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Death, destruction of flood still vivid

By BOB WITHERS, The Herald-Dispatch of Huntington

DATELINE: HUNTINGTON W.Va.

Edna Baisden (Short) and her husband, Sam Baisden, were in bed asleep at their Braeholm home on Logan County's Buffalo Creek. It was Saturday morning, Feb. 26, 1972, and someone was knocking on their door.

Sam answered.

"The dam has broken; you had better get out," he was told.

What did Short, now of Huntington, do? She went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee.

"We had heard that so many times," she says.

The couple and their 18-year-old daughter, Marsha Baisden Workman, walked outside and looked up the road.

"I saw it coming across the railroad crossing about 200 feet above where we lived," Short says. "It was like a monster, like something raising up."

As the tsunami-like waters closed in, Sam Baisden ignored his '67 Buick and his wife's '68 Pontiac in the driveway. He then hooked his beloved-but-inoperable antique Datsun, which was parked along the road, to Marsha's car, which was parked in front of it.

"They risked both of their lives to get that antique car out of the way," Short says.

But as the desperate drivers drove down the road and made a U-turn so they could turn into an alley near their home and race up the hill, Short went back in the house to retrieve the coffee pot before she fled.

"I was a-screamin' at 'em," she says. "I didn't know where they were at. When I stepped off the step onto the carport, the water was up to my knees."

Short started running for the hill. She had just emerged from the water when

she heard a neighbor, Emory Vanco, shout: "Edna, Edna, stand still!"

Live power lines were falling all around her. Finally, she heard someone say "We're all right." And her husband and daughter came back down from the hill to get her.

"We had no cups, but we stood there and drank coffee out of that coffee pot until it was empty and I threw it down," she says. "We saw the water lift up our house. When the water set it down again, it just flattened out on the ground. The water was there, and then it was gone."

About 50 people including the Baisdens stayed in the Vancos' home on the hill that night. Many of them went hungry, but they were alive.

"What food there was they gave to the kids," Short says. "There was nothing else left."

There had been concerns that one of the three dams on the middle fork of Buffalo Creek would break.

Melvin Duba of Beckley is a retired mine foreman. On that fateful day, he was wrapping up the closure of Buffalo Mining Co.'s 8-1/2 mine, more than a mile above the dams. Then, he and fire boss Luther Browning jumped in his new Volkswagen Beetle and headed for the other side of the hollow, where they were expanding the 5A mine from two to four sections.

"Luther and I left the No. 5 office at 7:45 a.m., stopped beside the No. 3 dam and walked out on top of it," he says.

Walden Mullins, the superintendent from No. 5 mine, and Steve Dasovich, the man in charge of Buffalo Mining operations, were there.

"We all stomped on the dam and said 'This is going to hold; there's no way it can break,'" Duba says. "We looked around a few minutes, got back in my Beetle, went down the hill past all three dams and started up the hill on the other side."

All at once they heard an explosion. Instantly, the car was showered with black, nasty water.

"We jumped out to see what happened and saw the slate and water come rushing out of that hollow," Duba says. "Then we knew the dam had broken. We watched it tear out a bridge and several houses. You talk about being thankful . . ."

Duba, Browning and other miners from 5A started walking out of the hollow using the road where it wasn't torn up and animal trails along the hillside where necessary. They surrendered their hunting jackets, overalls and other items of clothing to dazed survivors who had managed to outrun the water in

their shorts and nightgowns.

"The devastation was horrible," Duba says. "Horrible."

Barbara Johnson of Huntington said Kelly Mountain, behind her home in Amherstdale's Proctor Bottom, was too steep; she would never climb it.

On the morning of Feb. 26, her husband Charles Jr. had gone to the post office. She was alone in the house with their two youngest children, ages 6 and 7. The other seven kids were in an adjacent home the family had purchased.

When neighbor Patty Adkins' warning came, though, Johnson started rousing everybody.

"I ran up Kelly Mountain," she says.

Jim Piccirillo of Valencia, Calif., had stayed at a friend's house that Friday night after attending the Man vs. Chapmanville basketball game.

"Twenty-four hours later, I was back in that gym which by then had become the command center and temporary morgue for victims," he says. "I watched people covered in black, oily mud stumble in, dazed and confused."

Incidentally, Marsha Baisden Workman, who now lives at Robinette, a couple of miles from her parents' old property, picked up that coffee pot and still has it.

And it still works.