

In West Virginia

Walls Begin to Leak

By George Vecsey
Twilight, W. Va., (AP)

Alva Workman is a retired coal miner who likes to keep a neat house. Right now he has laid boards across his yard so visitors won't have to walk in the mud.

"This place ain't fit for a bunch of dogs," Mr. Workman said, glancing at the water and debris rolling down the hill behind his house.

But Mr. Workman saves his darkest glances for the waste pile that looms a few thousand feet up the hollow. Like many other residents here, he is afraid that Twilight may become the next victim of a Buffalo Creek, where at least 100 persons were killed and 5,000 made homeless when a dam of waste material gave way.

Twilight's waste pile belongs to Armco Steel, whose huge coal mine and processing plant darken the gap between the mountains. This waste pile does not seem to be burning as the Buffalo Creek pile was, and it does not seem to have a great pond of water, as Buffalo Creek did. But the people here say they are worried anyway.

Thousands of persons, many of them dependent on the coal industry for their livelihood, worried throughout the steep hills of Appalachia, where there are countless piles of waste because the coal industry finds it economical to dump its low-grade coal and slate wastes in the hills.

Strip mining, which is often viewed as merely an esthetic problem, is believed by some to be destroying nature's tenuous drainage system and causing more frequent floods. And abandoned mines, filled with water by accident or design are sometimes opened by strip mining, releasing an increasing number of floods of acidic water.

With Buffalo Creek on their minds, the people of Twilight say that they suffer from a rare combination of old mines, strip mines and waste piles.

After the heavy rains that hastened disaster at Buffalo Creek, the mountain above Twilight began to leak. There had been strip mining high on the hill, and the miners speculated that the old Wharton No. 1 deep mine, from the next valley, had begun to unleash water that had collected in its shaft.

"This is where the danger of

strip mining is," said Gene Harner, the Boone County extension agent of West Virginia University. "When you strip, you take away the outcroppings left by the deep mines. Then the water bursts through. Also, stripping destroys vegetation and leads to floods, particularly in the early spring before things grow."

Yet some residents of Twilight seem most fearful of the waste pile up the hollow from the Twilight grade school and their homes.

"Buddy, I hope you write something about that pile," one Armco employee said. "They're pumping water into that pile. Pretty soon they're going to seal it off. Then all that water from the hollow will collect behind there."

"When it comes down like Buffalo Creek, it's gonna be bad. First thing it'll get will be the school."

Coal officials maintain that waste banks can be controlled by proper grading. (A spot check in 1966 by the Geological Survey said that 30 of 38 waste banks inspected showed "some signs of instability." Twilight was one of the 30. Buffalo Creek was rated as stable, but it was said that it could be "overtopped and breached," with damage occurring below the pile.)

Sometimes, the waste pile is also used as a dump for dirty water — "Slurry" — from the coal-processing plant. A pump delivers the water to a pool formed behind a dam of waste. These dams can be made stable by proper engineering, but the danger comes from heavy rains higher up the mountain or from damming up the stream.

There are 100 Bureau of Mines inspectors in the fields, but there are more than 5,000 working mines and 5,000 abandoned mines throughout Appalachia. Because of this work-load, some observers wonder if federal and state authorities can control waste piles or any other aspect of mining.

There is even doubt as to which statute or which agency has the final authority in this case.

Blame for Disaster

Since the stream at Buffalo Creek was blocked, should the state's Public Service Commission have acted before the disaster? Since the bank was burning, should the state's Air Pollution Control Commission

have acted? Since the water may have been polluted, should the State Water Resources Division have acted?

Then again, federal regulations seem to show that the Bureau of Mines had the power to inspect Buffalo Creek — under one law if it was merely a waste pile, under another if it was an impoundment of water.

Meanwhile, stronger bills are likely to be passed by aroused state and federal legislature.

Are there any alternatives to dumping waste in the hollows? The state's Soil Conservation Service says that a Bethlehem Steel mine in Idamay has created valuable farm land by filling with 15 to 18 feet of waste then a layer of two feet of topsoil and then repeating the process until level land is achieved.

But the agency adds that this process has been successful only in the more rolling northern fields.

Another possibility is to cart all waste material back into the deep mines. But waste material takes up more space after it has been displaced, and the authorities say that the cost of replacing it would be high.

Buffalo Creek may have some effect on the Democratic presidential primary on May 9 in West Virginia, where only Hubert H. Humphrey and George C. Wallace are running.

But there is some question whether politics will excite many residents of West Virginia.

West Virginians say that their backs are up against the wall. And the walls are beginning to leak.

Day by

Ten Years Ago—1962

Macon County's Oakley Dam and Reservoir project won the approval of Gov. Otto Kerner.

Bryan J. O'Connor was named commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 99.

Twenty Years Ago—1952

The Illinois Commerce Commission again suspended a petition of the Decatur City Lines for a fare increase to a straight 10 cents.

North Water Street merchants delivered to Mayor Robert Willis a petition with 75 signatures protesting installation of parking meters in their area.