the photograph by the donor and then transcribed by WVRHC staff into the online database, West Virginia History OnView. It reflects the stereotypes of the residents of Scott’s Run. No date or identification information was available, but the images appear to be from the Depression era. Image from the Mary Behner Christopher Collection (A&M 3131), West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries (West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Center, n.d.b).



## Race Relations

In line with the concept of community-as-family, participants shared a great deal about race relations in Scott's Run during that period. Participants told us that, during those times, all children - black and white - played together, and that black and white families frequently visited each other's houses. Even so, some participants noted sorrowfully that formal segregation did exist at Scott's Run: There were separate lines for food, separate swim times at the community pool, and a "white school" and a "black school." Many of our participants recalled that as children, they could not understand why this was. It didn't make sense to them that they had to attend school apart from their friends, especially because they all played together as soon as the afternoon bell rang and—as one participant shared—they would "bite off the same apple." What is also interesting is that there are a few photos in the collection that appeared to depict white teachers in black classrooms. African American interviewees were quick to notice this, explaining that the white individuals must have been students from West Virginia University or from the Presbyterian Church who would come once each week to teach bible studies because the black school had only black teachers. This was one of several instances in which the interview clarified for us that things weren't quite as integrated as some photographs made it appear; those images were anomalies as opposed to a commonplace. However, when integration of schools was formally introduced nationally in the 1950s, leading to several well-documented incidents of aggression and violence around the country, the Scott's Run community members we spoke with reported that "there was not one incident" of violence as a result of integration in the Scott's Run community. In fact, they told us, it was just as the principal told them on the first day, "There will be no problems."



A food line for African American children during the Depression. A participant remarked, "How sad," after realizing that the image depicted the segregated community. Image from the Mary Behner Christopher Collection (A&M 3131), West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries (West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Center, n.d.c).



Students and an instructor at the Osage School in the 1940s. The teacher is most likely someone who came for a special class, possibly through the Mountaineer Mining Mission, the outreach program of the Shack Neighborhood House. Image from the West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries (West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Center, n.d.d).

It was not only the children who formed racially mixed groups at Scott's Run; it was community members of all ages. According to one participant, "If you saw a group of white guys, there would always be a black guy with them," and "there was never no trouble." This participant further explained, "Name any immigrant from any different country...they were here." Another participant recalled that there was a row of about 30 houses and described how in that row there would be "a white house, a black house, a white house, a black house, and so on," and he talked about how friends of all races and backgrounds would get together after work at each other's homes. Members of the community called this a "visit" that would typically include whole families and last at least two hours. Another participant noted, "Everybody was friends in the coal mines...black and whites...we had no racial problems." One participant noted that when miners came out of the mines, racial differences were unnoticeable in any case because "they were all black" (with coal, as recalled by those interviewed).

### **The Shack**

The Shack Neighborhood House, which residents commonly refer to simply as "The Shack," opened in the 1930s and was an integral part of the lives of the community members. Participating community members had many stories to share about their time at the Shack. They remember the times at this organization very fondly as the center of recreation and socialization for children and adolescents in the area. As noted by one participant, it was a place for kids to

swim, play ping pong and pool, and hang out on the playground. He explains, “It was our social life...there was nothing else...we lived at the Shack.” Another stated, “I grew up at the Shack.” As noted above, although kids of all backgrounds socialized at the Shack, the organization had segregated pool times, and white community members were permitted to swim at different times than black community members.



Group of children in front of the Shack for a Christmas parties during the 1940s. From the West Virginia and Regional History Center, WVU Libraries (West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Center, n.d.e).

## Coal Mining and Floods

Our interviewees also highlighted the influence that coal mining had on their own young lives and that of their broader community. Participants immediately and accurately recognized a photograph of a man sitting on a truck as a miner who had been evicted from the coal camp. Coal mining was a part of everyday life that, several participants reported, minimized other differences among community members since they were all mining families with similar incomes. Indeed, when the issue of poverty was brought up, several participants noted that as children, they didn't realize they were poor because they were just like everyone else that they knew. Photos of the floods during the time also elicited several stories. Many we spoke with had lived through three major floods in the community and perceived that as occasions residents bonded tightly to one another in order to preserve their community. As one participant explained, “You can't fight water...you can fight fire with water...but you can't fight water with nothing.” In fact, this former resident, like many others who grew up in the area, returned as an adult to help the community during a flood.



High waters at Jimtown where Scott's Run empties into the Monongahela River, 1936. From the Mary Behner Christopher Collection (A&M 3131) (West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Center, n.d.f).

### **Integration into a Social Work Course**

Aspects of this project were integrated into a macro HBSE course that covered groups, organizations, and communities that was taught by one of the team members. During the initial course session, the project was used to show the integration and interaction of parts of the macro community (Kirst-Ashman, 2014). The group that meets on Saturdays at the Museum was first introduced as a primary, natural group that had a common interest and shared history with a high level of cohesion. Next, the Shack Neighborhood Center was discussed as a goal directed, structured organization that began in response to extreme poverty in the area and continues to meet the needs of the community today. The role the organization played in the social lives of the participants as they grew up was also highlighted. Lastly, Scott's Run was considered as a geographic community where residents and former residents hold strong social relationships and have a solid community identity. In fact, even former residents return to the community weekly for fellowship and in times when they are needed. The importance of understanding the history of a community was also reinforced through discussing this project in the course. The history of Scott's Run could also be tied to plight of other rural communities in the state; a history in which a major industry draws in workers and employs an entire community and then economically devastates the community when it goes "bust."

The social, economic, and political forces that previously and currently impact these environments were also highlighted, particularly the impact of the Depression. The uniqueness of race relations and feeling of family in this coal community during a time when different ethnicities were very much segregated was also a valuable teaching point. The examples from

this project and community were revisited throughout the course. At the conclusion of the course, the video of the project, created by one of their classmates, was shared with the students and they were given extra credit for connecting the video with concepts related to rural communities; such as aging in place, limited access to resources and services, isolation, and individual and community-level poverty (USDA, 2017). The tight-knit relations and individual and community-level resilience were also connected with the people and community in this digital story.

## Discussion

The West Virginia Memory Project was an oral history and tagging undertaking involving an interdisciplinary team of faculty and students. Joining social work with other disciplines allowed for a uniquely rich look at a small, rural community and its residents through stories they told us about historical photographs of their community. In addition, the outcomes of the project wonderfully informed several units and brought to life concepts in a social work macro HBSE course. Other social work educators who are looking for opportunities to expand their understanding of communities are encouraged to seek interdisciplinary partners to discover the stories and contexts of local, rural communities, including their struggles and their resilience. In our case, the team was also provided with a positive lens in which to view the community and its history, which stands in opposition to many previous accounts. Involving students in social work and other disciplines is also of great benefit, whether they become part of the team or whether the project is infused into course content or assignments. Not only can a great deal be connected to content on communities, but also to the groups and organizations that are the building blocks of communities. Clearly, engaging an entire class of students directly in such a project and immersing them in the community would be an even better educational experience and the instructor is looking at ways to do this in the future.

A community that was only five miles from campus clearly provided the team and the students with a unique view of a rural community that is dramatically different from campus, in terms of its past and present. Those who venture into similar communities will likely find welcoming residents who are excited to share their stories, particularly if past accounts have been less than complementary. Scott's Run had an open and welcoming attitude toward "Scott's Runners" and "non-Scott's Runners" alike, as became immediately apparent to us when they warmly invited the team to join them for community celebrations and their regular casual gathering every Saturday at the museum. This generosity of time and spirit is an expression of community that we came to understand from their stories is an extension of the values of inclusion and care they have always shared.

The commitment the participants that the team spoke with have to Scott's Run may or may not be representative of others who have been a part of the community over the years. Perhaps those who return on Saturdays for conversation and community have self-selected because of their extraordinarily positive experiences growing up there, in spite of the documented hardships faced by the community at large. However, it is also possible that their positivity and continued warmth for their community exists not *in spite of* those hardships, but *because of* them—because they endured them and found their way through them together. Just as story-telling can be useful for sharing truths that archived photographs can cloud or even



(inadvertently, most likely) distort about a specific group, story-telling as a method can disclose important values and themes—among them, the critical elements of an enduring community. Scholars might find in this a means of cultivating a “Scott’s Run” attitude of openness, inclusion, and care for the work they do and the people they engage with to do that work. As evidenced by the vibrant community of the Scott’s Runners photographed and storied through this project, such cultivation is a worthwhile pursuit.

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