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Sunday, August 29, 2004

This is not Kennedy's Kentucky

Area has changed since 1968 visit



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By Roger Alford
Associated Press

WHITESBURG, Ky. — With eight children, Betty Terrill did not see gardening as a hobby. It was necessity.

Terrill, of Wolfe County, sat before Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 and explained how her family survived in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky on an income of \$69 a month.

"What do your children have to eat?" Kennedy asked on a fact-finding tour of the region.

"Well, we have a right smart," she said, using a mountain expression to describe her family's situation. "We raise our own hogs and have a cow, and we always raise a garden."

By all accounts, times were tough in central Appalachia in the late 1960s, and Kennedy was getting a firsthand look as chairman of the Senate subcommittee on employment, manpower and poverty.

Next month, mountain residents plan to re-enact Kennedy's tour to provide a fresh look at the communities he visited when he came to Eastern Kentucky to gauge the effectiveness of the War on Poverty.

People organizing the massive re-enactment, which will take place Sept. 8 through 11 in towns from Whitesburg to Prestonsburg, believe the project will foster appreciation for the major economic improvements in the region over the past 36 years.

"It will let us see that there has been great progress made," said Nell Fields, the project coordinator for Appalshop, a Whitesburg-based organization that is helping to orchestrate the re-enactment.

After stops in communities like Vortex, Neon and Hazard, Kennedy concluded that the anti-poverty programs then in existence had failed to adequately raise the standard of living in the mountains so that people did not go hungry.

"Family after family still survives on beans and potatoes or rice, cornbread and fat back," Kennedy said at the time. "...In many of the counties of Eastern Kentucky, more than half of the adult men, sometimes over three quarters, have no work."

Hazard Mayor Bill Gorman, who remembers walking with Kennedy through a street lined with run-down houses, said he is



Hazard attorney John Faust, center, talked with John Malpede and Henriette Brouwers in downtown Whitesburg. Faust will play Robert F. Kennedy in a re-enactment of Kennedy's 1968 poverty tour starting Sept. 8.

RE-ENACTMENT SCHEDULE

The re-enactment of Robert F. Kennedy's poverty tour will be staged in several communities next month. Here are the places, dates and times. All times are EDT:

Sept. 9: Wolfe County Senior Citizens Center in Campton, 9a.m.; Vortex Community Church in the Wolfe County community of Vortex, 11a.m.; Barwick School in the Breathitt County community of Barwick, 12:30p.m.; Liberty Street in Hazard, 3p.m.; Yellow Creek in Knott County, 4:30p.m.; Alice Lloyd College in Pippa Passes, 5:30 to 11p.m.

Sept. 10: Letcher County Courthouse in Whitesburg, 10a.m.; Fleming-Neon High School in Neon, 11a.m., followed immediately by stops in neighboring Fleming, Hemphill and Haymond; Floyd County Courthouse in Prestonsburg, 4:30p.m.

pleased that those days are long past.

"A lot of these problems have been worked on and solved," he said. "We have seen a lot of economic diversification, and we had to work hard to see to it that this came about."

Gorman said Hazard has become a regional center for health care, creating about 4,000 jobs for professional and hourly workers in that industry. Coal remains a major employer, along with timber, oil and natural gas. However, Gorman said a number of factories also have opened in and around Hazard, producing wood products, plastics and clothing.

"We're enjoying a pretty healthy economy here," he said.

John Malpede, director of the "RFK in EKY" re-enactment, said audiences will be able to compare and contrast the past with present-day Eastern Kentucky based on testimony in transcripts from Kennedy's public hearings and on media accounts from his visit.

Malpede, an actor, writer and director who has worked in New York and Los Angeles, said the beauty of the re-enactment is that the script is genuine — straight from the public record.

"The idea is to revisit a moment in history that was significant to the community and see how it resonates now," Malpede said.

John Faust, a Hazard attorney who will play Kennedy, said he has studied the transcripts of the hearings in order to deliver the speeches, portions of which talk about trash blighting the region, environmental damage caused by coal mining, and poor families in need of better housing.

"So many of the problems that he saw in 1968 still exist today," Faust said. "We will always have the poor among us. We'll always be working to alleviate their problems."

Even so, Ewell Balltrip, former head of the Kentucky Appalachian Commission, said the mountain region has radically changed in the decades since Kennedy's visit. He said a network of four-lane highways through the mountains has opened the region to economic development, and has changed nearly every facet of life.

Those roads, he said, opened the once isolated part of the country to commerce, giving businesses a faster connection to industrial centers in the East and Midwest.

"Certainly, per capita income for the region has improved dramatically," Balltrip said. "The number of people living in poverty is considerably less, because the region is better prepared to compete for jobs."

Fields agrees that the region has made great progress, and she said she hopes the re-enactment will help people to realize how far they have come.

"We still have needs," she said. "But I remember how hard it was for anybody to have anything."

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