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WELCOME TO THE HOLLER

Holler is a game about labor conflict, Appalachian culture, and environmental apocalypse. The setting draws heavily from the folklore and history of the region, but the game is a mythical recreation, not a historically accurate one.

The setting is inspired by the sardonic humor of Flannery O' Connor's short fiction; the haunted landscapes of Cormac McCarthy's early Appalachian novels; the outlaw drama of the television series, *Justified*; Manley Wade Wellman's John the Balladeer stories; the growling bluegrass of Dock Boggs; the unsettling domesticity of Ralph Eugene Meatyard's photographs, and a host of other regional influences.

Holler is a mixture of what I call Appalachian Pulp Gothic, dark fantasy, and folk horror, with a focus on strangeness, mystery, and eccentricity.

Cultural conflicts abound. Old-time religion perseveres in a demon-tainted world. A longing for escape pulls against deep connections to the landscape and one's kin. Veneration of the mines and mills as sources of material stability clashes with the reality of their destructive practices.

I was born and raised in the foothills of western North Carolina and have lived in several of its mountain towns as an adult. In many ways, I have devoted my intellectual and spiritual life to Appalachia—writing about it through my creative and academic work as a poet and professor, teaching its literature.

Though roleplaying games are often filled with tropes and archetypes (and this one is, too), I believe these can be approached with nuance and complexity. I consider this game an homage to Appalachian people and their stories.

The heroes in this setting are everyday Appalachians—miners, millhands, mothers—with some iconic and epic twists. This is, first and foremost, a game, and we strive to honor the *Savage Worlds* mantra of “fast, furious, fun.” Moonshiners, Granny Women, gougers and No Accounts all have roles to play in a world where stories become tales.

At the same time, we do not shy away from the harsher realities of the region, like pockets of seemingly intractable poverty, domestic strife, and substance abuse. These realities are fertile ground for storytelling, role playing, and cultural and personal reckoning.

The characters in *Holler* seek to survive in an isolated, blighted landscape. They create bonds with their neighbors and kin. They strive to overthrow their industrial oppressors. They cast their demons back into the darkness. And they do so with fierce-minded independence and powerful expressions of creativity, ingenuity, and resilience.

—Tim Earley

Lead Designer / Writer

THE RIDER'S CURSE

The old-timers claim they remember when the rivers ran clear, the forests deep, the earth produced bountiful food, and you could trust your kin and neighbors.

That was before the Riders came, leering down from their enormous stallions, eyes aglow with fiendish light. The Riders announced themselves as prophets sent by the Big Boys from the City to spread the gospel of a new god—Industry. They said we lived among natural riches that we could neither appreciate nor fathom—we were incapable of harnessing them for our own good.

They said the Big Boys had decided to save us from our poverty and ignorance. The Riders' voices thundered big as the sky, deep as the valley. The night winds seem to grow stronger with their wild gestures and declarations.

The Riders took their industrial tent revival from town to town, promising a future of wealth and convenience—no more back-breaking labor in the fields, our crops at the mercy of the weather; no more ramshackle living with dirt floors and rotting roofs; no more sick children; no more loved ones dying before their time. No more hunger and no more grief.

All we had to do was mark an X on a little paper, saying the Big Boys were welcome among us, we were welcome to what was beneath our land, were welcome to our labor. And a right good many of us thought that sounded like a fine deal. A right good many of us were tired of scratching and pecking at the ground to scare up what little bit of living we had.

But deep down, some of us knew one of Old Scratch's deals when we heard one, and when the Riders came together in Charhold to sing the praises of the coming Industrial Utopia, Bascom Hawkins stood straight up

"IF I WAS A BLUEGRASS PICKER, I'D SELL THE DEVIL MY TICKER, SO I COULD PICK MY TUNES QUICKER AND DRINK MYSELF SICKER"

—FOLK SAYING

in the middle of their sermon and said, flatly and firmly, "Over my dead body." Folks liked Bascom, tall and proud and completely free of nonsense. His word was all it took.

The crowd set upon the Riders with whatever was handy, pocketknives and pieces of timber, holy books and iron knuckles. It was a fight. The Riders seemed to billow up larger than themselves, and the wind drew to them. Their hands might as well have been claws, and their eyes bore right into your soul. We lost a good many fine folks.

By the end of the night those Riders were laid out in the street, each one dead as mutton. But before the last one died, before Bascom picked up a shovel to deliver the killing blow, that Rider let out a baleful moan and spoke, as clear and unbothered as you please, these words:

"I curse this holler with a quandary of demons. Neither bird nor bush nor butterfly. Neither hope nor joy nor beauty. Pit and prison and..." Thump! Bascom did him in, but those words stayed in all that heard them, and all that didn't. And they are still inside many of us today.

It wasn't long until the Big Boys came anyway. The mills went up, the mines went in, the days darkened, and the mountains closed in around us. "No way in, no way out," the Big Boys told us. They could come and go as they pleased, but sure enough, we could not. Any that tried disappeared into the trees or the mist or the maw of something evil.

What could we do? We went to work for the Big Boys, into their mines and mills, into our woods to cut down our trees, into our mountains to strip away the earth so those riches would come falling out. We gave the Big Boys everything we had. They gave us little in return.

The rivers ran sludgy and dark. The trees spit their leaves and grew crooked. The ground gave bad fruit. Black, gaseous clouds roiled through the sky and covered mountain peak and windowsill alike with ashy soot, and some say it sifted into our lungs and settled in our bones. Everyday critters became something else altogether. Demons of every sort gibbered in the dark with their hungers and perversions.

Folks changed. They became tough. Mean-spirited. Turned their anger on their kin and their neighbors and themselves. What could we

do? We kept working for the Big Boys. We kept humming into the bottle or under our breaths.

One day Ella May Hawkins (some say a descendant of Bascom), gathered a group of fellow workers in Stump Bumpers, an illegal speakeasy, after a shift at the Saxon Textile Mill. She got right in the middle of them and said, firmly and flatly, "Enough. We have had enough. This is what we're a-going to do...." The other folks looked at her with dull eyes. One or two murmured assents, but there has been no doing yet.

It's hard to rouse people who have had so much put upon them—the Big Boys working on their minds every day, their bodies bound beneath the earth and molded to machines. The soot of long years covers everything that is and everything that was. Until there are those brave enough to wipe it clean away.

WHERE THINGS STAND

The Big Boys are an association of eight tycoons and their powerful families who hail from the City, an almost mythical construct in the imagination of Holler residents, a place of scarifying hustle and bustle and untold riches.

The Big Boys pooled their enormous resources to seize control of the Holler and effectively separate it from the rest of existence, giving them sole access to its vast store of natural resources. They rule their company towns and coal camps with impunity and sadistic intent, having created the Holler as a perfect experiment in capitalist colonialism, extractive industry, labor exploitation, and environmental manipulation.

They are far from a monolithic entity, but

their various philosophical leanings and temperaments settle into agreement on a crucial point—they want to grow even richer and more powerful, fleecing the Holler for everything it is worth. This means maximizing worker production while minimizing worker freedom, which in their minds leads directly to malingering and rebelliousness.

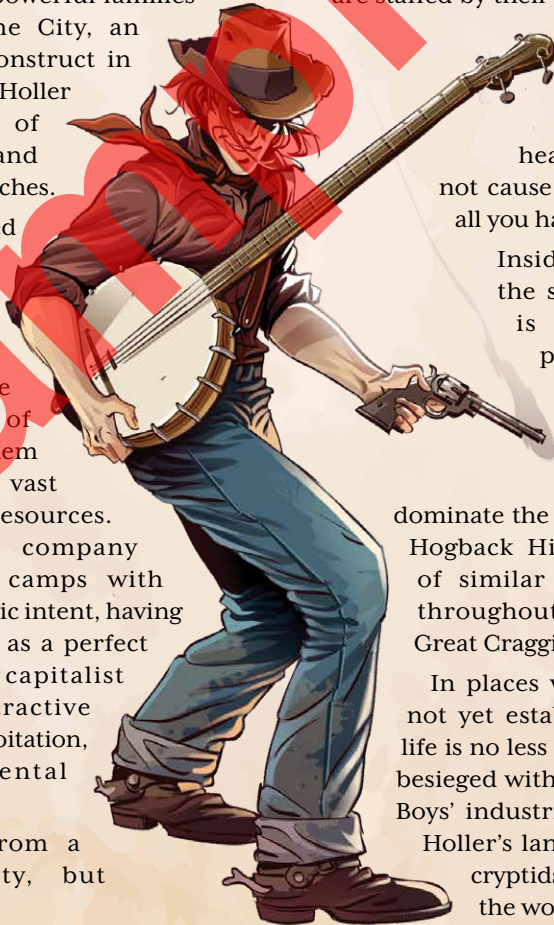
The company town system provides the perfect economic and social structure for their goals. Workers live in small houses, crowded together, making it difficult for them to establish a sense of privacy or keep secrets from their neighbors. It also makes it easy for the Big Boys' minions, the fearsome Kramer-Holt agents and venal company guards, to surveil the workers even when their shifts are over.

The workers must pay rent for their hovels, which is deducted from their paychecks before they ever see it. On top of that, the workers are paid in scrip, a form of currency redeemable only at the company store. The Big Boys sometimes provide scant schooling and small places of worship, but these institutions are staffed by their cronies, with the teachers and ministers espousing nothing more than the Big Boys' approved dogma— "Keep your head down. Work hard. Do not cause trouble. The company is all you have."

Inside the mills and mines, the shifts are long, the work is dangerous, and the punishments for any deviation from the foreman's standards swift and violent.

These company towns dominate the Sootstone Mountains and Hogback Hills, with logging camps of similar arrangement scattered throughout the Ghost Ridge and Great Craggies.

In places where the Big Boys have not yet established their operations, life is no less difficult, as rural folks are besieged with toxic Blight from the Big Boys' industries, the harshness of the Holler's landscape, and the demons, cryptids, and haints that populate the woods.



MUSTERING HEROES

Further afield, to the south, the fae rule the Faefall Mountains, untouched, pristine, and inscrutable to most Holler folks, though a few free spirits have been allowed by the fae to take up residence there. To the north, beyond the Stygians, Piney Dirge Plateau stretches ever horizon-ward, barren and scalded, home to competing clans of religious zealots.

This is the world that Ella May Hawkins—balladeer, weave room worker, mother of six—finds herself in. Like Bascom, she sees right through the Big Boys' fancy words and empty promises. She refuses to be brainwashed like other folks, who do not seem to fully recognize that the earth they walk upon has been transformed into a hell that seems to want nothing more than to torture and erase them.

After that evening at Stump Bumpers, when she tried to stir up some folks who just would not stir, she kept trying, kept working, kept reaching out. Eventually, she discovered some other ornery folks who thought like she did—the Big Boys are a pitiless scourge whose malice-fueled reign must come to an end. The Holler, and everything within it, rightfully belongs to Holler folks, and they deserve to live, dance, love, and fight upon its earth on their own terms.

One by one, small meetings popped up in safe houses in Marrow and Boscage. Some loggers in the Great Craggies refused to clear a patch of demon-infested woods. A miner in Ruin popped his shift boss right in the mouth. A Kramer-Holt vehicle exploded, the lucky agents who had not yet reached the car gazing on this act of unimaginable insurrection with something like wonder.

The brush back from the Big Boys was swift and violent. The threat of imprisonment or worse hangs over even trifling acts of insubordination. Granted, these small acts of rebellion didn't amount to much, but it's a start, and Ella May's looking for a few dissidents of truly uncommon resourcefulness, valor, and skill to step out of the shadows and help everyday folks discover the strength inside them. And if these dissidents are just a touch on the shady or nefarious side, well, that just might come in handy.

This is where you come into the picture. Whether you take the role of an exalted holy roller, a rakish bluegrass picker, or a crusty moonshiner with a heart of 100-proof liquid gold, you're in a world where your survival is constantly under threat. Trouble is everywhere, from the Big Boys and their ruthless underlings, to demons, haints, and cryptids with strange powers and stranger motivations. Even many of your fellow Holler residents have grown cold and amoral under the Big Boys' oppressive regime.

If you survive long enough, maybe you can win the hearts and minds of workers and farmers. Vanquish a legendary creature and learn the secret of its existence, granting you newfound power. Haggle a legendary talisman from the clutches of a tinker or steal a shipment of those fast-firing guns from the City.

Build a coalition of like-minded folks, the people rising up behind you, their hearts filled with hope. Charge into a factory, a hell of noisome gears and whirring machines, with your rag-tag army close behind, hungering for justice. Walk back out with the face print of a dandy from the City on the bottom of your boot.

Maybe the Blight clouds lift, the skies clear, and the mountains once again glitter with greens and golds. Or maybe not. Stories like these are mostly fairy tales. Actual history doesn't usually work like that, but there's only one way to discover your story.

"I AIN'T NO MAN FOR TROUBLE,
BUT I'LL DIE BEFORE I RUN."

CHAPTER 1: MAKING HEROES

Welcome to the Holler! This is your starting point for discovering a unique place characterized as much by its residents' indomitable human spirit as the terrible hardships that afflict it. In the Holler we call the Game Master the Shift Boss—a reference to the day-to-day overseers of the company mines and mills at the turn of the 20th century.

While all heroes are already dissidents and none of them currently work for the Big Boys, many of them have backgrounds that include those experiences. Though not an exhaustive list, here are some ideas to get you started.

SAMPLE CHARACTERS

Aggrieved Mother: Loss is constant in the Holler. Some women have experienced almost unimaginable misfortune. An aggrieved mother has suffered the loss of her children (and possibly her life partner as well) and now feels seeking justice for their deaths is her sole duty.

Bluegrass Musician: The Big Boys have long outlawed public performances of Bluegrass music because of its rebellious lyrics and power to inspire. Still, secret “stomp parties” in the woods and all-night kitchen table jam sessions are common. Truly skilled bluegrass musicians are part mystic, part minstrel, and their virtuosity beggars belief. From the banjo, to the mandolin, to the mouth harp—these instruments become weapons in the right hands.

Curious Youth: The Curious Youth's hope and optimism have not yet been extinguished. He questions everything—the Big Boys' power, the submissiveness of the workers, where the demons came from and how they can be sent back. He constantly seeks adventure, and rushes headlong into any mystery—yearning, perhaps naively, for a better world.

Gouger: Gougers take part in wild, barely regulated bare-knuckle brawls, a popular pastime in the Holler. They fight for money, food, honor, and pride. A flurry of wagers (scrip, livestock, tools, weapons) surrounds most bouts. Gougers are fearsome hand-to-hand combatants, and get their name honest, as gouging out an opponent's eyes is considered the ultimate form of victory.

Granny Woman: The cultural heart of many communities, the granny woman is a walking tome of folk lore, a midwife, a healer, a storyteller, and an arbiter of common sense and goodness. A granny woman does not have to be elderly, but she has done a good bit of living and knows more about the Holler than most. Don't let her age and generosity deceive you—she can do more damage in a dust-up than you might think.

Hell-Raiser: Some folks are born with a wild streak. Whether it's rage or rebelliousness, hell-raisers are always causing a ruckus. The first to brawl, the first (and last) to party, and the first to speak his mind, a hell-raiser's presence ensures there is never a dull (or safe) moment.



Holy Roller: Holy rollers believe in the Lord with all their might. They have a light in their eyes and a fire burning in their soul. They often engage in charismatic practices like foot washing, snake handling, speaking in tongues, wild dancing, and singing to high heaven. Their religious practices are disallowed by the Big Boys, so they must practice their faith in secret. Holy rollers do their best to live lives of compassion, altruism, and forgiveness.

Linthead: Lintheads work in textile mills where brown lung, lost fingers, and repetitive motion injuries are common. However, they often have above average manual dexterity and tireless energy due to their work with high-speed machinery in the weaving and spinning rooms. Their work ethic, determination, and mechanical skills prepare them for many challenges.

Logger: Felling and hauling timber in demon-infested woods is not an easy job. Loggers are capable of amazing feats of strength and are handy with an axe. The constant threat of death has made them a grim lot. Many of them feel deeply conflicted about their role in razing the Holler's majestic forests.

Miner: Miners are by necessity physically and mentally tough. Their lives are constantly threatened by wall collapses, dust or gas explosions, lack of oxygen, and black lung. Very little fazes or frightens miners. They are highly skilled at underground survival and exploration.

Minister: Most ministers are instruments of the Big Boys. Every company town has a Big Boy-sponsored church where the ministers mix their sermons with platitudes about hard work, clean living, and the beneficence of the Big Boys. Some ministers, however, hold the principles of their religion over profit and secretly work to undermine the Big Boys' grip on the people. Ministers believe in a more temperate expression of faith than holy rollers, which often causes friction between them.

Moonshiner: Moonshiners are masters of their craft, distilling concoctions that zip down your gullet and into your head quicker than a hummingbird hums and with more kick than a mule. Shiners fiercely guard their recipes, their stills, their trade routes, and their thoughts. They are loath to trust anyone, and are about the most stealthy, cunning, and ruthless rascals around.

Mountaineer: These rogue individuals would rather die than work in a mill or mine or be subject to the expectations of small-town society. They live in relative isolation and carve a difficult existence out of the Holler's increasingly harrowed environment. Whether mountaineers take to the wilds primarily out of a hatred of the Big Boys, a love of nature, or an inability to fit in with everyday folk, they develop into expert hunters and survivalists.

No-Account: No-accounts ("no-counts") just can't seem to "get right." Folks deem them allergic to work—too lazy or too weak to get their hands dirty. No-accounts have grand schemes and plans, and secretly pursue their obsessions (gadgets, book learning, unraveling the Big Boys' conspiracies), or possess a wild imagination that's so noisy and vibrant that it demands their full attention. Sometimes it's better when folks count you out. It makes it easier for you to do the real work when no one's paying attention.

Peddler: The Big Boys control the Holler's economy, and the official flow of goods in and out of its borders, but peddlers are masters of the black market. They know the back alleys and junkyards, and how to make all the right deals with all the wrong people.

Rabble-Rouser: While hell-raisers are good at getting themselves stirred up, rabble-rousers are good at stirring up other people. Fiery speakers, gifted with charisma and a deep understanding of human nature (and how to manipulate it), rabble-rousers are often found recruiting members to the resistance, organizing a picket line, or standing on top of a soap box to hear the thunder and glory of their own voices.

Rake/Jezebel: It is said that charming people live to the edge of their charm and behave as outrageously as the world lets them. Rakes or Jezebels get by on their good looks and magnetic personalities. Social manipulators and climbers, with an irresistible compulsion for roguishness, rakes are as likely to steal your coin as your heart. The bigger the stage, the bigger their interest in being on it—they fancy themselves as romantic heroes who can always save the day, if they feel like it.

Schoolteacher: Most schoolteachers are brought in from the City. They run rudimentary grammar schools and dutifully

propagate the Big Boys' propaganda. However, there are a few subversives among them who care about the welfare of the children and teach them things they are not supposed to know. These teachers believe raising awareness is the best way to empower the people and eventually send the Big Boys back where they came from.

Seer: Seers are often different from birth—a wen on the forehead, differently-colored eyes, a fairy-shaped ear. They tend to keep to themselves, spend long hours staring at the sky or wandering through the woods. Some have nightmares and some have day-lit visions, but

APPALACHIAN STEREOTYPES & CULTURAL AWARENESS

The people of Appalachia have long been subjected to negative stereotypes and unflattering depictions in mass media. On one end of the spectrum, they are depicted as simple rustics, beneficent but backwards. On the other, they are shown as ignorant hillbillies, venal and vicious, whose accent is synonymous with a lack of intelligence.

In *Holler*, we strive to create stories and characters that show the depth, complexity, and cultural richness of the region.

We intentionally play with stereotype and caricature. Sometimes we reinvent them, sometimes we revel in their absurdity, and sometimes we go in a completely new direction. Everything we offer here is presented with love, affection, and joy. Not only is Appalachia's landscape beautiful, it's people are as beautiful, complex, and varied as people anywhere.

The author of this game is a native of Appalachia, teaches Appalachian literature, and has published books of poetry that wrestle with issues of representation, class, race, labor and social change within the region.

The game is not an attempt to create an accurate cultural or historical representation, but rather to weave a mythic/gothic Appalachia drawn from many historical, literary, artistic, and musical influences that's multi-layered and fun to play in.

they all claim to pierce the veil that seals us off from the “other world.”

Tinker: They’ll raise a fence, bore out an engine, and rig booby traps for a still. If it’s broke, they’ll fix it. If it needs breaking, consider it broke. Masters with conventional and improvised tools, Tinkers are the perfect monkey wrenches to short circuit the Big Boys’ industrial machine. Also called handymen, handy-dandies, jury-riggers, or menders, depending on what part of the Holler you’re from.

MAKING CHARACTERS

Once you’ve developed a concept and background for your freedom fighter, you can begin figuring out her game statistics. Holler follows the character creation rules in *Savage Worlds*, with a few minor changes to skills and a complement of new Hindrances/Edges.

1) RACE

Every player character in *Holler* is human. They receive one free starting Edge at character creation as usual.

2) HINDRANCES

All the Hindrances from *Savage Worlds* are available except Poverty. All Holler residents suffer this affliction (see *Gear* below).

You can take up to 4 points of Hindrances. A Major Hindrance is worth 2 points, and a Minor is worth 1. A hero could thus take two Major Hindrances, four Minor, or any combination that adds up to 4 points. (You can take more Hindrances but the maximum benefit is 4 points).

Taking Hindrances not only helps you define and play your troublemaker, but also allows you to use the additional points to purchase the benefits detailed below in future steps of character creation.

FOR 2 POINTS YOU CAN:

- Increase an attribute one die type (see Step 3), or
- Choose an Edge (see Step 6)

FOR 1 POINT YOU CAN:

- Increase a skill one die type (Step 4), or
- Take one Uncommon item from the **Holler Gear** tables (see step 7).

3) ATTRIBUTES

Next, assign your rowdy’s attributes. A character begins with a d4 in each of his five attributes: Agility, Smarts, Spirit, Strength, and Vigor.

You have five attribute points to distribute among these abilities. Raising an attribute a die type costs one point to a maximum of d12.

You may also spend two of your Hindrance points to raise an attribute a die type.

4) SKILLS

Every character has a d4 in the “core skills” of Athletics, Common Knowledge, Notice, Persuasion, and Stealth.

After that, you have 12 additional skill points to raise core skills or buy and raise new skills as you see fit.

Buying a new skill costs one point and gives it to the character at d4. Each die type after that costs one skill point as long as it’s equal to or less than the attribute to which it’s linked (see *Savage Worlds*). If a skill exceeds the linked attribute, it costs two points per die type.

Skills may not be increased above d12 during character creation.

You may spend 1 Hindrance point to gain an additional skill point.

HOLLER SKILL LIST

Here are the skills available in *Holler*. Note that skills like Weird Science, Spellcasting and Focus may be used by Big Boys, fae, demons, and other malcontents, but aren’t normally available to Holler residents.

New skills are shown with their linked Attribute.

Athletics	Notice
Battle	Occult
Common Knowledge	Performance
Distilling (Smarts)	Persuasion
Driving	Repair
Faith	Riding
Fighting	Shooting
Folklore (Smarts)	Stealth
Folk Magic (Smarts)	Survival
Gambling	Taunt
Healing	Thievery
Intimidation	