Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man

By Mimi Pickering
Director of "Buffalo Creek Flood…"

File photo/The Herald-Dispatch (Huntington, WV). A young boy surveys the damage as cleanup begins after the Buffalo Creek Dam broke in Feb. 26, 1972.

I was at a meeting in central West Virginia on Feb. 26, 1972 when I first learned of the Buffalo Creek disaster. An hour or two had passed since the flood had swept through the Buffalo Creek community. Someone heard it on radio or TV --"A coal company dam has collapsed, thousands are affected, hundreds are missing and feared dead." The reaction to this news from the people in the room was similar--shock, horror, anger, outrage. The meeting was called to an end. Many people left for Buffalo Creek. I returned to Kentucky wondering what I could do.

Fearing that the Governor's committee set up to investigate the Buffalo Creek incident would not come up with a complete accounting for the events leading to the disaster, a group of concerned West Virginians formed the Citizens' Commission To Investigate The Buffalo Creek Disaster soon after the flood. The Citizen's Commission scheduled hearings on Buffalo Creek and asked me and other members of Appalshop to film the proceedings. We had only a couple hundred feet of black & white film, a few blank videotapes, no money and little credit, but we felt it was very important to be there to document what went on.

We ended up spending several weeks in and around Buffalo Creek recording the hearings, videotaping interviews with survivors, and filming the destruction and cleanup operations (and in the process, having one crew member arrested and jailed for trespassing). I had never before experienced anything like the chaos, confusion, and despair that engulfed the Buffalo Creek community in the first weeks after the flood, and I hope I never do so again. It was incredibly difficult to have to ask survivors to talk about the disaster and to go out day after day to film such massive destruction. The experience of being on Buffalo Creek was physically and emotionally draining for all of us. I left the area feeling horribly depressed and wondering how we could use the film and video we had shot to tell such a difficult story, and where in the world we would get the money to do so.

I wrote a proposal and sent it to any foundation or group I thought might be interested in supporting the film. In the meantime, we returned to Buffalo Creek whenever we could and tried to come up with enough money and film stock or videotape to cover such events as the survivor's trip to the stockholder's meeting. And I read anything I could find that had something to do with Buffalo Creek: government reports, the Congressional Record, university-conducted studies, magazine and newspaper articles, industry and citizen group newsletters, etc. Finally, when I was just about ready to give up hope of ever getting the project off the ground, the Abelard Foundation gave Appalshop a small grant to produce the film.

"The Buffalo Creek Flood: An Act of Man" took a long time to complete. It was a complex story to tell and a painful one to have to deal with. The film would have been impossible to make without the film footage, photographs, and time donated to the project by people from throughout the region. We never really had enough money and that fact, together with the variety of film stocks and formats included in the film and my own inexperience, led to a film of poor technical quality. I hope that those viewing the film will be able to bear with it and see

past these difficulties.

I made this film about the Buffalo Creek disaster because I believed the story of what happened and why needed to be told. As I learned more about the events preceding the tragedy and the responses of company and government officials afterwards, I became strongly convinced that the Buffalo Creek disaster was an outrageous example of an industry-wide attitude that places a greater value on profits and production than on the health and safety of coal miners, their families, and their communities.

Although the Buffalo Creek disaster affected more than those that mine coal, I do not believe it was an isolated incident. Rather, I see it as only one episode in an apparently unending series of mine-related disasters that periodically strike the coalfields. There have been over twenty U.S. mine disasters that have killed more than a hundred miners each. Added to these deaths are the more frequent mine fatalities that come in ones and twos. As of 1978, more than 120,000 men have died in the mines since the official death count began in 1839. There have been over 1.5 million serious mine-related accidents since 1930 alone. Even now in 1978, a miner is killed on the job on the average of once every other working day.

Yet, I do not believe it has to be this way. The technology is available to make mining safe for coal miners and the environment. Wales and West Germany are examples of other countries in which accident rates and environmental damages from mining have been greatly reduced for years. But the deaths in our mines and mining communities will not stop until the American coal industry is forced to take responsibility for its actions. Until that happens I believe there will be more Buffalo Creeks, more mine fatalities, and the people who live and work where the coal is mined will continue to pay its real costs.

I don't think this film will change the attitude or practice of the coal industry. I don't think a film can do anything of that magnitude. I only hope that the film will impart some knowledge, some understanding and insight, of the structure of power in Appalachia, and that it can provide a starting point from which to examine the rights and responsibilities of corporations, governments, and citizens in other coal mining communities and in our nation as a whole.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Mimi Pickering is an award-winning filmmaker with Appalshop, the media, arts and education center founded in 1969 in Kentucky's Appalachian coalfields. Pickering's documentaries often feature women as principle storytellers, focus on struggles for equity and justice, and explore the efforts of grassroots communities to address local concerns that frequently reflect global issues. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and two Al Smith Individual Artist Fellowships from the Kentucky Arts Council. Other films include "Chemical Valley" (*broadcast on POV), which focuses on the reality of environmental racism and the implications of the Bhopal disaster for residents of West Virginia's Kanawha Valley; and* "Hazel Dickens: It's Hard to Tell the Singer from the Song," a *portrait of this West Virginia native whose feminist country ballads, union anthems, and blue collar laments combine the traditional and the political. Most recently Pickering and Anne Lewis completed* "Anne Braden: Southern Patriot," *a documentary on the life and legacy of this white Southern woman who became a legendary civil rights leader, journalist, teacher and mentor to three generations of social justice activists.*

http://www.buffalocreekflood.org/bcf.htm