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# Struggling W.Va. Town Hopes Boy Scout Camp Brings New Life

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All Things Considered



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Mount Hope, W.Va., population 1,400, was once a thriving coal town. Today, many of the storefronts in its tiny downtown sit empty.

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Picture a tiny town set along a creek in West Virginia. A mountain rises from the town's eastern edge, overlooking the 1,400 people living below. Then, July comes — and 50,000 people arrive on that mountain for the National Scout Jamboree.

The town is called Mount Hope. I've heard some call it "Mount Hopeless." The town went through the long, downward slump from the boom days of deep-mine coal, when it was a grand, small-town capital of coal mining.

Now it's crumbling, struggling, but recently hopeful, because there's a veritable pot of gold on top of that nearby mountain. The Summit Bechtel Family National Scout Reserve, an adventure camp, sits there, right on the Mount Hope town line. The Boy Scouts of America says it's already spent \$300 million there. This summer, the camp on the mountaintop opens with the big jamboree.



A mannequin in the window of an odds-and-ends store in downtown Mount Hope sports an assortment of Boy Scout-related paraphernalia.

Noah Adams/NPR



Mount Hope Mayor Michael Martin hopes some of the Scout camp's 90 year-round, full-time staff will choose to live in the town.

Noah Adams/NPR



The Summit Bechtel Family National Scout Reserve while under construction in 2011. The camp will open in July 2013 with the National Scout Jamboree.

Noah Adams/NPR

### New Camp, New Families

So how do you get some of those gold coins to roll down the mountain?

"You can see that our Main Street has been milled and is ready for repaving," says Mount Hope Mayor Michael Martin, showing off the rough road through the tiny downtown. The state of West Virginia is paying for the new street, sidewalks and streetlights.

Martin takes me to look at a burned-out building, once a school. There's federal money to tear it down. Then we drive to a new industrial park, with a small factory that rebuilds underground mine cars, and a telemarketer and juvenile detention center. Then, on to the stadium that looks like a castle, built years back by local Italian stonecutters. But Friday night football is over for the Mount Hope Mustangs — the high school closed two years ago.

Martin says he would happily make this drive again if one of the new employees from the scout camp wants a tour of the town. The scouts will employ about 90 full-time, year-round staff.

"I would like for some of those people to consider homes in Mount Hope, to live and raise families," he says.

There are some links between the new camp and the town. The scouts are using Mount Hope water. The volunteer fire department has a new mini-pumper truck, bought by the scouts.

There's also been talk of annexation. But Mount Hope is just 1.5 square miles, while the Boy Scouts have 16 — so who would be annexing whom? John Potter, who's spent years trying to fix up a shuttered, falling down hotel, is quick to shake his head about that question.

"A lot of people here, the council, the mayor, are just average John Does," Potter says. "The Scouts are a savvy organization with lawyers, well-educated people. It would be easy for them to manipulate the city of Mount Hope to where we'd become Scoutsville, or something like that."

Most people here have more immediate concerns. Like, when the scout camp opens, why would visitors even come to downtown Mount Hope? The town shares a border with the Scout's property, but to reach the camp from any direction, visitors just follow signs to a bypass. There's no need to enter the heart of the town at all.

If you *do* turn off onto Main Street, you will find antique stores, but only one restaurant. There's no grocery store, no place to stay. "I don't have a single bed to let in Mount Hope," Mayor Martin says.

The high school is closed and there's no middle school. The yellow buses take the kids to a bigger town eight miles away.

There is still Mount Hope Elementary, and the town has tried hard to support this school. At Christmastime, 254 students were enrolled. For a party at Christmastime, 254 students attended. Jessica Zukowski had helped raise money for the Santa Claus event, and everyone got a hat and a pair of gloves.

"It was really a usable thing for each child because a lot of our kids don't have — they're not warm," Zukowski says. "They ask — they sit on Santa's lap and they ask for toothbrushes, they ask for blankets, they ask for pajamas, they ask for their siblings to get presents rather than them."

Zukowski, an AmeriCorps VISTA worker, spends her days trying to help young families who want to stay in town or move to town find a house to buy. The Boy Scout camp, she says, is sort of a neighborhood selling point.

### 'Something's Gonna Happen In Mount Hope'

On Main Street, a former building houses a new museum. Former resident Tom Eisenstein

Construction in 2011. The camp will open its July 2013 winter and National Scout Jamboree.

Noah Adams/NPR

### 'Something's Gonna Happen In Mount Hope'

On Main Street, a corner building houses a new museum. For years, resident Jean Evansmore had been collecting mementos from DuBois High School — Mount Hope's fondly remembered black high school, which closed in 1956. Evansmore had long been thinking of opening a small museum honoring the school's students and teachers.

Late last summer, she saw a "for sale" sign in a corner building on the main street.

"I called my daughter ... in New Jersey," Evansmore says. "And I said, 'I think something's gonna happen in Mount Hope ... Maybe not in my lifetime but certainly within yours ... So what do you think of this?'"

Evansmore's daughter told her to go for it. So she did. On this afternoon, several graduates are at the museum looking at pictures in a 1955 school paper, laughing over photos of old friends and boyfriends.

Just a few blocks away, eight people are attending a service at Mount Hope Presbyterian Church — but more will come when other members get back from wintering in Florida.

Elizabeth Stone is the lay pastor of the Mount Hope Presbyterian Church. There are eight people here this Sunday morning — more will come when other members get back from wintering in Florida.

Fran Birdsong, at 70, is the youngest in today's congregation. "We hope that maybe with the Scouts coming in that we'll get some younger people," she says. "This church was a huge church when I was a child. We would come in on special Sundays like Easter, and there was not a place to sit. It was full, including the balcony."

The Boy Scouts will spend millions more to complete their adventure camp this year. If you live in Mount Hope, you'll keep looking up at that mountain, wondering about this change that's coming.



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