

Buffalo Creek Revisited

Transcript

**Song: Ain't Goin'
Home Soon"**

I was born in a coal camp, stars in my head
Mountains as far as I could see.
Went to work everyday and brought home a big pay
There was honey in the horn for me.
Then the coal dust blows, like a dark summer snow
But I don't hear the roar of the tipple anymore
Or the whine of the trucks on the line.

Now the town's all gone, it's gone away.
The town's all gone, it's gone away,
Now the town's all gone, it's gone away,
The people are strong the wind has blown away.

Narrator:

On February the 26th, 1972, a coal waste dam collapsed at the head of a crowded hollow in Southern West Virginia. In the ensuing flood, one hundred and twenty-five people were killed. Most of the sixteen small mining communities along Buffalo Creek were demolished, and four thousand people were left homeless. The Pittston Company, owners of the dam, denied responsibility for the disaster, claiming it was an "act of God". Several years later, the Pittston Company settled a number of lawsuits out of court, although they never accepted responsibility. This film looks at the efforts to rebuild the Buffalo Creek community in the years after the disaster.

Gail Amburgey:

I've not wrote anything about the flood after this, I think it says it all, pretty much. I don't know if I'll write anything else about the flood or not. "It's Friday, late on the summer side of this West Virginia town wishing it was another West Virginia town maybe on some other West Virginia river bank as beautiful as autumn in your mind. Here in this seventy-five dollar room, I remember things and more things. I've forgotten nothing. My thoughts are as clear as the empty vodka bottle on my windowsill. I remember a dusty afternoon luncheon at the church yard ten years ago, every detail as close as it can be to me. My thoughts run ragged, one right after another, like seconds and minutes that turn into hours and days, thoughts and thoughts that turn into nightmares. The point in your life where thoughts take the place of time passing. That old license plate on the wall calls out a past best forgotten. And I've forgotten – now some names of those I knew, some faces of misplaced people. Those people are lost to me and I've forgotten the Friday night rain and the Saturday morning pain, no particular Saturday morning. I said I've forgotten that. I can't remember the dead dogs I pulled out of the mud in houses wishing and hoping and good God above, praying that it wasn't some child still warm yet stiff from the mud. I said I couldn't remember the water marks on houses condemned and the water marks on people condemned and the water marks zigzagging the mountain sides for ten miles down the hollow. I've forgotten the story of poor Mrs. Withrow buried to the neck for hours and saying a prayer thanking the good Lord she had survived and telling the sickened workers not to worry-she was warm-God had taken care of her while she waited. And I've forgotten the look in Mr. Johnson's eyes on that Saturday morning. The way he stared at me laying down in that rubble like that. Genitals torn completely off his naked tormented body. It showed in his eyes when I shook him, I asked him for an answer. I swear damn it, - I can't forget-not this late at night.

Church Service: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see

Rev. Paul Rhodes: We have two pots of roses, and we'd like to present a rose to each of you that is representing your families. In remembrance of the women: Mike Banks, Robert A. Murray, Thomas Vernatter, Leonard E. Butcher, Grady Michael Waugh, Frank _____ Sr., Kimberly K. Bailey, Augusta Miller, Sylvia Albright, Mary B. Markham, Goldie Marie Seals, Alicia Dempsey, Donetta Lynn Lester, Thelma Dillon, Wendall Dallas Osburn, Edith Blankenship, Lillian Carter, Anita Owen Smith, Herbert Peters, unidentified, Diana McCoy, Kimberly McCoy, Harold Dillon, Larry Wauth, Kathy Waugh, May Jarrel, Anita Owens, Gladys Fay, Nathan Quinn.

Ruth Morris: Our children were raised together, they wasn't like neighbors, they were family. I've traveled over this old hollow many a day with maybe tow families in my car to the doctor. My next door neighbor would take my carburetor and put it on his car, I'd take his tires off and put them on mine, that's the kind of neighbors we was. We didn't run and knock on the doors and say, 'Can I do', we went and opened the door and walked in and did do. We just worked together. I guess you could say we took care of one another. We joined everything. We belonged to the PTA, the scouts, the Cub Scouts, all community affairs, churches and stuff like that. And every morning to us was a Sunday morning, a smile, a 'Good morning', 'Hi., how are you.' That meant so much to us; we don't get that no more. We don't see it no more. It's a loss, it is. You know, a smile is worth a million dollars, and we don't get that no more. We get vacant stares, we get frowns, we get worries. It will never have another homey atmosphere. That's the only thing I can tell you really to define it, it was home.

Dr. June Church: I was one of the few psychologists that was available during the Buffalo Creek disaster in 1972. Some of the emotional problems, psychophysiological problems were headaches, some colitis, different types of stress reactions. There was an increase in alcohol consumption. The families became more disruptive within themselves, more arguments. There was an increase in accidents: people just running off the road, for instance. There was an extensive amount of depression, guilt, and anxiety.

Gail Amburgey: I don't know, I was real confused for a long time, for years and years after the flood. I couldn't really zone in on what was happening. I knew people was dead, dogs was dead, and people was out of homes and stuff. I was real busy, you know, everybody pitched in and I really didn't have time to think about what was going on.

Former Congressman Ken Hechler: The reaction was good as far as the clean-up and rescue effort, the recovery of bodies and bulldozing some of the debris out of the way. The National Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers did a fairly good and thorough job on that. But very little was done to deal with the human problems which this terrible disaster had caused among thousands of people throughout the valley. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, HUD, sent in some trailers. The coal companies, of course, didn't want them put on land that they hoped to be able to mine. And when HUD herded people into some thirteen trailer parks, it was done in a very arbitrary manner. It broke up communities. People had

been ripped up by the roots and forced into what were almost concentration camps.

Ruth Morris: I lived at the Accoville trailer park. They called it a 'Gestapo'. The one at Green Valley, they called it 'Little Peyton Place'. They never could keep track of their children. People were distrustful. They could see no peace, no rest. They put strangers in them HUD trailers among our people that we didn't know. It was frightful. And you'd hear mothers cry and worry and wonder when they was going to get to go back on their property. It just wasn't home to them. And they couldn't look into the future; they didn't have nothing to look to.

Dr. Church: Even though we had strongly suggested on the relocation to keep the natural groupings together, as much as possible, but apparently they were just haphazardly placed. The people, who had lived together for years, and their fathers and forefathers had all lived closely together, were disbanded – broken up. There were put next to strangers, they had no one that they could really risk themselves with, to talk with, share their common feelings, and they felt like they were alone in the world. And then unfortunately, it will take, in my opinion again, two generations for them to really resolve all the anxieties that have lingered on.

Ruth Morris: That used to be a trailer court. You can see them HUD trailers still lout there. This is the lower end of Lundale. Lundale lost everything and Lorado. Everything here is new. There ain't nothing, wasn't nothing, just like somebody took a magic wand and wiped it out, this whole bottom was wiped out. . . This is the main road, it went just exactly right here. It took three rows. There was three rows of houses in here. See these alleys through here? There was an alley in front of every house. Now, one of my sons lives right there. This is my property, Mimi. And I got that playground put in there after the dam broke. All this in here is new. See, this was all wiped out. . . See here? My daddy's property set right there, that was daddy's tree right there. My brother was washed off his property right there where you see that log laying. . . Now this was a big community. See the highway going right through there. There was homes here, three rows of them. One, two, three – went clear back. Now this was the property I was telling you about, that the highway department bought for the highway. And the people want to buy it back and they said they couldn't sell it to them. . . Well, what in the name of God is going on here? . . . Howdy! Guess you know what I'm doing, don't you? I'm checking out your property for you. And I'm a-telling them about it now. She's one of the ones they turned down, that's Mrs. Webb. She wanted her property back right down there, and they wouldn't let her have it, told her it wasn't for sale, and they turned around and sold it to another man, and she had to buy below me. Now all this property through here was full of houses, but still yet, they would not let us come back.

Ken Hechler: The state highway department was insisting that it needed to have time to engineer and plan out the right-of-way for a super highway. And I got a lot of calls from individuals who wanted to go back in the area where they had had their homes. They were told by the state highway people, 'you can't go there because there's no water and sewage there and we need that land for the super highway.' The emphasis kept being placed on the priority of the highway, which to them seemed to be far more important than getting people back into their homes.

Carl Bradford: We called together all the federal and state agencies that we felt might have some input redeveloping the area and initiated a planning process
Former director,

Governor's Office
of Federal/State
Relations

which resulted in this document, The Buffalo Valley redevelopment Plan. So our initial approach was to try to concentrate the redevelopment in what was then called three "nodes", which you'll hear quite a bit about the "node" concept down there even yet. But essentially what was done was look for the area where the most total destruction had occurred so the land was basically available, and concentrate amenities in these areas, and encourage people to rebuild and resettle in that area. The reconstruction of the road was included in the redevelopment plan along with water, sewer systems, health services, recreation, and other components of restoring community life.

Mryna Amburgey:

When you come down to the nitty gritty of it, the people really didn't ask for anything. It was the government coming in here and telling them what they were to do. Well, that caused expectations then, and then they wanted it.

Beth Spence:

I don't know what happened, whether the funding wasn't available or what, but the water and sewage system was completed in 1977, instead of in September 1972. The road took a long time to complete, and during that time people were really in limbo about going back to their homes, to their lots, to rebuild, because they didn't know whether it was going to be taken for this or that or the other. Well, one of the problems was nobody ever made an attempt to tell them.

Robert Wise:

I don't think people wanted the world, but it's when you come in and say there will be seven hundred and fifty homes, there will be immediate recreation, there will be a water and sewer system, and then it's not coming, that piled on top of an already traumatic even, such as the flood. . .

Mryna Amburgey:

Really, I think a whole lot of the dishonesty that went on in this creek was due to having broken promises. It turned their attitude, you know, completely around. It was really tough.

Jack Vernatter:

People's not the same yet.

Mryna Amburgey:

No, and they'll never be the same.

Jack Vernatter:

Used to be you could go up through these camps here and you stop at a community and the first thing you know, there's twenty-five or thirty around you – everybody talking to one another. You can go through there now, and you stop you car, there ain't nobody going to come to your car to see what you want.

Mryna Amburgey:

In fact, you debate on whether to stop close to their fence or not.

Carl Bradford:

There's no question that the building of the highway, many things affected a person's options in terms of returning to their initial place of land. In fact, looking at it in retrospective of how the resettlement occurred, there weren't that many people who really returned to their original place of land. If everything had gone according to initial perceptions of the optimum projections, we would have tried to create a suburban quality of life in nodules in Buffalo Valley. I don't think anyone really expected that to happen, but if you don't set your goals high, you'll end up much lower than you're shooting for. I think what we were shooting for, realistically, was safe, decent, sanitary living conditions in the Valley where people had some choice to choose the type of dwelling they want, the lifestyle they wanted to accommodate, and have some degree of protection in doing that. I don't think we got quite to there.

Jack Vernatter: I'll go back just a little bit further than the flood. I'll go back fifteen years ago. If either one of ya'll had told me that I couldn't have gotten anything from my state, or that my government would have lied to me, you would have had me to fight! Right now brothers, she's up in limbo. I think they'll all lie to you – everyone of them will give you a nice talk and they'll put a picture on there that, by God, you can almost see it in the dark. But it's not there, folks.

Beth Spence: The thing that frustrates me about Buffalo Creek is that I come up here today and I see not the communities that I knew as a child, but sort of scattered homes, a loss of community. People face death of friends and relatives, but also, when everything that was once familiar to them is also gone, the trauma is doubled. And I think Buffalo Creek stands as a symbol as to how important communities are.

Ruth Morris: That was Saunders Camp right there, where you see all that stuff piled. It was beautiful. It was the most modernist little community you ever looked at. There was about thirty-five families lived there. There was a whole complete community, one of the prettiest little places you ever seen. Little modern homes. Everybody was so happy there. Their big white church set right yonder in that dip. Pittston wouldn't let them come back on it, and the people went to Federal court and made them buy them some property down at Lulndale. They use it now to stock. The didn't want nobody back, the coal companies didn't want none of us back. The went right on building this. They didn't offer to make them people a way to live. They had this build before they ever made provisions for those people. . .The governor let them get away with it. . .Here's where the dam broke. They keep a check on it. See how they drain them, now. . . See how they drain them now. . .Well, they was all back to work in five days, if you'll just read your papers.

Ken Hechler: Because of the fact that almost three-quarters pf the land in Logan County is owned by a very few coal companies, lumber companies, oil and utility empires, it is very, very difficult for the average individual to find a place to live. Virtually all of the level land is being reserved by those companies that hope to extract the mineral resources. After Buffalo Creek, we had a combination of not only the state highway; but we had the coal companies vetoing the use of land to get people back into their homes. And this is a perennial problem in an area that is dominated by a small number of industries the way Logan County is. It's a problem not only in Buffalo Creek, it's a problem through the county where, if you want to resettle people that have been on Buffalo Creek, you can't find the land elsewhere. And there's been cases of whole communities that have been obliterated because of the need for a new coal tipple or a preparation plan.

Carl Bradford: Early on in the going we suggested to the people of the valley that one pf the solutions available to them in trying to get control of their destiny was to pursue incorporation. The people did start to push for incorporation, and pursued it as far as they could, and ultimately weren't successful.

Ruth Morris: The Logan County courthouse blocked us on incorporation for the simple reason was we wouldn't agree for the coal companies to be set outside of the taxes. And if we paid taxes, we felt like they ought to pay taxes.

- Ken Hechler:** The coal industry has great power over the politics of West Virginia. And of course, property taxes are necessary in order to sustain the school system, and to build the necessary water systems, and recreation areas. Yet in Logan County, when you have ten of the biggest companies controlling sixty percent of the land and only paying twenty-six percent of the property tax, well that's outrageous. It's no wonder that you have this syndrome of low property taxes, bad schools, bad roads and poor people.
- Robert Wise:** You've got a railroad train thirty feet from this living room that runs out every day loaded with coal, going to Boston, Chicago, and whatnot. And it's like you say, where are the fire trucks, where are the school buildings, where are the recreation centers? You have to raise that money out of the people that live here. Well, that's fine. But why didn't those corporate citizens also contribute? It was a coal company that caused this flood, it's coal companies that own this valley, it's coal companies that are going to cause another flood, I think, if we don't change some of these patters.
- Mryna Amburgey:** Well, they'll make their money and they'll move out. See, their headquarters, I think, is in New York. Their officials has homes in Florida and California and places like that. Once they're through, they move out. They leave their debris, their mess, their junk. They don't care about us anymore. So why put all that money in there? They're going to leave.
- Virgie Vernatter:** How many of their wives have been here to see how we live? How many of the owners, the ones that own stock in the coal company, how many have been through our area and looked it over? They don't know how we live.
- Beth Spence:** How many of their children have to go to school in our schools? And how many of them have to die in our hospitals because we don't have adequate health care? Not very many of them.
- Robert Wise:** We have to break some of that pattern somehow. So I think Buffalo Creek is symbolic and represents a good deal of the problem in this state and I think several of the Appalachian states.
- Ken Hechler:** The domination of the coal companies and the land that they owned is really one of the keys to why Buffalo Creek, in this period ten years after, had not really fully recovered. It's still under the domination and thumb of the coal companies. . .But there's more people than there are exploiters, therefore there ought to be an opportunity to organize the people to insist that they be given treatment as human beings instead of mere vassals in a fiefdom.
- Gail Amburgey:** In the conversations that I've had with people, they just say, 'look, it's over, forget about it.' They're crazy. When you forget about it, that's when you're crazy. If you think about it every day, as long as it stays with me, I'm going to be sane.
- Song:** I was born in a hollow that was lonesome and long
Where the sun didn't shine all day.
But the banjo's in the night and the stars big light
Was pleasures that I wanted to stay.
How could anybody know that the next year or so

We would all be traveling o'er the mountains and plains,
Tryin' to plant our roots again.

It's been a long time since I've been home,
It's been a long time since I've been home,
It's been a long time since I've been home.
And I ain't goin' soon, no I ain't goin' back soon.

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