6

"I just ask when you portray us, please don't portray us as ignorant hill folk, I guess," Harless said. "Because we are educated. We're poor, but we're educated, and everyone's pretty proud. It's not a desolate place where no hope can be found."

14

Many people here say they're rich in things that aren't included in any official measure of poverty. Things like family and faith. So they're understandably a bit bitter about how they're often seen from the outside.

2

There are lots of diversions in the Big White Ghetto, the vast moribund matrix of Wonder Bread–hued Appalachian towns and villages stretching from northern Mississippi to southern New York, a slowly dissipating nebula of poverty and misery with its heart in eastern Kentucky, the last redoubt of the Scots-Irish working class that picked up where African slave labor left off, mining and cropping and sawing the raw materials for a modern American economy that would soon run out of profitable uses for the class of people who 500 years ago would have been known, without any derogation, as peasants.

16

Thinking about the future here and its bleak prospects is not much fun at all, so instead of too much black-minded introspection you have the pills and the dope, the morning beers, the endless scratch-off lotto cards, healing meetings up on the hill, the federally funded ritual of trading cases of food-stamp Pepsi for packs of Kentucky’s Best cigarettes and good old hard currency, tall piles of gas-station nachos, the occasional blast of meth, Narcotics Anonymous meetings, petty crime, the draw, the recreational making and surgical unmaking of teenaged mothers, and death: Life expectancies are short — the typical man here (Owsley County) dies well over a decade earlier than does a man in Fairfax County, Va. — and they are getting shorter.

9

Driving through these hills and hollows, you aren’t in the Appalachia of Elmore Leonard’s Justified or squatting with Lyndon Johnson on Tom Fletcher’s front porch in Martin County, a scene famously photographed by Walter Bennett of Time, the image that launched the so-called War on Poverty. The music isn’t “Shady Grove,” it’s Kanye West.

12

There is still coal mining — which, at $25 an hour or more, provides one of the more desirable occupations outside of government work — but the jobs are moving west, and Harlan County, like many coal-country communities, has lost nearly half of its population over the past 30 years.

5

Those who have the required work skills, the academic ability, or the simple desperate native enterprising grit to do so get the hell out as fast as they can, and they have been doing that for decades. As they go, businesses disappear, institutions fall into decline, social networks erode, and there is little or nothing left over for those who remain. It’s a classic economic death spiral: The quality of the available jobs is not enough to keep good workers, and the quality of the available workers is not enough to attract good jobs.

11

It was a county formed 19 years before the Civil War.

But in the towns lying between borders in Owsley, in the coal fields of eastern Kentucky, a portrait of Americans shows a community that appears frozen in time, where many still live without water or electricity. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Appalachian county has the lowest median household income in the states - a staggering 41.5 per cent of residents falling below the poverty line.

7
The U.S. Census Bureau considers low income roughly $45,000 a year for a family of four. In Owsley, the median household income is $19,351 - the lowest in the country outside of Puerto Rico.

4

The benefits of Johnson's war on poverty here are undeniable. The programs help feed, house and educate the poor. Federal attention brought new roads — today, Route 3 is a four-lane highway — school buildings, the ability to buy more food and more access to clean water and health care. The one-room tarpaper shacks that dotted the mountains are a thing of the past, as are the distended bellies of malnourished children

But for all of Johnson's programs, and despite a coal boom in the 1970s and '80s, the county is back where it was in 1964 in one important aspect: There are not enough jobs to pull people out of poverty.

"You can't get out of poverty," Mike Howell says, "if you don't have a job.”

15

"After Johnson, the checks came, and people started to get on welfare," says Sheriff Garmon Preece, a onetime miner who was elected the county's top cop 14 years ago. "It's done more harm than good. People stopped selling hogs and chickens. They didn't have to. They went on to depend on their monthly checks."

He says the government benefits hurt young, healthy people by making them dependent. Many use drugs, he says. In Martin County, the painkiller Oxycontin is the drug of choice.

"The war on poverty was a good idea. ... It had a good heart, but it is an enabler today," he says. "It enables young people today to live that lifestyle."

1

I am concerned about the whole man. I am concerned about what the people, using their government as an instrument and a tool, can do toward building the whole man, which will mean a better society and a better world.

13

Poverty must not be a bar to learning and learning must offer an escape from poverty.

3
This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort.

8

The program I shall propose will emphasize this cooperative approach to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to even meet their basic needs.

10

Our chief weapons in a more pinpointed attack will be better schools, and better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities to help more Americans, especially young Americans, escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls where other citizens help to carry them.

Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper -- in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children.

17

Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it. No single piece of legislation, however, is going to suffice.