

price, and Mays is caught looking at a third strike. The head of the man in the Homburg slumps onto the shoulder of the woman next to him.

At the top of the fifth the Giants rough up Met pitcher Ray Sadecki for four runs. In the course of their rally they pinch-hit for their lefty McDowell; now Mays will have to hit against the Giants' tall, hard-throwing righthander Don Carrithers. Bad omens abound. If a lefthander can brush Willie back, what will a righthander do? The game is tied, and he will have to abandon caution. Worse, the crowd demands a miracle. Mays is an old man, this aging fan's mind reasons; let him bring back the skeleton of a fish, a single.

But even former residents of Mount Olympus now and then remember their old address. Mays hits a 3-2 pitch toward the power alley in left center—a double at least. I find myself standing, body bent backward, like a saxophone player humping a melody, until the ball clears the fence for a home run. The rest is simple: Jim McAndrew in relief holds the Giants for four innings, and the Mets win, 5-4.

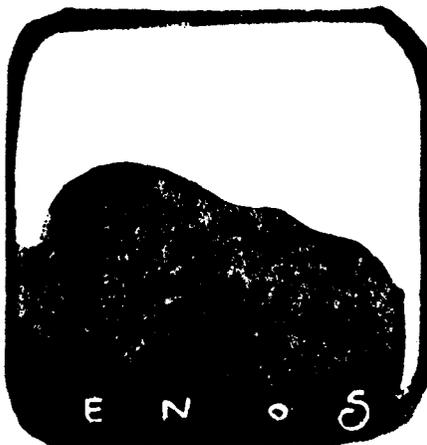
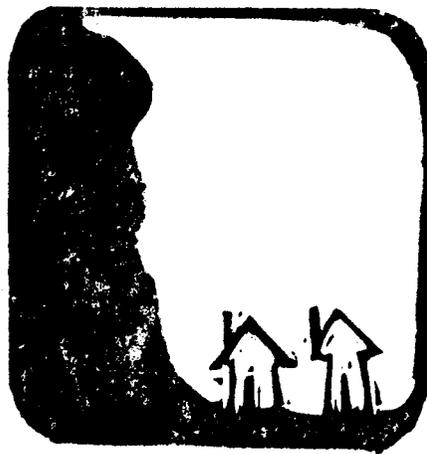
I didn't know until then that warmed-over passion could be so exciting. Since he joined the Mets, Mays has been responsible for, or at least instrumental in, winning about ten games with his hitting, fielding, high base-on-balls percentage, and his heads-up running of the bases. He has raised his average over .250 (his Mets batting average is over .280), has hit five home runs altogether, and has had nineteen RBIs in less than 200 times at bat. Plus, when he is listed in the lineup, he has the sure-fire gate glamour of a hootchy-kootchy dancer on a Bible-Belt midway.

So the message here is: Willie still swings. Unlike all those "son of" epics around now, he might be his own sequel. □

Buffalo Creek Aftermath

BY HARRY M. CAUDILL

BUFFALO CREEK, W. Va.—Last February 26 here in Logan County an enormous mountain of slag and other waste deposited by the Buffalo Mining Company collapsed after several days of heavy rain. Atop the heap hundreds of feet over the Buffalo Creek Valley sat a 14.2-acre lake like a pool of gravy in a mound of mashed potato. Together the 132 million gallons of water from the lake and the waste mixed into a thirty-foot-high



batter of gob that slopped down the steep valley, tearing through a dozen hamlets, smashing and burying hundreds of houses, sweeping away roads and bridges. At least 125 persons died. Over 4,000 of the valley's 5,000 residents, mostly from poor mining families, saw their homes destroyed.

Now, more than six months later, desolation and despair are nearly all that is left in Buffalo Creek Valley. The dislocations caused by the flood remain overwhelming—the mind cannot grasp the situation unless one has seen it. Some people have lost relatives or friends or both. Many who have lost homes and savings have little hope of possessing either ever again. Some can't even be sure where their houses once stood, for all landmarks are gone. Where thousands of people once lived on cinder-coated streets, many acres now stand vacant and await the future.

Unfortunately, much of that future is dependent on those whose neglect and indifference were responsible for the disaster: the Pittston Company, owner of Buffalo Mining and the nation's fourth-largest coal producer. A huge corporation with immense profits and influential connections has simply eradicated a whole string of communities—and done it with astonishing composure.

For years Pittston blithely disregarded state and federal laws prohibiting discharge of industrial wastes into navigable streams and "tributaries thereof" and proceeded to rid itself of slate, shale, coal, and sludge simply by dumping them into a hollow. The company also flouted regulations issued by the Bureau of Mines under the 1969 Coal Mine Health and Safety Act, which declare that "refuse piles shall not be constructed so as to impede drainage or impound water." The peril posed by the slag heap and the lake of poisonous water glistening on its top had been discovered long before the prolonged rainfall in late February. In 1966 then Interior Secretary Stewart Udall ordered the U.S. Geological Survey and the Bureau of Mines to make a study of mine-waste dumps in the coal fields. Among thirty-eight singled out as hazardous in West Virginia, an immense pile on Buffalo Creek drew the special attention of USGS geologist William Davies. The official form asked, "If bank should be unstable what would happen?" To which Davies answered, "Large wash would fill valley." Another question asked, "Would this bank remain stable after hurricane-type precipitation?" And the reply was an unequivocal no. In a splendid display of prophecy and forewarning, Davies dealt

Last February a wave of gob slopped through a West Virginia valley, killing at least 125 persons.

with the final query, "If not, what would be the result?" His answer would be precisely fulfilled on the fatal morning of February 26: "Low freeboard of dike (8 feet) on N.E. corner of lake would allow topping and breaching of bank."

Because of Davies's report federal officials knew of the existence of the gob pile, that it was unstable, that the northeast corner of the dam was weak, and that in a "hurricane-type" rainfall it would break and fill the valley. They knew that such rains would come to wet Appalachia—as one did for several sodden days in late February. But no action was taken. Udall sent a warning letter to the state's representatives and two senators and the then governor, Hulett Smith. The letter proposed a requirement that the angle of bank slopes be reduced and that adequate spillways be installed. The companies ignored the suggestions, the officials ignored the warning, and the Bureau of Mines ignored Udall's pledge "to continue to observe mine dumps for possible critical situations." No one did any costly boat rocking. In 1971 Pittston's profits soared to \$44.4 million, a husky 16 per cent of income.

And when the clearly foreseeable inundation came, there was an almost equally foreseeable rush to disclaim responsibility. Speaking for the U.S. Bureau of Mines, Donald Schlick, deputy director, said, "We might have jurisdiction if it was a refuse pile, but if it was a dam per se, I guess we don't." Gov. Arch A. Moore, Jr., running for re-election against John "Jay" Rockefeller IV, was all bluster and thunder. He denied that his own failure to try to alleviate the perilous conditions at Buffalo Creek had contributed to the disaster and rejected the company's feeble assertion that the state had refused to allow it to drain the lake because the water would kill fish downstream.

Then the busy governor ordered state police and national guardsmen to keep "irresponsible" news people, including some who were bird-dogging Sen. Jennings Randolph, out of the valley. This act of statesmanship riled Randolph, who solemnly intoned: "The public has a right to know. Someone is trying to cover something up, and I want to know what." The "somebody" and the "what" were indicated by other pronouncements from His Excellency, the Governor. The lake had been used as a settling basin for mine wastes, Moore said, and was, therefore, "logical and constructive." Sadly, the chief executive observed that the worst thing about the tragedy was the bad publicity it had brought the state.

Robert Reineke, a spokesman for Clinchfield Coal Company, Pittston's biggest operating subsidiary, admitted to reporters two days after the event that

"The public has a right to know," intoned Senator Jennings Randolph. "Someone is trying to cover something up and I want to know what."

"the responsibility is Pittston's in the long range. I would say the refuse pile is our responsibility." But Pittston promptly overruled the candid Mr. Reineke with a statement an earlier era might have treated as blasphemy. Reporter Mary Walton wrote in the *Charleston Gazette* that a Pittston official had told her by telephone that the flood was an act of God. There was nothing wrong with the gob pile except that it was "incapable of holding the water that God poured into it," he had said.

The federal government has provided some aid, but, as is usual in such situations, the effort has been inadequate and snarled in red tape. Federal relief funds amounting to \$7 million and another \$5.4 million in loans have been made available through a maze of thirteen governmental and social agencies. The multiplicity of overlapping and competing agencies involved would baffle the most sophisticated, but despite monumental bureaucratic ineptness some benefits have filtered down to the stricken.

The Army Corps of Engineers has donated mobile home sites, and 483 of the wood and metal oblongs have now been installed at a cost of \$2.4 million. They provide shelter for 633 people. The sites and their water, sewerage, and electric facilities cost another \$3 million. The homes can be occupied rent-free for a year, then bought over a thirty-year period at the government's cost minus one year's depreciation. Since many of the buyers are old, disabled, and sick, it is likely that a good many purchasers will have become delinquent long before 2002.

In the meantime the state has imposed a quarantine that prevents private rebuilding until adequate water and sewerage facilities are available in the valley. Since they never existed before, their installation may take years and, more probably, will simply never occur.

As of mid-May Pittston had not been nearly so generous as the government. By that time 1,971 claims had been filed against the company, but only one—for \$4,000—had been paid. In mid-August Zane Grey Staker, a Pittston lawyer, said that the company had made progress. "A

lot of water has passed over the dam," Mr. Staker stated, adding that a vast majority of both death and property claims had been settled and that fewer than 100 remained outstanding. He did not say how much money had been paid. Attesting to the general poverty of the valley, property loss claims range from \$2,500 to \$47,000. Charles Cowan, a black service-station operator at Amherstdale, has organized some of the victims into the Citizens' Disaster Committee, and they have contacted a Washington law firm (Abe Fortas's old Arnold & Porter) to prosecute claims against Pittston. But at Pittston's office in New York no one seems worried. In a statement filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission on March 31 the corporation reported that, while the claims may, in the aggregate, be substantial, "... Pittston believes that ultimate effects of such claims should not be material in relation to its consolidated financial position."

Nothing at all has changed on those scores of hilltops in Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, western Virginia, and West Virginia, where mine refuse towers are being readied. After ceaseless hand wringing about the doom that has already struck on Buffalo Creek, an apparent consensus seems to ensure that nothing either extensive or costly shall be undertaken to prevent future disasters.

In May the oft-fooled people of West Virginia nominated Jay Rockefeller for governor on the Democratic ticket and thwarted the legislature's attempt to force Rep. Ken Hechler, an ardent critic of rapacious mining practices, out of office by nominating him in an elaborately gerrymandered new district. The vote for Hechler was an astonishing 2½ to 1. West Virginians have wearied of environmental desecration and irresponsible corporations that kill miners and their communities through monumental negligence. The horror of Buffalo Creek has done much to awaken the state to an awareness of its plight and to start it moving into modern times. Accountability is coming at last to the hills and hollows.

The new mood was illustrated recently when Governor Moore visited the valley. A mountaineer, Delbert Toler, complained about the ruin caused by hillside stripmining, and the governor undertook to defend the industry and his own pro-coal position. Toler got the message, and, when the governor extended his hand, Toler refused to shake it. Enough is enough, even in West Virginia. □

Harry M. Caudill is a lawyer in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and the author of Night Comes to the Cumberland.

SR REVIEWS

Travel

That Persian Feeling

BY RENÉ LECLER

I am sitting in the Persian caravanserai garden of the Hotel Shah Abbas in Isfahan. The night is falling gently and the roses Omar Khayyám wrote so many poems about are blooming all over the place. The muezzin next door is calling the faithful to prayer from the top of his glowing minaret, which looks like an exotic cigar being smoked by an invisible giant. Like a true tourist all I can do is sit there, order my Scotch without any regret, and hope that tomorrow is going to be just like today.

Which it won't be. A moment or feeling never seems to repeat itself in Persia, or Iran as it is now called. That is the trouble with Omar Khayyám. He draws you to Persia, but when you arrive, you find that all he is known for is his mathematics. Some mathematician. Some poet.

This is Persia all over—incongruous, commonplace, and utterly beautiful. The surprises never end. For instance, the Persian word for "thank you" is *Merci*. Some Persian. Every car and almost every taxi has its own wall-to-wall Persian carpet, which, as status marks go, beats a two-note horn. Persians are strange people, too—they don't seem to hate or dislike anyone, which, in today's world, is very odd. One Jewish-American fellow traveler told me last night: "You know, I just don't understand these people! They know I am Jewish and they know by my passport that I have just visited Israel. They are Muslims, but they just smile. When I mentioned this to my guide, he said: 'Well, we did have a little trouble with the Jews, but that was 3,000 years ago and we have forgotten about it!'"

A cup, or rather a glass, of tea in any Persian village costs the best part of one cent, and some say that before inflation reared its ugly head, it was even cheaper. The ice cream tastes like frozen molasses—where is that sherbet of yesteryear?—and on the

Caspian coast I saw a sturgeon that tipped the scales at 1,200 pounds and yielded 320 pounds of caviar.

I was told at Bandar Pahlevi that the Iranians rear baby sturgeons and float them back into the Caspian. Although they go to feed in Soviet waters, they always come back to spawn in Persian territorial waters, which is very patriotic and also very good business for the shah of Iran, who owns the fisheries.

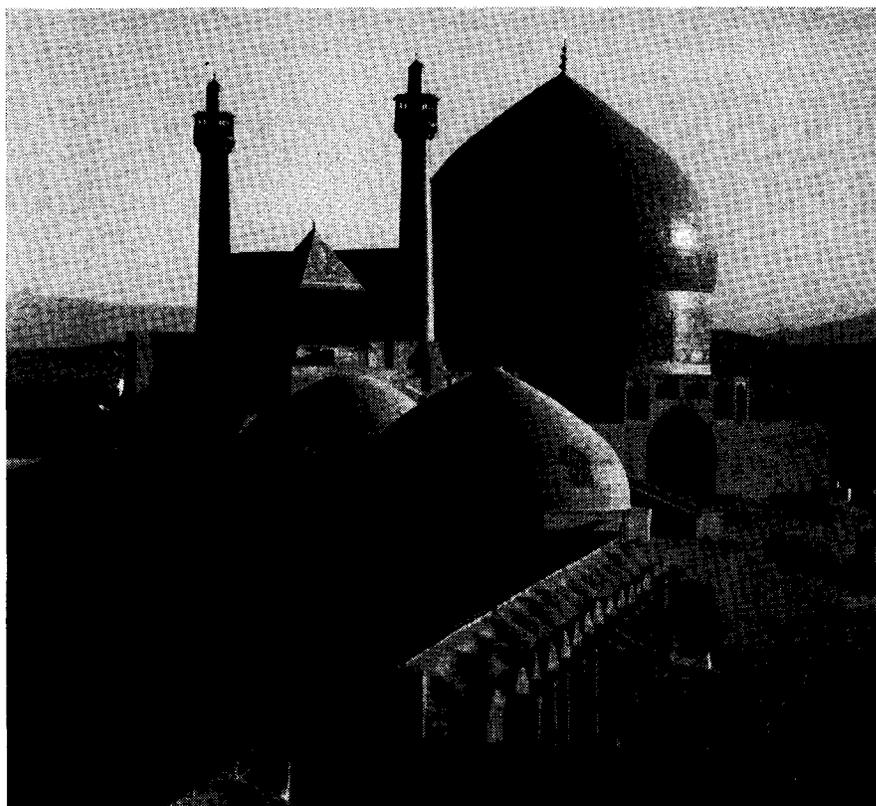
For me, the most interesting part of Persia is Isfahan. You can fly there in forty-five minutes by an Iranair plane from Teheran. I preferred to go by road, 250 miles full speed ahead, skirting the Great Salt Desert. This is an experience in itself—a succession of elemental landscapes changing under the sun from light champagne to dark brown and from hazy blue to the violent green of the fields on the banks of the *wadis*.

But it is at the journey's end where the real revelations begin. Isfahan is one of the most beautiful places on earth. In famed Shiraz, further south, there is a garden called Heaven, but

heaven for me is here. If Oxford has its dreaming spires, Isfahan has its dozing domes, each one perfectly shaped, ranging from cerulean blue to sea green—each one guarded by a posse of slender minarets, a procession of archways, and a gurgle of fountains.

Isfahan was the creation of the Safawid kings and the personal masterpiece of the grandest of them all, Shah Abbas the Great, the Sun King of Persia. He and his family knew a thing or two. They practically invented Turkish delight, were all top mathematicians, hybridized roses to the point where they got the maximum amount of scent from the tiniest rose, and discovered the ultimate relationship between water and vegetation. Here, amid a sea of little houses that resemble freshly baked cottage loaves, they taught their contemporaries how to live.

The center of this seventeenth-century Safawid Empire was the great Maidan Square in Isfahan, which is practically untouched to this day. It is the size of the Place de la Concorde, but infinitely more graceful and better pro-



"This is Persia all over—incongruous, commonplace, and utterly beautiful."

René Lecler is the travel editor of *Harpers & Queen* in London.