

## Horror of Buffalo Creek Slide Lingers

# Dangerous Coal Waste Piles Hover Over Miners

© New York Times News Service

TWILIGHT, W. Va. — 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," Workman said, glancing at the water and debris rolling down the hill behind his house.

But Workman saves his darkest glances for the waste pile that blooms a few thousand feet up the hollow. Like many other residents here, he is afraid that Twilight might become the next Buffalo Creek, where at least 117 persons were killed and 5,000 made homeless when a dam of waste material gave way Feb. 26.

### Not Burning

There is a waste pile up the hollow from Twilight, too. It belongs to Armco Steel, whose huge coal mine and processing plant darkens the gap between the mountains. This waste pile doesn't seem to be burning and it doesn't seem to have a great pond of water, as Buffalo Creek did. But the people here say they are worried anyway.

Probably thousands of people are worried throughout the steep hills of Appalachia, where countless piles of waste are hanging over their heads because the coal industry finds it economical to dump its low-grade coal and slate wastes in the hills that mountaineers still grow sentimental over.

But Appalachians are learning that coal does more than merely crush too many of its brave workmen. Doctors, for example, are beginning to testify that a few years in the mines may fill a man's lungs with crippling coal dust. And the tragedy of Buffalo Creek is chilling proof to many residents that coal mined by one generation may eventually come crashing down on the heads of the next.

With Buffalo Creek on their minds, the people of Twilight say they suffer from a 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 wise old 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 to 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."

### School Nearby

Some residents of Twilight seem most fearful of the waste pile halfway up the hillside, slightly up the hollow from the Twilight grade school and their homes.

"Buddy, I hope you write something about that pile," whispered one Armco employe, his eyes darting about for the presence of any company officials. "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."

But does Twilight really have a similarity to Buffalo Creek? Waste piles, after all, can differ from one hollow to the next.

Sometimes the pile is composed of mostly slate, so its principal danger comes from instability. Other piles have a higher degree of low-grade coal, which can catch fire from spontaneous combustion deep

inside the pile. (A 1971 report by the Bureau of Mines, cited 292 burning waste banks, 132 of them in West Virginia — one of them at Twilight, one of them at the top of Buffalo Creek.)

When the waste banks burn, the smoke pours into the valley killing vegetation and offending the nostrils, and there is no sure way of putting out a smoldering fire deep inside a waste bank.

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 and Buffalo Creek was rated stable but it could be "overtopped and breached" with damage occurring below the pile.

### Dirty Water

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. Too much water can cause the dam to crumble — and sometimes the water acts as a catalyst upon gassy deposits in the bank, causing steam explosions.

Buffalo Creek seemed to have elements of all these dangers — a dammed-up stream, a burning bank, sudden spring runoff from the mountain and perhaps even an explosion that helped destroy the dam. Even Robert Reineke, a lawyer and spokesman for the Pittston Co., the parent company of Buffalo Mining Co., admitted that the slurry pond at Buffalo Creek was "functional — to filter acid and to back up the water."

There is little smoke evident

at Twilight and no visible collection of water. But residents insist that Armco did some heavy fixing with bulldozers soon after Buffalo Creek took place. And an employe pointed surreptitiously to a pipe dumping water near the back of the pile.

"We do pump water up that hill," said Jerry Swanson, the young head of the Armco operations here. "It settles out through the hills. There is nothing critical here that I can see."

"I've been reading about Buffalo Creek," Swanson continued. "It's just awful. Naturally, everybody is concerned. We've never had any accidents with ours — but then they never had with theirs, either."

It is possible that residents here are unduly alarmed. In fact, with 120 Bureau of Mine inspectors scurrying out into the fields, slurry ponds may become the safest aspect of coal mining — at least while the heat is on.

### Who's in Charge?

Yet with over 5,000 working mines and a minimum of 5,000 abandoned mines throughout Appalachia, can the federal and state authorities 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. Since the stream at Buffalo Creek was blocked, the state's Public Service Commission could have taken action before the disaster. Since the bank was burning, the state's Air Pollution Control Commission could have stepped in. Since the water may have

been polluted, the state Water Resources Division might have had responsibility.

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 law if it was an impounding of water.

Meanwhile, stronger bills are likely to be passed by aroused state and federal legislatures — and the politically directed and undermanned inspection forces will have yet another law to cope with.

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 perhaps two feet of topsoil and repeating the process until level land is achieved.

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

Another possibility is carting all waste material back in the deep mines. But waste material takes up more space after it has been displaced — and authorities say the cost of replacing it would have to be high.

### Use Strengthens Voice

NEW YORK (AP) — Voice specialist Allen Swift says he takes advantage of his voice. He makes no effort to save it from overuse because he says the use of his voice strengthens it for radio and television commercials.

