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AMERICAN HOLLOW

(DOCU)

A Home Box Office presentation of a Moxie Films production. Produced, directed by Rory Kennedy. Executive producer, Sheila Nevins. Camera (color), Nick Doob; editor/music supervisor, Adam Zucker; music, Bill Frisell. **Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 22, 1999.** (Also in South by Southwest Film Festival, Austin, Texas.) Running time: 86 MIN.

Fascinating docu offers a sympathetic yet unsentimental look at an extended Appalachian family in an isolated valley of eastern Kentucky. Filmmaker Rory Kennedy (youngest daughter of Robert F. Kennedy) upends traditional "hill-billy" stereotypes by focusing on the simple joys and day-to-day struggles that inform the hardscrabble lives of her economically deprived subjects. Well-crafted pic merits fest and theatrical exposure before its fall HBO airing.

Wizened matriarch Iree Bowling emerges as the "star" of "American Hollow," demonstrating homespun common sense tinged with fatalistic acceptance as she discusses her husband — Bass, a taciturn recovering alcoholic — and their 13 children and 30 grandchildren. Almost all of the Bowlings qualify for welfare assistance, a fact underscored when Iree's son Edgar is wrongly accused of trespassing and other family members are unable to raise his \$5,000 bail. Pic is most compelling as it deals with daughter Samantha's efforts to break free of her abusive husband. Clint, Iree's 17-year-old grandson, inadvertently provides some comic relief as he doggedly seeks the hand of a girlfriend who, not surprisingly, has serious doubts about their ability to live happily ever after.

—Joe Leydon