

- Nell Quesenbery Report

Claiborne County Progress

August 3, 1982

BARREN CREEK FLOOD

By Nell Quesenbery

Sixty-six years ago, on Wednesday, August 2nd, 1916, Claiborne County experienced the worst flood of its recorded history.

This midsummer, well into the “Dog Days,” the weather had been seasonably hot. Women, while tending their families for the last month, had been busy picking berries, fruits and vegetables from their gardens to can and store for the winter.

The men, too, went about their daily chores watching the corn and other grains ripen for harvest. Many of the men were overseas, where the world’s greatest armed conflict was beginning its second year.

Wednesday dawned another hot moisture-laden day that even the heavy night dew had not cooled. Most places where one could expect breezes, nothing stirred. Boys slipped away to play in the creeks, splashing, throwing pebbles or catching crawdads. Sometimes a slender water snake would raise itself, perhaps a foot, and stare at them curiously.

Some folks living near the Clinch River dug a few red worms and fished with a cane pole. Our water courses, running slow and sluggish, offered little relief from the hot humidity to the people on their banks.

People also traveled on Wednesday, August 2, 1916. My granny, Dora Jennings Holland, rode horseback from Lone Mountain to the Head of Barren Creek section. She stayed all night with her kinfolk that lived in a two-story house.

Frank Evans, road surveyor, boarding with the Cox family, that lived across from Johnson’s Mill on Barren Creek, moved his crew out Wednesday morning to work someplace else for a few days. His wife, Ollie Stone Evans, and young daughter, Imogene (Mrs. Thomas J.

Rose) returned home to the Stone farm Wednesday evening. They had traveled by buggy to visit their Aunt Mollie Davis in Howard's Quarter.

Eva Carter of Knoxville and Ethel Payne (Mrs. J.R. Greer) of Lone Mountain spent Wednesday night with Ewing and Mag Yoakum of Tazewell. The Yoakums had three young children, Blanche, William and "Dick," a babe of nine months.

Ott Walker of lower Straight Creek rode horseback to visit Mae Bullard, age 16, Wednesday evening. Mae lived with her brother, Charlie Bullard, in the Head of Ball Creek section. Charlie's house was near the second trestle, about three miles south of Tazewell. That evening, Ott and Mae walked from the second trestle, about two miles down the railroad tracks, to attend the Lone Mountain Methodist revival.

At 11 p.m. on that Wednesday in 1916, the hot, saturated air lying over Tazewell was met by a high atmospheric chill wind. No longer able to hold its moisture, a cloudburst occurred, dropping nine inches of rain in the next five hours.

Lucy Phelps Jennings said, "There was continuous lightning without ceasing." Imogene Rose remembers the ever-present roar of thunder. Joe Smith of Liberty section had threshed wheat all day but quit late that night due to the bad electrical storm. Down on Bear Creek, lightning ran in on Preacher Kelly Harrell's phone.

A.J. "Andy" Quesenbery's farm bordered the first trestle and Greer Tunnel on the KC&G Railroad.

Along the tracks, back toward Tazewell about three quarters of a mile from the tunnel, stood his large two-story house.

Andy's son, E.L. "Pete" Quesenbery, made his way over the first trestle and on to the "tunnel hill" section of the farm to see how their stock was faring in the fierce storm.

Returning home, he heard the sucking roar of the water about the trestle. He crossed the first trestle just before it was washed away forever.

Ott Walker and Mae Bullard returned up the railroad tracks from the Lone Mountain Methodist Church to Mae's brother Charlie's house, situated near the second trestle on Ball Creek. Ott and his horse were forced to seek shelter in Tom Janeway's barn for the night.

Meanwhile, the Bullard family awoke to water reaching their knees. Grabbing one quilt, the family first sought safety under a large overhanging rock. Then, amidst heavy wind and chill rain, they climbed further up the hillside. Later, they saw the rock they first sought shelter under had fallen with one of the massive mudslides found all over the flood area.

That night on Ball Creek, William's sawmill, Francisco's Mill, and a small house were washed away.

Near the Lone Mountain Methodist Church, the main part of Anderson Cardwell's two-story log house stood. He, his daughter Mattie and their overnight guest, the Methodist preacher, had to climb to the second floor.

On the Lone Mountain Road, near Ball Creek, water rose to the counters of Charlie Rose's store. His mill dam at Farmer's Mill washed away.

At Day's Siding, Tinker Bunch's house, Alvis Hurst's grist mill and the country bridge washed away.

Tazewell, being of higher elevation, escaped the worst of the flood. Several small buildings were lost on Russell Creek and Blairs Creek.

Meyer's schoolhouse and a few buildings were lost on Lower Straight Creek. Most of Straight Creek road was washed away or suffered mudslides.

G.L. "Shoate" Phelps lost his barn, farm machinery, sawmill and several head of stock.

In Dry Hollow, Hent Singleton's house was washed away.

Midnight . . .

The worse part of destruction was along Barren Creek that flows southwest of Tazewell. Thence, five miles from the Head of Barren Creek, through a valley to the Clinch River. In less than an hour, twenty-four people would be dead, and untold dollars' worth of property lost.

At the Head of Barren Creek, Thompson's Mill Pond covered more than five acres. The dam was over twenty-one feet high. This barrier gave way, creating a deadly surge of water, twenty-five or more feet high.

This great rapacious wave, running wild down the valley to the Clinch River, picked up and swept away Meyer's Mill, Chumley's Mill, Keck's Mill and Heath's (Johnson's) Mill.

Bud Mayes' house was the first destroyed. Aware of the violent rainfall, he grew uneasy about the large dam of water above his house. Watching the dam by flashes of lightning, he saw the dam break. The water spilled out forming a huge wave. Shouting, he roused his family. They fled to the nearby hillside just as the flood took his house.

Next was the home of Bunk Ferguson. The maelstrom took himself, his wife and seven children. Bunk Ferguson's body was never found.

Crockett Edmonson lost his wife, three children and two grandchildren. Crockett, along with a son and a daughter, survived to tell their tales of horror while in the water. The Edmondson's' daughter saw and heard the panic-stunned screams of her mother as she was carried to her death.

The Edmondson son held the hand of his younger brother until they struck a tree and were torn apart. Crockett was carried more than a mile by the rampaging torrent.

By lightning flashes, he could see objects, stock and trees in the foaming churning water becoming twisted and mangled. His ears rung with the screams of death and terror before he finally became free of the water.

Robert Johnson, his wife, as well as Porter Zachary, his wife and five children were victims of the deluge.

After floating into the Clinch River, some of those bodies were found in Lenoir City and Kingston, Tennessee.

John W. Chumley, Millard Meyers, Dr. Carter Carr, Johnson Cox, Sam Beeler, John Keck, among others, suffered property loss.

The houses on Barren Creek, where my granny Dora stayed, did not wash away. The family spent the night on the second floor.

On Straight Creek, Ben Phelps and the other children were happy to see their father's old mule, "Big Daddy," return. The mule had a great tear in its belly from which his bowels were protruding. Ben's father "Shoate" Phelps pushed the mule's intestines back into their cavity and successfully stitched the huge wound.

Tom Rose remembers that for days, he helped his father, Charlie Rose, dry out the store goods.

Ed Shumate had the Ball Creek mail route during the flood. He remembers the next day was Election Day. Then women did not vote. Hardly anyone could get to the poles to vote, but they held the election anyway.

Claiborne County was sorely tested during the flood, with devastation of life and property. The people promptly formed rescue missions and also collected funds to help the worst cases. Still, the cost of this destruction took many years for some families to overcome.

[Return to Joe Payne's Claiborne County Page](#)

[Return to Joe Payne's Genealogy Page](#)