

Tom Nugent. *Death at Buffalo Creek*. New York. Norton. 1973. 191 pp. \$5.95.

The gob pile dam in the Buffalo Creek Valley of Southern West Virginia's Logan County broke at 8:01 AM, February 26, 1972. Tom Nugent's book, *Death at Buffalo Creek*, is the story of the 135 million gallons of water that were retained by the dam as it formed a wall-like wave and traversed the 17 miles down Buffalo Creek Valley, killing 135 persons and destroying everything in its path. It is a story of death and devastation. It is also a story of a people who have had a unique relationship to their land. While they have never owned much of it (over half of the entire State of West Virginia and 80% of Logan County is owned by landholders outside of West Virginia), most of the working male population have spent one-third of their lives deep inside it, in the mines, and virtually everyone's life has been shaped within its narrow, twisting valleys.

The story is also a tragic political history. The disaster in Buffalo Creek didn't have to happen. To understand why it occurred, Nugent suggests it is also necessary to understand a political system that, until recently, routinely accepted the statistics of the most hazardous

occupation in the United States: e.g., 625 deaths in the mines in West Virginia in 1908, 686 deaths in 1925, the Monongah mine explosion that killed 361 miners in 1907, and the 78 deaths in the 1968 Farmington mine disaster (which led to the passage of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969). This same political system, particularly in the Southern West Virginia coal fields, came to be known for its resistance to outsiders in general and unions in particular.

Logan County miners remained unorganized until 1936. In later years the county remained a comparatively closed political system. An understanding of how there could exist a poorly engineered earthen dam which was unregulated by any agency of government yet was massive enough to impound 135 million gallons of water at the head of a valley in which 5000 people lived, lies in understanding this political history.

Nugent's story is simple and dramatic. The dam on the Middle Fork of Buffalo Creek filled up and burst. After describing ineffectual attempts to prevent the dam's breaking and noting the absence of any warning system for the valley residents, he follows the sometimes 50 foot high flood wave and its devastating force as it passes, village by village, down the

Buffalo Creek Valley. The images are clear and haunting. Easter Lambert finished pouring a bowl of breakfast cereal, looked out the kitchen window and saw the darkness of the approaching flood wave. She heard a neighbor boy yell, "Run for your lives, here comes the church house." . . . Three Forks was coming apart. House by house, every standing structure was being ripped out of the ground and hurled straight at them. Suddenly the Lamberts were in a race with death." They made it to safety. One hundred and thirty-five other people didn't.

Along with her son and 19-month-old adopted granddaughter, Sylvia Albright, water rapidly rising to her waist, then her shoulders, stood at the "bottom of a slope, swinging the baby back and forth through the air, trying to find the strength to throw him up to the crowd on the hill. Finally, the child dropped out of her arms, and, in the clear view of the horrified people above, all three of them were swept away."

The final part of the book chronicles the investigations into the causes of the disaster. The evidence developed in hearings of the U.S. Bureau of Mines-Geological Survey Task Force, the U.S. Senate Labor Subcommittee, West Virginia Governor Moore's Investigative Commission, the Citizens' Committee to Investigate the Buffalo Creek Disaster, and research conducted by the U.S. Corps of Engineers all arrived at essentially the same conclusion: The negligence of the Pittston Company and its subsidiary, Buffalo Mining, not an "Act of God," led to the destruction of the Buffalo Creek Valley.

The book gives only passing attention to one of the serious and lingering problems of the disaster: The re-settlement of victims who lost their homes. Twenty-five hundred refugees were housed in 700 house trailers in thirteen trailer parks. The trailers were provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Develop-

ment. HUD assigned people to available trailers on a first-come, first-served basis and assumed responsibility for the management of the trailer parks. The parks were densely populated, unorganized residential environments which later became the source of considerable controversy. Observers of the Buffalo Creek Valley recovery effort became increasingly concerned with the very negative, sometimes pathological living conditions and behaviors which seemed to be typical of some of the parks. HUD took virtually no steps to attempt to place former neighbors and families back together in the re-settlement effort, and missed a critical opportunity to begin to rebuild the natural ecology of community life. In a paper delivered at the NIMH Seminar on Emergency Mental Health Services in 1973, I remarked: "It might be argued that if a deranged social scientist were to design a system of disaster intervention that would maximize pathology, it is likely that he would do precisely what was done." It would have been helpful if Nugent had dealt in depth with this particular problem, as well as the larger general problem of the long-term effects of this event that ripped out the social and psychological foundations of the valley's community life.

Death at Buffalo Creek is a thoughtful and very human account of a disaster. It gives attention to two major factors that separate this disaster from others: first, the disaster was man-made, and second, virtually the entire community was destroyed. While each of these factors have been independently present in various disasters, it has been rare for them to occur simultaneously. It is unfortunate that no agency of government or private foundation has seen fit to research the long-term consequences of this unique catastrophic event in American life.

Dwight Harshbarger
 Department of Psychology
 West Virginia University