

## **Buffalo Creek: A Morality Play**

**By John Alexander Williams**

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The Buffalo Creek flood occurred on a Saturday. In contrast to the assassinations and upheavals of the previous ten years, I don't remember where I was or what I was doing when I heard the news. My wife and I had separated only a few weeks before, and she had taken our three small sons to live with her sister in Albuquerque. I was a lonely bachelor, in the company of an equally lonely family dog, rattling around an empty apartment on Chicago's north side. Did I watch the news obsessively that weekend? Did Chicago's notoriously provincial newspapers give the story much play? I can't remember.

What I do recall is trying to get my American history class at the University of Illinois to discuss the tragedy the following Monday. As far as my students were concerned, Buffalo Creek ranked with disasters in far-off places – like typhoons in India or earthquakes in Peru. No matter how many people were killed in whatever ghastly circumstances, these eighteen-to-twenty year olds barely noticed such happenings, if at all. They couldn't see how such things connected to their own lives. Finally in exasperation I turned out the lights.

The Chicago campus of the University of Illinois had been designed for the convenience of janitors. Chairs in most classrooms were bolted to the floor, so students couldn't comfortably turn to talk to one another. Discussions in such rooms were all but impossible. The classroom building was also designed to be easily defended in cases of campus unrest: There were narrow tinted slit windows that did not open and didn't – at least on a winter morning – admit much light. Turning off the lights at least got the students' attention.

“West Virginia is where the electricity comes from!” I told them, explaining how the mining of coal was related to the energy abundance that made it possible to live comfortably on the chilly shore of Lake Michigan. Two days later I showed parts of the Haskell Wexler film *Medium Cool* in another attempt to demonstrate a Chicago-West Virginia connection. The students paid polite attention but had little to say. I knew then that I had to return to West Virginia. I called Morgantown to inquire about a vacancy I knew about in the history department at WVU; a few weeks later I had the job. Since this doomed in advance a reconciliation that my wife and I attempted in the spring, I guess you could say that, as with so many other people, Buffalo Creek changed my life.

Soon I had to confront Buffalo Creek in a different way: as a writer trying to make interpretive sense of the many twists and turns in West Virginia's history. In 1975 I was completing a book that would be West Virginia's volume in an American Revolution Bicentennial project to create an interpretive history of each of the fifty states. Seventy thousand words had to cover everything from Chief Cornstalk to Arch Moore, and Buffalo Creek was still very much in the news. I decided to make the disaster the

interpretive focus of what was then recent history, just as I made the Point Pleasant battlefield the focus of colonial history or the Paint Creek/Cabin Creek strike the focus of the early industrial age. I remember pouring over the reports and newspaper clippings, noting that the victims bore names that could be found in earlier chapters of West Virginia history – names like Bailey, Blankenship, Browning, Davis, Ferguson, Hatfield, McCoy, Peters, Perry, Staton, Waugh, and White. There were also names – Florencio and Magdalene Sosa, for example or Margaret Yanco Jarrell – that spoke of the social changes that industrialization had wrought.

The stories of ordinary people tend to get lost in historical accounts of important events. My published account of Buffalo Creek is no exception. I ranked the flood with the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster and the Paint Creek/Cabin Creek strike as episodes in a long-running story of how West Virginia's leadership and institutions have failed to protect the state's people and its land. Many of the interesting details got lost in the editorial process, but most people got the interpretive point. "What you wrote may be true, but you didn't have to write it," an angry ex-West Virginian wrote me from Huntington Beach, California. True enough, I wrote back, but I didn't set out to write a pasteurized history that flattered an exile's childhood memories but rather a realistic view of the past that might serve as a guide to the future. Then three years after the book was published, I became an exile myself and have never again lived in the state.

In 1992, at the time of Buffalo Creek's twentieth anniversary, I was at work in a different medium, turning my interpretation of West Virginia history into the script for a documentary film. Here we were able to recapture much of the emotional power that was submerged in the analytical approach of the book. History in books and on film has different emotional timbres. Print calls for an Olympian stance: considered judgments, sweeping views, the forest rather than the trees. In contrast, film is relentlessly up close and personal. Sometimes I watch uneasily as *West Virginia: A Film History* feeds back my ideas stripped of nuance. The "ifs, buts and on-the-other-hands" that allow historians to make judgments without ignoring alternative viewpoints don't come across on-screen the way they do in a book.

Yet these differences recede when it comes to Buffalo Creek. In print and on film, Buffalo Creek is a morality play: innocence versus evil, peaceful families on an early Saturday morning betrayed by institutions they were entitled to trust. The contrast is compounded by what we now know about the governor – that in addition to being callous, he was also a crook – and the standards that law and economics now set in defining corporate liability for preventable accidents. This is how Buffalo Creek still looks to me after thirty-three years, and it is how I think it will look on its fiftieth anniversary or its hundredth.

### **Never Forget: Appalshop's Films on the Buffalo Creek Disaster**

The two Appalshop films on Buffalo Creek reflect the moral dimension of the tragedy. Yet the differences between the two films are also important. Consider the sound tracks. Music adds a lot to the emotional impact of film, and documentaries are no

exception. *The Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man* opens with grainy black and white footage. “The bacon was sizzling and the coffee was poured”: The lyric drives home the poignancy of the victims’ fate and offers a counterpoint to the survivors and experts who indict the Pittston Company for the practices and outlooks that led to the disaster. “An act of God the bosses did cry/ But God ain’t that cruel: He can see through your lies.” Here the sound track summons the sentimental appeal of Appalachian balladry to lend force to the film’s main thesis: that Buffalo Creek was an act of men – identifiable, indictable men, even though none were indicted – not as in Pittston’s notorious pronouncement, “an act of God.”

*Buffalo Creek Revisited* is made in color, not black and white, but that is not its principal departure from the earlier film. Here the filmmaker uses the distinctive sound of an unusual instrument – the Tibetan bowl – to provide an interpretation more clearly stated through music than anywhere else in the film. Just as the testimony of survivors traces the path from horror to grief to anger and frustration, the bowl emits a shrill sound that first resembles a siren, evolves into a wail, then into an almost unbearable shriek. The conventional ballad that opens and closes the film also conveys a complicated message. The song laments the loss of community among the survivors and joins their experience to a universal theme of lost innocence: You can’t go home again.

*Buffalo Creek Revisited* should be required viewing for people on the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast, for even in the face of a genuine natural disaster, it shows that tragedy can be compounded by what follows. The Pittston Company is shown once again evading its responsibility, this time by legal maneuver and slick public relations rather than the bald-faced denials that followed the flood.

But much of the film focuses on the lesser evil of unintended consequences. Well-meaning relief officials rushed to provide emergency housing but failed to think through the social and psychological consequences of how the housing was sited. Public officials promised a new, job-generating highway (although given the experience of other Appalachian districts we are entitled to wonder if the road’s primary purpose would have been to speed up coal production rather than to help residents.) The road project forced delays in the rebuilding of communities, and this was further compounded by the well-meaning proposals by development experts to reconstruct the Buffalo Creek valley according to a model that embodied the conventional wisdom of planning experts but which failed to take account of cultural traditions and social relations that had prevailed there before the flood. Politicians were lavish in their promises, just as they were in the first weeks following Hurricane Katrina. But as time passed, promises were forgotten except by those who had pegged to them their future hopes. The film depicts the verbal hand wringing of two West Virginia congressmen – one of them a future governor – both presenting themselves more or less as bystanders with no responsibility for the broken promises and angry frustration that characterized the flood’s aftermath. No wonder the Tibetan bowl player drives his instrument to a shriek.

The value of these two films is grounded in the ways they fix our memories of the human face of this event. The archival record and the volumes of investigations and

reports survive and will always bear re-examination for the light they can shed on the many dimensions of this disaster. But archives and reports remain the provinces of experts, shielded from public view by the protective barriers that preserve them. The films anchor the human dimensions of Buffalo Creek in the public memory through the most popular and accessible medium of our time. This is important, for in the words of one of the survivors, counseled to let go of her memories and get on with her life lest she drive herself mad, “When you forget about it, that’s when you’re crazy.” As long as *The Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man* and *Buffalo Creek Revisited* remain accessible, we are unlikely to succumb to the insanity of forgetting.